

AN ALAN CLEVERDEN THRILLER

PATRICK
GOOCH

THE ART OF
DECEPTION

The hunt is on...



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Edouard Manet painted two canvases of a serving girl at the Folies Bergère. The first, in 1881, was more a study for the major work in the following year. It was a carefree exercise featuring a worldly blonde, whom, one presumes, was one of the many prostitutes who paraded their charms at the music hall. Manet's painting in 1882 of a bar at the Folies Bergère depicts Suzon, one of the regular barmaids. On her face is a look of detachment and melancholy, Around her neck is a locket, a token of another life? A world away from the suggestive innuendos of the men who lingered at the bar of the Folies Bergère

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CHAPTER ONE

Sergei Litvinov had endured a lifetime of service to others.

As a small boy, working in the forests around Kalach, he had spent his days sharpening the saws and axes of the woodsmen. A demanding task, but it was employment; and contributed to the family income. At sixteen, about to join the loggers' ranks, suddenly the Soviet Union's economy tumbled, the forestry trade collapsed, and Sergei found himself out of a job.

Undaunted, he boarded the train to Alapayevsk, a hundred and eighty kilometres away, and took up waiting on tables in a restaurant. It was there he developed the knack of foretelling what customers might choose from the menu.

He was rarely wrong.

When questioned, Sergei found it hard to rationalise how he knew what diners would order. It was, he said, a combination of their manner, dress, and attitude.

But it was more than that.

By the time he was twenty, he had moved to Moscow. After working in several eating houses he landed a job at the Café Pushkin. Designed to recreate the aura of a nineteenth century aristocrat's home in pre-revolutionary Russia, the restaurant was one of the most popular venues in the city. Not only famed for the quality of its food, and impeccable service, it had the additional attraction provided by Sergei Litvinov.

Within two years he was appointed head waiter. Now his talents were reserved for the more celebrated diners.

Many of those eating at the restaurant were politicians. Frequent visitors were the chairman and local government officials of the Moscow City Duma. Invariably, they lunched at the Pushkin. But one evening, a large party from the council offices on Strastnoy Boulevard descended upon the restaurant.

They were in a lively mood, doubtless fuelled by alcohol. When Sergei came to take their orders, he began by first asking the chairman his preference.

It was evident the head of the city council was uncertain what he wanted. Litvinov murmured, "What you really fancy, sir, are the Russian dumplings stuffed with venison and cabbage with a delicate mushroom sauce."

The chairman nodded. "How did you know that?"

"It's a house secret, sir," smiled Sergei.

"OK, tell me what he is going to eat," said the chairman pointing to the man on his left.

Sergei studied him for a moment.

"It would seem he is going to have the same as you, sir."

The chairman grinned. "And the fellow next to him?"

A brief moment passed before Sergei remarked. " Trio of smoked fish with fresh artichokes."

Sergei Litvinov was told to reveal the other diners' wishes.

He erred only slightly with someone's choice of vegetables.

"If you can do that, you should come and work for us," remarked an official. "Tell us what the people of Moscow are really thinking."

Laughter ran round the table.

Litvinov bowed slightly, acknowledging the comment, and headed for the kitchens.

Several weeks later that same official appeared again in the restaurant. But not to dine.

“I want to speak with you privately, Litvinov.”

And thus it was that Sergei took his first steps to becoming a civil servant. Initially, as a silent witness to events in the Moscow Duma: attending committee meetings, then sitting at the table when more intimate gatherings were held. His presence was explained as being the Duma’s recorder.

In reality, his unstated role was to provide assessment of whether outsiders, be they suppliers, bankers, lobby groups, even other government officers, were truthful in their dealings.

After a few months, Sergei found he was able to make such judgements with commendable accuracy. As the value of his abilities was realised, imperceptibly he assumed more the role of the chairman’s right-hand man. Whilst not a political adviser, his foresight contributed much to smoothing the path for his leader.

When the council chairman eventually retired, the man who took on the coveted mantle was the official who had originally engineered Sergei’s appointment.

With the new regime came marked changes. Most of the current batch of council officers were swept away. Although Leoni Tupolev, the new chairman, retained the continued presence of Sergei Litvinov.

It soon became evident to Litvinov that Tupolev was ambitious.

He did not view becoming chairman of the Moscow Duma as the pinnacle of his career. He was destined for higher things. In moments of reflection he would confide in Sergei that he was out to reach the top. No one would be allowed to stand in his way.

“And you will come with me, my friend,” Tupolev would add expansively, whenever he had indulged to excess. Though, admittedly,

those moments were rare when Tupolev was not in full command of his senses.

And rise he did, with Litvinov in tow.

Leoni Tupolev moved from the confines of the Moscow city council, to deputy in the State Duma, the Lower House. A short time later he joined the Upper House as a senator in the Federation Assembly. He worked assiduously in the role, and catching the eye of the President, was appointed Minister of Finance of the Russian Federation.

With the ever-present whiff of corruption about the Ministry's affairs, Sergei Litvinov was used like a sniffer dog to identify those conceivably linked with mis-management and duplicity.

The newspapers highlighted the clean-up of the country's finances. *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, and the prominent business daily, *Kommersant*, made much of Tupolev's efforts. While his regular appearances on the main television channels, *RTR - Russia 24*, *Ren TV*, *RTR - Russia-1*, *Channel One Russia*, reinforced his popularity.

Suddenly, Leonie Tupolev was the country's blue-eyed boy.

After many years of profligacy and wastefulness, here was someone who stood firm against dishonesty. At this point it mattered little if Litvinov were right or wrong in his assessments. When people were fired, the Russian public were only too ready to cheer the minister's actions.

When the election of the country's leader came around, Tupolev was an obvious candidate. On such a ticket as 'Mr Anti-Corruption', small wonder he won the exalted title of President of the Russian Federation.

In recognition of the part Sergei Litvinov had played in Tupolev's rise to power, he was appointed Deputy Head of the Presidential Property Management Department. Yet another role in which he would be called upon to serve his master.

“There are two things I want you to do, Sergei,” remarked Tupolev, bending low over the cue. They were playing Russian Pyramid on the full-size table left by his predecessor. In fact, nothing had been removed from Novo-Ogaryovo, the President’s heavily-guarded residence on the Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Road, north-west of Moscow.

He scored freely, moving around the table potting the numbered balls.

“Firstly.”

Tupolev halted briefly while he judged the angle of the next shot.

“Firstly, I want you to organise the complete re-decoration of this place.”

He smiled at Litvinov.

“I know I don’t have to tell you what I want. Secondly, I want you to add some interest to the place. Other than the map in my office, it’s completely bare. Magdalena believes it shows a sterile mind, lacking appreciation of the finer things in life. She wants ornaments on side tables, sculptures set in recesses, paintings on the walls, OK?”

It was Sergei’s turn.

He carefully assessed how he would angle the ball off the cushion, adjusted his stance, slowly he drew back the cue.

“I was thinking, Sergei. . .why don’t you bring a selection of items from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.”

Litvinov fluffed the shot and the cue ball rolled harmlessly up the table.

“How could I possibly do that? Kosnievsky, the Head Of The Department, is constantly looking over my shoulder.”

“I’ll send him somewhere. After all, your lot are responsible for dozens of development projects. Once they’re installed here, there’s not a lot he could do or say about it, is there?”

Litvinov raised his eyebrows.

“I know,” continued Tupolev, “he can check the work being carried out at Yelizovo Airport on the Kamchatka Peninsula. That should keep him occupied for a couple of weeks. Let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll dispatch him to the other end of the country.”

CHAPTER TWO

“What do you mean, Kosnievsky, I have denuded the Hermitage of its exhibits?”

The President was in his richly-panelled office in the Senate building. The Head of the Presidential Property Management Department paced to and fro in front of the leader’s desk.

“Sit down, Ivan. You’ll wear out my carpets.”

Not an idle comment. The Russian people have long had an ingrained passion for carpets, especially those from Iran. Originally they were used as wall-hangings to counter the bitter cold of a Russian winter. Even today, many adorn the walls of the wealthy, and are highly-prized.

“I’m sure you are familiar with the fact that the museum has in its possession over three million works of art,” said the President urbanely. “There are countless paintings, sculptures, artefacts rarely seen by visitors. So what if I borrow a few pieces to display at Novo-Ogaryovo. I frequently entertain foreign leaders there. It does them good to see we are not lacking in cultural appreciation.”

“But that’s not the point, Mr President. I was not told you wanted to line your walls with some of the country’s most precious works. The museum director informed me some very valuable pieces were removed. Their condition is fragile, and not likely to be kept at the right temperature and humidity.”

“Don’t worry about that, my friend. There has been a complete overhaul of the building, and the air-conditioning throughout will meet even his

exacting standards.”

“I still believe I should have been consulted.”

“Why?” A harsher tone was creeping into Tupolev’s voice. “Are you not aware of the Decree of 12th June 1996?” he growled. “You should be. In the decree the State Hermitage Museum was placed under personal patronage of the President of the Russian Federation. In other words I have access to the museum’s contents whenever I wish.”

“But. . .”

“Kosnievsky, this conversation is at an end,” declared the President, rising to his feet. “Now, get out!”

Tupolev sat at his desk contemplating his success.

He was still surprised by the change in attitude towards him by his former colleagues in the Senate. The respect the title, President, kindled among the high and the low of Russia; and, the regard he now received from high-ranking officials from other countries.

He was gradually coming to terms with the extent his powers.

Not on petty-fogging types like Kosnievsky, but on the world stage.

He grinned to himself.

Picking up the phone he spoke briefly to his aides in the outer office.

“Tell Litvinov to come and see me.”

In the whole of the country there were only two people who did not dance attendance upon him. Sergei Litvinov, his arch mister fix-it, and Magdalena, his wife. They had known him too long. From when he was a minor civil servant of the Moscow City Council seeking to climb the next rung on the ladder.

One readily satisfied his demands; the other, well he was quick to respond to her wishes.

Magda was happy with the changes made at the residence. The décor was perfect; and the whole complex enhanced with the numerous works of art that covered the walls and were displayed on shelves, in cabinets and on stands. Her one disappointment was the lack of paintings by her favourite artist, Edouard Manet.

Among all the many paintings in the Hermitage, there were only two by the French Impressionist. Portraits of the women, Mademoiselle Isabelle Lemonnier and Madame Jules Guillemet. According to Tupolev's wife, neither truly reflected Manet's artistic abilities. She so dearly wanted a work on show at Novo-Ogaryovo that demonstrated his talents to the full.

"You wanted to see me, Leoni?"

"Come, let us sit by the fire, Sergei."

They walked over to two ornate chairs set in front of a mid-19th century Renaissance style fireplace carved in Italian Carrara marble. In the grate the artificial logs glowed in the gas-fired flames, giving a pleasing appearance of warmth.

"Something to drink, Sergei?"

"Not for me, thank you."

Litvinov could see that the President was hesitant. Inching towards the reason for calling him in.

Eventually. "Look. . .I have a problem. . .and you're the only one who can help me."

"Oh, perhaps you'd better tell me what it is, Leoni."

It came out in a rush.

"Magda wants a proper painting by Edouard Manet. She doesn't like those portraits you brought back from St. Petersburg."

“Mm. . .that could be difficult. There aren’t any more works by him in Russia. Shchukin, the textile merchant, was the major collector of French Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art. He used to bring their paintings back to Russia on his business trips to Paris. Do you know he had a hoard of fifty Picassos, thirty-eight works by Matisse, thirteen Monets, eight Cézannes and four van Goghs. In one room alone, Shchukin had sixteen of Gauguin’s Tahiti paintings. But, I’m sorry to say, no Manets.”

“So what happened to the paintings?”

“They were seized by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution in 1917.”

“Do you know where they went?”

“Lenin himself signed the decree to expropriate the works, and Stalin carried out the order, scattering Shchukin’s collection of some two hundred and fifty paintings, Some to museums in Moscow and St Petersburg, but the majority were sold to collectors in other countries.

“In his ignorance, Stalin condemned some of the masterpieces of nineteenth and twentieth century art as ‘bourgeois and cosmopolitan’.”

“What happened to Shchukin after Stalin did his worst?”

“He fled Russia and went to live in France.”

Tupolev slowly shook his head.

“A victim of the times, eh? Just like you, my friend. I have to tell you, Sergei, the buck stops with you. I don’t wish to know how you do it, but I want a Manet painting, a decent one, hanging on the wall at Novo-Ogaryovo by the end of summer.”

CHAPTER THREE

Harvey Munro always awoke at five thirty.

He showered and shaved by six.

Ate breakfast until six twenty five.

Dropping into the passenger seat of his wife's car at six thirty, he read the newspaper while she drove five miles to Scarsdale Railway Station. Boarding the six forty eight for Manhattan, it arrived thirty three minutes later at Grand Central Station.

Munro walked two hundred yards on West Forty Second Street, bought himself a latte at Starbucks, and entered his office building five minutes later.

The elevator whisked him up to the tenth floor, and a short walk along a wide corridor brought him to the glass entrance doors of Munro Freeman Events Inc.

He scanned the computer for emails while drinking his coffee. At eight o'clock precisely Harvey was ready for another day of creative planning, meetings and organising the details of a project he had been working on for the past two years.

It had all stemmed from a friend's casual invitation.

He was playing in a foursome at the Quaker Ridge Golf Club, when his partner asked if he would care to join him on his new motor yacht. A week later Munro drove over to the moorings at Mamaroneck, in Westchester County.

He was impressed.

It was a fifty foot long Beneteau Monte Carlo MC Five.

Munro admired the craft as they made their way up Long Island Sound, towards Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket Island. Moving out into the open sea, they climbed onto the flying bridge, and his friend opened up the twin Volvo Penta IPS 600s. The bow lifted, the craft leapt forward, quickly reaching thirty knots as it sped across the water.

Easing back the throttle his friend began a wide turn. It was then Munro's attention was caught by a cruise liner making its way steadily southwards.

"I wonder where that's been," he murmured thoughtfully to his companion.

"Probably Iceland, stopping off in Halifax before moving on to New York. This is a regular route for cruise liners."

The ship made its unhurried way past them. A majestic sight, the water from the bow wave catching the early morning sunlight.

The memory of the trip, and the sight of the liner, stayed with Harvey Munro for several weeks before the idea struck him.

The eureka moment lasted for several days as he came to grips with the format of what, in his mind, was gradually becoming, a major project.

When he was ready, he walked into Jeff Freeman's office, shut the door and said. "Got a minute?"

Two hours later they came out, and called an *ad hoc* meeting in the general office.

Harvey outlined the proposal he had in mind, albeit at very much the concept stage. It would take the most careful planning, persuasion, and project management to get the scheme off the ground. But, if they succeeded, it would propel Munro Freeman into the top rank of event agencies.

It was agreed Munro would create a working document and schedule, and a half dozen people in the company would devote all their efforts to Phase One – selling the project to likely participants. Harvey would tackle the project from another angle.

Munro sat at his desk recalling the occasion when he had flown business class to Miami.

A taxi had taken him the short distance to Northwest 87th Avenue, the headquarters of the Carnival Corporation. He was met by Frank Masters, the Chief Communications Officer of the world's largest cruise liner company.

“Look, I’m sorry about this,” declared Masters, as they walked to the elevator. “I’ve got a rush meeting coming up. I can only give you ten minutes.”

“That’s OK,” replied Munro. “You’ll either like what I’m going to say, or get rid of me well before the ten minutes are up.”

In Masters’ office Harvey took a seat at the conference table, and removed from his shoulder bag several DVDs, copies of a leather-bound, presentation folder, and two pairs of virtual reality headsets.

An hour later, Masters said. “Tell me, Harvey, how long are you in town? I was wondering, could you delay your return for a couple of days? I’ll tell you why. Our weekly management meeting is on Thursday, and I’d like you to put your proposal to the other vice-presidents. I’ll table it on the agenda if you can make it.”

Masters introduced him to the other VPs at the conference table, adding that Munro had a proposal we should all seriously evaluate. It was new,

innovative and first-class PR for the company. As communications officer he believed it had considerable merit.

Munro got to his feet.

It was make or break time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my company, Munro Freeman, is an events management organisation. We work for a number of top drawer clients, and without any show of undue modesty, we do a great job for them. The fact that we have held onto the majority of our accounts for so many years is testimony in itself.

“The proposal I put before you today breaks new ground. Let me tell you, the glimmering of the idea came to me when sailing off Nantucket Island. One of your cruise ships, presumably en route to New York, came by. A remarkable sight. gliding its way south. It looked magnificent. . .and that’s when the idea came to me.

“Why not combine the allure of a cruise liner with that of a floating museum? Not, I hasten to point out, the fuddy-duddy concept of staring at artefacts in glass cases on rainy days, but a vibrant, exciting museum of art. As we speak my people are busy talking to all the important art galleries around the world to gain their interest. As we see it, ladies and gentlemen, we would be taking a selection of the finest masterpieces to major cities along the eastern seaboard of North America.

“Having installed the paintings on board one of your ships in New York, the tour would begin in Québec. It would stay there for two weeks, then on to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Miami. Remaining in each port for the same length of time.

“Our aim would be to publicise heavily the ship’s arrival at each destination, using TV commercials, and advertising in the key newspapers and magazines. We would garner a hell of a lot of free publicity for such a

novel concept of taking the world's art to the people. My team would seek sponsorship from all the local, interested parties, and we would also charge a nominal sum for the public to come on board the liner.

“After the two week stint in Miami the ship would sail to Grand Bahama, carrying likely buyers and their agents as well as the many representatives of the sellers and the selected auction house.

“We would hold the premier floating auction of the works galleries wish to put up for sale. The reason we are completing the tour in the Bahamas is, as you know, the island's capital is Freeport - and that's exactly what it is, a free trade zone. So buyers would not incur taxes or import charges.

“The theme of the project, ladies and gentlemen, is ‘The Sail Of The Millennium’.

“Let me show you how it would all come together, and the involvement of each of the individual participants.”

Masters had been primed, and turned on the LED projector.

Fifteen minutes later, the presentation came to an end.

Harvey Munro rose to his feet.

“One more thing. ladies and gentlemen, let me pass round these virtual reality headsets. They will give you a guide how we could install the paintings on board ship, and even, with the latest technical advances, how observers could actually enter some paintings and view the people and the landscapes close up.”

As the headsets went round the table, so muted exclamations of wonderment could be heard.

Questions began to flow. Some of the vice-presidents asked why sculptures and other works of art could not be included. One or two raised the question of insurance and security; and almost all referred to the costs involved.

Masters declared that Munro had provided a full budgetary account, and the likely charges met by those involved.

He went on. "It's a reasonable division of costs, and I'll circulate the financial document so that you are fully informed of all the various aspects. But, ladies and gentlemen, what Mr Munro wants to know is this. Would Carnival be prepared to provide one of our cruise ships for the venture?"

"In addition to Mr Munro's figures, I have added what it would cost us. I've also taken into account the benefits side of the equation, in terms of bought and free publicity for Carnival. In my estimation, it would be value for money."

The murmurings around the table were eclipsed by the vice-president in charge of operations stating that in his view a ship and crew that regularly sail into the nominated ports would be his choice. "Moreover," he added. "The Princess Line cruise ship, the Sea Empress, is on its last voyage before going for a major refit in Hamburg. We could delay that, for the ship would fit the bill ideally."

Frank Masters escorted Munro to the door.

"Come and see me tomorrow morning, Harvey. Say eleven o'clock. I'll have their decision by then."

Ushered out the building, Harvey Munro took a taxi to Herald Plaza, overlooking Biscayne Bay in downtown Miami. This was the site of Art Miami, an exhibition contractor that specialised in putting on fairs for all forms of contemporary art.

The company also ran a major exhibition called Art Miami New York, held annually on Pier 94 in Midtown Manhattan. If the proposal to Carnival were accepted, he wanted to employ the help of these art show organisers in New York.

Harvey Munro remembered sitting in the first-class section of the plane on that return trip to New York, drinking champagne, quietly elated at Carnival's decision. Savouring that moment Frank Masters had vigorously shaken his hand and said, "We're all with you, Harvey. Let's go for it!"

He had also enjoyed another glass of vintage Dom Pérignon saluting Art Miami's support of the venture.. Of course, he had not revealed all the key aspects of the project, though now it was in the final stages, he intended to go down to Pier 94, where Art Miami New York Fair had been held. It was now being prepared for the arrival of the Sea Empress, and the many works of art. These would be guarded in the transfer hall prior to loading aboard the liner by Art Miami's very capable security officers.

CHAPTER FOUR

“So why should Restitution be involved?”

I was sitting in Roger Tamworth’s office in Salisbury.

Roger was a private investigator. At least, that was the role he had assumed when I first met him. I had been seeking information about an art dealer living in Switzerland. Tamworth had uncovered much about the questionable activities of the individual, Horst Schendler and his henchman, Peter Engel. Because of the close association Schendler had had with Michael Johns, my maternal grandfather, I had briefly become an unwilling pawn in the couple’s illegal affairs, before managing to throw off their hold on me.

I asked the question, but really, I already knew the answer. Restitution Incorporated was an American company offering a range of services within the art world. However, the company’s real *raison d'être*, and certainly the most remunerative, was the discreet search for missing antiques, artefacts and paintings and negotiating their return to rightful owners.

While it employed a host of in-house lawyers to mediate, Restitution regularly made use of trusted freelance people, like Tamworth, to locate works of art that had been ‘lost’. Not lost in the narrow sense, but expropriated, as they had been in the Nazi era; stolen to order from museums and galleries; removed from private collections, and often held to ransom.

In the United States, Restitution liaised closely with law enforcement units. It did not operate in quite the same way here in the UK, or on the

Continent. Consequently, Roger had to be a little more careful. In the past, he had called upon my help to locate works of art, even to the point of sharing the reward monies.

“Look, Alan, it’s a straightforward request,” Roger leaned back in his chair. “It won’t take more than a day of your time. But you know your way around the art world much better than I, so I was hoping you would help me.”

“But surely, it’s more a job for a security firm?”

“You’re right. But the galleries and museums are a little edgy when it comes to handing over their valuable works of art to a shipping company. That’s why Restitution want me. . . us. . . to oversee the loading and sign off to the fact none of the items disappeared when dispatched.”

“Do you have a list of the works and the various senders?” I asked.

Roger withdrew several sheets from a folder and passed them across the desk to me.

As I scanned the inventory I could understand the senders’ concerns. The Tate, Britain and Modern, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, The Courtauld Institute, museums in Glasgow and Edinburgh, as well as Wales, and a good number of continental galleries, were all providing works to display on board a cruise liner.

“So, I ask again, how specifically would we be involved?”

“Well, as you can see, every item from Europe is coming into the UK, for onward transfer to New York,” explained Roger. “It’s a huge undertaking, and insurance companies are getting nervous. They want reassurance, from this side of the Atlantic, that the many paintings all leave these shores without a hitch. Although the paintings will all be crated, we have to check the security tags have not been tampered with, and each one is carefully stowed aboard a Fedex Express plane chartered for the flight. Surely, you

can spare a day from your busy schedule? After all, Heathrow Airport is just down the road from your place.”

A few months earlier, when Grandpa Johns died, I had been left a large, three-storey house in West London. I had occupied the top floor for some years, ever since I was a student at the Courtauld Institute of Art. When grandfather’s will was read I discovered I had inherited the rest of the building.

“OK. . .usual terms?”

“Of course.”

“When do you want me to join you?”

“The day after tomorrow. Come to the Fedex offices first of all at about ten o’clock. They’re just behind the airport. I’ll email their address. We’ll pick up the clearance passes which allow us into the freight-forwarding section.”

Roger and I spent nine hours watching and checking as the crates and containers were stowed aboard the Douglas DC10. It had taken longer than I expected. The Fedex people were much aware of the valuable cargo, and on a number of occasions dismantled the stacking to improve safety. Eventually, everything tallied with the manifests, and the Fedex security guards took up their positions in the hangar before the plane departed early the next morning.

It had been surprisingly tiring; and I invited Roger to stay the night at my place, rather than face the drive back to Salisbury.

We bought fish and chips, stopped at an off-licence for some wine, and ate the meal in my apartment in St George’s Square.

We were lounging on the settees when I asked Roger what was a cruise liner doing with the world’s most valuable paintings on board.

“From what I can gather, the ship is stopping off at cities along the American east coast. A bit like a mobile library, it’s going to the people instead of people coming to a gallery.”

“Sounds a good idea,” I remarked. “Though, I’ll bet the insurance is high, any mishaps and the payouts would be astronomical.”

“Fortunately,” murmured Roger, “it’s not our headache.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Harvey Munro's team working on the project had doubled. It now comprised twelve members of staff, each looking after various aspects of 'The Sail Of The Millennium'.

With two weeks to departure from Pier 94, there was still much to do in readying the ship; installing the vast number of paintings down to allocating cabins for all the many people travelling on the floating gallery.

The response from museums, galleries and private collections, world-wide, had been overwhelming. Many had sent valuable paintings. Moreover, the long list of works submitted for auction had attracted buyers in their droves. All needed to be accommodated when the Sea Empress sailed from Miami bound for Grand Bahama.

Thus far, there had been few hitches. The security arrangements had satisfied insurers: though their representatives still walked about the ship looking pensive. The lighting, and the displays on which the paintings were to be hung had been installed, with the ship's wall panelling and décor intact: making Frank Masters a contented person.

In fact, he was much in evidence aboard the liner. Frequently conferring with Munro, and liaising with Carnival Cruises' New York office, just off Union Square. The preparations for putting to sea followed a pattern. Though the voyage was a little out of the ordinary, the basic needs of food, entertainment and cabin service still needed to be addressed.

Munro, himself, had supervised the advance publicity. Arranging TV and radio interviews at the venues., issuing press releases, and producing a host of promotional material.

Already, advance admission numbers were high. The ticket sales and distribution agency, Showtime, was masterminding this aspect of the venture; and their regular reports emphasised the public's enthusiasm for 'The Sail Of The Millenium'.

Just before sailing, when everything was at last in readiness, crews from American and international television channels were allowed on board. Suddenly, the salons were alive with a wide array of languages, as presenters talked directly to camera and held interviews with the curators, conservators, and officials from the galleries. Frank Masters spoke of Carnival's involvement in the endeavour, stressing the company's support for the arts.

Harvey Munro was content to be in the background. If he could pick up event contracts from the cruise company in the future, that would be more than adequate reward. In any event, he had his own camera team recording the enterprise. He would be prominently featured in the film, and would make sure it was widely circulated after the project was finished.

Two days later, the Sea Empress set sail for Québec. The first port of call on the grand tour. On the ship there were close to seven hundred people. They would be looked after by an equal number of personnel.

CHAPTER SIX

Several of the restaurants and the gymnasium had also been converted to galleries, which allowed an even greater array of Italian Renaissance paintings, 18th and 19th century English artists, Dutch and Flemish painters, German works of art, and a wide cross-section of work by American artists.

When it docked at Pier 22 in Québec, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation gave the arrival of the Sea Empress full coverage on both TV and Radio. Being partly French-speaking, the local media focussed largely on the French schools of art, featured in two adjoining salons.

Munro had persuaded an expert from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to curate the floating exhibition; and she had created an imaginative content of exhibits from the wide and varied number of paintings submitted for display.

A large crowd gathered on the quayside to witness the Mayor of Québec City formally welcome ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’; and soon afterwards, the first day’s visitors began boarding the vessel.

Although there were rope barriers between the spectators and the paintings, the salons were rigorously patrolled by security guards. They were not easily distinguishable in their dress, wearing informal clothes and mingling with the on-lookers as they moved through the ship.

At one stage, the press of the crowd in the French Impressionists’ room, caused an elderly man to topple over the rope, dragging a heavy, free-standing post with him.

An alarm sounded.

Instantly, three guards rushed forward, and took hold of the fellow. It appeared merely an accidental tumble, and they helped him to his feet. What was significant was their reaction. It happened swiftly, before anyone else had even moved. An impromptu demonstration of the speed of their response .

One individual, who had engineered the gentleman's fall, took careful note of the incident.

Recognising that while the rope was a barrier, it was no more than a flimsy deterrent. The real element of security was the invisible laser beam, which had been broken when the man toppled forward, triggering the alarm and the guards' prompt reactions.

For some days the media carried the story; and the crowds continued to roll up clutching tickets they had purchased in advance of the ship's arrival. Eventually, when, after two weeks, the time came for the Sea Empress to depart, a brass band played rousing music on the quayside.

As it swung away from the pier, and manoeuvred its bow to face downriver, it did so to a chorus of sirens from other cruise liners, container ships and smaller craft in Québec waters.

Slowly, majestically, it made its way down the St. Lawrence River, towards the distant estuary and its next port of call.

It was obvious to everyone on board that the floating gallery of the world's art had been a resounding success.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The welcome in Boston was equally rapturous.

Only a little more than three hundred mile away as the crow flies, Québec's welcome of the Sea Empress had been widely reported in the *Boston Globe*, *The Herald* and the *Metro Boston*, as well as all the television channels.

The demand to visit the floating gallery had been high. The Showtime ticket agency had sold out within hours of the announcement for all the days the liner was in port.

The Sea Empress docked at the Black Falcon cruise terminal in South Boston, about two miles from the city centre.

Originally a World War One military warehouse, a few years earlier, the Massachusetts Port Authority had spent eleven million dollars refurbishing the port's facilities. Nowadays, more than a hundred ocean-going liners tie up to Boston's docks each year.

Watching the activities on the quayside, Munro suddenly felt he needed to get away from all that was going on. He had lived, slept and dreamed of the project for the past two years. Now it was actually happening, he wanted some respite from the demands upon him.

As Munro was thinking of some form of release, Frank Masters came over and stood by his side in silence for several minutes. Then he said. "How about if you and me get off this goddamned ship and book into a hotel?"

"Is it getting to you as well, Frank?" queried Munro.

“Let’s just say I’ve had enough for the moment. Are you with me?”

“Too right, I am.”

“Then pack an overnight bag, and join me at the foot of the forward gangway in twenty minutes.”

They took a taxi to the Lenox Hotel at Exeter and Boylston Street. A short time later they walked three blocks west to the Capital Grill, an upscale chophouse.

Not a lot was said until halfway through the meal.

“I don’t know about you, Harvey, but I just had to leave the ship to recharge my batteries,” murmured Masters, taking a sip of wine. “I looked at you from the bar, and came to the conclusion you felt the same.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Frank, but I have been living with ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’ for so long, my mind is closed to anything else. I needed this break, even if it’s just one night,” replied Munro.

He had followed their taxi from the terminal, telling the driver to keep close, he was unsure whether they were eating first or going to an hotel. When they pulled up outside the Lenox, he hurriedly paid and seemingly joined them as they entered the lobby.

Standing close at the desk, it was easy to overhear their conversation with the receptionist, and note Munro’s room number when she handed him the entrance card.

He also checked in for just one night, and paid the room charge in advance. He was only four doors further along the corridor from their rooms on the sixth floor; and having heard them arrange to go out for an evening meal, it fitted neatly into his plan of action.

He waited for almost an hour before seeking out the housekeeper. He declared his name was Harvey Munro, and stupidly, he had left the entrance card to six two eight in the room. Checking the guest list, she obligingly opened the door for him.

It was the work of a moment to find Munro's official pass allowing him access to all parts of the Sea Empress. Even better, it was a simple white plastic card hanging from a blue neck ribbon.

He photographed the pass in close-up, capturing a high resolution image of the bar code, and Munro's full name and company details on the obverse.

There was no one in the corridor. He swiftly returned to his room, collected his travel bag, and left the hotel.

Harvey joined Frank Masters at breakfast the next morning.

"Morning. . .sleep well?"

"Do you know," Munro smiled. "I feel really refreshed for being off the ship, even if it were just for one night."

"Well, why don't you stay another night? You don't have to be on board, do you?"

"Unfortunately, I do. We have a new team of security guards joining the ship, and I need to ensure the night patrols work efficiently, and the communications room is properly manned, twenty four hours a day."

Frank nodded. "Well, I'm going to stay on. At least for one more night. Then I'll go and see the people in our Boston office."

The two weeks in Boston passed in a whirlwind of activity. Harvey Munro was in constant demand. It seemed to him the new security people he was employing lacked initiative, did not have the drive to make even the

smallest decision. They were forever running to him seeking his advice or guidance for even the simplest task.

Just as demanding were the gallery assistants. They knew their job in discussing the artists whose works were on display; but where practical matters were concerned, such as maintaining a regular flow of visitors through their salons, constantly checking for questionable characters, and liaising with the guards, a number of them were sadly lacking. They would be released, along with half a dozen security people when the liner arrived in New York.

It was early morning when Munro stepped out onto his balcony and watched the pilot launch from Sandy Hook on Staten Island making for the Sea Empress. Having navigated under the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, the Sea Empress was now standing off Bay Ridge awaiting guidance into New York Harbour.

Several hours later when it came alongside Pier 94, he had seen his wife on the quayside, waiting while the crew undertook the final docking procedures. Munro was one of the first off the cruise liner, impatiently allowing the officer to swipe his boarding/access card to confirm departure.

He hugged her tightly. “God, I’ve missed you, honey. Am I glad to see you! Let me find a cab, then I’ll take you for a decent meal.”

“Where are we going, Harvey?” asked Jean Monro, as the cab ferried them across town.

“It’s a surprise. I booked ages ago. . .we’ll be there shortly.”

The driver pulled up outside an imposing building.

Harvey paid him off, and escorted his wife through the door of Eleven Madison Avenue, one of the current top-rated restaurants in the city.

“Wow! Wait ‘till I tell friends at the bridge club!” were her first words. And the last for the next twenty minutes. During which time the head waiter led them to a table, provided aperitifs, and brought the menus.

“So,” ventured Munro, “what do you fancy eating?”

Surprisingly, his wife quickly made up her mind.

“The foie gras, followed by the venison will be fine, Harvey.”

He told the table captain he would have the same, and to bring a bottle of Krug, they were there to celebrate.

“So is the tour going well?” his wife enquired. “When we speak on the phone, there are times I wonder if all is going according to plan.”

“Oh, you know, sweetheart, with a project as big as this, things can easily go adrift. You find some of the people don’t pull their weight, are not conscientious enough. I’ve got to go back to the ship later and sort a few things out. It won’t take long, then I can come home for a couple of days.”

“If you’re going back to the ship, can I come aboard with you. I’d love to see the paintings.”

Sure, honey, I’ll arrange a pass for you.”

A cab dropped Harvey Munro and his wife at Pier 94.

At the top of the gangway a ship’s officer was scanning passes.

“That was a short stay on shore, Mr Munro,” he said, staring at the screen.

“Howd’ya mean?”

“Well, according to the system, you only left the ship ten minutes ago.”

“Can’t be right. I took my wife to lunch at twelve thirty, and I haven’t been back since. That was three hours ago.”

The officer peered intently at the computer screen as he scrolled back in time.

“Yessir, I got that here. Twelve thirty eight. Then you returned at two forty one and went ashore again at three twenty six.”

“Sorry, son. I’m telling you I haven’t been back at all.”

“Joe, on the other gangway, scanned your pass. Perhaps, he made a mistake. Though I can’t see how. Anyway, no worries, welcome aboard, sir, and you madam.”

But Munro did not shrug it off so lightly

“Just walk with me to the other gangway, Jean. It won’t take a minute.”

“All I can say, Mr Munro, is that the photo on the pass certainly looked like the image we have of you on the computer. There again, passport style pictures rarely show us in our best light. But the bar code matched, so I had no reason to query access.”

“Hm. . .thanks, Joe.”

The Munros walked away.

“It’s still troubling you, isn’t it, Harve?” murmured his wife.

“ It is, honey. Still. . .let’s forget about it for the moment. Let me show you round the salons before we open them to the public tomorrow.”

The New York media created a last minute rush for tickets that again threatened to overwhelm Showtime. The *Times*, *Sun*, *Tribune*, *Daily News*, even the *Wall Street Journal* had large spreads, giving full voice to the unique way the world’s greatest paintings were on show to the public.

Once again, all the major TV channels featured interviews with representatives of the leading galleries; and Frank Masters, the Carnival spokesman, gave a altruistic performance in citing his organisation’s role as a dedicated patron of the arts, and a willing provider of one of their cruise liners.

The relaxing few days he spent at home, playing golf, enjoying his wife's company, meeting up with friends, took his mind away from 'The Sail Of The Millenium'; and the oddity of someone seemingly posing as Harvey Munro. He had quietly convinced himself it was merely a computer error; and when he returned to the Sea Empress, immediately committed to making a host of decisions, slowly the incident slipped from his mind.

A week into the exhibition in New York, the President of the Carnival Corporation met with the city's Mayor on the quayside, and it was widely featured in the media. Thereafter, there was a continuous stream of celebrities coming aboard the liner. Valuable publicity, but it did result in long queues forming while they had private viewings: much to the annoyance of those who had paid for their entrance tickets.

Harvey Munro had a word with Frank Masters, and they agreed that when the celebrities' agents contacted the Carnival offices on West 55th Street, they would be offered slots after the public viewing finished at six o'clock. Unsurprisingly, a good many cancelled their visits, once they realised the press would not be in evidence at night.

Harvey went home to Scarsdale and spent the last night at home before joining the ship when it sailed for Philadelphia.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Sea Empress dropped anchor off Cape Henlopen Point, at the mouth of the Delaware River, and awaited the pilot from the Lewes Station.

Harvey Munro was in his office, adjacent to the purser's desk, when Frank Masters knocked and opened the door.

"I've just been informed by the Staff Captain that the Bay and River pilot will be coming aboard in about twenty minutes, Harvey," reported Carnival's head of the communications, dropping into a chair. "He also told me he had given permission for three cruise liner captains to join the ship when we sail upriver. They're from Norwegian Cruise Lines, which is about to resume using Philadelphia as a port of call, and they want to familiarise themselves with the complexities of taking their ships upriver.

"I said to him, as you are responsible for the security of our precious cargo, he should have mentioned their presence on board to you first. If it's likely to cause you a problem, Harvey, they can always stay on the pilot's launch, and return to Lewes."

"They'll be supervised won't they?" Munro smiled. "They won't be stealing any paintings, hopefully."

Masters grinned back. "They'll be on the bridge the whole time, I shouldn't wonder."

"Then it's fine by me, Frank."

The pilot, Matthew Waites, was known to the captain and the other personnel on the bridge. When they had shaken hands, Waites introduced

the three Norwegians, dressed in their company uniforms.

“John, let me introduce our guests. They’ve been with us a couple of days, getting acclimatised to the rigours of navigating the Delaware. They’ve been up as far as Wilmington but this is their first opportunity to go on to Philadelphia. They are Captains, Magnus Johansen, Henrik Larsen and Bernhard Olsen.”

Each stepped forward and warmly shook the captain’s hand.

“Let us move over to the map table, gentlemen, I’ll introduce you to my Staff Captain and my First Officer.

Once more, there was a flurry of handshakes. At that point the three Norwegian took their own maps from the long cylindrical leather tubes they were carrying.

“We’ll make notes on our maps as we sail upstream, if that’s OK?” remarked Larsen.

“Of course. I would do the same,” replied the First Officer and Navigator.

“Right, Matthew, the Sea Empress is all yours.”

Four hours into the passage upstream, as they neared the town of Wilmington, the captain suggested they take a break from the bridge for a short while.

“We’re in Matthew’s capable hands, so I’m quite content to spend a short time with our guests,” said the captain with a smile, as he led the way to his quarters.

When they were served drinks by the captain’s valet, he casually asked. “So what vessels will you be bringing up to Philadelphia?”

Johansen sipped his glass of water before replying.

“I’m on the Norwegian Dawn, currently,” he replied.

“What’s the tonnage of that? You don’t want anything more than a hundred and ten thousand tonnes coming up the Delaware if you can help it.”

“It’s ninety two thousand.”

“And the length and the beam?”

Johansen placed the glass on a low table.. “Two hundred and ninety six metres by thirty eight metres. Or, in your measurements, nine hundred and sixty five feet by one hundred and twenty five feet.”

The captain nodded. “And you gentlemen, what are you on currently?”

Larsen mentioned he was on the Norwegian Gem and Olsen on the Norwegian Jade. Both of similar tonnage to the Dawn.

“You should be all right. It’s not the berthing facilities at Philadelphia harbour that’s the problem, it’s the larger ships with high superstructures. They won’t go under The Delaware Memorial Bridge, and several others between Wilmington and Philadelphia.”

After seven hours on the bridge, Matthew Waites was feeling tired.

From the mouth of the Delaware River to the docks, was eighty eight nautical miles; and there was little respite for the pilot, who not only had to concentrate on the correct channel to follow, but be aware of other river users, from dinghies to large sailboats. Even throwing the ship’s propellers into reverse to avoid a collision would take more than a kilometre to bring a vessel such as this to a standstill.

He rubbed the back of his neck. He was not getting any younger; and the responsibility, that once he relished, was now a strain on mind and body.

How’s it going, Matthew?” asked the captain.

“Another hour, and we’ll have this baby tied up on the quayside. Where are the Norwegians, by the way?”

“They’ve asked if they could have a quick tour of the salons, to see the paintings we have on board. My Staff Captain has taken them to meet with Harvey Munro, who’s in charge of ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’, as they call it.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing them myself, once we’ve docked. Would that be possible?” asked Waites.

“That’s the least we can do after bringing us all this way. I’ll have a word with Mr Munro,” said the captain. “Incidentally, what happens to your Norwegian friends once we get to Philadelphia? Do they stay overnight and go back to Lewes on the next ship out?”

“No. . . as I understand it, they fly out tonight.”

“I can escort them, round, Harvey, I can see you’re busy,” volunteered Antony Siren, the Staff Captain. “Although it will have to be brief. We’ll be docking shortly, and I must be back on the bridge,”

The next salon on the tour was the Renaissance Room. The Staff Captain, Antony Siren, next in line to the master, appeared anxious. The ship had just passed under the Commodore Barry Bridge, and would soon be employing the fore and aft thrusters to bring it around in its own length, and back alongside the pier.

He had to be in radio contact with the officers at the stern and the bow, who used laser rangefinders and UHF radio informing him of potential obstacles, other traffic, and possible hazards.

“Gentlemen, I’m sorry, we are docking shortly. I must leave you and get back to the bridge.”

Siren turned on his heel and strode quickly from the salon.

In the control and communications centre, most of the six-strong security team were leaving their computers, telephones, radios and CCTV screens, and making for the gangway exits, where they would set up the personal monitoring and bag checking units.

For a brief period, the communications room would be abandoned, save for one operator whose attention would be primarily focussed on the quayside: paying close attention to the re-victualling vehicles and all the other services required over the next fourteen days.

However, it would only be for fifteen minutes.

Once everything was in place, the five guards would return to their posts.

Alone, the three Norwegian sea captains made directly for the French Impressionists' salon. They were aware of the cruise liner's berthing procedures, and that the one person left in the communications room would be watching closely the CCTV screens covering the exterior of the ship.

At the entrance to the salon, formerly the gymnasium, they began unfastening various zips on their cylindrical map carriers. In less than a minute they had converted two of them into elaborate stilts. Johansen was helped up and given a black cloth. Approaching the camera, set high on the wall, from an oblique angle, he dropped the cloth over the lens.

In the communications room, the screen went blank.

The three of them moved swiftly down the room, stopping in front of the celebrated painting. Larsen and Olsen helped their companion on stilts to climb over the rope, and the discreet laser beam.

Taking a razor-sharp blade from his uniform pocket, Johansen cut the oil painting from its frame, and carefully handed it to the pair standing the other side of the rope.

From the third map tube, Olsen handed Johansen a well-executed, same size print of the original and a staple gun. He carefully pinned it to the wooden stretcher inside the frame.

Johansen stepped over the laser beam and the rope, removed the cloth from the camera, and joined the others as they made for the door. Outside, the map cases were restored to, seemingly, their purpose; and the trio made one further call, before taking the stairs to the bridge.

The picture came alive in the communications room. From where the camera was located, if the lone operator had glanced at the image, he would have believed all was in order.

Fourteen minutes had elapsed.

After they docked Harvey Munro was happy to escort Matthew Waites, the pilot, around the salons. Antony Siren, the Staff Captain, also accompanied them. Thus far he had had only a brief glimpse of the exhibition when with the Norwegians.

Whereas, concern for their charges had prompted people from the many galleries to check their works of art every three or four hours, Québec and New York had gone so smoothly, they, and their insurance agents, were rarely to be seen in the salons. The majority now appearing to regard ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’ as an all-expenses-paid holiday.

An hour passed in pleasant company, for Waites was a painting buff: not only creating seascapes around the coast of Lewes, he was also something of an art historian.

When they entered the French Impressionists’ salon, he literally stopped in his tracks, and murmured, “Wow, this really is something else!”

Slowly, he moved around the salon drinking in the colour, the exuberance, the talents of the French artists on display. Siren and Munro trailed after

him, as he kept up something of a running commentary on what was on show.

He stopped suddenly before Manet's painting of '*A Bar At The Folies Bergère*'. He stared at it for some minutes before muttering with a sigh, "It's a pity that the Courtauld Institute in London, wasn't able to release the original, instead of this print."

The three Norwegian ships' captains were escorted by Customs officials to a private room at Philadelphia International Airport. They were surprised to see their suitcases stacked on a nearby table.

"Please, can I ask why you have detained us?" asked Johansen politely.

"Routine, sir, purely routine. We often select passengers at random and give them a thorough check before boarding. You'd be surprised what some people tuck away in their baggage or under their clothing. We have a legitimate right, of course, to ask passengers to show the contents of their suitcases and any luggage they are taking on board flights out of the USA. So, gentlemen, would you kindly unlock and open your bags, please?"

Twenty minutes later, as the travellers repacked their belongings, the senior official said. "Now, gentlemen, if you wouldn't mind, would you kindly open these carry cases. What are they, fishing rod containers of some sort?"

"They are map carriers, sir. We are masters on Norwegian cruise liners, and these are maps of the approaches to and navigating the Delaware River."

They were quickly unzipped to reveal. . .maps of the approaches and navigational site marks to aid sailing up the Delaware River.

"Thank you, gentlemen. We shan't detain you any longer. You are free to join your flight, which is to where?"

“British Airways to London Heathrow, and a connecting flight to Oslo. We are having a brief holiday, before returning to Miami to rejoin our ships.”

“Have a pleasant journey, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER NINE

“I think I’ll have to stop wearing female disguises. They don’t look quite so authentic anymore, ” said Roger forlornly.

We were standing on the steps of my house in London’s St George’s Square.

“It’s not that. . .it’s, well. . .if you stopped trying to look in your thirties, you might get away with it,” I remarked, perhaps a trifle sharply.

“But I am in my thirties!”

“Yes, as a man. As a woman. . .how shall I put it? It’s like mutton dressed as lamb. You could easily be mistaken for someone desperate to snare a man, or on the game. Go for a more matronly look, it would probably work.”

I could see I’d touched a nerve.

“Anyway, come in. We’re getting funny looks.”

As we trooped up the stairs to the top floor of the house, a young woman came out of her apartment. She looked startled when the female I was with was conversing in a rich baritone.

“Good morning,” I said. “Hilda, this is Miss Ingrid Jakobson. She has just moved in. Ingrid, this is my godmother.”

I’m sure she did not believe me. But she raised her eyebrows in Roger’s direction, and hurried down the stairs.

“What do you mean your godmother?” he muttered. “You’re older than I am. How could I possibly be your godmother! By the way, she’s attractive. Where does she come from?”

“I’ve no idea. The agent told me she was a mature student doing research for a doctorate. She had good references, pays up promptly, and yes, she is also attractive. The ideal tenant.”

We reached the top floor, and I ushered him into the set of rooms I occupied.

“How long have you been waiting for me?” I asked.

Roger was standing in front of a tall mirror in the hallway, turning this way and that, trying to judge if my remarks bore any credence. He gave up, came into the sitting room, and plonked himself down on one of the settees.

“About half an hour. Another of your tenants told me you’d gone shopping, and shouldn’t be too long.”

What would they have thought I wondered, confronted by this tall, inelegantly- dressed woman, trying hard, it would seem, to act younger than her age.

“Did you come up by train?” I asked, putting on the kettle.

Beside his predilection for adopting numerous guises, which he declared was essential in his line of business, his other passion was tea. Whenever he stayed at the flat I invariably ran out of teabags.

“No, I drove up from Salisbury.”

So, at least he had not subjected fellow train passengers to his uncertain sexual orientation.

Roger came through to the kitchen, leaning one hip against the counter, while I poured hot water onto the teabags. Then, he walked over to the fridge and retrieved the milk, and while I stirred he poured it into the two mugs.

Then he remarked. “We’ve got a problem, Alan.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Oh.”

“I got here as quickly as possible. I had shaved my legs, and was trying on my ‘ young thing about Harrods’ outfit, when the phone rang. It was from Restitution on behalf of your old *alma mater*, the Courtauld Institute.

“You remember, we checked all the paintings being forwarded to the States at Heathrow Airport. They were destined for a cruise ship being used as a floating gallery. Well. . . a painting by Manet has gone missing, and Restitution want us to get it back.”

“Which painting?”

“*A Bar At The Folies Bergère.*”

“Damn! I always thought that particular painting by Manet summed up his talent. It was the last work he produced before he died. It is. . .was, one of my favourites. I had had a go at copying that, and the preliminary painting he did a year earlier on the same subject. They are at my mother’s place, in the long gallery at Mead Court. So Roger, what’s expected of us?”

“We are due at the Restitution offices at three o’clock for a briefing. I brought a change of clothes, so after lunch we’ll take a taxi to Belgrave Square.”

CHAPTER TEN

What Roger had not explained, he had not only brought a suitcase full of clothes with him, but his passport as well. Restitution wanted us to fly out that same day.

We managed to book on a late flight to Philadelphia, giving me just enough time to pack and for the pair of us to get to Heathrow Airport's Terminal Five.

As they were paying, we travelled business class; and after a light supper settled down for the night.

At least, Roger did. I was still coming to terms with the speed of events. This morning when I had strolled to the nearby shops, there was little inkling I would be airborne and flying to the United States nine hours later. Whereas my unpredictable companion took such things in his stride, I struggled to keep up with the rapid changes he seemed to inflict upon me.

I gave a wry smile.

Little had I realised when, a year earlier, I had commissioned his services as a private detective, that our lives would become so entwined. After my grandfather's death, my mother had inherited Mead Court, a magnificent house and grounds near Shaftesbury in Dorset.

To me, he had bequeathed not only the house in London, but all the paintings in the long gallery at Mead Court. I had, unthinkingly, regarded them as copies of the originals, until disabused of the notion.

The majority had been genuine works, which he had acquired when serving in the Monuments and Fine Art Archives during the Second World

War.

I had felt compelled to return them to their original owners by some means, without bringing the world down about my ears. Not only had Roger Tamworth been instrumental in accomplishing the deed, at times against his better judgement, he had also become a good friend.

The only irritant in the relationship was his inclination to appear in various disguises. Vital, he assured me, if you wanted to hide your identity in his kind of work. Though, I was not always sure that the characters he adopted were not more conspicuous than if he had just remained himself.

His other more discreet work was as a finder of lost and stolen works of art. With my background – I had studied art history at the Courtauld institute, and frequently worked as a presenter on TV culture programmes – I provided some measure of knowledge and reassurance when tracking down works of value. The call from Restitution, on behalf of the Courtauld Institute, was one such occasion.

We landed at Philadelphia Airport and were met by someone holding a name board. We waited outside the terminal building while a car was collected, and he then drove us to Pier 5, where the Sea Empress was tied up.

At an adjacent pier was an aircraft carrier.

When I asked the name of the huge ship, our driver growled. “It’s named after the 35th President of the United States, the USS John F. Kennedy, nicknamed ‘Big John’. If you ask me, they should chop it up and reuse the metal.”

On board the cruise liner we were led to the organiser’s office, and greeted by a harassed-faced man of middling height in shirtsleeves. Large, heavy-framed glasses enveloped most of his features, which were

surmounted by a profusion of greying hair. He was sweating slightly, even though the air-conditioning was cool.

“Welcome to ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’,” the fellow said grimly in a New York accent. “My name’s Harvey Munro. I’m nominally in charge of this junket.”

He looked across at Roger. “And you are?”

“Roger Tamworth. . .and this is my partner, Alan Cleverden.”

“Right.”

Then he pointed in the direction of the three men standing close by. “This here is Hector Rozanski, head of security. Next to him,” he nodded to the fellow alongside Rozanski, “is Mike Burton, the detective from the Philadelphia Police Department. And this is my assistant, Ted Philby.” He turned and gestured to the last in the line.

Roger and I and shook their hands.

“Well, gentlemen,” Munro said, staring in our direction. “I can well understand the Courtauld Institute of Art sending a representative or two. We’ve already had their insurance company assessor on board taking all the details. He has all the information we were able to provide on the theft.”

“Of course, Mr Munro, I was well aware of his visit, their liability is substantial. They would most certainly want to know how the theft was allowed to take place.” Roger emphasised the term ‘allowed’.

Munro visibly winced.

“And, as you might expect, both the Institute and the insurer would like to discover if the painting can possibly be retrieved. Hence our presence. What we have to determine is, firstly, who stole the painting. Knowing that, could well pinpoint where the painting might have been taken. Or is it being held to ransom, and is its return negotiable? More worrying, has it been stolen

for someone to whom money is no object, merely satisfying the whim of adding it to his private collection?”

Roger turned to Mike Burton.

“Have you discovered how they took the painting? When, and who might have been involved if it were an inside job?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea when the theft occurred,” said Burton. “The CCTV camera in that salon went off-line at ten to six and came back on at five after six.”

“And no one monitoring the screens realised it was down?” queried Roger.

“Well, according to Mr Rozanski, there is a moment during the tour when there is a weakness in the security set-up. The thieves must have known that, and taken full advantage of when there was hardly anyone scanning the CCTV screens. It happens when the guards are preparing for disembarkation, and the control and communications room is manned by only one operator.”

He glanced across at head of security. “I guess it was sufficient time to cut the painting from its frame, and fix a print in its place.”

“Who was it who noticed the painting was missing? Have you found out who visited the salon before the alarm was raised?” I asked.

“I took the pilot who brought the ship up the Delaware River, and the Staff Captain joined us again, on a tour of the salons at about six thirty,” responded Munro. “In fact, it was the pilot who noticed something was amiss. He pointed out that it was a print in the frame, not the original oil painting.”

“And who visited the salon immediately before you?”

“The Staff Captain, Antony Siren, and the three Norwegian cruise liner captains we had on board, However, he had to leave them because we were

close to docking.”

“Where are they now?”

“They’ve gone,” explained Munro. “They left to catch a plane home. Don’t worry. . .we had them frisked. They had nothing on them or in their baggage. And, according to the cab driver Mike here interviewed, they didn’t drop the painting off anywhere on the way to the airport terminal.”

Roger turned to the detective. “Have you spoken to all those who were in the vicinity of the salon around the time of the theft? In case they saw or noticed something.”

“Not all,” the detective replied in a flat voice. “I came on board yesterday and started taking statements of those who, at the time, were likely to have been near the salon. Thus far, I’ve interviewed five members of the ship’s crew; two maintenance engineers; and four curators from various galleries.”

“How many people left the ship when it docked?” I asked.

Ted Philby, Munro’s assistant spoke up.

“Quite a number. Many wanted to catch the shops in the mall at Victoria Place before they closed at seven o’clock. There was also a rush to get a close-up view of the aircraft carrier at the adjacent pier. I would say at least two hundred, two hundred and fifty, left the ship directly it docked.”

“We checked all those going ashore through our detector frame,” commented Rozanski. “And all their bags and items of luggage were scanned. Nothing!”

I looked at him. “So, according to what you and Detective Burton have said, no one could have smuggled the painting ashore. *Ipso facto*, Manet’s painting must still be on board. Do you agree?”

All of them shook their heads. No. . .the work of art was no longer on the ship. They had searched every conceivable hiding place, every corner of the

cruise ship: then repeated the exercise three times more. It was no longer on board. Of that they were certain.

“Before the painting was removed,” Roger continued. “You said the last people to visit the Impressionists’ salon were three Norwegians. Other than the airport officials, have you spoken to them? Perhaps they may have seen or noticed something.”

Glances were exchanged between Munro and Rozanski.

“We contacted the Norwegian Cruise people, only to learn that Johansen, Olsen and Larsen are on holiday, and not expected back for another week.”

“Did you get their home addresses?” Roger questioned. “Their families must know where they are.”

“The company did try to contact them, but there was no reply from any of them. Not so strange, perhaps. One is a widower, and the other two are single. In this business, being away for weeks at a time, a high proportion of cruise ship officers are either unmarried or divorced,” murmured Rozanski.

“Tell me,” I turned towards Munro, “have you replaced the missing painting? And are you continuing with your itinerary?”

“Replacing the Manet is not a problem. There are several in the storage unit to choose from. Ones that the owners are putting up for sale in the auction in Grand Bahama,” he replied. “As for continuing, we have little option. Ticket sales have gone through the roof. We’ve even got waiting lists to pick up cancellations.”

“So after Philadelphia you’re going on to Miami, right?”

“Yes, that’s the schedule,” Munro confirmed.

“Is it possible to visit the Impressionists’ salon?” Roger asked, turning to Burton. “Or is it still a crime scene?”

“No, we’ve finished there for the moment,” Burton replied.

Munro added. “Not a problem. The salons are open to the public tomorrow, so we’re all ready to go. I’ll escort you to the salon myself.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We booked into the Courtyard Hotel, on the corner of Intrepid Avenue and Rouse Boulevard. Just a short walk from Pier 5.

Later, in the bar, we sat at a table in quiet contemplation. I felt tired after the plane journey. All I wanted to do was eat a light meal and have an early night.

I glanced at my companion.

He was staring at the wall behind me.

“You seem engrossed in your thoughts, Roger. What’s on your mind?”

He stirred and lowered his gaze to look at me. “When we were in the salon this afternoon, how high would you say the CCTV camera was located?”

I pictured the room in mind.

“About nine or ten feet. Why?”

“In my opinion the culprits were the Norwegians. Do you agree?”

“Undoubtedly. In this instance William of Ockham was dead right. If the window of opportunity occurred when the Norwegians were in the salon, if the Norwegians were the last in the salon, if they left immediately after their tour of the salon, the culprits are. . .the Norwegians.”

“Frankly, I cannot see how any of the ship’s personnel, or any of the people connected with the tour, could have been responsible for the actual theft,” remarked Roger. “Those who went ashore early were thoroughly screened, and, since then, every cabin and likely hiding place has been

thoroughly searched. Although. . .someone might well have been helping them in some way.”

“What an inside helper?”

He nodded.

“What is more, the camera was tested, and there was nothing wrong with it. So. . .they must have covered it in some way. Probably, just draped a cloth over the lens. Now the question is. . .how did they reach the camera when it is that high? Think about it. If one of them had been lifted up by the other two, they would have had to stand close to the camera. Yet, how did they manage to miss breaking the laser beam? No images of the thieves appeared on the recording before it stopped transmitting. So, whoever laid a cloth over the camera, had to be able to stand clear of the beam, yet approach the camera at a sufficiently oblique angle to avoid his image being captured.”

“So. . .you’re saying what exactly?”

“Nothing for the moment. Just trying to exhaust all the possibilities. Now, let us go and eat, my friend. I’ll shall feel better with a good meal inside me.”

At Roger’s insistence we arrived at the cruise liner before the opening time for public viewing. Though, already a queue was forming.

After being subjected to close scrutiny by the security people, we made our way to Harvey Munro’s office.

He came round his desk to greet us.

“Morning. . .you’re earlier than I expected,” he remarked. “Can I help you in any way?”

“Mr Munro. . .” Roger started.

“Call me Harvey,” he interjected.

“Harvey, do you have a carpenter on board?”

He looked puzzled. "We sure do. . ."

"Good! Can someone take me to him?"

Munro looked perplexed, but he did not query the request. He called through to the next office.

"Ted. . .can you come in here a minute!"

Philby joined us, and listened to Munro explain what we wanted.

"Follow me, gentlemen," grinned Philby, and we set off into the bowels of the ship.

A half an hour later, Munro, Rozanski, the security chief, Roger and I were in the Impressionists' salon.

"OK, Jeff, keep your eye on the screen."

"Can I have a quick word with him, Harvey?" asked Roger.

Munro passed the cell phone to him.

"I'm just checking with you that the laser beam is on, and that you tell Mr Munro of any image or shadow on the screen before it goes off-line, OK?"

He passed back the cell unit.

"Right, give me a hand, Alan."

Leaning against a wall were two upright lengths of wood, fashioned into stilts.

I held them steady while Roger mounted the hastily-constructed platforms. He walked up and down the corridor a few times to get his balance, murmuring. "I haven't done this in years."

One more circuit, and he ducked under the door, and keeping close to the rope moved into the salon. Short of where the painting had once hung he lifted his right leg, clearing the beam with ease. He was now straddling the rope as well. More slowly he inched along the wall, below and to the right of the camera.

From a pocket he withdrew a black piece of material.

Moving even more slowly he carefully raised an arm, and in one fluid movement dropped the cloth over the camera, completely obscuring the lens.

Munro came into the salon.

“Jeff didn’t see a thing, Roger! Well, I’ll be damned! So that was how it was done.”

“But what did they use for stilts, do you think, Roger?” I commented.

He turned to Rozanski.

“You said they carried leather cylinders containing their maps the whole time. How long were they?”

Rozanski thought for a moment.

“A good metre. . .probably more.”

“How tall were these Norwegians?”

“Johansen was the tallest. About Mr Cleverden’s height. . .six one, six two.”

“And build?”

“Much lighter than you.” He said, again turning in my direction.

The officer considered the question, while stroking his chin.

We had been at the airport for thirty minutes before the man who had checked the Norwegians and their luggage was found.

“I remember looking at them initially, and thinking they were elaborate pieces just to hold maps. But, I suppose to maritime people, they are precious commodities. I couldn’t work out how to unfasten them, until one of the Norwegians came to my aid. He undid a couple of zips, and there they were inside. . .maps, several of them, in a roll.”

“Were the leather cases strong enough to carry a man’s weight?” I ventured.

“Possibly. . .no, on reflection, definitely. They had an aluminum inner tube, which would have considerably strengthened the sides to prevent buckling. Why do you ask?”

“Just a random thought.”

“I still say they had help on the inside,” muttered Roger, as I paid the cab driver, and caught up with him as he strode towards the liner.

We took the gangway for use by the ship’s personnel, cleared security, and made our way to Munro’s office.

“If we are going to tackle that theory, you’d better let me do the talking,” I remarked. “You are too direct, and we can’t afford to alienate these people.”

Surprisingly, he shrugged. “OK. . .I’ll leave it to you.”

Ted Philby looked up when we entered the outer office, rose to his feet and tapped on Munro’s door.

“Yes?” came the muted reply.

Philby put his head round the door, and mumbled something I didn’t catch. However, a moment later, Munro appeared and beckoned towards us.

“Gentlemen, come in, come in. Do you know Mr Weir? He is the Courtauld Institute insurer I mentioned came aboard the other day.”

We shook hands, and introduced ourselves.

“Well, I sincerely hope you fulfil the task our mutual client has set you. Mr Munro and I are counting on it. He, to save the reputation of the event, and I to save paying out the market value of the painting, which is not inconsiderable.”

“What would it be worth if it came up for auction?” asked Roger.

“Conservatively, in the order of a hundred million dollars,” replied the assessor.

For a moment Roger was taken aback. Then he blurted out. “Harvey, the more we consider the theft, the more we are convinced the Norwegians were the culprits. But, they would have needed help. . .”

Munro looked up sharply. “How d’ya mean?”

“They would have been aware of the gap in security when the ship was docking. . .of the laser beam set just behind the guard ropes. . .of the field of cover by CCTV camera. . .and most certainly, how to dispose of the painting before they caught their plane.”

For a moment, Harvey Munro stared at him intently. Then angrily, he exclaimed, “You mean someone on the inside gave them the information! No way! What sort of a half-arsed comment is that, for Chrissake!”

“Harvey,” I moved between them, trying to ease the antagonism that had flared up. “Stop for a minute. . .can you think of any incident, however minor, that, at the time, pulled you up short. That was slightly out of context. Anything at all?”

He moved slowly back to his desk, and plumped down in the chair.

“There are always odd happenings, unexplained incidents, that occur when setting up an event,” he murmured. “This one, ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’, was no different. They happen all the time. You just have to work around them.”

He paused. “Something unexpected did happen that first day in Québec. An elderly gentleman, toppled over the rope barrier, and triggered the alarm when he broke the laser beam. Rozanski’s people were there in an instant, and pulled the fellow back behind the rope. We ignored it at the time, putting the fall down to his age. . .but he was insistent he was pushed.”

Munro stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Then there was another occasion when I came aboard ship and the security guard said, ‘back so soon?’ I asked him what he meant, and he told me I had left barely five minutes

earlier. At the time I put it down to a computer error. . . and thought no more about it.”

“Could the guard have made a mistake?” Roger enquired.

“No. . .not really. . .I gave him my identity card, which, as you know, is read by the computer. Everyone with authorised access has one. Mine is with me the whole time on the end of this.”

He lifted the white plastic card on its blue ribbon.

“Could someone have got hold of it?”

“No, I always have it on me, or close by. At night I take it off and put it in the bedside drawer. The only occasion I ever left it behind was when Frank Masters, a vice-president of Carnival, the company that owns the ship, and I stayed in an hotel in Boston. When we went out for a meal, I left it in the room.”

He sat there in silence for a moment.

“Do you think someone copied it?”

Roger leaned over. “Can I have a closer look at it, Harvey?”

He took it from around his neck and handed it over.

Roger studied the card for several minutes.

“Hm. . .simple enough to copy. In fact, all someone would need is a strong light and a good camera. The work of a moment. How long ago was it you stayed the night in Boston?”

“It was the 12th of May. I clearly remember the date.”

“OK. . . then can you remember your room number, or the floor it was on?”

“Both. . .it was six one nine, on the sixth floor of the Lenox Hotel.”

The police in the States are much more approachable, and helpful when works of art are stolen, simply disappear, or are held to ransom. It may be

lack of manpower in the UK, but, to a large extent the British police will note the situation in an Incident Book, issue a reference number, and leave it largely to the insurance companies own investigators to trace missing objects.

Burton of the Philadelphia Police Department had contacted his opposite number in Boston, and I volunteered to fly up there and meet Detective McNally at their headquarters on Schroeder Plaza, in the south of the city.

He was a man of average height, balding, with the cast to his eyes suggesting he had seen the worst and not much of the best of life. But he was welcoming, and we spent thirty minutes drinking coffee while I explained our role in attempting to pick up the trail of a painting worth close to a hundred million dollars.

How they did it was currently exercising our minds, and I was in Boston attempting to discover how someone planning the robbery might have broken into a room at the Lenox Hotel and stolen an organiser's identity.

"And you would like me to accompany you to the hotel, adding a sense of purpose to your quest. Is that it?" he said smiling at the thought.

"That's about it," I smiled back.

"OK. . .As it's Mike Burton who asked if I'd help, you've got my support, mister."

We travelled in a police cruiser, and just before drawing up in front of the building, the driver let the siren wail briefly.

He grinned over his shoulder. "It livens things up. . .gets people ready to cooperate."

In the lobby I headed for the concierge with McNally in tow. If ever you need to see beneath the surface of an hotel, to learn of its inner workings – from the fabric of the building to the people who work in it - always speak first with the concierge. It was one of Roger's dictums.

A smiling face greeted me.

“Good morning, sir. Can I help you?”

It was delivered in a measured tone, ready to tell me of the sights of Boston, how to get anywhere, and the weather for the day.

McNally stepped in front of me, and discreetly showed the man his badge.

“We would like to put a few questions to you, and as I know you will have ready answers, this will only take a few minutes. Got it?”

The smile disappeared from the concierge’s face.

He nodded uncertainly.

“What do you want to ask, Mr Cleverden?” murmured McNally.

“This would have happened on 12th May. A man checked in at approximately fifteen after five, and was given room 619. Can you tell me if any other guests checked in around the same time, and were given rooms on the sixth floor?”

“One moment, sir. I’ll check on the computer.”

He studied the screen intently.

“Yes, two other gentlemen, sir. One at seventeen after five, and another at twenty after five. Their names were Masters in six twenty, and Simpson in six twenty three.”

“Can you give me their home addresses?” asked McNally.

The concierge wrote them on an hotel notepad.

“Tell me, how would I break into a room on the sixth floor. Would it be difficult?” I queried.

“It would be for a locksmith, possibly not for a computer hacker. But even he would find it difficult. The only way to get into a room, other than your own, is to steal the plastic card from a cleaner, or take it from an open door to a room while she is servicing it. But at the hour these guests arrived, room cleaning would have finished long ago.”

“Mm. . .would it be possible to see the layout of the sixth floor?” I said to the concierge. “Just so I can get a picture of the proximity of the rooms.”

The concierge told his assistant to man the desk while he accompanied us. Coming out the elevator we walked the short distance to the rooms in silence.

“Six nineteen, sir,” said the concierge. “And next to it, six twenty.”

As we walked further along the wide, corridor, a woman dressed in the hotel livery approached us.

“Can I help, Mr Andrews?” she asked.

“No, it’s all right, Mrs Russell.”

He turned to McNally and me. “Mrs Russell is the housekeeper for this floor.”

He turned back.

“These two gentlemen are from the police department, and are following up an enquiry. We were just viewing the scene of the crime.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that, sir,” muttered McNally. “We are investigating an art theft, and have reason to believe one of the culprits stayed here, on this floor, a month ago.”

I moved towards the door of six nineteen.

“Tell me, Mrs Russell, a few weeks ago, did anyone ever ask you to open this door?”

The woman stared at me. . .then nodded slowly.

“Why, yes. The gentleman had left the door card in his room. I asked his name, I can’t remember what it was now, but it tallied with the guest list. I used my master card to let him in.”

I glanced at McNally.

“Do you remember what he looked like?” asked the detective.

“I guess he was about your height. I remember now, he wore heavy-framed glasses, and his hair was a mass of curls, going grey at the sides.”

“When he spoke to you,” continued the policeman, “did he have any sort of accent. Was he American?”

“I guess he was American. . . though there was something slightly different in the way he spoke, even though he uttered very few words. Sorry, I can’t tell you much more than that.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs Russell, you’ve given us more than enough,” I said thoughtfully.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“That’s how, whoever it was, got on the ship. Moreover, we don’t know how many times he did it. But enough, clearly, to build up a picture of the security system, the layout of the salons, ways to overcome the invisible laser beams, and to spirit away Manet’s painting.”

As I reported what I had discovered in Boston, Harvey Munro’s face slowly took on a look of anguish.

“What have I done. . .what have I done?” he murmured.

“Listen Harvey, it wasn’t your fault,” I said, trying to offer some small comfort. “When people like that are abroad, and are prepared to go to such lengths, little can stop them. Isn’t that right, Roger?”

“What?. .oh!, yes. . .absolutely.”

Munro looked up. “Thanks, Alan, but I don’t see that way. I’ve got to get that painting back. My reputation is on the line here.”

“Leave that problem to Roger and me, Harvey. You concentrate on keeping all the works of art intact until after the auction, and they are shipped back to museums, galleries and private collections.”

At the Courtyard Hotel that evening we discussed our next move.

“Well, it is now all too obvious the Norwegians pulled off the theft, and very efficiently,” remarked Roger. “There must have been at least five or six people involved. Besides our disappearing trio, there was someone who impersonated Munro, and plotted the heist. Then, there must have been another to whom they passed the Manet between leaving the ship and

arriving at the airport. Perhaps, the cab driver who drove them was in on it?”

“Doubtful, Roger. Any number of cabs were arriving and leaving the pier. From what I understand, a cab discharged some of the liner’s personnel, as they got out, the Norwegians got in. Far too random to be planned.”

“Well, whatever happened, the key to it all are the Norwegians. *Cherchez les matelots!*”

“OK,” I murmured thoughtfully. “But before we do, I want to find out exactly where the Sea Empress is being taken for its refit. Someone mentioned Hamburg. But we should know the yard, just in case we need to take another look at the vessel when it’s being stripped down prior to refurbishment.”

“Well we can’t do much more here,” said Roger. “We should move on to Miami now, and hopefully greet the sea captains when they return from their holidays. Though, with their share of the theft, I don’t place much store on them turning up.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He was wrong.

They did turn up in Miami.

At least the real ones did.

We had arranged to meet the Norwegian Cruise Lines operations director, who had been made fully aware of the need to talk with his officers. Once again, we were accompanied by a detective. This time, from the West Miami Police Department.

We were greeted with the news that early that morning, Captains Johansen, Larson and Olsen had been found standing outside the Miami headquarters of Norwegian Cruise Lines.

Escorted into the building, they had no recollection of where they had been for the past few weeks, or how they had got to the building on Corporate Center Drive. The last they remembered was taking a cab to the airport to fly to Philadelphia. Neither did they did recall taking the holiday they had planned.

The director told us they had been taken for examination to the Mercy Hospital overlooking Biscayne Bay.

Eventually, we were allowed to see them.

Though the doctor warned us they could remember little of what had occurred during the past fortnight. He explained the blood tests revealed that a mix of anaesthetics and heavy doses of benzodiazepines had been regularly administered.

“What are [benzodiazepines](#)?” asked Roger.

They are drugs used most often in medical procedures,” observed the doctor, “when you need patients to be responsive during surgery. They are not unconscious, but sedated, and are in what is known as a ‘twilight state’. Relaxed, sleepy, and yet able to follow simple directions given by the surgeon. Generally, twilight anaesthesia causes patients to forget the surgery for a period immediately afterwards.

“Obviously, in this case the drug has been used to leave their short-term memory totally blank. Hopefully, not too much has been administered, for then we could have a problem on our hands.”

It was exactly as he said.

The questions we posed were met with blank stares, and a total lack of comprehension.

Eventually, we gave up.

Outside their room I said to the doctor. “When the drug wears off, will they recall anything of their recent activities?”

“Doubtful. It happens sometimes, when perhaps they have not had any great quantity administered. But these guys were drugged constantly during the past fifteen days. It might happen that something triggers faint recall, but I wouldn’t put any money on it. It’s probably locked in here forever.”

He tapped the side of his head.

“Even with hypnosis they probably wouldn’t be able to recall what they’ve been up to. Sorry.”

“I’ve revised my thinking about numbers,” said Roger.

We had booked into the Four Seasons Hotel for the night, just two kilometres north of the hospital. At the breakfast table we were reviewing our next move.

“In what way?”

“I reckoned the art thieves had a couple of helpers in Philadelphia. But to keep the real cruise liner captains incarcerated somewhere, clinically sedated, and at the same time fed and watered, it would have required three, possibly four more people’s involvement. And clearly, someone with medical knowledge.”

I put down my knife and fork, thinking through what Roger had said.

“You could well be right,” I murmured. “A regular team . . .not an ad hoc affair involving outsiders. I wonder. . .”

Roger stared at me intently.

“You’re thinking of Sophia Linard aren’t you?”

I nodded. Sophia and I had been students at the Courtauld Institute of Art. We had been close, though, at the time, not as close as I would have welcomed.

Eventually, she had almost been my nemesis, when she decided her talents could be used more effectively liberating works of art for wealthy individuals.

Her aim had been to acquire the reins of an existing organisation that specialised in such work; and with the help of Nikos Ioannidis, an heir to a shipping fortune, she had succeeded in doing so. She had even acquired the home of the previous master thief, and now lived on the shores of Lake Lucerne.

I still had a soft spot for Sophia, whose real name was Sofia Linardki; and I believed the feelings were reciprocated. Though the acquisition of wealth was the more dominant force in her make-up.

I still kept in touch, the occasional phone call or email, even though we were now on opposite sides of the fence.

“Perhaps, it might be worthwhile giving her call,” added Roger. “I don’t believe she masterminded this little caper. From what I can determine, there

are too many loose ends, too much left to chance. . .that's certainly not her style."

"Maybe I should," I replied thoughtfully. "She may know something. I'm sure she keeps a watchful eye on the competition."

He gave a wry smile. "To be honest, I think it's a forlorn hope. I doubt she would shop her rivals. . .they all have too much to lose."

I pushed the plate away, I had almost finished anyway.

"But it's worth a try. Give me a minute. I'll go into the lobby to make the call. What time is it in Switzerland?"

Roger glanced at his watch. "It's eight o'clock here, so it must be two o'clock in the afternoon in Lucerne. She is probably having lunch."

It rang for so long I was about to hang up.

"Oh, it's you, Alan, I was just having lunch. How are you?"

"Fine. . .and you?"

She gave that throaty chuckle I remembered so well.

"Is this a social call? Just checking how I am, or do you want something?"

"Well, yes, I wanted to ask you a question about your competitors. Tell me, do you know of anyone involved with the stolen *A Bar At The Folies Bergère*?"

"Is this from the ship, the floating gallery? Are you working on that one? Is Roger with you?"

"Yes, and yes, we are working together. To be honest, I thought you just might have an idea who might have masterminded the theft."

"Where are you phoning from?" she enquired.

"From the USA, I'm in Miami."

"Well, that's as good a place as any to start. There are several organisations like Nikos' and mine, and one of them operates from Miami. Although, from what I've heard, it has a Scandinavian flavour."

“What have you heard?”

“Just rumour and hearsay. . .nothing concrete. Look, as it’s you, I’ll ask around. I’ll speak with my people, who may have picked up something on the grapevine.”

She gave another chuckle. “I’ll bet you thought it might just possibly be me, and was probing to find out if I had organised the painting’s disappearance.”

“Actually, no. You’re a much better planner. You wouldn’t have taken the risks these people seem to have done.”

There was a lightness to her voice when she said. “Alan, give me a couple of days and I’ll get back to you.”

There was a click. She had disconnected.

I made my way back to the table, and recounted the conversation.

“There’s such an outfit right here in Miami, is there?” Roger observed. “That’s interesting. So did the trio fly to Oslo, or did they slip out a convenient side door at the airport, and are still in America? We’ve got to discover exactly where they went, Alan. That could well be the clue who was responsible for the theft.”

“Well, after they checked their luggage,” I remarked, “the immigration official at Philadelphia Airport said he saw them in the departure lounge for the British Airways flight to London. One of the fake captains mentioned they were taking a BA connecting flight to Oslo. So let’s speak with our friendly policeman, Mike Burton, in Philadelphia. Hopefully, we can persuade him to get the official to ask British Airways people at London Heathrow if they actually boarded the Oslo plane.”

Three hours later Mike Burton phoned back.

We were in a cab on the way to the Mercy Hospital. Roger and I were making yet another attempt to discover if the three Norwegian Line captains had even the faintest memory of their kidnapping.

“The immigration guy came good,” he reported. “They did get the British Airways flight to London. Here’s the crunch. Apparently, they cancelled the one to Oslo, Conceivably, they’re still in London.”



Library Sec

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We had lost them. Now our task was even more difficult.

I was disappointed.

Not only had the trail suddenly gone cold, but when talking with the cruise liner captains in a private room at the hospital, all we achieved were blank stares, shrugs, and helpless looks from all three of them. Yet, somehow, I held onto a belief that they just might give us something. . . anything, that would give us a clue to their captors.

“I think we’d better head back to Philadelphia,” said Roger dejectedly. “The Sea Empress will be there for another few days, and there just might be something we’ve missed on board ship. At least we could look while it sails for Miami. It would be better than kicking our heels waiting for the liner to arrive here.”

I wasn’t keen to let go.

“I’m not so sure. . . I still feel that as the drug-induced state of the captains diminishes, we could get something out of them.”

Even though the medical evidence clearly indicated they had been held in a drugged state for some time, now that the effects were wearing off, I had expected some reaction. A tiny glimmer of awareness as to their whereabouts, even a hazy description of their keepers.

I had even harboured the thought they might be playing an elaborate game, showing surprise and bewilderment that they had lost some days of their lives.

“Look, give me another twenty-four hours. Wait until tomorrow. If they show no change, then, OK, we’ll go back to Philadelphia.”

However, when I went to the hospital on my own the following day, I found that the doctors had brought in an hypnotist to break into their unconscious minds. Alas, without success. The void in their memories remained intact.

On the plane, Roger asked the question he had voiced several times over the past few hours.

“So. . .what do we do now? After Miami, do we go back to London and try to pick up the trail? Or do we stay here, in the States?”

I had uttered the same response.

“Let us wait until I hear from Sofia.”

“You can’t rely on her! She’s one of them! They may be rivals, but they close ranks when outsiders attempt to pry into their secrets!”

The afternoon flight by Frontier Airlines got us to Philadelphia, and we climbed the gangway to face the most rigorous assessment before being allowed on board.

By now it was early evening, and still visitors were parading through the salons

Harvey Munro was in his office, and the sight of us brought a brief glimmer of hope to his face. Though, it faded quickly when we broke the news. The genuine Norwegian captains had been drugged, and could not recall anything of their abduction. Moreover, the impostors had flown to London. . .and simply disappeared.

“Geez. . .am I in the mire! The owner’s insurance company is threatening to lay the blame, and the costs, on me for a security failure. Who has that kinda money?”

At the Courtyard Hotel I went to bed early that night.

Not that I slept well.

It was dark when my cell phone chirped.

“Yes!” I said. On reflection it was more of a bark.

“My, are you always this grumpy of a morning? Perhaps it was a good thing I never stayed over at your place.”

“Hello, Sofia. Do you know what time it is here? It’s. . .” I glanced at the phone, “four o’clock in the morning!”

“It’s ten here. If you wish I’ll phone back later.”

“No, no, do you have something?.”

“I’m not certain it helps. But for your information, the only organisation that has the wit and ability to carry off such a heist is located in Helsinki. Before I give you a name, there is a mutual arrangement we have to come to.”

“Oh? OK, what do you want from this?”

“The name and location of his client. I may be able to provide something else he or she yearns for.”

“That’s aiding and abetting possible theft. I couldn’t do that, Sofia.”

“No? Right, goodbye, Alan.”

“No. . .no. . .wait a minute. OK, I agree. You give me the name, and I’ll find out the client for you.”

“That’s a commitment, Alan. I don’t ask this lightly. . .although I do trust you. Don’t let me down. There are a few individuals in Norway, and even in Sweden, but they are not of the calibre of one Aarni Karppinen. His operation works out of Helsinki. If you like, I’ll email you his address.”

“So, if they actually work for this fellow, Karppinen, perhaps they flew somewhere else,” I ventured.

“Mm. . .I wonder if we could use Detective Burton again to find out if they took another flight?” Roger mused.

I had left Roger to his own devices at Philadelphia Mills, a large shopping complex catering largely for women's fashion. At least, he was looking at dresses for the more mature.

I had taken a cab out to the Brandywine River Museum Of Art, twenty miles west of the city. I have long been an admirer of Andrew Wyeth, a [realist](#) painter working predominantly in a [regional](#) style. He was one of the best-known American artists of the mid 20th century.

In his art, Wyeth's favourite subjects were the land and people around his hometown of [Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania](#). The museum had maintained the character of his home and studio, and featured many of the paintings he had created. Totally absorbed, I must have been there about three hours when my cell phone rang.

"Wherever you are," stated Roger, "get yourself back to the ship."

The three of them were in Munro's office.

Roger, Detective Burton, and Harvey Munro.

I took the spare chair next to Roger. Turning in his direction, I asked. "Did you get the dress you wanted?"

"I got three," he replied. "You wouldn't believe the prices I got them for."

The other two stared at Roger, as if seeing him in a different light.

"They're for his *alter ego*. . .a fancy dress party." I explained, smiling at the thought.

"Anyway, now you're here, listen to what Detective Burton has to say," he said testily.

I sat up straight and looked across at Mike Burton.

"I contacted immigration at the airport once again. It was a different guy on this occasion. In fact, it was the head man there. I explained what one of

his people had done in following the trail of the three wanted men.”

He looked around at each of us.

“At first, he was unwilling to help. To spend time making phone calls, sending emails, getting involved. He said, quite emphatically, neither he, nor anyone else in his department, had the time to do police work. I excused myself for a moment, and spoke with Mr Munro.”

He grinned, and glanced across the desk at Harvey.

“When I got back to his office minutes later, he completely changed his mind. . .he was eager to help.”

“I simply told him it was in the best interests of the country,” Munro murmured. “That, and the promise of four tickets to ‘The Sail of The Millenium’.”

“Good move, Harvey,” grinned Roger.

Burton continued his story.

“Well, I have to tell you our three Norwegians slipped up. They probably thought they were home and dry once they got to London,” he said with a grim smile. “As we know, they cancelled their flight to Oslo, but, would you believe, they took a plane bound for. . .where do you think?”

“Helsinki.” I answered.

“Right! How the hell did you know that?” Burton glanced sharply at me.

“Lucky guess, I suppose.”

“Mm. . .well anyway, we were fortunate. The slip up they made was to book the flight with the same airline, British Airways. If they had gone elsewhere, to another carrier, we would never have discovered their destination.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Roger had a long conversation with the people at Restitution; and when the ship docked in Miami we flew back to England. A few days later both of us attended a meeting with Restitution and representatives of the Courtauld Institute.

Roger reported all we had learned during our time in the States. Finishing with the belief that a Finnish organisation, noted for acquiring stolen works of art for wealthy clients, was the prime suspect.

Having discussed it at length, Roger and I were of the opinion that, as yet, the painting had not got as far as Finland. Thus, the conclusion at the end of the meeting was that we should undertake surveillance of the Karppinen enterprise in Helsinki, and attempt to retrieve the painting, if and when the opportunity allowed..

On reflection, it seemed a tall order. How do you maintain a round-the-clock watch with just two people.

“We’ll have to co-opt some people to help us out. Do you think. . .?” muttered Roger.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I interrupting him. “I’m going down to see my mother at Mead Court this weekend, I’ll broach the subject then.”

Because of the need for someone to observe Karppinen’s movements as soon as possible, Roger took the first available flight to Helsinki. I took a taxi to St George’s Square.

I was walking up the stairs to my apartment when the door opened on the first floor and Ingrid Jakobson stopped me.

“Mr Cleverden, can I have a word?” she said in an accent I had not yet been able to place.

“Of course. . .how can I help?”

“You have hot water, yes?”

“Yes, of course. Don’t you?”

“Not all the time. Sometimes when I want to shower, all I get is cold water.”

“Have you spoken with the letting agency. They will correct the problem for you. That’s what they’re paid for.”

She nodded. “That’s what I expected. I called them on the phone. Then I visited their offices, I have even written to them. They promise to sort it out. . .but so far they have done nothing. I’m going out shortly, and I was wondering. . .if you have hot water, could I use your bathroom? I shall be very quick.”

“Of course, Miss Jakobson, and I shall also speak with the agent concerned on your behalf.”

“Thank you, Mr Cleverden,” she smiled. “May I use it now?”

“Be my guest.”

When she came out the bathroom I made sure she could smell the coffee.

“Would you care for a cup, I’ve just made some?”

She was dressed in a long bathrobe, blonde hair pinned up, and clutching at her towel in indecision. She had this aura of freshness about her which I found enchanting.

“I’m not dressed properly, Mt Cleverden. Perhaps, another. . .”

“Look, sit down there.” I pointed to a settee. “ I’ll bring it in to you. It will only take a minute.”

I turned and walked into the kitchen before she could dismiss the offer.

She left nearly an hour later. By that time we were on first name terms. I discovered she was Estonian, studying at University College London for a doctorate in Archaeology.

The hour had gone all too quickly.

I did phone the agent, and indicated that while there was a problem, and someone should come round immediately to identify the fault, there was no great hurry to fix it.

McKenna, my mother's recently-acquired second husband, met me at Gillingham Station to ferry me the eight miles to Mead Court, in the hamlet of Melbury Abbas.

Since I was a child, when he had been my grandfather's helpmate and companion, he had always been known simply as McKenna. Now he was my step-father, I wondered at first if a different relationship might exist. But nothing seemed to have changed.

When mother and I came to live at Mead Court after my father died, he would drive me to and from school. Few words were ever exchanged between us.

But, he was more than a hired help. When grandfather died, mother relied on him heavily. McKenna had a quick mind and a good business sense, which mother recognised, and appointed him the general manager of the family haulage company in Blandford Forum.

Although I did notice, after they were married, he was much more forthcoming. Clearly marriage had drawn him out. He was far from the taciturn Scotsman I had always thought him to be.

"So, how are you, laddie? Are you busy writing epics for that newspaper? Or are you doing a grand television special for this new company you're working for?"

“Yes, I’m still writing for the Art Newspaper. In fact, if you don’t mind I’ve got to finish a piece over the weekend. It won’t take me more than a couple of hours.”

He nodded. “And the television?”

“This new arrangement is even better, and if Sky Arts take some of the material, I could be back on the British screens in the near future.”

I no longer worked for the BBC fronting art programmes. Instead I was now one of a team of presenters at ARTE, a TV company based in Strasbourg. Financed largely by French and German interests and a hint of EU support, the company put out a range of programmes connected with the arts. As I speak French and German, they had given me the opportunity to do a series called, ‘Life of the Artist.’

The first, about Jan Vermeer, was due to be filmed in the very near future. However, at the moment, that was not uppermost in my mind.

“Well, I must say things are pretty peaceful at the moment,” said McKenna, changing gear. “I no longer go over to Blandford Forum every day, John Fielding is doing such a good job. He’s sharp and tuigseach. In fact, we are busier than ever. Aye, John’s nay gomerel.”

“Meaning?”

“Och, sorry. John is on the ball, he’s no idiot.”

When the Range Rover pulled up on the forecourt, mother came out to greet me. We hugged for a moment, before I looked into her eyes. They reflected serenity and contentment.

“So, how was your holiday in America, darling?”

“Actually, Mother, it was work, not play. Moreover, it was frustrating in the extreme.”

She took my arm. “Well, you must tell me all about it over lunch.”

I went first to the kitchen to say hello to Mrs Dimmock. She was another whom I had known since a child.

“Alan, it’s lovely to see you,” she cried enfolding me in a warm embrace.

She stood back and looked at me critically.

“You’ve lost weight. You can’t afford to lose anymore, otherwise you’ll look gaunt and undernourished. And you wouldn’t be a very good advert for my cooking. Now, go and sit down in the dining room, and I’ll bring you something to fill you up.”

The three of us had ham salad. Only, when I peered under the greenery, I realised there was twice as much meat as anybody else on my plate.

I had munched a good way through the salad before the subject of my time to the States came up again.

“You were saying dear. . .about your trip. It was business not pleasure,” remarked my mother.

“Yes, I was working with Roger. We were commissioned to locate a painting that has gone missing.”

“How do you mean, missing, laddie?” asked McKenna. “Are you saying temporarily misplaced. lost even. . .or stolen?”

“I’m afraid it was stolen.”

“I think I read something about a painting, a Manet, disappearing from a ship. Was that the one?” my mother queried.

“Yes, that one.”

I recounted the whole story. How impostors, posing as cruise liner captains, had come aboard, and during the docking procedures at Philadelphia they had somehow managed to remove the painting from its frame and make off with it.

“We now believe, Roger and I, that they were working for a Finnish organisation that is in the business of procuring works of art for wealthy

private collectors. Much the same as Horst Schendler, then Peter Engel, and now Sofia Linardki.”

“That woman is dangerous, Alan,” murmured my mother. “I know you had a soft spot for her, but don’t get involved with her again.”

I smiled at the thought.

“I don’t intend to mother. After all, she nearly shot me last time.”

“Well, learn your lesson from that,” she said sharply.

“So, what are you doing about these people in Finland, Alan?” asked McKenna. Putting his finger precisely on the key to our problem.

“I wanted to talk to you about that, McKenna. Roger has already gone to Helsinki, where this fellow, Aarni Karppinen, has his headquarters. He is setting up a surveillance post, so we can keep a close watch on the people involved.”

“What, just you and Roger?”

“Er. . . I was hoping to gain your help in some way. . .”

“No. . . I don’t want him to,” said mother. “Not after the last time. He was threatened by those horrible men. I’m sure these are equally nasty.”

“I wouldn’t expose him to any danger, Mother. All I need are an extra pair of eyes, so that we can keep the people and the place from which they operate, under scrutiny.”

“I’ll stay out of trouble, Suzanna. As Alan says, all they need me for is to keep watch. Nothing physical. That’s right isn’t it, Alan?”

He turned to me and gave a slow wink.

“Mm. . . I don’t like it. Knowing you, you’d be in the thick of anything that’s going on,” she muttered.

“Tell me, laddie, will it be just the three of us? That’s still not enough, surely? We ought to bring John Fielding with us, don’t you think? The way

he has got things running at Blandford Forum, he could be spared for a few days.”

On Saturday morning I took the Range Rover and drove over to the industrial estate at Blandford Forum. John was in the yard at the haulage depot, supervising the day’s activities.

“I’ll be with you in a minute, Alan. Get Jean to give you a coffee.”

Ten minutes later he came into the office, grinned at Jean when she handed him a mug, and said. “Good, that’s all sorted. Now, how can I help, Alan?”

John came over to Mead Court in the late afternoon.

I took him and McKenna into the orangery, sat them among the exotic plants and shrubs Grandpa Johns had cultivated, and told them of the plan of campaign Roger and I had devised.

I would join Roger in a few days time, once he had established where and how the surveillance would work. Then I wanted them to fly out to Helsinki, and to bring their golf clubs with them.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ingrid took a shower, while I made the coffee.

Sitting on the settee in her bathrobe she explained that someone had come to assess the problem in her apartment, and concluded that the hot water tank and immersion heater needed replacing. Unfortunately, it could take a few weeks to obtain the size of tank required to fit in the linen cupboard. She was apologetic, but would it be possible to use my bathroom in the meantime?

Naturally, I said. In fact, she could have my spare key, for I would be away for a while on business.

Two days later I took the underground train to Heathrow Airport.

However, during those two days she had showered in my place, and was quite at home sitting in my living room now drinking wine. Why did I have to go to Finland, leaving this gorgeous creature alone in my flat?

Before leaving I phoned Harvey Munro.

I felt obliged to offer him a crumb of comfort, and told him we were on the trail of the stolen painting, and should have some news in the near future.

He informed me the next port of call was Grand Bahama. Crowds had flocked to view the paintings in Miami, and the Carnival Corporation Board members had also come to enjoy the event. But for this cloud hanging over him, the venture would have been a rip-roaring success.

I said I would keep in touch, before ringing off.

Roger met me at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, and we took a taxi to the Hotel Grand Marina. He had taken a suite on the second floor, with a clear view of the one entrance to the building in Kanavakatu - Kanava Street –close to the docks in the Katajanokka district.

Karppinen's offices, studio and workshop were on the first floor, and Roger told me that ten to a dozen people worked there. He could see most of their activities quite clearly, even through the vertical blinds at the windows, which, seemingly, were never closed .

He had discovered that the Finn maintained a legitimate business of fine art restoration; and, from what he could judge, his employees were versed in all manner of conservation and repair.

It was soon evident Roger had not only secured the perfect observation post, he even had several pairs of binoculars, and night-time vision goggles to ensure nothing escaped our notice.

"Where did you get these?" I asked.

"I spoke with the hotel concierge, and he told me of a company out at Espoo. That's about twenty kilometres north-west of Helsinki. It's a warehouse, and would you believe, it's got everything we need for keeping tabs on what's going on over there."

I told him that both McKenna and John Fielding were standing by, ready to come to Finland.

"As you've got everything so well organised, Roger, I'll phone them now, and tell them to come as soon as possible."

"Anything else on your front?" asked Roger.

"I spoke to Harvey, tried to lift his spirits. . .and that's about it."

I did not mention Ingrid Jakobson. For the moment, it was something I wanted to keep to myself.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Roger and I took it in turns to watch the premises from early in the morning until late at night. The novelty of sitting in a convenient chair by the window, drinking coffee and eating sandwiches soon wore off; even though we were each doing two hour stints.

Two days later, Roger went off to the airport to collect McKenna and John Fielding.

Now it was easier. We would take up our vantage point about seven in the morning. If I were first, I would study the activities in Karppinen's studio until nine. With four of us watching, my next turn was at three o'clock in the afternoon. At the most I did two shifts a day, and periodically one, which left us time to explore the city, and reconnoitre Karppinen's home. This was a walled villa overlooking the bay on Kulosaari Island, about six kilometres from the city centre.

There was a steady flow of customers to Karppinen's premises during the first week we kept watch. On six occasions a large van disgorged paintings that seemingly needed attention. Whenever it drew up at the main entrance, close scrutiny with the binoculars confirmed that among the various works carried up to the first floor, none appeared to be Manet's *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*.

A few days after the observation pattern was established, Roger and I left the suite and went to lunch at the nearby Wanha Satama Brasserie.

"I must give Harvey Munro a ring," I said looking up from the menu. "The ship must have finished the tour by now. It should be docking in New

York, and unloading all the paintings not in the auction.”

Roger glanced at his watch. “You’re losing track of time, Alan. It’s the twenty-second already. It should be en route to Germany for the refit.”

“Where is it actually going for the refit?”

“Frank Masters of Carnival told me the Sea Empress was sailing to Hamburg. Though he didn’t mention the shipyard.”

“Mm. . .I wonder if the painting is still on the ship,” I mused.

The waitress served our meal, and both of us were silent, occupied with our own thoughts.

Roger drank from his beer glass, and casually remarked. “You reckon the painting might still be on the ship. What prompts that thought?”

“Nothing in particular. Though, just supposing it was on the ship the whole time, and likely to be retrieved when all the fixtures and fittings were removed prior to the refit.”

Roger stared at me for several seconds.

“You think that’s a serious possibility?”

“Well, the fake captains did not have it at the airport. Yes, they may have off-loaded it somewhere, but can we afford to ignore the likelihood the painting was hidden by someone on board ship, awaiting the ideal opportunity to spirit it away. If that’s the case, what better moment to do so?”

“Mm. . .I can’t imagine it’s still on board. But if you really think it’s a possibility, go ahead. So long as I don’t have to come with you. If you wish I’ll get the name of the shipyard from Frank Masters, and get him to arrange your visit.”

“Harvey. . .it’s Alan Cleverden, How are things?”

“Alan, well, ‘The Sail Of The Millenium’ has finished, and I’m back in New York. Any news of the painting?”

There was note of anxiety in his voice.

“Not yet, Harvey. not yet. But we are working on it. We have a strong lead, which hopefully, will point us in the right direction.”

“I sincerely hope so. Things are starting to get uncomfortable here. The Courtauld Institute’s insurance company and their legal people are piling on the pressure. I’ve been speaking with our lawyers, and if it comes to court, I’m not too sure how it might go.”

“What about claiming against the security company you used?”

“Yer, that’s been suggested. But it could leave a sour taste in the mouths of would-be exhibitors. Loss of the painting could scotch the idea of holding a similar event again. Mind you, if the claim against Munro Freeman were upheld, I would not be a position to do it again anyway. I’d be out of business, and flat broke. So, I’m really counting on you, Alan, to pull my nuts out the fire.”

“Blohm and Voss is the company doing the refit. It’s a big organisation sited almost on its own island in the River Elbe, just south of the city centre. Masters has contacted the operations people, they’ve already started removing much of the fixtures and fittings and putting them into storage. But you can go on board before they commence the major works in two days time. So, you’ve got forty eight hours to follow-up on your crazy idea,” declared Roger forthrightly.

In the end, much against his will, Roger came with me.

We arrived in Hamburg and booked into the Hotel Hafen Hamburg, on the north bank of the river.

The following morning he and I walked round to the St Pauli Elbtunnel, which, for the past hundred years, has been used mainly by pedestrians to cross under the Elbe. Now, more a visitor attraction, art exhibitions are frequently held in the tunnel.

When the lift rose to the ground level, we found ourselves outside the entrance to the Blohm and Voss yards. In the main reception area we were greeted by one of the operations team, who escorted us to the Sea Empress located in dry dock, Elbe 17.

On the sea the ship looked huge. Now out of the water, with all the hull exposed, it was gigantic. Moreover, instead of the gently sloping access gangway, it was now a set of steps up the side of the vessel. Suffering slightly from vertigo, it was a testing time for me until I was thankfully aboard.

Karl Schmidt, one of the company's naval engineers, took us through to the salons, at least that was what they once were. Now they were large empty spaces. The French Impressionists' room, formerly the gymnasium, looked uncomfortably bare.

"I suppose only a skeleton crew brought the ship across the Atlantic," remarked Roger.

"Yes, you need surprisingly few people to sail something like this. A dozen or so at the most," Schmidt explained.

"Do they wait in Hamburg for you to do the refit," I asked.

He grinned at the comment.

"No, it takes quite a few months to bring a cruise liner back into service. Everything has to be right, and that takes time. No, the captain, the staff captain, navigator and crew members flew back to the USA. They'll probably take a two or three week holiday, and when they come back on

duty, will probably be assigned to another ship. They don't stay idle for long."

Schmidt glanced at his watch.

"May I leave you gentlemen, briefly, " he said. "I need to speak with the foreman in charge of renovating the kitchens. That's one of the major works now in progress."

With bars, and fitness apparatus attached to the walls, it was clear nothing could have been hidden away in the gym. I went through to what was once the Renaissance Salon, which had panelled walls. I moved around the capacious room, tapping the walls, hoping to hear a hollow sound.

Nothing.

Roger had done the same in the other rooms, with the same degree of success. He did come across several cupboards,, which, alas, were empty.

When Karl returned an hour later, I was forced to admit the painting was not on the ship. Roger's stare was more damning than words. He had held to the belief the visit to the shipyard was a crazy notion, a waste of precious time.

"Tell me, Herr Schmidt, where do you store all the many free-standing items from the ship? Obviously, a great deal is kept, cleaned and returned to the cruise liner once the refit is complete."

"True, Mr Cleverden. Everything we can remove goes into our storage facility the other side of the shipyard."

"Would you mind taking us there?" I asked, glancing at Roger.

"If you wish, Mr Cleverden."

On the way, I walked alongside Karl Schmidt, ignoring the long-suffering glances of my colleague.

"How long does it take to clear a ship, Herr Schmidt?" I questioned.

“At least a week. It is very labour-intensive, for everything must be carried onto the decks, and a crane on the quayside loads the items onto a service vehicle. Then it is off-loaded, the furnishings covered in polythene sheeting and everything carefully stored in one of our buildings.”

Schmidt introduced Roger and I to the warehouseman, who led us through to where the many items from the Sea Empress were located. I translated what he was saying for Roger’s benefit.

“Get on with it, Alan, so we can get back to Helsinki,” Roger muttered.

“I won’t be long. I think we can ignore much of what is stored, I’ll just have a look at the apparatus from the gymnasium. It won’t take a minute.”

While Karl, the warehouseman, and Roger stood in one of the main avenues, I wandered down a side aisle, until I saw the gleaming chrome and grey steel of the various fitness machines. All manner of exercise apparatus was here. Used periodically by those on board ship, attempting to burn off the calories of over-indulgence.

With most of them I found it difficult to comprehend how they worked, or what muscles they brought into play. The only items whose function I could more readily understand were the running machines. Even so, these were large, heavy, and came with TV monitors, headphones, and a host of controls.. They were equipped with side rails, and the running platform was wide and at least two metres long.

Something orange caught my eye. No more than a speck on the dark, pristine floor. About a centimetre long, it was shaped as though a splinter. I bent down to examine it , and noticed several more specks of different colours under the side bar of the machine.

“Roger, come here a minute,” I called out.

In fact, the three of them joined me.

“What do you think that is?” I asked, holding up the speck of colour on the tip of my finger. Schmidt and the warehouseman shook their heads.

Roger looked at it for ten seconds or more, then muttered. “Is that a fragment of oil paint?”

I nodded. “Bend down here.”

In fact, we knelt by the side of a running machine, and I gently raised the rubberised track. It did not lift far, but it was enough. On the rollers were wisps of a thin plastic film, and more traces of paint.

The painting, *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*, had been on the ship the whole time, hidden under the running platform. It had not been in use, of course, for the gymnasium had been converted into an art salon.

Whoever, had stored it there must have bided their time until the ship reached Hamburg, and had now removed it.

“Do all the people you employ to clear a ship, before you begin the renovation, work directly for Blohm and Voss?” I queried with Schmidt.

“No, we could not carry that number of people just for clearance and re-installation. We use an agency for the times we need a large work force.”

“Could you let me have the name of the agency, please?”

“Guten Morgen, meine Herren, wie kann ich Ihnen helfen?”

A young lady came forward with a ready smile on her lips. I explained that Herr Schmidt had phoned to ask if the gentleman called Cleverden could check the names of those who had been sent to Blohm and Voss shipyard a few days ago. I was that gentleman, Alan Cleverden.

“Yes, I have the list ready. Come this way, please.”

She led us through to a room at the back of the office.

The document comprised four pages of names.

I carefully scanned each page, but there was no reference to any of them called Johansen, Olsen or Larsen.

“Do you have any Norwegians on your books?” I asked, staring at the pages.

“A few,” she replied. “But as Norway is outside the EU, we tend to favour German nationals, then those from EU countries.”

“What about Finland? That’s in the EU.”

“Yes, in fact, we had three Finns working on the Blohm and Voss contract. They are on the list.”

She took back the four pages and glanced through them.

“Yes, here they are. Korhonen, Virtanen, and Mäkinen. We shall not be employing them again. Two days ago they walked off the job.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Roger and I caught the first available flight back to Helsinki.

We walked into the hotel suite to find both McKenna and John peering intently through binoculars at the Karppinen studio in the building across Kanavakatu.

I had phoned from the airport to advise that the painting could be on its way. In my view, they would probably avoid travelling by plane with the intense scrutiny at airports. Leaving them the choice of driving through Denmark and Sweden, or by car across to Travemünde, ferry to Tallinn, and another ferry to Helsinki. If they opted for the latter, it would take them thirty-six to forty hours, if all the connections were in their favour.

So, two days from when they disappeared from the shipyard suggested their arrival was imminent.

The other worrying thought, constantly at the front of my mind, was if the painting did not arrive soon at Karppinen's offices, it would signify he was not involved, and I would have made one colossal error.

In fact, it was close to forty five hours, and well into the night when a car drew up outside the building opposite. The faint light that had been glowing in the studio, suddenly burst into brightness, and three men entered bearing a flat case, some one hundred and fifty by a hundred centimetres.

Roger and John had the binoculars, and I had bought a small video camera in Hamburg and began to film the painting's arrival.

In a sense, it was something of an anticlimax. From what I could gather little was said, the case was placed in a side room, doors were closed, the

lights extinguished, outside on the pavement they shook hands, one man walked away, and the trio got into the car and drove off.

“So was it the Manet that was delivered. . .or some other work?” John whispered.

We were still none the wiser. The only way we could verify if it were the painting was to break in and look in the case for ourselves.

The agent was obviously keen to sell or lease the property, that much was evident. We were looking at a suite of rooms on the first floor, adjacent to Karppinen’s premises.

Suddenly, the high-pitched scream of a saw punctuated the conversation. Though muted, it was a brief but intrusive noise, which was followed shortly by some hammering.

I said in German. “Is that the reason these rooms are not occupied?”

“It does not happen all the time. . .just occasionally,” the fellow said, almost accepting that we would not take it because of the carpentry taking place next door.

“But it could affect our telephone conversations at awkward moments,” I continued. “Not good for business.”

“You will have noticed how well-appointed the suite is, there is an alarm system already installed, and for what is offered, the price is most reasonable.”

“True, though the alarm is not an up-to-date system, I suppose it would be all right.”

My gaze was slow and deliberate as it took the surroundings.

“OK, I like the suite. So, what do you say to my company taking it initially on a three month lease, with the opportunity to extend the lease to the full term you are seeking thereafter. In that way we would be able to assess the level of interference from our woodworking neighbour.”

He readily agreed.

Later that day I signed the agreement, and paid five thousand Euros for a three month lease. Roger went to the warehouse in Espoo for recording equipment, listening devices, and some discreet bugs.

We moved McKenna in that night, when all was quiet next door. He was the obvious one out of the four of us, being the acknowledged lock expert.

He fixed the listening and recording devices to the wall immediately next to Karppinen's reception area, and set up the recorder in readiness. When we bade him goodnight, he retired to a portable bed and sleeping bag.

He phoned about ten minutes past eight, while I was with John at the breakfast table.

"I've got the sequence, laddie. Thought you'd like to know."

Little had the property agent realised that the key attraction in taking the suite was the alarm system, which was present in all the offices, studios and workshops in the building. I had emphasised its age. It was at least several generations behind the current sophisticated installations now on the market. But, in truth, it was ideal for our purpose.

Each key of the coded entry lock, when pressed, emitted a different tone.

As did the alarm system close to the receptionist's desk. McKenna had recorded all the tones of their entry and alarm system when Karppinen's people arrived that morning.

Now we had to wait to learn the closing sequences. Once we knew that, we could simply walk into the offices, studio and workshop next door. All we had to do was wait until nightfall, and walk across the road to discover if I had been right. . .or wrong.

I had been right.

The frayed edges of the painting, where it had been cut from its frame, were an upsetting reminder that the three impostors had no great love of art.

They were merely interested in removing the work as an exercise in theft: without any regard for its beauty, its inherent qualities.

I stared at it for several minutes. Almost inclined to remove it there and then.

“Come on , Alan, take the painting and let’s get out of here,” whispered Roger.

But, after being in the innards of a rowing machine, and ill-treated in its journey to Helsinki, the painting would be subject to serious conservation, and restored to a frame similar to the original, before being shipped out to its intended recipient.

We had time to put into operation a plan that had come to me that afternoon, during the waiting hours in our hotel suite.

“No. . .we now know it’s the right painting, and we can get at it whenever we wish. So I have an idea, which we can discuss back in the hotel.”

Roger looked at me as though I had another hare-brained scheme up my sleeve. But I had been proved right about the painting still being on the ship. He shrugged, and walked towards the door.

“Yes, I have seen them, and they are good. But would they fool Karppinen?” Roger put the question thoughtfully, adding. “And don’t forget his conservator could easily pick out a wrong’un.”

It was in response to telling him, McKenna and John, the plan I had in mind. My idea was to substitute my copy of the painting for the original just before it was dispatched.

“Not if it’s in the container, all ready to go,” I explained.

What they did not know was my pact with the devil. In this case, the devil being Sofia Linardki. I had promised that, in return for Karppinen’s name, I would make every attempt to identify the client for her.

Making the substitution was the only way I could think to draw him out.

McKenna remarked. “So, which one of us is going back to fetch the paintings?”

Roger’s reaction was immediate.

“No one can be spared at this critical moment. You’ll have to think of some other way, Alan.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I let it ring for some time before cancelling the call.

Then I had a thought and dialled my own number.

A rather breathless voice said, “Hello?”

“Ingrid, it’s Alan.”

“Hello, Alan. I was just taking a shower. I’m still damp, but I came into the living room to take the call in case there was an important message for you.”

Then, in the same breath. “Damn, I’ve left wet footprints on your carpet . . .sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll soon dry. Ingrid, can I ask a big, big favour? I need your help in a project I’m working on.”

“Of course, if I can.”

I took a deep breath. Here goes I thought.

“Ingrid, I need you to bring a painting to me. I wouldn’t trouble you normally, but then, this is an abnormal situation.”

“What, a painting from the wall of your apartment?”

“No, from my mother’s home in Dorset. I have already spoken to her, identifying the one I want. I have also told her someone might be coming down to Mead Court, which is the name of the house, to collect it. Would you do that for me?”

“Where are you, Alan? Are you in England?”

“No, I’m in Helsinki.”

“Oh. . . do I come by plane?”

“Yes, but my mother will organise the travel arrangements if you are free and can come out to me.”

There was a brief pause. Then she asked in a low voice. “It’s nothing illegal, is it, Alan?”

“No, no. I assure you it isn’t.”

Another pause. . . then. “OK, how do I get to Mead Court?”

“Let me give you my mother’s number. Tell her what train from Waterloo to Gillingham in Dorset you are on, and she’ll collect you from the station.”

“Right. How big is the painting?”

“Actually, on reflection, it will be two paintings. But don’t worry, they’ll be in a lightweight aluminium container, and without their frames. So easily carried with a shoulder strap. It won’t be cumbersome or too heavy.”

I hesitated for a moment. Although not the genuine articles, she could easily be questioned, perhaps even detained by the authorities at the airport.

“I was thinking, instead of coming back and taking a flight from London Heathrow, I’ll ask her to hire a plane for you from an airfield near where she lives. It will save time.”

I was there to meet Ingrid when she came through the arrivals door. I kissed her on the cheek, in gratitude for dropping everything and helping out, but, more telling, because of an overwhelming desire to do so.

In the taxi I asked about the flight, which she had enjoyed, having never flown in a small aircraft before. She also told me they had passed close to Tallinn, her home town; and she was sure she had spotted her parents’ home on the north east side of the city.

Ingrid then told me all that had happened after my phone call.

She had contacted my mother and made her way down to Dorset, where she was collected from Gillingham Station by McKenna. What is more, she stayed the night at Mead Court.

“What a splendid house your family has, Alan. . .and the grounds are beautiful.”

“Yes, my grandfather lived well when he was alive.”

I did not mention the haulage company in Blandford Forum, nor how he had acquired a good part of his wealth when in Germany during the Second World War. Having an art degree he had been seconded to the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives programme, and taken full advantage of the role.

“And the long gallery is remarkable. I didn’t know you could paint so well. The copies of the masters’ paintings are so close to the originals. I liked the idea of you adding below the inscription showing the title and the name of the artist, ‘in the style of’, ‘after’, or ‘copied from’.”

“It’s just a hobby, really,” I murmured.

Neither did I mention that when the originals had been removed from the long gallery for return to their rightful owners or surviving relatives, I had promised my mother to fill the walls once more with my copies. I had almost completed the task, although, now, I would have to replace the two works by Manet.

She then told me of the arrangements that had been made for the flight. The next morning mother had driven Ingrid, and the container, to Compton Abbas Airfield, and waved her away in a Cessna 402 twin-engined plane heading for Denmark, their first stop.

Four hours later the pilot touched down at Holbaek, a bustling private airfield with a grass strip sixty kilometres from Copenhagen.

After a light lunch, they took off once more, heading north east across Sweden and the open stretches of the Baltic Sea.

Another four hours brought them in sight of Helsinki.

Dropping through the cloud the pilot had swung out across the water to make an easterly approach to Helsinki-Malmi Airport. Closer to the city

than the international Vantaa field, the airport caters more for flying clubs and private planes. As a consequence, it was less likely for incoming flights to be subjected to intense scrutiny.

“Did it matter if they had checked the contents of the container?” she asked.

I avoided the question, for we had arrived at the Grand Marina Hotel.

A room had been reserved for her, and an hour later, having showered after the long flight, Ingrid tapped on the door of the suite we were occupying.

She must have been surprised to see the others, but she took it all in her stride as I made the introductions. When it came to Roger, she looked puzzled.

“Haven’t we met before?” Ingrid queried

“I don’t think so.”

Suddenly, she smiled at the memory.

“Yes, it was when you were coming up the stairs to Alan’s apartment. I came out my place and saw you.”

She then gave him a strange look, and changed the subject.

That evening the five of us ate in the hotel.

Over dinner I explained the whole story, how Roger and I worked together on locating works that have been stolen, or by some quirk of fate, simply disappeared. I also mentioned our more regular work. Roger was a private detective and I wrote for the Art Newspaper and presented art programmes for ARTE, the European TV culture channel.

Ingrid was intrigued.

“Do people actually steal works of art, and sell them to those who wish to own them. . .for no one else to admire?”

“All the time,” said Roger. “Most often their clients commission them to acquire specific items.”

She shook her head, not understanding the wiles and fancies of the super-rich, burdened with so much wealth.

“Let me get this right,” Ingrid said thoughtfully. “The people across the road actually removed the painting from the ship when it reached Hamburg, and brought it to their studio. They are now in the process of restoring any slight damage, and installing it in a frame similar to the original. So what happens then?”

“A little sleight of hand, my dear,” remarked McKenna. “It will happen just before it is dispatched to their client. The trouble is we don’t speak Finnish, so we are not exactly sure when that might be.”

“How could you possibly hear them from this distance?”

“First of all,” John explained, “we have rented the offices next door to the studio across the road. We had equipment that identified the codes for the entry and the alarm systems, and, in fact, we have been in their studio to confirm they actually have the Manet painting. We also bought some transmitters to listen in to their conversations, but as we haven’t a clue what they are saying, we haven’t bothered to install them.”

Ingrid glanced at me.

“I can understand Finnish,” she murmured. “At least the basic elements of the language. Most Estonians can, Finland is a close neighbour.”

That night McKenna and I installed the bugs.

There were a couple in the studio, one in Karppinen’s office, one in the gentlemen’s toilet, and another in the kitchen cum employees’ restroom. John confirmed on the mobile phone the recording machines were clearly picking up our test conversations.

Initially, Ingrid was translating most of the chatter taking place. But it was tiring: after an hour or so, she was only telling us of exchanges that were relevant.

At half past ten Karppinen arrived.

John isolated and tuned in to the bug in his office, situated behind a row of art journals on a bookshelf.

For the next half hour it was relatively peaceful. A secretary brought him a coffee; the workshop foreman had a query; and we heard him open the wall safe.

It was close to midday when the phone rang.

The conversation was in Russian.

“Bugger!” exclaimed Roger, “We didn’t allow for that. I wonder if it’s important?”

Ingrid turned towards him.

“Apparently, the fellow on the other end was asking when it would be ready for delivery. There was no hint of what he was talking about, until the parting words, which were, ‘how is the painting coming?’ Karppinen replied, ‘by car on Tuesday. It will be in Moscow Wednesday evening, when they collect me at Sheremetyevo Airport. I arrive at seven thirty, meet me there, and we’ll deliver it together’.”

I said. “That was impressive. I didn’t know you spoke Russian as well.”

She gave a bleak smile. “Almost all Estonians do. You should read the history of my country.”

We now knew the painting was leaving for Russia in two days time: which meant we must make the exchange tomorrow night, after everyone had left.

For some reason I was expecting something to go wrong. Not disastrously, just a hiccup, which would raise the tension when we made the exchange.

But everything went smoothly. McKenna and Roger went into next door's premises, and returned to our offices in minutes. McKenna used his skills to unlock the container, and I removed the original from its new frame, and inserted one of the paintings Ingrid had brought from Mead Court.

A half an hour later it was done,

The new work was wrapped, carefully eased into the container, and firmly secured by McKenna, our resident locksmith.

A few minutes later we left the building and returned to the hotel.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Someone was pulling my arm.

In my dream I pushed whoever it was away.

But they were persistent, and slowly I came to with Roger tapping me on the shoulder.

“For chrissake stop it! Go back to bed,” I hissed.

“Just thought I’d tell you they’re about to leave.”

“Who? Karppinen?”

“No, those taking the painting by road. You should see the car they are using, so you can identify it in Moscow, and the drivers as well.”

I clambered out of bed and went through to the sitting room.

Ingrid was already there, wrapped in an hotel robe.

“They’re not saying much,” murmured McKenna.

“From what I’ve gathered so far,” said Ingrid. “They are taking the ferry to Tallinn, driving down the E263, and crossing into Russia at Lütä. Thereafter, they’ll drive to Pskov, south on the E95, eventually picking up the M9 all the way to Moscow, where they’ll take the ring road north to Sheremetyevo Airport.”

“Well that’s comprehensive enough,” grinned John. “We can work out their approximate timing of every stage of their journey.”

I took up the binoculars and studied the faces in the windows of Karppinen’s well-lit studio, and then the registration of the white Nissan X-Trail parked in the street.

“I wonder if the couriers are the fake sea captains?” I muttered.

“Can we take some photos?” suggested McKenna.

John went to his room, and returned with a camera. He took a number of shots, though only a few showed the faces clearly. In most of them the features of the people were in deep shadow.

“I’ll get the hotel to run off some prints for you, Alan, before you leave,” John added. “They’ll help if there’s any uncertainty.”

“What I want to know is,” McKenna remarked, “how can they drive up to the border with what they believe is hugely expensive painting in the boot, and not get stopped.”

Ingrid turned towards him.

“Probably, the guards on duty at the crossing have already been notified to let the car through without checking it too thoroughly. They’ll go through the motions of asking them to get out the vehicle, and peer through the windows. Then they’ll stamp their documents, and let them pass. No doubt, a number of American dollars will change hands, and no questions will be asked.”

“Oh, as simple as that.” he humphed.

“As simple as that,” Ingrid gave a wry smile.

The next day Ingrid and I caught the early morning Finnair flight to Moscow.

Roger had pressed me several times why I needed to trace the recipient of the painting. Again I could not tell him it was the deal I had made with Sofia Linardki. She had given me the dealer’s name in exchange for that of Karppinen’s client. I had to find out, or at least make the effort, otherwise she would not be so forthcoming if ever I needed her help in the future.

Instead, I told him ‘know your enemies’. If there were the likelihood of reprisal, we should be aware from which quarter it might come.

An hour and forty minutes later we landed at Sheremetyevo Airport.

We headed for the Avis desk in Terminal D, and hired a Hyundai Solaris for two days. The rental representative could not understand when I explained I did not want it immediately, I would collect it at six thirty that evening. Regardless of when I drove it away, it would be booked out to me at midday.

We boarded the AeroExpress into the city; and at the Belorussky Terminal took a taxi to Tverskoy Boulevard, heading for a restaurant I had heard much about, the Café Pushkin.

It was, as I imagined, like being transported back in time. The décor, manners of the staff, the menu and the wine list, every detail, harkened back to the nineteenth century. Long before Communism stripped the country bare of its flamboyant past.

Ingrid and I ate a leisurely meal, and enjoyed a good Moldovan wine.

I asked her how long she would be in London doing her thesis.

“Another six months, then I shall return to Estonia and take a job at the University of Tartu.”

“Where’s that in relation to Tallinn?”

“It’s in the south-east of the country, about two hundred kilometres from Tallinn. I’ll get rooms in an anonymous apartment block,” she smiled. “Not like my flat in your house, Alan.”

I stared at her, and felt myself redden.

“Have you known for long?”

“Before you went to Finland, and gave me the keys to your place.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” I murmured.

She smiled.

“In truth, I was intrigued by the pretence, and it was very pleasant. Particularly, the times we sat and enjoyed a glass of wine. I also wanted to see how long you could keep it up.”

“Oh. . .look. . .I enjoyed your company.”

I glanced across the table at her.

“I couldn’t think of any other way of enticing you into my apartment.”

Ingrid leaned forward. She had that soft smile on her lips I found enchanting.

“I also have a confession to make, “ she said quietly. “The repair to my boiler was made some time ago. Just after you left for Finland.”

I stretched across the table, and placed my hand over hers. I stared at what I had done. Somehow I could not believe it; but she did not withdraw her hand. I looked up, searching her face. Instead of shock, or irritation, she was grinning broadly.

We left the restaurant around four o’clock.

I cannot remember much of the rest of the conversation at the table. Though I think we starting talking about ages. I mentioned I was thirty two, and discovered she was twenty six.

When we moved to the restaurant door, Ingrid held my arm.

How could I concentrate on what we were about to do with this adorable creature by my side? Especially, on the AeroExpress train back to Sheremetyevo when she held my hand.

We picked up the Hyundai and drove to the short term car park opposite Terminal D. Ingrid stayed in the car, while I strolled through several floors of the multi-storey, before spotting the Nissan X-Trail. There was one occupant., smoking a cigarette. Obviously, his companion had gone into the terminal to meet Karppinen and the mysterious Russian.

Back in the car, we agreed that Ingrid would observe those coming through the arrivals gate, to witness the dealer meet with his courier and the

unknown individual whom we had heard speak of the arrangements on the telephone.

Ten minutes later Ingrid joined me in the car, telling of what she had seen as she shut the door.

“Karppinen came through and was immediately joined by one of the couriers from the Nissan,” Ingrid recounted. “They stood talking for a while, until they were joined by a man, I would say in his thirties. They shook hands, and I followed them over to the car park. We are on a lower tier, so I should imagine they will pass us on the way out any time now.”

As she finished, the white Nissan glided by.

I glanced at the registration to confirm it was the correct vehicle, and reversed out. They had just cleared the gate when we pulled up at the barrier. I quickly paid what was due, and saw that they were about a hundred metres ahead of us.

The Nissan was easy to follow.

It was now dusk, and all they could see from the vehicle ahead of us were car lights.

Leaving the airport we turned south on the M-11, and eight kilometres later right onto Moscow’s outer ring road. They were driving sedately in front, keeping to the inside lane. I allowed two cars to come between our Hyundai and their Nissan.

Fifteen kilometres later they signalled to leave the MKAD, and turned onto the A-106, the Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Road.

Now there were no cars between us, and I lengthened the gap to about two hundred metres. After ten more minutes we were driving through deep forest that stretched along either side of the road.

I glanced at Ingrid, her face taut in the soft glow of the instrument panel. When I turned back the Nissan had disappeared.

“Christ! We’ve lost them,” I shouted. “Where the hell did they go?”

“I saw a brief flicker of the braking lights,” she said. “They must have taken a track off to the right.”

I slowed the Hyundai to a crawl, looking for the turning amongst the trees.

“There it is!” Ingrid cried.

I turned off the road and drove at a slow speed along the narrow, well-maintained roadway.

Suddenly, there were soldiers in my headlights. One of them was holding up his hand. I stopped and wound down the window. It was then I noticed other soldiers on either side of the car.

“Это - частный дом президента. Отпуск немедленно, или мы будем стрелять Вас!”

I looked at Ingrid.

“What’s he saying?”

“I’ll tell you later,” she murmured. “Just don’t speak English!”

The one in command said something else.

“Get out the car,” she whispered.

They patted us down for weapons, and looked in the boot.

Then the captain of the group ignored me, and held a brief conversation with Ingrid.

Then he grinned, and waved an arm, indicating we get in the car.

“Turn round and drive off, now!” she said under her breath.

We drove in silence back to the airport; dropped off the Avis car; and booked into the Radisson Blu Hotel for the night.

We took a room with twin beds, and ordered a meal from room service.

I poured two gin and tonics from the min-bar, and handed one to Ingrid, saying. “OK, now you can tell me what happened back there.”

The captain of the guard said. *“Это - частный дом президента. Отпуск немедленно, или мы будем стрелять Вас!”*

“I heard that, but what did it mean?”

“It meant, my fine, English friend, ‘This is the private home of the President. Leave immediately, or we shall shoot you!’”

“Good God! So the painting was destined for President Leoni Tupolev! Wow! that was a close shave.”

Then I had a thought.

“What did you say for him to let us go?”

She smiled, but there was a faint blush on her cheek.

“I said my boyfriend and I were looking for a quiet spot to get close. When, suddenly, you and your men appeared with guns. I had not expected that kind of heart-racing adventure.”

I laughed, and bent to kiss her cheek. But she had turned towards me, and our lips met. . .and stayed.

I lifted Ingrid to her feet and kissed her again. This time with a passion I had not felt for a long, long time. The drama of the evening, the name of the recipient, the fate of Aarni Karppinen, all faded into obscurity.

I let her go, and she sat on the edge of a bed while I opened a bottle of champagne from the mini-bar. Time to celebrate properly. My mind racing with unchaste thoughts, I handed Ingrid a glass, and lifted mine in quiet salutation.

We sat close and, at first, talked trivialities. Then she startled me by saying. “When we kissed just now, it dispelled a thought.”

She looked into my eyes, and squeezed my hand.

“Oh, and what was that?”

“Do you remember that time you came into the house with Roger, and we met on the stairs?”

“Yes. . .yes, I do. Why?”

“Well he was dressed as a woman. I thought he was a cross-dresser, and you and he. . .well., you know.”

I stared at her in alarm.

“You thought Roger and I were an item! No way! Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Well, nothing, until this evening, suggested otherwise. You’re close, argue like an old, married couple, and at times, you put your arm around his shoulder.”

“Christ! I’d better stop doing that!”

I got to my feet, took hold of the bottle, and poured more champagne into her glass.

“But now I know you’re not. So that’s OK,” she said drowsily.

I poured another glass for myself, and turned to sit by her side.

Her empty glass was on a side table, and she was curled up, fast asleep on her single bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Sergei Litvinov led Karppinen through the two check points once they had entered the presidential compound. The couriers stayed in their vehicle under the watchful eye of guards from the Federal Protection Service (FSO), a powerful, multi-purpose and extremely secretive agency.

That he was accompanied by the Deputy Head of the Presidential Property Management Department eased the double scrutiny, but it was still rigorous. The aluminium container was subjected to an X-ray machine; and both men had to pass through several metal detection units, as well as being patted down by two of the guards before being allowed into the building.

In the outer office, they waited to be notified when the President was ready to receive them. Several more guards were in the room, and behind a large reception desk sat a formidable character, surrounded by a host of telephones and computer screens.

Litvinov and Karppinen waited for over twenty minutes, before the man at the desk nodded to one of the guards, who rose and moved towards the tall, double door. He tapped lightly on the half-door on the right, and opened it a fraction. Then called the visitors forward, opening it fully as they approached.

They moved into Tupolev's home office.

The President rose from his chair and beckoned them towards him.

They walked past the long conference table, and stood by the Russian leader's desk.

Tupolev came forward. A man of no great stature, but authority and command radiated from him. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“So this is the gentleman I have to thank for providing Manet’s creation is it, Sergei?”

“Yes, Mr President. This is Mr Karppinen from Helsinki. He devised its liberation from western clutches. Now it is in Russia, where it will be more readily appreciated.”

“True. . .true.” He smiled at the thought of how much pleasure it would give his wife.

“Right. . .let us see what you have brought me, Mr Karppinen.”

The Finnish dealer took several keys from a pocket, unlocked and eased back the lid.

While Litvinov steadied the body of the container, Karppinen lifted the painting from the padded inner recess. He began to unwind the soft wrapping. The top of the frame appeared, then a hint of the canvas. The rest of the wrapping fell in untidy folds on the carpet.

“Ty che, blyad!”

Suddenly, the full force of Tupolev’s fury was aimed at Karppinen.

“Schas po ebalu poluchish, suka, blyad!”

“This is not the painting I’ve paid for! What do you mean by off-loading this futile effort on me. . . of all people!”

Tupolev came up to the Finn. “I have a good mind to deal with you where you stand! Do you understand? This is a fucking charade!”

He was enraged. His face purple with anger.

Suddenly, he turned and kicked the painting, tearing a jagged hole in the canvas. Then he jumped up and down on it, until it was a mass of fragments and broken wood.

His fury spent he came over to Karppinen and muttered. "I spare you because you are going to get me the right one. Do you understand? The right one! You have a month to bring me what I want. In four weeks time, if I do not have the painting, my people will hunt you down. Now, get out! Get out! You Litvinov, you stay!"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

When Litvinov got in the Nissan X-Trail, he found Karppinen shaking with anger, and also fear.

“Someone swapped the painting,” he muttered through clenched teeth. “I saw it packed myself. I checked it was still in the container before it went into this vehicle the following morning.”

He leaned forward and grabbed the driver’s arm and that of the fellow in the front passenger seat.

“Did either of you remove the painting? Did you?”

“No, of course not! We took it in turns to drive right through to Moscow. We stopped for fuel, but there was always one of us in the vehicle.”

“Anyway,” said the other. “ You had the keys to the lock, and it was obvious no one tampered with.”

Karppinen slumped back in the seat.

“More to the point, Aarni,” Litvinov said. “What are you going to do about finding the real painting. That was no idle threat. When Tupolev wants something, nothing and nobody stands in his way.”

“Alright, alright,” muttered the dealer. “I’ll sort it out.”

“You had better, my friend. My neck is on the line as well.”

The Nissan dropped Litvinov outside the Presidential Administration building in Staraya Square. The Property Department had been moved there, largely to make Litvinov more readily accessible to Tupolev’s demands.

At that moment, he would have welcomed a much greater distance between himself and the Russian leader. After Karppinen had been dismissed from his presence, Tupolev had castigated Litvinov for dealing with someone so unreliable.

“When you advised it was arriving, I promised Magda it would be hung in our private sitting room. Now what do I say to her? I hold you responsible, Sergei, and you know what happens when people fail me. . .eh?”

Litvinov shivered involuntarily as he made his way past the guards and took the lift to the third floor.

Karppinen stayed at a hotel in the airport complex, while the two couriers had driven off into the night on their return journey. The dealer had a troubled night, and the next morning flew to Helsinki on the first available plane.

In his studio on Kanavakatu, he sat morosely in his office, going over and over in his mind how the theft of the painting could have been carried out.

Eventually, he called in his assistant, Henrik Virtanen, a fellow similar in age to Karppinen. They had worked together for the last twenty years. The degree of trust ran deep: which was all to the good, for Karppinen needed desperately to speak to someone about the parlous state he now found himself in.

“Henrik, have you got a minute?”

Sure, Aarni. You’re in early today. How did it go in Moscow?”

“Se oli vitun katastrofi!”

“A fucking disaster? How could that be?”

“When I opened the container and took out the painting, it was the wrong one!”

“What are you talking about? We all saw it being packed. It’s impossible. Or did the two couriers, Korhonen and Nieminen, make the swap while

they were en route to Moscow?”

“No, I’ve ruled them out. They would have disappeared with the painting, yet they were waiting for me at the airport.”

“Mm. . .but if it didn’t happen here, where else could thieves have stolen it?”

“My feeling is it did happen here. . .between eleven o’clock when we left, and five o’clock when we put the container in the Nissan. The place was alarmed, but I reckon someone broke in, took the original and put another in its place. Not only to sell it to their client, but to embarrass me. There are some fearful rogues in this business, Henrik.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The next day Ingrid and I flew back to Helsinki.

We entered the hotel suite to encounter a trio of smiling faces.

“Everything OK, laddie?” McKenna was the first to enquire.

I nodded, grinned, and said. “Let’s see what we’ve got in the mini-bar. Then we’ll tell all.”

When everyone had a glass in their hand, I recounted the events, beginning with Karppinen’s appearance at the Arrivals Gate.

“Ingrid buzzed me on my mobile that they were heading for the car park, and we left the airport and followed the Nissan for a good thirty kilometres.”

“I was watching the tail lights of the car ahead,” said Ingrid, “ when suddenly they disappeared. For a moment, panic. We had lost them. But when Alan, came to where the vehicle had vanished, there was a narrow side road. We turned onto it, and had gone no more than fifty metres when we were confronted by armed soldiers.”

“They had us out the car while they examined it, inside and underneath, then the officer asked searching questions.,” I added. “Whatever Ingrid said, they eventually they let us go.”

“So, did you find out who Karppinen’s client was?” asked Roger.

“Yes,” I said. “We were stopped by guards at the entrance to the Russian President’s private compound. Karppinen’s client was Leoni Tupolev!”

“So now we have the painting, how do we get it back home?” John queried in a low voice.

We were lunching at the Wanha Satama Brasserie, a block away from the Grand Marina Hotel.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I replied, “ and I think the possible solution is that I take it with me back to England, But first, I’ve got to do some alterations to both paintings!”

“Oh. . .what kind of alterations?” said Roger anxiously.

“I’m going to paint over the original and my copy of the painting.”

“Ye Gods, laddie, that’s a bit extreme isn’t it?” gasped McKenna.

“Not really. I need to disguise both of them. Declaring the paintings would mean leaving a trail that Karppinen could well pick up. And I don’t want to lead him to us, for obvious reasons. So, when you’re ready, you three make your way back home. Ingrid and I will join you in a few days time.”

That afternoon I bought an art bag, small easel, paints, brushes and two large canvases. In the hotel suite I placed the Manet original on the easel and painted a wash of white gesso over the whole surface, much to the concern of the others.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Alan,” murmured Roger.

“Is it really necessary, Alan?” asked John, staring at the fast disappearing masterpiece.

“Let me explain what I’m doing,” I said, covering the canvas of my copy with the white gesso. “Tomorrow, Ingrid and I are going to Tallinn. We won’t be stopped by Customs, for Finland and Estonia are members of the Schengen Zone, which enjoy open borders. When we’re there I’ll paint something, and bring into the UK two indifferent work of art. So, as I said earlier, you go on ahead, we’ll meet up later.”

In Tallinn, Ingrid took me to her parents’ home in Merivälja.

They lived in an Emil Urbel-designed villa, overlooking Tallinn Bay. It was an intriguing house, extremely modern and open-plan in style. Wooden polished floors were covered with judiciously placed rugs. The few works of art on the all-white walls were mostly pen and ink drawings.

Ingrid's mother, Jaanika, was at home when we arrived. Tall, like her daughter, still blonde with just a few wisps of grey in her hair, and an open, friendly countenance. She made me most welcome; and in her walk, mannerisms and attitude I had a glimpse of Ingrid in the future. I don't know how Ingrid had described me to her mother, or what she thought I was doing accompanying her daughter, but no questions were asked.

That evening, Ingrid's father arrived home from his office in Tallinn. Again, nothing was said about my presence, not even when the use of his garage was raised.

He too, was a well-preserved, fit fifty-year old, about one ninety metres, the same height as me, with a natural tan which, I discovered, came from sailing in the Bay of Tallinn most weekends.

"You must call me Enno, Alan," he said, shaking my hand. "I understand you are Ingrid's landlord. She has told Jaanika and I much about the apartment she has in your house in London."

Both spoke perfect English.

After the evening meal I was shown where I could work in the garage. Surprisingly, it had an aerial window at one end, which provided the ideal light in which to paint.

Ingrid borrowed her mother's car, and the next day we visited the Jägala juga falls, a picturesque beauty spot fifteen kilometres east of Tallinn. The sweep of the falls ideal for what I had in mind.

I spent an hour taking photos with Ingrid's camera, then we had lunch in a nearby restaurant.

“Will you be able to create something from the photographs,” she asked.

“For the purpose I want, they’re ideal. Thank you for choosing the spot.”

“Actually, the falls look better in the wintertime. Everything freezes, and you have long ,jagged spikes of water hanging motionless until the spring thaw.”

Later that afternoon, I set up the easel in the garage, and working from the photos, began to paint a view of the falls that might appeal to tourists over the original. I then painted a different view on the copy. When Ingrid’s father came back from Tallinn I asked him if he knew of a good carpenter.

“There’s someone I’ve used in the past. He has a place over at Maardu.”

Ingrid added. “It’s an industrial area and a container port about ten kilometres away. If you like, if mother is not using her car, I’ll run you over there tomorrow.”

With Ingrid’s help I explained to the carpenter exactly what I wanted. It was a straightforward request, and he said he would have it ready in two days time.

I continued to paint the scenes in a ‘chocolate box’ style, making much of the cascading water and children watching from the river bank.

Ingrid came in to the garage now and then. Standing back, admiring my efforts.

“That’s good. . .really good. You’d capture the souvenir-seekers’ market with those views of the falls. When they got them home, they would never adorn a wall but live forever in the attic. Perfect.”

I took the paintings with me when I went to the carpenter’s workshop. There he installed them in cheap frames and constructed a padded box fitted with a simple lock.

The following morning we left for England.

Though not without argument.

I felt sure we had adequately covered our tracks. If Karppinen concluded how the break-in and substitution had been carried out, I doubted he could identify us as the perpetrators. But I still felt a little uneasy.

“I think, Ingrid, you should stay here in Tallinn for a while. Just until things settle down.”

A frown creased her forehead. “What are you talking about, Alan?”

“Well, I don’t think our friend Karppinen can get on to us, but it’s not worth the risk. You’d be safer here. . .just for a few weeks.”

Her face reddened. But this time it was prompted by irritation.

“Let us get this straight. If I don’t come with you now, I don’t come at all. . .ever! Got that?”

“Look, I’m trying to protect you, for God’s sake!”

“I’m a big girl, Alan. I can take care of myself. . .and make my own decisions!”

There were no concerns raised when the box went into the luggage hold at Tallinn Airport: at Heathrow it was a different story.

The Customs official was polite but firm when he pulled me to one side.

“Can you tell me where you have just come from, sir?”

“Estonia.”

“I see. Did you pack this suitcase and the box yourself?”

“Yes and no.”

“Care to explain what you mean, sir?”

“Yes, I packed the suitcase. No, I didn’t pack the box.”

“Right. . .would you mind opening the case, please?”

He rummaged through the suitcase, lifting everything out onto the counter. Then he felt round the lining, and found nothing.

“Right, sir, can you tell me what this is, and what it contains?”

“Of course. I bought two paintings for my mother while I was in a gift shop near rather spectacular waterfalls, not many miles from Tallin. I told the fellow in the shop I was travelling by plane, and he offered to put them in this box. He charged me fifty Euros for the container.”

“I see. Would you mind opening it, please?”

I had told Ingrid that if I were stopped not to wait, but to go through to the concourse. Hopefully, I would join her later. But, for some reason, she stayed close by. I noticed the official periodically glancing in her direction.

I unfastened the lock, and removed the top of the box. I then eased out the paintings, each in its plain white frame.

“Mm. . . I hope your mother enjoys them.”

I could tell he did not like either of them. But he was starting to take closer interest, turning it round and looking at the back for any distinguishing marks on the canvas or the stretcher.

“I got a bargain. Apparently, the paintings were in a sale, and all I paid was three hundred Euros.”

He held one at arm’s length, the real Manet, and I realised it was for other officials to gain a clear view of it through a one-way mirror. If they started getting overly inquisitive, things could become difficult.

Ingrid came and stood beside me. “Really, they are a joint present to my future mother-in-law, aren’t they darling. Though she doesn’t know it yet, we got engaged while on holiday.”

He laid the painting on the counter.

“Three hundred Euros, you say?”

I could tell by the look on his face he thought I had been had. Paid well over a realistic price. So much so, he did not ask to see the non-existent receipt. Those sort of paintings were worth no more than a hundred Euros, if that.

“Well, sir, normally you would have to pay to import such works. But I dare say we can let these through without charge.”

I packed the paintings into the box, and closed the lid.

We took the tube to Paddington, and boarded a train to Gillingham in Wiltshire. We passed through Reading before I broached the subject.

“That was quick thinking.”

“What was that?”

To say we had just become engaged, and the painting was for your future mother-in-law.”

I noticed, for the first time that the blush on her cheeks reached her ears.

“I had to think of something, before more Customs people confronted us. Sorry, did I embarrass you?”

“Quite the contrary.”

As ever, McKenna was there to meet us. He, Roger, and John, had been back almost a week.

“Any problems?” I asked, a trifle anxiously.

“None at all, laddie, none at all.”

Everyone had come for lunch.

John had driven over from the yard at Blandford Forum, and Roger from Salisbury. The six of us sat at the dining table to enjoy one of Mrs Dimmock’s meals. Good wine flowed, and Ingrid and I took it in turns to recount once more how we had followed Karppinen around Moscow and along the Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Road.

“We were trailing the Nissan,” she said, “when suddenly, its rear lights disappeared. The vehicle had turned off the road onto a side track. We turned off as well, and had travelled no distance at all before we were confronted by hordes of soldiers with nasty-looking guns.”

I picked up the tale.

“We were made to get out, while several of the soldiers searched the car. Fortunately, there was nothing to be found. Thank God Ingrid speaks Russian. She managed to persuade the officer in charge to let us go.”

“Well done, Ingrid,” said my mother. “What did you say to him?”

I looked across the table, to see her face again turn a delicate shade of pink.

“Oh, I’ve forgotten. Something like please release us.”

“Come on, Ingrid,” declared Roger. “You can’t get away with that! Tell us what you really said to him.”

Everyone was looking at her.

“Well, if you must know,” she glanced at my mother. “If you must know, I said, I thought this was a nice, quiet little lane where my boyfriend and I could get up to a little naughtiness.”

Everyone roared with laughter, including mother.

“Quick thinking, my dear,” she chuckled.

“So what happened then?” enquired McKenna.

“We got back in the car,” I said, “turned round, and headed straight for Sheremetyevo Airport. We left Russia in a hurry the next day.”

“So, whose place was it?” asked my mother.

“The President of The Russian Federation! It was his private home. And to think we foisted a copy of Manet’s preparatory work on him,” I said, with raised eyebrows.

“ I wonder if he realised that Manet’s preliminary sketch in oils, which he did in 1881, brought twenty one million dollars at auction recently,” added Roger thoughtfully.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Roger delivered the painting to Restitution, with instructions for the conservators at the Courtauld Institute not to announce the return of '*Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*', until it was completely restored and properly framed. Meanwhile, I restored and varnished my copy and re-hung it in the long gallery.

When Ingrid and I went back to the house in St George's Square, I now more readily understood the phrase, 'looking over one's shoulder'. While Ingrid blithely went back to her studies and to work on her thesis, I wrote a number of articles for the Art Newspaper, and resumed the Vermeer programme for ARTE.

But every time I left the house I took note of the people around me, and chose different routes to the shops, galleries, and offices I needed to visit.

I also spoke with my mother, who, during the conversation, said she was coming up to London to do some shopping, and could she and McKenna use the spare room. Naturally, they could, though I realised I would have to return the room to its original state, having used it as a studio for the past six months. I had been copying a work by Vermeer called '*The Little Street*'. It was only fifty four by forty four centimetres, yet it had taken me an inordinate amount of time to get the detail right. Fortunately, it was nearly finished.

Ingrid thought me increasingly paranoid. Perhaps she was right. In any event, as time passed my concerns lessened. It seemed we were no longer a target for vengeance by the Finnish dealer, Aarni Karppinen.

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CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Henrik Virtanen was the first to notice that the tenants in the offices next door were no longer there. Not that there had been much activity; but when he saw the property agent showing others around the premises, it struck him as odd they had occupied the nearby rooms for so short a time.

It was a few days later, when Karppinen entered the building at the same moment as a delivery of furniture was made to the offices adjacent to his studio. He thought to remark on it to Virtanen.

“I see the people next door are having more furniture delivered. What do they do there, do you think?”

“No idea, but anyway, they’ve gone. Funny that. . .those rooms have been vacant for months, and suddenly there are two lots of tenants within weeks. The other lot were only there for a fortnight, then they just upped and left. . .just like that.”

Karppinen looked at him sharply.

“When did they leave?”

“I can’t be sure. . .eight or nine days ago, I think. Why, Aarni?”

“Just after I went to Moscow,” Karppinen murmured thoughtfully. Then added. “Do you know the name of the property agency?”

“*Hyvää huomenta*, Pakkala, can I help you?”

“*Huomenta*. . .I’d like to speak to the person who looks after property in the dock area.”

“Oh, you’ll want Mr Eskilinen, sir. Just one moment, I’ll put you through.”

“Eskilinen, can I help you?”

“My name is Karppinen. I have the studio and workshop at number six Kanavakatu. Tell me, I want to contact the previous tenants who had the offices next to mine. Not the new people, you understand, that are recently installed.”

“I’m afraid I cannot release such details of our clients, sir.”

“Well, we have just taken delivery of what I assume are laboratory specimens. I have checked with the people there at the moment, and they know nothing about such items. I’ll just have to put them in the entrance hall, and hope they come back for them before the smell becomes worse.”

“Smell?”

Well anatomical samples do smell, don’t they.”

“Just a minute Mr Karppinen.”

A hand was placed over the receiver, and he heard the muffled sound of conversation.

“In the circumstances, Mr Karppinen, the previous tenant was a Mr Alan Cleverden. An Englishman who took the offices on a three month lease. He paid up front for the period. I was surprised that after a fortnight he handed back the keys.”

“I see. Do you have his address that I might forward the specimens to him?”

“Yes. . .just a moment, I’ve got the file in front of me. It is one hundred and twenty seven, St George’s Square in London.”

Karppinen peered at the image on Google Earth. In that part of London, and that size of house, the fellow must be wealthy. If he were the person who had masterminded the theft of the painting, and to do it with such skill, he must be in the same trade as myself, was his immediate conclusion.

But he needed further evidence. Whoever had broken in must have been aware of what had been going on in his studio. The restoration work on Manet's painting; the precise moment when everything was in readiness for dispatch; the few hours the painting was left unattended. All suggested that Karppinen's premises had been under surveillance, visually and audibly.

He and Virtanen began a systematic search of the offices, the workshop and the studio. Two hours later, when they had finished, five listening devices lay on Karppinen's desk.

"Someone has been listening in to every word we have spoken, Henrik. We have been slipshod. We haven't swept the place for bugs for ages. . . a fundamental mistake. But, thinking about it, I believe we have also been spied upon. They, if it is they, have also been watching our movements. So they knew when the premises were occupied, and when they were not."

He went into the studio, and looked out each of the windows.

"The only building that has line of sight is the hotel across the road," he murmured. "I wonder. . . Henrik, I'll be back shortly."

An hour later he returned.

"It cost me fifty Euros, but would you believe, a group of Englishmen recently occupied a suite on the second floor for ten days. When I was shown the rooms, there was an uninterrupted view of our studio and workshop. We have been made fools, Henrik, and no one does that to me and gets away with it!"

Karppinen continued to check what was known about Alan Cleverden, and also Roger Tamworth, the name in the Grand Marina Hotel register. He had acquired copies of their passport photographs, obtained from an obliging hotel receptionist for another twenty Euros.

It did not take long to unearth more details about the pair. Both were featured in LinkedIn, the business social network.

Tamworth was listed as a discreet private investigator, and Cleverden, as a producer cum presenter of art documentaries, and a regular contributor to the Art Newspaper. The ideal background to learn where works of art might reside, and the levels of security they were afforded.

He is our man, decided Karppinen. Now I shall find out who his client is, and where the painting is located. Once I know, he will pay for placing me in jeopardy with one of the world's most powerful men.

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CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Ivan Kosnievsky, the Head Of The Presidential Property Management Department, was still smarting from the President's blatant disregard of the care required to preserve works of art for the nation.

Moreover, his deputy, Litvinov, had openly defied the curators in St Petersburg when he had organised the removal of a considerable number of items merely to satisfy the whims of Russia's leader.

If Kosnievsky had been in Moscow at the time, the transfer of paintings and statuary to the private dwelling on the Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Road would never have taken place. He had been out-manoeuvred. Litvinov was clearly close to the President, too close for Kosnievsky's comfort.

The more he thought about it, the more irritated he became. Something had to be done. But what? Sitting at his desk after everyone had left for the day, a glimmer of an idea emerged.

From his safe he removed a large bunch of keys that opened every lock within the department. He headed for Litvinov's office, which was empty: the occupant had left in a hurry earlier in the day. No doubt to attend upon the President.

He turned on a side light and looked closely at the labelled keys, finally selecting the one he thought appropriate. This he inserted into the wall-mounted safe, and turned a handle ninety degrees. There was a satisfying click, and the door swung open.

It did not take long to isolate the two files unrelated to the business of the department. The first contained correspondence – letters and emails – to

someone called Aarni Karppinen in Helsinki. The other held notes of conversations with Leoni Tupolev. From the latter it was soon evident to Kosvievsky that the President had ordered Litvinov to obtain a vast number of works of art, and in particular the painting, *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère* by the Frenchman, Edouard Manet.

It appeared he wanted it solely for his personal enjoyment, regardless of cost, and whatever was involved in its acquisition.

He took the cell phone from his pocket and quickly photographed the sheet of paper showing Karppinen's contact details and the typed notes of the demands made upon Litvinov by Tupolev to secure the priceless painting.

"So what is the latest news? What do I say to Magda?"

Tupolev glanced at him across the desk.

"I understand that Karppinen is on the trail of those who swapped the paintings, Leoni," explained Litvinov. "It would appear they are British, and similar to his set-up in that they also acquire items to order."

Relations had cooled between the two men since that fateful incident. Though the rapport Litvinov once enjoyed with the country's leader now showed a hint of revival.

"I must admit, Sergei, I was a little upset on that occasion," murmured the President. "But, if you can make sure this time that the painting will soon be in my hands, let us forget past unpleasantness. Come, join me in a drink."

Kosnievsky spent several evenings reading Litvinov's notes. He also conducted two further late-night examinations of the contents of the safe to learn of his recent meetings with Tupolev.

It now seemed much depended on what the Finn could achieve. According to the exchanges, Karppinen was about to follow the trail of a

British dealer called Alan Cleverden.

The instructions to Virtanen, Korhonen, and Mäkinen had been precise. He had given them Cleverden's address, and initially, they were to watch his movements. Once they established the pattern of when he was away from the building, they were to break in and look for any documents that showed where the Manet painting had been delivered.

At this point, retrieving the painting was the primary consideration.

Dealing with Cleverden and his team would come later.

Karppinen heard the phone ring while he was briefing the three men. Moments later, Henrik Virtanen put his head round the door.

"There's a call for you from Florida. Do you want to take it?"

Yes, can you put it through? Well, I think that's it for the present. We'll have another word before you go tomorrow."

Once the door was shut behind them he picked up the receiver.

"Hello?. . .Ah, it is you. I've tried your cell phone on a number of occasions, but there has been no reply. . .You were told by the family to leave it behind! Well, I can tell you, quite a bit has happened since you left the ship in Hamburg. . .Oh, you've heard, have you? . . .Yes, apparently it's in England somewhere. I'm about to try and locate it. . .No, there's nothing you can do for the moment. But this time keep your phone open, OK?"

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

ARTE, the TV channel in Strasbourg, agreed we could use Peter Soames as the director.

Six months ago I had been looking forward to working with him on a programme on the Newlyn School of artists for the BBC. But he had been knocked down by a hit-and-run driver, and out of action for a lengthy period.

Though not seriously injured, we had been forced to bring in Roger Melville, renowned for his last minute changes and pernicky manner. With some trepidation I had gone to Cornwall with him to film the artist colony in Newlyn at the turn of the last century. I was surprised how well we got on; and indeed, the finished film had been widely acclaimed.

But Peter would always be my number one choice.

It was shortly after its transmission, that the Corporation decided to modify the culture programme and shorten its time slot.

As a consequence, I went off and signed up with the EU-sponsored channel, ARTE, which covered a good part of northern Europe.

I saw little of Ingrid while working with Peter putting the finishing touches to the screenplay. She, too, was busy researching aspects of her thesis before its final submission.

When I had finished the script and Peter and I had worked out the locations and shooting sequences, the two of us flew to Strasbourg to finalise the details.

They raised a few queries of minor importance, and we were given the green light to begin filming as soon as possible.

Within hours of arriving back , Ingrid and I met on the stairs. On impulse, I mentioned I had to take the latest painting, along with several other canvases, down to Melbury Abbas at the weekend. Would she care to accompany me?

She said she would be delighted, and we agreed to drive down on Friday afternoon.

I phoned my mother, and hesitantly asked if I could spend the weekend at Mead Court, and could I bring Ingrid with me?

“Of course,” was the reply. “Why do you need to ask?”

“Because, Mother, you are now married, and it’s no longer my home, but yours and McKenna’s.”

“Darling, come whenever you feel like it. After all, we are coming up to St George’s Square in a week’s time.”

“Yes, about that Mother, I won’t be here. I’ve got to be in Holland filming. So I’ll give you the keys when I come down on Friday.”

Henrik Virtanen and Mäkinen had followed him to Strasbourg.

Hours were spent watching the ARTE building on the Quai du Chanoine Winterer bordering the River L’ill.

Karppinen had impressed upon them to watch Cleverden’s every move. Follow him wherever he went; and note and take photos of everyone with whom he was seen.

They even booked into the same hotel, the Orangerie on Rue Geiler, located on the opposite bank of the river.

For two days they followed Cleverden and Soames when they walked across the Pont de la Dordogne, and along the quay to spend much of the day in the ARTE building. The Finns took it in turn to keep a close watch in

case they emerged. But from ten in the morning to five o'clock in the evening, the pair remained in its interior.

At the end of the second day's vigil they witnessed Cleverden and Soames leave ARTE, take a taxi to the airport, and catch the late night flight back to London.

Virtanen and Mäkinen were now thoroughly bored with their part of the surveillance; and even more ill-tempered when they found the plane was full, and they would have to wait until the following morning for a flight to the UK.

On Friday I collected the Range Rover from the nearby garage and pulled up in front of the house. It took several trips to the top floor to load the canvases carefully into the back of the vehicle; and then we were ready.

On the last working day of the week we joined the westward exodus from London, threading our way through the suburbs to the M3 motorway. It was an easier run to the A303, and the traffic lightened perceptibly when we turned off for Salisbury, and thereafter the minor roads across Cranborne Chase towards Shaftesbury.

I had first noticed a blue car in my rear mirror on the motorway, and thought I saw the same vehicle when on the ring road around Salisbury. It was surprising, but coincidence often is. I'm sure I caught a glimpse of it again when I turned south into the lanes leading to Melbury Abbas.

I pulled into the drive and came to a halt on the gravelled forecourt. For a few minutes I sat there staring at the house, more a mansion, that my grandfather had bought after the end of the Second World War.

Grandpa Johns had played his part in MFAA, and in the process acquired a number of paintings that he had installed at Mead Court.

He had even built, at considerable expense, a gallery to house his acquisitions.

Whether they were gifts, bartered for food, or works he had liberated for his own personal pleasure, I knew not. I did not enquire too closely.

However, when he died and left them to me in his will, then it became a matter of conscience. Eventually, I made the effort to return the authentic works to those who had originally possessed them.

The long gallery at Mead Court was suddenly denuded of paintings, and my mother lamented that it was now a dreary passage, bereft of the once vibrant, colourful series of canvases lining the wall.

Although I studied art history, perhaps immodestly, I recognised I was a good copyist of other people's artistic creations. Gradually, the long gallery was being filled by copies, painted either here or in the apartment in London.

This recent collection comprised 'The *Hunters in the Snow*', also known as 'The *Return of the Hunters*', a 1565 oil-on-wood painting by Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It was a comparatively large painting, approximately a metre square; and had taken three months to complete; Although, part of that time had been spent retrieving the Manet.

There were also two slightly smaller canvases: 'The *Avenue in Sydenham*' by Camille Pissarro, which he painted at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War when he moved his family to Norwood, then a village on the edge of London. The other was Renoir's painting of his future wife, Aline Charigot, called simply, 'By The Seashore'.

"Are you all right, Alan," asked Ingrid uncertainly.

"Just memories, Ingrid. I'll tell you about them some time."

At that moment the front door opened and my mother and McKenna came out to greet us.

"They are carrying paintings into the house," Virtanen whispered to his companion, as he watched the scene through binoculars. On this occasion it

was Korhonen.

He was silent for several minutes before remarking. “Well, Alarik, I think we have pin-pointed Cleverden’s client. Quite clearly, the Manet has just been delivered to a very wealthy buyer, judging by the size of the place, and its grounds.”

He grinned suddenly.

“I’ll phone Karppinen and tell him the good news.”

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

We went shopping in Shaftesbury to buy Ingrid a pair of walking boots.

When she was kitted out we took a walk along the main street, and just past the Town Hall down a cobbled, narrow-stepped path between houses to emerge at the top of Gold Hill.

The well-worn, cobbled street winds down the steep hill, passing old stone cottages with views over the roofs to the Blackmore Vale. The street is thought to capture the quintessential image of rural England, and has been featured on everything from book covers and calendars to chocolate boxes.

Ingrid was enchanted by the thatched roofs, and the view of the distant heights

“I knew England was picturesque, but this is enchanting, Alan,” she said, grabbing my arm.

“Come on, I’ll show you a little more of the town.”

We strolled in a circle around Shaftesbury, stopping at the Two Brewers pub in St James’ Street for a ploughman’s lunch and a glass of beer. At least, I did. One taste of the bitter, and she shuddered.

“God! How can you drink that?” she asked, looking up at me while screwing up her eyes.

“Something wrong with the beer, madam?” queried the landlord.

I answered for her. “Unfortunately, my companion is not used to the taste, and it rather overwhelmed her.”

“That’s a shame, it’s my best brew and all.”

“Could I have an orange juice instead, please, Alan?”

“I tell you what miss, you haven’t passed the initiation test. That’s a pity,” said the landlord, winking at me. “When you came in the door, I said to myself, well, there’s a lass who could easily become an honorary member.”

“An honorary member of what?” asked Ingrid doubtfully.

“Why, The Society Of Dorset Men, of course,” he replied. “Strict rules the Society has. Starting with downing a pint of best Dorset bitter in one go.”

A look of determination swept across her face.

I hadn’t seen it before. It brooked no nonsense, this was serious business. She grabbed my glass: I had drunk a quarter of it. Glared at the landlord, and downed the contents in a matter of seconds.

“Ugh. . .that was awful! Now do I qualify?”

Ingrid had a glass of wine on the house, and a hastily-typed note on the Two Brewers’ letterhead declaring that, while she was in Dorset, she was an honorary member of the Society.

“Which,” said the landlord when he presented it, “ allows you one free half-pint of beer when next you visit the pub.”

When we arrived back at Mead Court, she was fast asleep in the passenger seat. I realised then, with Ingrid seduction and alcohol did not mix.

When Grandpa Johns, my mother’s father, first bought Mead Court, he not only added more rooms he also had built the long gallery, running the depth of the house.

The outer wall was predominantly of glass, allowing light to flood in through slightly tinted windows, blocking out the more harmful rays of the sun. On the opposite wall was an array of quite magnificent paintings, a number of which were copies; but, as I later discovered, the majority were priceless originals depicting themes from the Renaissance, the Impressionist period, Dutch and Flemish paintings.

In my youth I would often stroll through the gallery with Grandpa Johns, while he talked at length about the paintings, often in German which he had learned while stationed in the country during the war.

Small wonder that my appetite for the subject was fired at an early age. I had a ready tutor, a linguist from his years spent in Germany, and surrounded by pictures by noted artists.

All that had changed when the many works passed to me, and the process of returning them to their rightful owners began. I promised my mother I would replace them all with my own efforts, using the inscriptions that had once accompanied the various works during my grandfather's lifetime.

This time the wording would more accurately reflect the artist behind them.

With the paintings I had brought this weekend, the wall was gradually assuming its earlier appearance, leaving only a few gaps to be filled. It had been a herculean task, but from a dreary pathway to the rear of the house, it was now taking on a more colourful, more aesthetic mantle which encouraged one to dawdle. Not to admire my efforts, but to imagine what confronted the painter when he first took up his brush; how he had adapted the elements or people ranged before him; what he might deliberately have left out; even how he, or she, calculated the perspective to draw the eye to a particular area of the canvas.

"Did you paint these?" murmured a voice behind me.

"Most of them," I replied, standing back and adjusting the angle to make sure the Renoir was level.

"You're very clever, I wish I could paint like this," she added wistfully.

"Copying is easy. . .creating an original work is far more difficult."

I turned and smiled at her.

"What was here before?"

How do I answer that?

“My grandfather took charge of a number of paintings, mostly from a dealer called Hildebrand Gurlitt. They have now been returned leaving the gallery bereft of colour and interest. I promised my mother I would copy a great many of the paintings once on the wall, and bring the gallery back to life.”

“Well, you’re certainly doing that. They all look so authentic.”

“Adding to a convincing impression is mounting them in frames that correspond to the periods they were painted.” I added. “I often scour antique and second-hand furniture stores, charity shops and auctions to find suitable frames.”

I smiled. “Sometimes I paint a canvas not to the size of the original, but to that of an ornate, antique frame. If I want a particular style I often go to a gallery at the top end of Kensington Church Street.”

Ingrid walked slowly down the length of the gallery, stopped and turned back towards me.

“I don’t know what to give my father for his fifty third birthday,” she said lightly. “Would you accept a commission from me to paint an original in the style of David Hockney? Mother and he came over to the Tate exhibition of his work last year, and he was captivated by the artistry. It would be wonderful to see a bit of colour in the house, so much of it is monochrome.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’ve got the time at the moment. I think I mentioned I’m off to Delft in a couple of days time, and. . .”

“Oh, it’s not immediate. His birthday isn’t for some while.” She walked back, and looked at me with those bright, blue eyes.

“Say you’ll do it. . .just for me?”

“But it might be considered a deliberate fake, calculated to deceive. I could get into trouble.”

She was still looking up at me.

“Not if you put an inscription on it. ‘In the style of David Hockney’ would do.”

I tried hard to muster some resistance.

“Can I think about it?” I replied.

On Sunday evening we motored back to London.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

I collected Peter Soames from his home in South London, and drove up to Harwich to board the overnight ferry to the Hook of Holland. From the terminal it was no more than ten kilometres to Delft.

By nine o'clock we had checked into the West Cord Delft Hotel, on the eastern outskirts of the city; and an hour later we met up with the film crew.

They had each been provided with a copy of the screenplay and location shots, and I knew that Rudi Demotte, the cameraman, and André Antoine, the sound recordist, had both scouted the area in which we would be mainly working. They spoke good English, as did most of the crew, which would make life easier for Peter, the director.

After lunch Rudi, André, Peter, and I made our way over to Oude Langendijk, close by the New Church, where Vermeer spent most of his life after he was married. Another church had been enlarged, and now covered the site where Vermeer's home once stood. However, to add authenticity, we were going to superimpose a seventeenth century image of the house onto the religious structure.

"Alan is going to stand here," Peter indicated with his hands, "while people, dressed in costume go about their daily chores. I've been in contact with the Friends' Theatre in Delft, and actors from the group will play the local householders."

He grinned. "I should tell you all its members are Russian emigrés, and the plays they have performed, thus far, have been by Chekhov and

Nabokov. Nevertheless, they are keen to participate, and for very modest fees.”

“What are the weather forecasts like?” asked Rudi.

“Favourable,” Peter replied. “Cool for the time of year, but bright, so no worries there.”

We walked around the area, looking for vantage points and elevations where the camera might be used in high level shots.

“Do you envisage any problems, either of you?” asked Peter.

“Not really,” said André. “There could be noise from the people walking around Alan, so I might have to use a shotgun microphone just below waist level, to isolate the sounds of the villagers and their pushcarts. I presume the area will be cordoned off to avoid modern-day folk walking by?”

“Only the area in which we shall be working,” declared Peter. “It’s a pedestrians only street, just delivery vehicles allowed. Right, I think that’s about it. Bring your truck tomorrow morning and park it behind those buildings facing the church precinct. We’ll do the same with Alan’s Range Rover. Now, I must go and brief our Russian actors.”

At nine o’clock the next day we were all assembled in Oude Langendijk. I had gone over my introductory piece last night, and again before breakfast, and I was walking up and down mumbling the words to myself, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. It was Adrien De Jong, an art historian from the University Of Technology in Delft. He and I had been corresponding for some time on the more obscure aspects of Vermeer’s life; and his contribution had been of considerable help in unearthing hitherto unknown facts about the almost anonymous artist.

“Adrien, it’s good to see you. Thanks for coming.”

“Not at all, Alan. Actually, it’s only a short stroll from the university, so I just had to come and see what you were making of Vermeer’s life.”

“I included your comments in the final version of the screenplay, for which I thank you. By the way, before we start, let me introduce you to Peter Soames, who’s directing the project.”

We walked over to Peter who had just finished rehearsing the actors, to ensure they knew where and when to pass in front of the camera.

“Peter, this is the fellow who has corrected the screenplay, and added some pithy comments which were invaluable. May I introduce you to Adrien De Jong. Adrien, this is Peter Soames, the scourge of presenters.”

They grinned at each other, shook hands and started chatting.

I left them to it, and went back to the Range Rover to don my suede jacket. I tended to wear it when doing interviews and speaking to camera. It identified me, and for some reason, I seem to talk more freely, and fluff my lines less often when I was wearing it.

It was while donning the jacket I noticed two men watching the set-up intently. People always gather and stare when a film is being shot. It’s a natural reaction. But, somehow, they were apart from those who had halted when about their everyday tasks.

I was also aware their eyes upon me when I returned to stand beside Peter and Adrien.

“Ready, Alan?”

I nodded.

Peter moved to be beside Rudi, the cameraman, and I took my place against the church, where part of the building would become a seventeenth century, wealthy Delft family home.

Peter waved an arm, and the actors began parading around me.

“Ready. . .steady. . .go!”

He thrust out a finger in my direction, and I began speaking in German.

“In the seventeenth century this building,” I half-turned and pointed over my shoulder, “was the home of someone wealthy enough to reside in the more affluent part of Delft . Moreover, it is nicely situated next to a church. Not, that you would be aware of it, for it is not the usual religious house you would have found in the Netherlands at that time.

“No, this is a Catholic church. As you can see, the entrance is discreet, and there are few signs it is a place of worship. Indeed, it was once called the ‘hidden church’. The reason. . . a hundred years earlier Calvinism was adopted as the official faith, and Catholicism banned throughout the Low Countries.

“The fact that the owner of this house, a Catholic, was tacitly ignored by the town burgomasters, was because it belonged to the indomitable Maria Thins. A woman of substance, a woman forthright in her views, a woman mother-in-law to Johannes Vermeer.

“It was in this house that Vermeer produced the majority of his paintings.

“But before that, let us consider where, and how, the artist first developed his talents. There have been any number of theories, ranging from Vermeer being influenced by his father, Reynier Janszoon Vermeer, an art dealer cum publican, and was largely self-taught. . . to studying at length, under the masters in Amsterdam.

“However, we now have firm evidence that he was apprenticed to the Utrecht painter, [Abraham Bloemaert](#). But not primarily as an artist, more to learn the techniques of painting in order to follow in his father’s footsteps, as a dealer.”

“Cut! OK for a first run through, Alan. But when you mention the church, move slightly to your right towards it. Then come back slowly towards the house.”

We did the opening sequence twice more before Peter was satisfied.

Then four more takes in French, for ARTE's transmissions were in both languages.

It was on the last shoot that the two men I had noticed earlier, had moved even closer to the taped-off area in which we were filming.

Over the next three days we filmed in the many places frequented by Vermeer during his time in Delft. However, on the fourth day Peter and I in the Range Rover followed the truck to Utrecht, fifty kilometres to the east.

We were heading for the former priest's house on the Nieuwe Gracht, where Vermeer had been a pupil of [Abraham Bloemaert](#). Fortunately, the house was still standing, and the eight minute piece here would be edited into the early sequences of the film.

"Ready, Alan? OK. . .Get ready. . .Set. . .Go!"

It always amused me the different phrases directors use nowadays to get a film rolling. Gone, for many, was the simple word, 'Action'!

"This is where Johannes, though now he is more commonly known as Jan, began his apprenticeship with [Abraham Bloemaert](#).

"Originally Bloemaert was one of the '[Haarlem Mannerists](#)', selling most of his output to Utrecht's clandestine Catholic community. However, he altered his style to fit the new [Baroque](#) trends when 17th century artists from the [Netherlands](#) travelled to Rome, and were entranced by the works of Caravaggio.

"On their return Bloemaert helped them improve their skills, and the group became known as the 'Utrecht Caravaggisti'.

"Vermeer was plunged into this artistic melting pot, and was strongly influenced by [Bloemaert](#). Not only in terms of painting, but in his leanings towards Catholicism, and in his interest in Bloemaert's relatives.

The artist was an uncle by marriage to Jan Geenzoon Thins, and a cousin to Maria Thins. It would seem that Vermeer's stay in Utrecht led him,

eventually, not only to embrace Catholicism, but to marry into the family.”

We did the piece four times in both languages, until I got it right.

It was on the return trip to Delft that I noticed a blue car in a wing mirror. Peter was driving, so I was able to pay more attention to the vehicle behind us. It was also when noting its make and registration that my satellite phone began ringing in the glove box.

“Cleverden,” I answered.

“Mr Cleverden, you don’t know me, but I believe we have a great deal in common.”

Intriguing, the fellow was speaking English with a Russian accent.

“I am phoning because I think it would be beneficial if we could meet. I may be able to help you. You may be able to help me.”

“What is this about? How did you get this number?”

“My friend, I have made it my business to know a great deal about you. Telephone numbers, even for the most private satellite phones, rarely present a problem. So, I repeat, when can we meet?”

“I’m filming in Holland at the moment, and we are on a tight schedule. I don’t have a lot of spare time.”

“Make time. . .as they say, you will learn something to your advantage. Why don’t we meet in The Hague at the weekend? Shall we say on Sunday the twenty seventh at eleven o’clock? I presume you will not be filming on a Sunday. So, come to my suite at The Hilton. Ask for Albert Fischer.”

The line went dead. He had finished the call.

Peter came up with the idea.

“I’ve been thinking, Alan. What if we could re-create one of Vermeer’s paintings? You know, the actual scene, then walk around it and explain what the artist was trying to achieve. That really would appeal to viewers.”

“In a sense that has been done using virtual reality,” I said, glancing again in my wing mirror. Nothing. “But you can’t portray that on a television.”

“Just imagine,’ Peter went on, “walking into the painting of the ‘*Girl With The Pearl Earring*’, and asking her was she the artist’s daughter, a maid, or perhaps his mistress? Or asking ‘*The Woman Seated at The Virginals*’ to play something for you. That really would be fun.”

I nodded slowly. He had the germ of a good idea.

“Actually, that could be quite fun. Like those people in costume who stand motionless in a town square. They suddenly lean forward and speak to you. By the way, Vermeer painted five, perhaps six versions of a young lady seated or standing before a virginal.”

“Well, you get the picture, Alan.”

“I do. . .and it could work, Peter. But you would need an actual painting. We have permission to film in the Mauritshuis gallery in The Hague, but to do what you have in mind, we would need an actual painting, or a reasonable facsimile I could physically touch and chat about for a minute or so. Then the crew and I could enter the full-size duplicate and film particular features of Vermeer’s work close up.”

“That’s the problem. How do we get hold of a priceless Vermeer painting just like that?”

“Do you know, I think I may have the answer.”

She was in when I phoned.

“Ingrid, it’s your landlord. I need your help.”

“Oh, for a minute I thought you were phoning to say you would do the Hockney painting for me. Evidently not,” she said shortly.

“Er. . .perhaps we could come to an arrangement.”

She flew into Rotterdam The Hague Airport in a plane from Compton Abbas. On this occasion she declared the copy, explaining it was for use in

a TV programme about Vermeer.

Neither believing or disbelieving, they called in an expert who confirmed it was a copy. In fact a very good copy, one that could fool people until they saw that the craquelure had been induced using [formaldehyde](#) and a baking process rather than the paint surface cracking naturally.

I had become worried, for two hours passed after her plane had landed. When she finally appeared through the Arrivals gate I could not help but hug her.

In my absence Peter had gone to the Vermeer Centre on Voldersgracht, just across the town square, to enquire if the curator would be prepared to participate in the film; and importantly, if we paid, to devote a room to the re-creation of a three-dimensional copy of one of Vermeer's paintings.

He agreed to both counts, adding that he would like to buy the tableau from us when we had finished. It would add another feature to centre dedicated to Johannes Vermeer and the work of his contemporaries.

Peter later discovered the building was a rebuilt version used by the local Guild of Saint Luke, a trade association for painters of which Vermeer was a member. In fact, he often used the premises to engage with gallery owners, traders and collectors, in his role as an art dealer.

"He is up to something. We followed him to the airport and, after hanging around for a couple of hours, he met this young woman who was carrying an art container. Obviously, something was in it. . . Yes, we've seen her before, she must be one of his operatives. . . No I don't know what was in the case. . . Yes, we know his room number at the hotel. . . Forty eight hours, and you'll be in England? . . Good, I'm getting tired of chasing round Holland. . . OK, we'll do it then."

It was going to take a week or so to fashion the room exactly like the setting in the painting, *Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman*. The original

was housed in Buckingham Palace. My copy came from the long gallery at Mead Court, and would suffice for the amount of time I would be referring to it in the film.

While Peter and his crew spent a great deal of the time filming in and around Delft, to provide an historical background for me to do voice over at the editing stage, I took Ingrid on a grand tour of the Dutch towns.

I cheated a little – which was the operative word. We went to Madurodam, a [miniature park](#) in the [Scheveningen](#) district of [The Hague](#). It is home to a range of scale model replicas of famous Dutch landmarks and historic cities. Madurodam was named after [George Maduro](#), a Jewish law student from [Curaçao](#) and a member of the Dutch resistance during the second World War.

After lunch we strolled along the beach at [Scheveningen](#), and paddled in the cold waters of the North Sea. Not that I stayed in particularly long, Ingrid was more resilient than I. Perhaps they are hardier in Estonia.

Our trip to the seaside coincided with Flag Day in Holland, which heralds the start of the herring season. A feast of herring washed down with lager for me, wine for Ingrid, while sitting on the promenade made for an enchanting moment in the day.

In the evening, back in Delft, I took Ingrid to the Spijshuis de Dis, a restaurant serving traditional Dutch food I had come across earlier. Each dish comes delightfully garnished, and the quality was excellent. We drank a superb wine with the meal, and Ingrid leaned heavily on my arm when we strolled back to the hotel.

The lift whisked us up to the fifth floor, both our rooms no great distance apart. I escorted her to five one eight, took her key card and inserted it in the lock. I pushed it open and stood back for Ingrid to pass. I was well

aware that with the amount of alcohol she had drunk, she would fall asleep as soon as the door closed.

I leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek, but never made it.

Ingrid turned, enveloped me in her arms and kissed me deliciously on the lips. Not a brief encounter. We stayed rooted to the spot for several minutes. Then, suddenly, she stepped back, pulled me through the door, and kicked it shut.

We both fell on the bed: where we stayed in various forms of rapturous embrace for much of the night, until, eventually, in the wee hours, she fell asleep.

Giddy from the warmth of our mutual desires, I slowly eased myself from under her arm and searched for my clothes that, in the dark, had been randomly discarded. Eventually, it felt as though I was passably dressed, though my shirt was hanging over my trousers, I had no socks, and could only find one shoe, when I groped for the door.

Opening it quietly, I peered into the corridor. Thankfully, at four o'clock in the morning, there was no one about.

Easing the door shut, I crept towards my room.

I was fumbling in a pocket for the key card, when the explosion blew me, and the door, against the far wall.

I could not see too clearly. For some reason I could not focus on the woman in the towelling robe. I could not hear anything either. But from her actions I guessed she was shouting and sobbing while holding my head in her hands.

I looked away and saw blood on a door which lay near me.

Vision cleared a little, and on it I could make out the number five one four above the spyhole. That's my number I thought in a detached way.

Then two men in uniform lifted me onto a stretcher, and I don't remember anymore until I woke up in bed. A hospital bed, with Ingrid gripping my hand tightly.

"Hello," I murmured in a tone I hardly recognised.

Whereupon she burst into tears.

"You bastard, Cleverden!" she muttered under her breath. "I've never been so worried. How dare you play with my emotions like that!"

"Like what?"

"What do you mean, like what? You share my bed, then creep out in the middle of the night, leaving me distraught when a bomb goes off in your room. I thought you were dead. When I rushed out into the corridor all I could see was your body lying on the carpet."

"Share your bed? I was in my own bed all night."

Her face changed progressively from sorrow, through confusion, to anger.

"What are you talking about? Don't you remember where you spent most of the night, and what we did?" Ingrid blurted out loudly as a doctor came into the room. She blushed when she realised how far her voice had carried.

"No. . . tell me what we did," I whispered , squeezing her hand.

"Good morning, Mr Cleverden. How are you today?" asked the doctor grinning at me. "I didn't appreciate how much the concussion had affected you.

"Still," he continued, "it should clear fairly quickly now we've stitched you up and you're fully rested. In fact, you can be released today if your young lady can bring you some clothes. I'll be back later to sign you out."

He swept out, this time closing the door.

Ingrid was looking at me oddly.

"Am I your young lady, Alan?"

“I sincerely hope so. Of course I remember last night. Every sweet moment we were together.”

I grabbed for her hand.

“You bastard, Cleverden,” she said quietly, and kissed me with feeling.

Ingrid came back an hour later with an array of trousers, shirts, shoes, underwear and toiletries. She entered the room carrying a number of shopping bags as the two policemen were about to leave.

“Have you caught who ever planted the bomb yet?” were Ingrid’s immediate words.

“No, Madam. We are still trying to piece together the bomb components, to see if their handiwork belongs to anyone we know. As soon as we have any information we’ll be in touch.”

When they arrived, shown to the room by a nurse, their first question had been did I have any enemies, any petty jealousies or hatred displayed by anyone?

“No,” was my reply, “the bomber must have got the wrong room number.”

For much of the time they were at my bedside the policemen kept reverting, in a roundabout way, to the same question. They were clearly convinced I was the intended victim.

Towards the end of the interview they had told me I had been extremely fortunate to be elsewhere when the bomb had detonated. It had blown through the outer wall, which was predominantly glass; and the inner walls were peppered with holes and cracks wrought by the flying debris. If I had been in my bed, little would have been left from which to identify me.

A sobering thought.

And that prompted another thought.

Had it been Karppinen taking his revenge?

It seems to be a common practice with hospitals in most countries. To move you off the premises you are pushed to the exit in a wheelchair.

A taxi was waiting and Ingrid helped me into the vehicle, which drove us to the West Cord Delft Hotel.

I held onto her arm when we made for the lift.

The new door to five one four was firmly shut, and I could hear the sound of builders at work as we walked past. I also noticed that the rooms either side were also being refurbished.

In Ingrid's room I sat in a chair while she called room service.

A short time later there was a knock, and Ingrid opened the door.

It was not a waiter with a food trolley, but the hotel manager.

It was all done very pleasantly.

"In the circumstances, sir, I must ask you to leave the hotel. I'm sure whoever perpetrated the act of aggression against you made a mistake, But from my guests' point-of-view, they may well feel the explosion was directed against you personally. Moreover, having failed on this occasion, they may well try again.

"I cannot permit that fear to translate into cancelled reservations. Do you see my problem? Of course, we shall not charge you for the use of the room thus far. But if you could make other arrangements, seek other accommodation, that would be a satisfactory outcome to this conversation."

We never did move to another hotel.

While we were having lunch in Ingrid's room, the phone rang.

It was John Fielding.

My mother and McKenna were in the Community Hospital in Shaftesbury. She had had been knocked unconscious, and suffered heavy bruising. McKenna had a broken arm and had also succumbed to a beating.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Roger picked us up at Heathrow Airport, and drove us down to Shaftesbury.

We arrived at the hospital to find they had been discharged, and had now returned to Mead Court.

When we came to a halt on the forecourt, I laboriously climbed out the car and made for the front door. I did not bother to knock but walked into the house, and stood still in the hall listening for the sound of voices.

They were coming from the kitchen.

I shuffled along the corridor, down the steps and opened the door.

“Alan!” called my mother looking up.

McKenna rose to his feet. His face was pale, with smudges under the eyes. His left arm was in a fashionable sling of grey material and zips.

“Ach, you’re here at last, laddie,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

He peered over my shoulder.

“Roger, come and sit down. And Ingrid as well. We are honoured. It’s math sibh a fhaicinn, Nighean!”

Ingrid looked puzzled.

“My mother explained. “He said, it’s good to see you, lassie’. Though, heaven knows why he uses the Gaelic when he has only ever lived a wee while across the border,” she added.

We all sat around the long table in the kitchen, including Mrs Dimmock, the cook and lady of many parts, while my mother and step-father recounted what had happened.

“Two days ago, about eight in the evening, there was a knock at the door,” said McKenna. “I was crossing the hall at the time, so went to see who it was. I had half-opened it when three men wearing those balaclavas just with eyeholes, and shouting in some foreign language, burst in and knocked me off my feet.”

He glanced at my mother.

“They charged into the sitting room where Suzanna was, and pulled her from the chair. I rushed in, and one of them hit me with a baseball bat. This was the result.”

He slightly lifted his left arm.

“That didn’t stop him,” added my mother with a wistful smile. “He grabbed hold of one of my captors with his good arm and tried to pull him off me. . .then they hit him again.”

“I was winded, and fell across a settee. I tried to get up, but then another of them jerked his baseball bat round Suzanna’s throat, and said. “Where’s the painting? Where’s the Manet? Tell me, or I’ll pull this tighter!”

McKenna stretched out and grasped my mother’s hand.

It was a poignant moment.

Nothing was said. I glanced at Ingrid. She dropped her head, but I had seen her eyes mist over.

McKenna eventually carried on. “I led two of them into the long gallery. One of them whistled at the sight of the collection hanging on the wall. The inscriptions had not yet been fixed to the frames, and they thought they were all originals. We walked towards the far end to your copy of the Folies’ girl.

“It must have been the leader of the group who took it down from the wall, and said in this strange accent. ‘Right, we’ve got what we came for. But because you have caused us problems, we are taking this one as well.’

And he grabbed hold of that van Gogh you painted. . .the one with the fellow wearing a cap.”

“*The Portrait of Dr Gachet*,” I murmured. “That’s a stroke of luck. The original is in a private collection somewhere, and no one knows who bought it from the Austrian, Wolfgang Flötti. Whoever, has taken the Manet could more easily believe it’s the real thing, if they think the van Gogh is genuine.”

“I’m sorry, laddie, I couldn’t stop them,” said McKenna contritely. “Once they had the paintings they hit us both with the bats, knocking us to the ground. When I came round Suzanna was still unconscious, and I phoned for an ambulance, which whisked us both into Shaftesbury Hospital.”

“Did you tell the police?” asked Roger.

“Yes, they came to the hospital and took our statements,” explained my mother.

“I told them that the robbers had stolen two paintings,” continued McKenna. “And I gave them the sizes and styles of frame. I also pointed out that the Folies’ bar was not painted by Manet, an apprentice in his studio completed the work. And though the van Gogh is also a copy by an unknown artist, both had strong sentimental as well as commercial value.”

He grinned. “I added both were extremely dear to us, and they must do all that is possible to retrieve them. I understand they have circulated photos of the missing paintings to airports, ferry ports and harbour authorities, so they won’t be able to ship them out too readily.”

I sat on my favourite bench overlooking the lawns and the avenue of trees leading down to the lake. A view I had always found comforting. This was once a peaceful haven, sheltered from the outside world.

Not anymore.

Outsiders had infringed the sanctuary of Mead Court. They had wrought injury on the two people I held dear. The paintings were nothing compared with their safety. They could have removed the lot.

But they chose to take just two works, and in the process to frighten, bully and injure my mother and McKenna.

No one should get away with that.

I would not let them get away with that.

A hand rested on my shoulder.

“Suzanna said I would find you here,” Ingrid murmured.

She sat beside me and took hold of my hand.

“What are we going to do, Alan,” she asked in a quiet voice. “They are obviously shaken by what has happened. Although their injuries are not too serious, they now feel vulnerable.”

“First thing tomorrow I am having a better alarm system installed, with cameras that can show likely intruders, and panic buttons to the police if anyone looks threatening. Then, after I’ve finished in Holland, I’m going after those who attacked my mother and step-father.”

“You’ll be careful though, won’t you!”

It was more a statement than a question.

We went back to St George’s Square.

Ingrid had handed in the hard submission of her thesis, and was now awaiting to be called for the *viva voce*, the oral examination. I packed fresh clothes and caught the late flight to Rotterdam alone.

I missed her by my side. Never indifferent to a pretty face, I had enjoyed the company of a number of young women. But they had been passing fancies. Most often, the current enchantress had been fun, engaging and sexually entertaining; but invariably she, like the others, had wandered off and found someone new, more suited to their temperament.

Thinking back, I was never dismayed when a relationship ended.

Invariably, with most of them, we parted friends and exchanged Christmas cards, even when they were married. I continued urbanely, the idea of marriage never crossing my mind.

Suddenly, far from being unruffled, I could not get Ingrid out of my thoughts. What would happen when she secured her doctorate? She had said she would be going back home. Could I shrug off, as I had done so readily in the past, her leaving me and returning to Estonia?

I used my cell phone to wish her good night from the plane. . .just to hear her voice.

“When the couple moved into her mother’s house, it was spacious enough for Catherine to give birth to fifteen children, Although, sadly, not all of them survived. Even so, the shouting, screaming and caterwauling of infants, of all ages, running through the building must have been unrelenting.”

“Cut! Alan, the open door to the house is on your left. You’re turning to the right.”

“You’re waving your arm on the right!” I responded.

“My right. . .you’re left! Got it? Let’s do that intro again, everybody.”

We were filming once again in front of Maria Thins’ imaginary house. The next sequence would be filmed in a building in the old town, much like that of Vermeer’s mother-in-law. At the moment we were setting the scene. The clever bit was the image of the front door slowly swinging open to the sound of children at play, arguing, and coursing across bare wooden floors.

The noise would, briefly, carry over when I walked into the house in the next series of shots.

This time I turned to my left, and Peter finally called. “OK, let’s live with that.”

He had the shot he wanted.

I walked towards the camera into the seventeenth century building with the crow-stepped gable.

“Apart from a few city views and allegorical works, Vermeer devoted the rest of his career to depicting scenes within the household. What is perplexing, only thirty-six paintings by him are known to exist. Even if he produced at most forty-five works up to the time of his death in 1675, that would only have been an average of two to three canvases a year. It is tempting to attribute this modest output to Vermeer’s precise and labour-intensive painting style.

“Anyone painting so few pictures annually could hardly make a living from his art, even if he had regular patrons prepared to pay high prices for his work. But, as we know, Vermeer was not only a painter, he was also an art dealer. Most likely, this was the more profitable source of his income.

“He did have one valuable patron. The local art collector, [Pieter van Ruijven](#), who frequently advanced monies to Vermeer for the purchase of materials.”

I was now climbing the stairs as I spoke, turning my head down towards the following camera.

“There was no other seventeenth century artist who employed the exorbitantly expensive pigments [lapis lazuli](#) or natural [ultramarine](#) so lavishly. Vermeer not only used the latter in elements that are naturally of this colour, but also in combination with the earth colours, [umber](#) and [ochre](#). In this way, he created a world more perfect than any he had witnessed.

“Whereas other artists of the time bought their raw materials from myriad sources, including quacks, travelling sailors and apothecaries, ground their

own paints and stretched their own canvases, Vermeer bought ready-made pigments and prepared canvases in stock dimensions.”

I reached the next floor, still talking to camera.

“And this is where it all took place. The front room on the second floor. In here he produced the majority of his domestic scenes, using the same models, often family members, and simply re-arranging the furniture.”

“And cut,” Peter shouted up the stairs. “Let’s do that scene again, Alan. This time pause on the stairs when you say Vermeer was also an art dealer, and made his money largely that way. Then again when you refer to his use of expensive pigments. OK?”

I nodded and retraced my steps to the ground floor.

Eventually we got it right in both languages on the seventh take.

After that we did a series of scenes with me walking along various canals, before I returned to my room now at the Hampshire Hotel on Koepoortplaats.

That evening I phoned Ingrid.

It was only a short conversation, she was going out to dinner with friends.

“What friends?” I asked, trying to keep a lightness in my voice.

“Oh, people I have been studying with these past few years.”

“Oh. . .by the way did I tell you? I had a call from some mysterious person who wants to meet me on Sunday morning. I don’t know what it’s about, but he was fairly insistent.”

“Alan, what did your mother tell you about not talking to strangers? I don’t think you should go, do you hear? It could be dangerous.”

“It’s OK, I’m sure.”

“No it’s not. Take Peter or someone with you. Don’t go on your own.”

“OK, I’ll ask him to come with me.”

“Good. Now I must fly. Speak to you soon.”

We did not do any filming on Saturday morning. The day was overcast with a hint of rain in the air. As a consequence, Peter Soames and I set out to visit the Vermeer Centre across the Market Square on Voldersgracht.

Walking across the square I asked him if he were free for an hour or so the next morning.

“Sorry, Alan. I’m going on a canal trip with Rudi Demotte, the cameraman, and André Antoine, the sound recordist. We want some film material from the water, and we are going to check out likely locations.”

Ingrid phoned as we drew close to the Centre.

I had a brief, hurried few words with her, promising to ring back.

We met with the curator, who took us upstairs to the second floor. Where he flung open a door, and there before us was a life-size three-dimensional rendition of the painting, *Lady At the Virginals With A Gentleman*. Hesitantly, we stepped over the frame to stand inside the painting,

It was uncanny.

I took up my copy of the work for comparison, to discover the perspective was spot on; everything in the tableau was placed exactly as it was portrayed in the original. They had even included the easel, captured in the reflections in the mirror hanging on the wall above the virginals.

“Remarkable!” exclaimed Peter.

“Outstanding!” I declared. “How on earth did you manage to produce all this in such a short space of time?”

The curator preened himself. “With a certain amount of persuasion, and a large amount of money,” he said smiling at our bemused looks. “So, gentlemen, I look forward to seeing you both, with your film crew, on Monday morning.”

I took the lift to the sixth floor, and walked along the corridor to six seven two. I was on my own, and little anxieties were creeping in.

Perhaps I should have taken more notice of Ingrid's words of warning.

Too late now. I tapped on the door.

"Come in, Mr Cleverden. I admire your promptness."

Somewhere in the city a bell was chiming the hour.

"Can I offer you something? Won't you join me in a glass of wine, or coffee, or perhaps something stronger?"

"Coffee would be welcome Mr Fischer. . .or whatever your name is," I replied shortly looking around the room.

I had the impression there was no one else in the suite.

He led the way to a settee, then picked up a nearby telephone and called room service.

"So. . .how is your Vermeer project coming along?" he asked, making polite conversation.

"We are on schedule."

I assumed that if he knew a great deal about me, as he had mentioned earlier, he was aware of my work, how I made my living.

He nodded. "And your activities with the Art Newspaper, they are progressing smoothly?"

"Why ask these questions if you already know the answer?"

He gave a half-smile.

"Because Mr Cleverden. . ."

The knock at the door interrupted what he was about to say.

He rose, opened the door to allow the waiter to bring in a loaded tray.

"Black or white?"

"Black, please."

He put the cup on the coffee table in front of me, and carried his to a small side table.

“Before we continue Mr Cleverden, I must ask you to turn off your cell phone, and place it on the table. For reasons that will become clearer, I would not want our conversation to be recorded.”

I removed it from my pocket and did as he requested,

“As I was saying. . .” He sipped from the cup, then went back to the sideboard and added more milk. “I could perhaps be of considerable use to you in your line of business.”

“Which one?” TV activities or the newspaper?”

“Don’t be coy, Mr Cleverden. The one few people know anything about. Your discreet acquisitions for clients.”

Now I was puzzled. What was he talking about?

“I don’t follow you. What acquisitions?”

“Do I have to spell it out? I must admit it was an astute move letting the Finn, Karppinen, go to the trouble of removing the painting, *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*, from the ship. Then to steal it from right under his nose and substitute it with another. That was a masterstroke. Leoni Tupolev was beside himself with fury when he saw what was in the container.”

Who is this fellow I wondered? How does he know so much about what has been going on?

“From that remark you will have guessed I am Russian, Mr Cleverden. I also know that Karppinen has now stolen back the Manet and another painting from your client at Mead Court. I do not know the agreement you have with your buyer, but I should imagine you will attempt to claim back the paintings, as you were responsible for leading Karppinen’s hoodlums to your private collector in Dorset. Am I right?”

“Before I answer any of your questions, Mr Fischer, why are you involving yourself in this? You said earlier on the phone there would be

some form of mutual benefit. But what is in it for you? Is it money or personal gain in some way?"

The fellow sitting opposite smiled. "It is not money, I assure you, Mr Cleverden. You might well call it personal gain. Though more, it is to limit somebody's acquisitive powers. To make him operate in the best interests of the country, not to satisfy the whims and fancies of his wife."

"Are we talking about your President, Mr Fischer?"

"Exactly so, Mr Cleverden."

"I think I would like to join you in that glass of wine you mentioned."

He nodded, rose to his feet, and removed a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the mini-bar. Handing me a glass, he said. "First of all, Mr Cleverden, let me introduce myself. My name is Kosnievsky. . .Ivan Kosnievsky. I am the head of The Presidential Property Management Department. I have deliberately told you this, for now you have the suggestion of a hold on my future. Unsubstantiated, I must admit, but it could make life a little awkward if it were made public.

"The situation is this. Our President has commandeered works of art from St Petersburg, and other museums and galleries, for his personal pleasure. Our nation's heritage is now lining the walls of his home when they should be on show, under controlled conditions, for all to enjoy.

"He has overstepped his authority. And as a tax-paying Russian his greed is being paid for by me and millions of others. So you want your paintings back, and I want to expose Tupolev's avarice. I have a plan by which we could both achieve our objectives."

I did not disabuse him of the notion I was a thief given to stealing works of art for wealthy, private collectors. But I did reveal the following.

"Before you and I discuss what you have in mind, Mr Kosnievsky, let me tell you the real situation. The collectors at Mead Court have a gallery to

which guests and visitors have access. They also have another viewing room, strictly private, wherein the true treasures lie.

“Most of the paintings in the open, long gallery are copies, painted to fool the casual observer. The Manet and the van Gogh taken by Karppinen’s people are both fakes. They look authentic, even down to the craquelure, but they are still phonies. At the moment, they could well find it difficult to move the paintings they stole out of Britain, for the police are watching all the likely departure points. At the very least, they will have to remove the canvases from the stretchers and hide them amongst their baggage.”

A slow grin spread across Kosnievsky’s face.

“In which case I’ll use my resources to track them down and follow their movements.”

“How could you possibly do that?”

“Mr Cleverden, it is not only the West which has very capable computer hackers. We know the names of Karppinen’s people, and I’m sure they will use their credit cards. It will be a simple matter to trace the movements of Virtanen, Korhonen, and Mäkinen. Every time one of them makes a purchase, we shall know where they are, and importantly, where they are going.”

He went over to the mini-bar, removed another bottle of wine, and poured two glasses. As he carried them over, Kosnievsky said. “So, they are not only fakes, but I now have a little extra time to put my revised plan into operation. When the Manet and conceivably, the van Gogh eventually arrive in Moscow, I shall be ready to spring my trap. But I must ask, Mr Cleverden, if *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* is not genuine, what’s in it for you,?”

“You mentioned personal gain,” I said grimly. “In this instance, Mr Kosnievsky, it is revenge. I need to witness the downfall of Aarni

Karppinen.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

The *viva voce* was brought forward, and Ingrid Jakobson was plunged into revising late into the night to ensure she was on top of all the essential elements of her thesis. She even reviewed the possible negative factors that might be touched upon by the examiners.

Come the morning of the oral examination she was nervous but at the same time confident her intensive research and subsequent paper on Iron Age settlements in the Somerset Wetlands would stand up to the grilling she was about to encounter.

She had numerous photographs of samples to support her submission. Because of the anaerobic conditions present in waterlogged environments, the normal processes of decay do not occur. The result, organic materials such as wood and leather often survive in reasonable condition. Such survival was of immense archaeological importance, because the organic component forms the largest part of the material culture of all societies from prehistoric to mediæval times.

This allows archaeologists, such as Ingrid, to reconstruct the changing local landscape over thousands of years, and comprehend how it responded to alterations in sea levels and climate change; and, importantly, how people adapted to it.

Two hour later it was over.

In her enthusiasm, Ingrid phoned Alan. Contact and comforting words seemed essential.

She caught him just as he was entering the Vermeer Centre in Delft. The exchange was brief, even though he congratulated her, she sensed his immediate thoughts were elsewhere.

Never mind, she would arrange a get-together with her fellow Estonians, on Saturday evening. They knew how to party, and after all that hard work, Ingrid felt she needed to let her hair down.

She met them at the Century Club, just off Piccadilly, ready to dance and drink the hours away. But, as the night wore on, Ingrid found she was not enjoying herself as she had in the past. Her friends were cavorting and downing drinks around her, but slowly her smile waned and she gradually withdrew from the shouted conversations.

Just before midnight, she made the flimsiest of excuses, and left the club. A taxi whisked back to St George's Square, and as she climbed the stairs to her apartment she started to dial Alan's number. . .but halfway through she cancelled the call.

Ingrid awoke late.

It was eleven o'clock when she dialled his number again. No answer. It was then she remembered he was going to meet the stranger in The Hague. She hoped Peter Soames was with him.

At two o'clock Ingrid tried again.

Still no answer.

Nor could she reach Alan when she phoned at four, and again at five.

An hour later when Alan's phone was still dead, she contacted Peter Soames.

"Hello!"

"Peter, it's Ingrid Jakobson. I was trying to speak to Alan, but his phone is switched off. I've spoken to the people at the Hampshire Hotel, where he is

now staying, and they told he was not in his room. Do you know where he is? Did you go with him to The Hague this morning?"

"No, Ingrid. He asked me, but I had other commitments. Why? Do you think there's a problem?"

"I'm not sure. . ." she replied, but there was uncertainty in her voice. "Right. . .I'm coming over on the next plane."

"Let me know your arrival time and I'll pick you up," said Peter, now sharing her concern.

When she came through the Arrivals Gate, Peter was standing there to meet her.

She rushed over and asked. "Have you heard anything? Is he all right? You must tell me!"

Peter smiled, stretching out his arms he held her shoulders.

"I spoke to him just twenty minutes ago. He had just returned to the hotel. Apparently, he was out at Scheveningen this afternoon, eating sardines and walking on the beach. He had left his phone in the Range Rover, anyway it was switched off. I didn't tell him you were worried about him, Ingrid. He doesn't know you're here, in Holland."

"The bastard, worrying me unnecessarily like that. Just wait 'till I see him!"

"While I was waiting for you I had a better idea. Tell me what you think."

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

Kosnievsky had certainly made me think hard about his proposition. I was not too upset about the probable loss of my copies of the Manet and the van Gogh. I could always paint them again. In fact, I had come up with an even better method of ageing canvases and inducing the right form of surface cracking.

I had been studying the masters at some length, and came to understand the variations in craquelure that developed in their works. To create a better visual suggestion of age, I photographed a predominantly white area of a painting, and copied a purely black and white image of the cracking to a sheet of acetate. Any minor blemishes were carefully removed, and the small image replicated a number of times to create a large area of false craquelure.

This was transferred to a silk screen. Thereafter, it was a simple task to roll on a mixture of carbon black tattoo ink and much diluted rabbit's skin glue over the painting's surface to give a realistic impression of antiquity. Also, when heated in an oven at just the right temperature up to three centuries could be added to the image.

Of course, under magnification it would not stand up to scrutiny; but it was purely for my own satisfaction, and that of my mother.

After I had left the hotel and the meeting with Fischer, or rather Kosnievsky, if either were his real name, on a whim, I decided to drive over to the beach at Scheveningen. In part, it was the memory of the day spent with Ingrid that prompted the idea.

Predictably, people were out enjoying the sunshine. I strolled along the seashore and thought long and hard about the conversation with the Russian. Time and distance were forgotten until suddenly I realised two things.

I now accepted that Kosnievsky's proposal was the only way to avenge the attack on my mother and McKenna. I could not forgive myself for placing them in such jeopardy.

Secondly, none of the simple pleasures I had enjoyed with Ingrid could be recaptured without her presence. After tomorrow's filming in the Vermeer Centre I would fly back to England and tell her so.

Monday dawned, and I phoned Ingrid's number.

No answer, it was not switched on. Strange. It was invariably active, if just to take messages, day and night.

After a light breakfast I walked the six hundred metres along Nieuwe Langendijk, heading for the Nieuwe Kerk, whose prominent spire was like a guiding beacon as it caught the rays of the early morning sun.

The weather was holding, so we should be able to do more exterior shots after finishing in the Vermeer Centre.

My timing was good. I arrived as the crew members were taking equipment up to the room on the second floor. Peter was standing by the truck talking to Rudi. No doubt, going over the last minute details of the shots he wanted from the cameraman.

Lighting was crucial in the interior, and when I went over to them they were talking about what reflectors they could use in the confined space of the tableau.

"Ah, there you are," said Peter. "Sleep well? No more bombs under the bed? So what did you get up to on Sunday?"

“I was over in The Hague,” I replied. “Then went to the beach at Scheveningen. And you?”

“Oh. . .I pottered around Delft in the morning. In the afternoon I was here, briefing the actors about their roles in the tableau of Vermeer’s painting.”

Someone called. “We are ready for the run-through, Peter.”

“Right, well you’d better let them improve on things in make-up, Alan. Come up in ten minutes , and we’ll take it from there.”

We wandered into the building. He mounted the stairs and I turned towards Miriam, the make-up artist. She made a few passes over my face and pronounced me ready for the shoot. She also handed me the suede jacket, my constant companion during film sequences. Fortunately, it had been in her care when my room was demolished at the West Cord Delft Hotel.

I climbed the stairs rehearsing my lines. As I neared the room , Peter came over “We’ve mounted the copy of the painting on an easel on the right hand side as you enter the room. I want you to stand to the left of it while you talk to camera. After fifteen seconds or so Rudi will come in on close-up of the painting. Then he will pan slowly to the left, at the same time going to wide angle to encompass the tableau. When he comes to a halt I want you to have completed the introduction to the painting. Got it?”

I nodded, glancing at the stage set of the painting.

I could not fault it. The actors were in their place, the woman looking down at the musical instrument. The man, portrayed in profile, resting his arm on the virginals while looking at the keyboard.

I took up my position.

“OK. . .Get ready. . .Set. . .GO!”

I suppressed a grin at Peter’s usual injunction to begin, and picked up the thread of the last commentary when I referred to Vermeer using family

members in his paintings and re-arranging the furniture around them.

“Take the work Vermeer painted in 1665, Lady At The Virginals With A Gentleman. This enigmatic work, most often referred to as ‘The Music Lesson’, is characterised by the artist’s remarkable use of perspective, drawing the viewer’s eye to the man and woman standing by the virginals at the back of the room.”

Rudi was starting to move the camera from the painting towards the tableau.

“In front of them, a viola da gamba lies on the floor. The Latin inscription on the lid of the virginals, MUSICA LETITIAE COMES / MEDICINA DOLORIS, means ‘Music is a companion in pleasure and a balm in sorrow.’

“It suggests the artist is exploring the relationship between the figures. The presence of two musical instruments in the composition implies shared pleasures and potential harmony. This theme is echoed by the rapt expression on the man’s face, as he listens to the woman play.”

“And . . .Cut! We were three seconds over, Alan. Rudi had finished when you were still speaking. Can we trim the script a little? Let’s look at the wording.”

It was a simple matter of taking out a few extraneous words, and cutting out any slight hesitations. We did three more takes until Peter was satisfied.

The next scene involved me moving through the set and standing by the virginals. I was to walk across the black and white tiles, close to the window, while Rudi tracked me on the camera from the other side of the room.

Lights and reflectors had been installed around him, otherwise my features would have been in deep shadow. Again I talked to camera over my shoulder.

“Get ready. . .Set. . .GO!”

“Many have interpreted the picture not as a music lesson, but the gentleman singing while accompanied by the young lady. But no singer would gaze so intently at the keyboard, he would effect a more upright posture to allow for his lungs to fill, and breathe more deeply.”

My attention was taken by the colour of the young lady’s hair. This was the one slight error in creating the tableau. In the painting the hair was darker. This woman, with her eyes cast down over the keyboard, was quite blonde. Even while I was recounting the lines from the script I wondered if it would be sensible to stop and point out the discrepancy.

I was now close and could see the fine hairs on the back of her neck. But I carried on.

“There is a school of thought that Jan Vermeer was something of a mechanical artist. We know he used ready-prepared materials, but there is also the strong suggestion he indulged in camera obscura.

Using almost a photographic image transmitted to the canvas, and simply applying the paint, like painting by numbers. This viewpoint is held largely because there is no underpainting or corrections made to any of his works.

“Two things make this an implausible theory. Firstly, look at the windows. They are not big enough to allow sufficient light through for such an instrument to work effectively. And secondly. . .

Now I was staring hard at the woman’s profile.

My heart missed a beat.

Then she turned and looked up at me.

“. . .and secondly. . .the. . .”

I grabbed Ingrid, pulled her to her feet, and kissed her hard with real intensity.

Everyone started cheering and applauding.

Eventually, I turned to Peter. “I hold you responsible for this,” I said, grinning like the Cheshire cat. “Thank you.”

“And secondly, the camera obscura of the time was a cumbersome, unwieldy piece of machinery. With such a large family, space was at a premium. Hardly worth installing if the artist painted only two or three pictures a year. And with such poor light coming into the room, he was probably confined just to wielding his brushes during the summer months.”

It took me a dozen attempts to get it right.

“Why the satellite phone as well? And why did you go alone to the meeting in The Hague? Really, Alan, that was an unforgiveable risk. Then when you didn’t phone I got worried. I caught the first available plane here.”

She sniffed. “I can’t leave you on your own for a minute.”

“Is that a promise?”

“What do you mean?”

“That you won’t leave me on my own?”

She leaned on one elbow and looked into my eyes.

We were in my room at the Hampshire, lying in a king-sized bed. Well-filled champagne glasses an arm stretch away on the bedside tables.

“I might,” Ingrid said in a low voice.

“Good. I was thinking of asking you to move in with me. . .but then I realised you already have,” I said smiling up at her.

But she didn’t not react to the humour of the remark.

“Are you ever serious, Alan?”

I leaned upwards and kissed her.

“Actually, I am. I made a joke of it in case you rejected the idea, and me with it. I would dearly love, Ingrid, to share my life and my apartment with you on the top floor.”

She smiled coquettishly. "I might like that. I could save on the exorbitant rent my landlord charges. But you haven't answered my question. Why are you carrying two telephones around with you? And you haven't told me yet what happened at this mysterious meeting in The Hague."

So, instead of unbridled passion, we spent several hours discussing all that had taken place at the Hilton Hotel in The Hague.

"You say this fellow, Kosnievsky, is working in the best interests of his country. But how do you know that?"

"There are times, Ingrid, when you just know a person is being truthful. You can see it in their eyes, in the manner in which they speak to you. Anyway, he wouldn't have given me his name if he were being duplicitous."

"But you don't know that is his real name. He could have been using someone else's to draw you into his web of deceit."

"Look, I am totally convinced he is genuine. But, let's look at it another way. I probably won't see him again. He promised to keep me informed, hence the satellite phone, which is not readily traceable.

"He had a plan he wanted to discuss, but when I told him that the Manet painting stolen from Mead Court was a fake, he was delighted. He would have tried to return the painting if it were the original, but now he said, his plan would be even better. All I have to do is sit back and watch events unfold."

"You're sure? Promise me you won't be going anywhere near Russia. It could be too dangerous."

"I promise."

"Good! How is the ARTE programme coming along? How many more days will you be filming?"

“Actually, it’s coming together nicely. Peter wants to film on some of the canals, and visit Amsterdam briefly for footage in the galleries. After that. . .”

I looked across at Ingrid. She was already fast asleep.

Henrik Virtanen opened the boot of the Volvo, and eased out the base board over the spare wheel. He took it to a work bench, and using it as a template, marked out its dimensions on a thin sheet of plywood.

He did it twice.

Removing the Manet and the van Gogh from their frames and from their stretchers, he was left with just the canvases.

Taking up sections of bubble-wrap, he interleaved each canvas, then slid the contents onto a cut-out section of plywood. Taking up the other piece, he placed it carefully on top and sealed all round the edges with a staple gun.

Next, he cut sufficient black, felt-like, material from a roll, and expertly covered the plywood sandwich.

Thirty minutes later the vehicle had a new base board.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

The satellite phone buzzed at six o'clock in the morning.

Trapped under a tangle of legs and arms, it took me a while to free myself. Finally. "Cleverden."

"You must be a heavy sleeper, Mr Cleverden. I almost gave up."

"I've been weighed down by other matters, Mr Fischer."

"Well, our friends are on the move. It would appear that tickets have been bought for the ferry from Immingham. Where exactly is Immingham, Mr Cleverden?"

"Interesting. It's a major east coast port, on the south bank of the River Humber in Lincolnshire. They are obviously taking a ferry to somewhere. Do you know their departure time or destination?"

"No, unfortunately, all I have so far is the purchase of ferry tickets."

"Well, if they are boarding a ferry boat, that should show up soon enough on your system."

"Hm. . .I'll phone when I know more."

Click. The line was closed.

"Who was that?"

A face appeared from under the duvet.

"My questionable friend, Mr Fischer, alias Ivan Kosnievsky."

"What did he want?"

"To tell me the thieves who broke into Mead Court are on the move. They're heading for a ferry port in the north of England."

"Where can they go from there?" asked Ingrid, sitting up in bed.

Momentarily, I was distracted. “Sorry?”

“I said, where can they go from there?”

“I believe to various ports in Scandinavia. My bet is they’ll head for Gothenburg. Anyway, Kosnievsky will let me know.”

Ingrid and I met up with Peter and the film crew in the square in front of the Nieuwe Kerk, the new church.

“What I want to do this morning, Alan, is to film from the top of the tower. This will be a better intro to the film. We can follow with the scenes outside Vermeer’s house afterwards. I’ve been to the top and there is a clear view of where it once stood, and a number of other landmarks we can film.

“There might be a problem getting the equipment up there. But we can deal with that. I must tell you the tower is not for the faint-hearted. The spiral staircase is narrow and quite claustrophobic, and when you get onto the roof space is limited and the parapet is not very high. It’s not recommended if you are overweight, George.”

George was our lighting expert. A full-figured giant of a man who seemed to be forever hungry.

“You won’t need lights up there, Peter,” he replied, adding. “Thank God!”

Ingrid kissed me on the cheek and went off shopping, grinning at the thought of me climbing all those stairs.

Eventually, we sorted out what to take, and set off. Rudi carried the camera, I carried his tripod, André, the portable sound equipment, bringing the shotgun microphone to counter wind noise at that height. Peter brought the shooting script and himself.

Some fifteen minutes later we emerged breathless onto the ledge. It was surprisingly windy. I am not a great fan of heights and it took a moment’s concentration to walk to the rail and peer over the edge.

The view overcame the slight unsettling feeling.

I could make out The Hague, and even the North Sea in the far, far distance.

Rudi and André quickly set up the camera and sound equipment, and the first shots were a panoramic sweep of Delft, to which I would add voice over commentary in the studio. Moving in towards me in close-up, I began, as usual in German, with:

“The ancient city of Delft was a thriving township in the seventeenth century. Once the de facto capital of Holland as the seat of the Prince of Orange, one of its other notable figures was Johannes Reijniersz Vermeer, whom we know simply as Jan Vermeer. Born in 1632 at the family home in Voldersgracht. . .”

Rudi swung round the camera and pinpointed the house.

“. . . just across from the market square, most of his immediate family survived what became known as the Delft Thunderclap. On the twelfth of October 1654 a [gunpowder](#) store exploded, four hundred metres from his home, destroying much of the city.

The camera panned to the north and closed in on the area in nearby Geerweg.

“30 [tonnes](#) of gunpowder were stored in [barrels](#) in a [magazine](#) in a former [Clarissen convent](#) in the Doelenkwartier district. Cornelis Soetens, the keeper of the magazine, opened the store to check a sample of the powder, and a huge explosion followed. Luckily, many citizens were away, visiting a [market](#) in [Schiedam](#), or the [fair](#) in [The Hague](#). Even so, over a hundred people were killed and thousands injured.

“When he married Catharina Bolnes in 1653, Vermeer literally moved across the square to live in his wife’s mother’s house next to the Catholic church.

Rudi was kept busy. He brought the camera round to focus on where Maria Thins’ house once stood on the Oude Langendijk.

“Throughout his life in Delft, Vermeer’s long-time companion and patron, who bought the majority of his paintings, was Pieter van Ruijven, who lived close by on Voorstraat.”

Once again Rudi and I were synchronised. As I said the name , he had already zoomed in on Ruijven’s house.

“Cut! How was that for sound, André?”

“OK, Peter.”

“Good. . .let’s just play that sequence back to see if we need run through it again. Then we’ll do it in French.”

We crowded around the monitor and watched the shoot, looking for ways we might improve on it. It was one of those takes that succeeded first time. We did film it again, but Peter declared we’re not going to beat the first take. The French version took three attempts before we packed up and made our descent to *terra firma*, three hundred and eighty steps below.

I gave my suede jacket to Miriam for safe keeping, and, in exchange, collected the cell and satellite phones from her. I was stowing them in my shoulder bag, when the satellite version vibrated.

I answered the call walking away from the film crew.

“Hello.”

“Mr Cleverden, good morning. Just to let you know they boarded the ferry to Gothenburg in Sweden on last night’s sailing. It should dock in Gothenburg this evening. From now on I shall have someone following them. I shall keep in contact.”

Again the line was closed abruptly.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Border Protection Officers at Gothenburg had pulled the Volvo to one side, and searched the occupants and examined the boot, before they took note of their passports. These confirmed they were Finnish and heading for the ferry to Helsinki.

Free to go, they drove the short distance to the Thörnströms Kök on Teknologgatan, for a late meal. It seemed appropriate, considering it was situated just a few steps from Götaplatsen and Gothenburg's Konstmuseum, the main art gallery.

Back on the road, they took it in turns to drive through the night, opting for Route 40, and picking up the E4 trunk road at Jönköping for Stockholm.

The trio spent much of the day in the Swedish capital, before boarding the Tallink Silja Line ferry departing at a quarter to five in the evening..

Arriving at ten o'clock the next morning, it was a short drive from the ferry terminal to the studio on Kanavakatu, to be greeted by the eager smile on Aarni Karppinen's face.

"Litvinov."

"Mr Litvinov, it's Aarni. . .Aarni Karppinen. Just to let you know, the goods have arrived safely. We have to check them, of course, to make sure they are in good order, and to prepare them for delivery. But, after a brief examination, I should imagine they will be ready for dispatch in seven to ten days time. I'll let you know the details well in advance. I shall make the delivery myself, and travel on an Aeroflot flight. So I would like you to ease my trip with the airline. And please, make special arrangements with

your Border Service, and the Federal Security Service, to avoid any .
.misunderstandings.”

“That should not be a problem, Mr Karppinen. I shall be at the airport to escort you to my client, and after delivery I shall transfer the agreed payment. Thank you, it now seems I can satisfy his demands.”

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

When the director and crew took the truck to Amsterdam for the filler shots of the city and the art galleries, Ingrid and I drove to the Hook of Holland and the ferry to Harwich.

Peter and I would meet again in the studio in ten days time for the editing and voice over commentaries.

We drove for the most part in silence: quietly content with our new-found relationship. She had not agreed, as yet, to sharing her life with me; but if I read the signs correctly, she was not averse to the suggestion. I would gain a better idea when we got back to St. George's Square.

"How are your mother and McKenna, Alan?" she asked, stirring in her seat and turning towards me. "Have you spoken to them in the past few days?"

"Well, I have been busy, Ingrid, as you know."

"Surely, you could have found time to give them a ring?"

"No. . .I'll phone them when I get to London. Then I can have a long chat on the landline."

"I think we ought to drive down to see them when we land at Harwich. Knowing your mother and McKenna, they won't reveal anything to you on the phone. We should see how they are. After all, McKenna has only got one the use of one arm, and he would not ask for help."

I had booked a cabin for us on the ten o'clock night crossing. As a consequence, by the time the ferry docked at Harwich at six thirty in the

morning, I had had a good rest. We headed south-west, stopping for breakfast at Arundel; and two hours later we came to a halt outside Mead Court.

Suddenly, I was apprehensive. Normally, my mother comes out to greet arrivals. Though their Range Rover was standing on the forecourt, there was no sign of life about the house.

I took hold of Ingrid's hand and we walked to the rear of the building. I lifted the latch on the door to the kitchen, and found my mother, Mrs Dimmock and McKenna sitting round the table drinking coffee.

McKenna looked up in surprise.

"Hello, laddie. . .and Ingrid, what a sight for sore eyes. Come and sit down, lass."

Ingrid glanced at me and slightly shook her head. All three were vulnerable She knew I was on the point of berating them for not locking the door.

My mother came over, and kissing Ingrid on the cheek, ushered her to a place beside her at the table. Then she glanced in my direction.

"All right, Alan, dear?"

"Fine," I muttered, pouring Ingrid and I coffee from the cafetière. She liked it white, I prefer black. When I brought the mugs to the table, my mother was pressing her for details of her trip to Holland.

"Delft, where Alan was filming is a charming place. Particularly, the old part of the town. I had time to wander through the narrow streets, alongside canals, and absorb the quaintness of the buildings, and the pleasant nature of the people. I hadn't realised," she said, again glancing in my direction, "that there was a seaside only fifteen kilometres away. Alan and I spent a wonderful day there, eating sardines, walking along the beach. The sun was

shining, and though the place was full of people, it wasn't crowded. Everyone was enjoying themselves."

"Did you finish the film?" McKenna asked, turning his attention to me. "Did everything go smoothly?"

I knew instantly he was obliquely referring to Karppinen's people taking their anger out on me. But I was not going to worry him or mother by mentioning the explosion at the West Cord Delft Hotel.

"Yes, all the outside material has been taken. Now, it's just a question of some studio shots and putting it all in some semblance of order."

I changed the subject.

"I must phone Roger. Has he been in touch?"

"Every other day," replied my mother. "He has also called in twice to check on us."

"Good. May I use your phone? I'll give him a call."

I went into the hall so they would not overhear the conversation.

"Tamworth Associates. Can I help you?"

"It's Alan. How are you?"

"Why haven't you phoned me, you bugger! We're supposed to be partners. Leastways, when we're working for Restitution. I know you've been filming, but you could have picked up the phone."

First Ingrid, now Roger. . .perhaps they were right.

"Sorry. . .I really should have done. Bad manners on my part. I'll try to make it up. When can we meet?"

Partially mollified, he said. Well, it won't be for a few days. I've got to go to Cardiff on a case. A Tamworth case."

"So what are you doing this afternoon?"

"I'm not coming up to London, if that's what you've got in mind."

“No need, I’m at Mead Court. By the way, thank you for keeping an eye on things over here.”

“I could make this afternoon about four. But hadn’t you better ask if I can visit. As I said earlier, it’s not your house anymore.”

“Just a minute, I’ll ask.”

My mother and McKenna agreed immediately.

“OK. . .see you about four.”

On this occasion Roger came as himself.

“I was wondering who you might be,” I said opening the front door. “I haven’t seen you in a disguise for some while. You’re not giving up on the cross-dressing, the naval officer, or the vicar, are you?”

“Certainly not. But in case I forget who I really am, I’m playing myself for a few weeks.”

We walked into the sitting room.

“Good Lord, it’s your lodger, Alan!” he exclaimed, seeing Ingrid next to my mother on one of the settees. She laughed, and stood up to welcome him. He kissed her too heartily for my liking.

He leaned forward to embrace my mother, and shook McKenna’s serviceable hand.

“So, did the filming go well? Everything all right in Holland?”

“Yes and no.”

It was out before I could stop it. Damn!

“What do you mean, Alan?” asked mother anxiously. “Did something happen? Tell me if I should be worried.”

What do I say now? Do I tell them about the bomb?

I glanced at Ingrid.

“What he means, Suzanna, is he asked me to come and live with him in his apartment. I said I’d think about it. I have. . .and the answer is. . . yes!”

She grinned at me, then laughed openly at my blushing countenance.

My mother wrapped her arms around Ingrid and hugged her. McKenna came over to me. “You’ve a fine girl there, m’ealaibh ur naidheachd!”

“What did McKenna say?” asked Ingrid, over my mother’s shoulder.

“He was congratulating me,” I replied.

“You’re a lucky fellow, Cleverden,” said Roger, “has she got any sisters?”

McKenna went off to get a bottle of champagne, and called for Roger’s help. My mother followed them to the cellar door.

“Was that said to cover my awkwardness when asked what I meant by yes and no?” I said in a low voice.

“Well, I had to come up with something before you dug an even bigger hole for yourself,” murmured Ingrid.

“It’s going to be a bit of a shock for them when you get your doctorate and go back home,” I murmured.

“Who said I’m going back to Estonia?”

The three of them came back into the room. McKenna with the bottle; Roger with the glasses; and mother with Mrs Dimmock, and a fruit cake. One of my favourites.

They, then, proceeded to fill the flutes, hand round slices of cake, and drink a toast to Ingrid and myself.

Roger stayed for dinner.

Mrs Dimmock surpassed herself. Cooking a sumptuous meal before going back to her cottage.

We were drinking coffee in the sitting room, when Roger said he had had a lengthy phone call from Harvey Munro, to let him know that despite the

theft, it had not cast a blight on ‘The Sail Of the Millenium’. Certainly, now the Manet painting had been recovered. In fact, Frank Master of Carnival had confirmed that they would happily participate, and provide another liner for a similar venture in two years time.

The route had yet to be finalised, but would probably be along the west coast. Calling at Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Acapulco, before sailing through the Panama Canal and heading for Grand Bahama and another art auction.

“He also said,” added Roger, “would we, you and I, care to take charge of security?”

“That could be interesting. . .” I murmured.

“And rewarding,” declared Roger. “The only trouble is, if as we believe, it was an inside job, we never did discover who was helping Karppinen’s people. We would have to instigate a stringent vetting procedure for all those involved with the displays in the salons, even to checking members of the ship’s crew.”

“That could present difficulties,” I remarked. “I can’t see Carnival giving us personnel information, that might be thought contravening the new Data Protection laws.”

“They did provide the names of all the officers on board. And while there were one or two newcomers, they confirmed that the majority were experienced cruise people, and had worked for the company for some years.”

I can’t imagine that any of the officers would have been involved,” said McKenna. “Surely, they stood to lose more than they would gain.”

“Don’t forget dear,” countered my mother. “that was an expensive painting that was stolen. It might have been worthwhile to someone, no

matter how marginally caught up in the theft, if they were close to retirement and wanted to boost their savings.”

That’s an astute remark, Suzanna,” Roger commented.

My eyebrows fluttered. I didn’t know he called her Suzanna.

“Do we know their ages, Roger?” asked Ingrid.

“Now I come to think of it. . .I believe they were shown against each of the names,” he said, his brow creasing in thought. “But, I can readily check. The file is in the car.”

There were thirty eight names on the list, ranging from the entertainments officer up to the captain. All would have had access to the salons.

I had never seen the list, which I presumed was sent to Roger long after the incident.

Not that it was particularly revealing. As Roger had said, it was purely a list of names, nothing more, their ages shown in parenthesis. I passed it to my mother, who scanning it, remarked that six of the officers could be heading towards a quieter life, but were still some years off retirement age.

McKenna glanced at it, and passed it to Ingrid. She spent longer than any of us perusing the thirty eight names.

“This man, Antony Siren, aged fifty six. Do you know how long he has been with the company?”

She put the question to Roger.

He retrieved another sheet of paper from the file.

“It seems this was his first voyage with Carnival. Why do you ask?”

“It may be nothing, but Siren could also be a Finnish name. In their language it would be pronounced, ‘Sirén’. It may be worth checking him out with Carnival.”

“But he was number two on the cruise ship,” muttered Roger. “He was the Staff Captain! No. . .I can’t see him involved in all this.”

“You should still check, Roger,” I said quietly. “Why not give Frank Masters a ring now? It’s late afternoon in Miami, he could be still there.”

According to Masters, Erik Anton Sirén had impeccable references, or so they appeared.

Born in Tampere, two hundred kilometres north of Helsinki, he, and his two brothers, had emigrated to the USA in 1990. Erik Anton had served first in the American Navy, thereafter, he worked for several cruise line companies, always achieving excellent results

He had married a Finnish girl, and they had a home in Miami, and another on the island of Kulosaari, six kilometres from the centre of Helsinki.

“Well, I’m damned!” declared Roger “That’s where Karppinen lives. The link is right there! He could well be our man!”

This was confirmed when Roger spoke again with Frank Masters, who told him that Sirén had not returned from the break between postings. Everyone else had reported for duty.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

“Mr Cleverden, it would appear delivery is going to take place in Moscow very soon. When I know the date for certain, I would like you to contact a number of people who should be present to witness the event.”

Ingrid and I were now back at St George’s Square. I was still occupying the top floor on my own, so the call at five o’clock in the morning woke me alone.

“Good morning, Mr Kosnievsky, and how are you today?”

I was a little brusque, prompted by a combination of his ill-timing and my solitude.

It passed over his head.

“Do you have a pen and paper available? I want to give you their names and contact numbers. You should speak to them twenty four hours before Karppinen arrives with the painting at Sheremetyevo Airport. He will come through Terminal D. Advise each one that they will witness something to their advantage, and to make sure they attend with cameramen.”

I grabbed my notebook, and spent the next ten minutes scribbling down names and numbers.

“When I know the date and flight number I shall phone you again. Don’t forget. . . speak to these people from a pay-as-you-go cell phone, so you cannot be traced.”

Then he was gone.

When Ingrid came into the house and mounted the stairs that evening, I stood at the top of the next staircase and asked if she had any photographs of her mother and father. I was invited into her apartment while she ferreted through drawers and shoe boxes. Eventually, she found several references.

“Are you going to paint the picture for my father’s birthday?” she enquired.

“I thought I might make a start on it.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. Then added. “Now I must fly, I’m meeting Tom, my Ph.D supervisor for dinner, and I’m already running late.”

With that she ushered me out the door, and shut it firmly behind me.

Was it my imagination? Was I being over-sensitive? Of late, I had felt an underlying coolness in our relationship. What’s going on I wondered. One minute, she is loving and attentive. The next, distant, as if a barrier were growing between us. I had noticed it after our visit to Mead Court.

Having decided to move upstairs and live with me, she now appeared to be changing her mind. Was there a reason? Was it too big a step for her to make. . .or had she gone off me and was now gradually breaking the closeness I thought we both enjoyed.

Dismay was slowly turning to irritation. In the past I had always kept a tight hold on my emotions. With Ingrid I had allowed my feelings to run unchecked. I had made a heartfelt commitment to this woman, and it seemed as though, by degrees, I was now being rejected.

Well, two can play at that game. I’ll go out as well. In fact, I’ll drive down to Mead Court. But first, I needed to get into the right mindset.

In the spare room I placed a large, square canvas on the easel, and began the preparatory work of getting it ready for the Hockney painting of Ingrid’s mother and father.

It was going to be in the style of *[‘Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy’](#)*, which David Hockney painted in 1971. The figures would be dressed casually, juxtaposed against the stark simplicity of the square-shaped house in his painting, *‘American Collectors (Fred & Marcia Weisman)’*, completed in 1968. I chose this background, for the design of the house was not unlike that of Ingrid’s parents in Estonia.

A good wash of gesso would be left to dry When ready I would roughly delineate the two principal characters, and complete the under- painting in grisaille.

At that stage I took myself off to Dorset.

“Hello. . .on your own? Where’s Ingrid?” asked McKenna when he opened the door.

“I’ve no idea. She is doing her own thing of late, and I’m excluded.”

Mother came into the hall.

“Hello, dear.”

She peered over my shoulder.

“Where’s Ingrid?”

Out the corner of my eye I caught McKenna shaking his head.

“In London!”

Oh. . .well come in , Alan. Are you staying or just passing?”

“Well, tonight , if you don’t mind. Sorry. I should have phoned and asked if it were convenient.”

“Come and have a drink, laddie,” declared McKenna, putting his good arm on my shoulder.

The next morning I drove over to Roger Tamworth's office in Salisbury to tell him of the request by Ivan Kosnievsky.

How's Ingrid? Is she at Mead Court?"

"No!"

"Hello, had a lovers' tiff have we? Can't put up with you going off at tangents, never telling people what you're up to?"

"What? I'm not like that. What do you think I'm doing here this morning? I'm keeping you up to date with events."

"But, it doesn't come readily, Alan, does it?. Did you really come down from London to tell me what's happening?"

I did not answer. I changed the subject.

"Look, I've been thinking. What if you and I are present at the airport too, when Karppinen arrives? I wouldn't mind seeing what Kosnievsky is up to."

"Well. . .if you think it would be worthwhile."

I drove back to Melbury Abbas a little distracted. Playing over in my mind what Roger had said. Did I ignore others when I went off somewhere? Was my being in Dorset an example of the very point he had made?

Lunch was being prepared by Mrs Dimmock, and I could hear her and my mother talking in the kitchen. When she heard my footsteps, my mother came into the hall, took my arm, and pulled into the sitting room.

"Now, what's going on? Have you had an argument with Ingrid and you've run home to your mother?"

Ouch. . .that was a sensitive remark.

"I brought down a canvas, and I hoped you wouldn't mind if I painted it down here."

She nodded.

“Right, that’s got the excuse out the way. . .now for the truth.”

I found I could not look her in the eye.

“Ingrid seems to be ignoring me. Suddenly, I’m aware she is putting a distance between us. You know she said, in so many words, she would come and live with me in my apartment. . .well now that seems furthest from her mind.”

“Have you thought you might be to blame, Alan?”

I frowned. “How do you mean?”

“Did you tell her you were coming down here, for example? Does she know what’s on your mind. Do you tell her your plans? Do you, perhaps, tell her she’s the one for you?”

“Well yes. . .to the last comment.”

“But do you speak to her regularly when you’re away?”

“Er. . .not if I’m very busy. She understands that.”

“Perhaps, but you carry several mobile phones with you all the time, don’t you? What’s to stop you spending thirty seconds of your precious working day being in contact? You were like it when you lived here. I never knew where you were, when you’d be home, if you were coming home.”

My mother was being brutally frank. She had not spoken like this to me before.

“Alan, I must confess I mentioned to Ingrid that I never knew what you were up to when you lived at Mead Court. If she has seen signs of you already taking her for granted, she probably feels that once she moved in you, you would treat her as you treated me. The same goes for others around you. I wouldn’t entertain living with someone with that attitude.”

I drove back to London that afternoon..

A little too fast at times.

I burst in the front door, and ran up to her apartment.

There was no answer.

So I sat on the floor and waited.

It was nearly two hours before I heard her key turn in the lock and her footsteps on the stairs.

Ingrid saw me when she turned towards her door.

I rose stiffly to my feet, and walked over to her, and took hold of her hands.

“Ingrid, I suppose being an only child, always getting my own way, ignoring people until I wanted their attention, has made me less caring of others’ needs. If I have treated you like that. . .I’m sorry. It will never happen ever again.”

She looked up into my face. Her eyes moistening, a lopsided smile appearing

“Do you really mean that? I couldn’t bear it if I thought I was just someone’s plaything to be picked up, then put down.”

Suddenly, she slipped her hands free and fastened them round my neck. Then she kissed me.

That’s when I heard myself whispering in the tangle of her blonde hair. “Ingrid, will you marry me?”

There was no answer, she burst into tears.

We were sitting together on her settee when the phone rang.

Ingrid eased herself from my arms and picked up the receiver.

“Hello. . .hello, how are you? . . .He is already here. . .No everything is fine. In fact more than fine, he has asked me to marry him.”

I heard the squeal of delight from where I was sitting.

“No, I haven’t said yes yet. . .Of course I am, Suzanna, what do you think.
. .Well not for a while, I guess.”

Ingrid smiled in my direction.

“I’ll have to have a word with my parents. . .If it were in Estonia, would
you come? . . .

This time it was a shout of indignation.

“Good, I was hoping you’d say that. . .Well, please, that would be nice. .
.At the weekend, if that’s OK. . .Good , I look forward to it too.”

She came back and dropped down beside me.

“We are expected at Mead Court on Saturday. Is that OK?”

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

We arrived at five in the evening.

My mother immediately came out the front door, and rushed to open the passenger door.

Ingrid jumped out and they both fell into each other's arms.

More sedately, McKenna strolled across the gravel and shook me by the hand. Then, rare for him, clutched me in a manly embrace.

“Sealbh math dhuit, laddie! Long may your chimney smoke!”

Over my mother's shoulder Ingrid grinned and said. “What on earth does that mean, McKenna?”

“The first was good luck, and the second phrase means ‘may you live long and keep well’.”

Ingrid eventually broke free from my mother and heartily embraced McKenna. “I'm going to adopt that phrase and use it in Estonian.”

We came down for the evening meal and crossed the hall to the dining room.

Opening the door, we were assailed by a roar of welcome. Many of the people I knew well at the haulage company in Blandford Forum were present, together with Roger, John Fielding, and several local neighbours.

The evening passed in a haze of drinks, light-hearted chatter and kind words showered upon Ingrid and me. At about midnight, the party began to break up. Roger, and John and his wife, Evelyn, were staying the night, and they helped us tidy up before making our way to various bedrooms.

I escorted Ingrid to her room, and she pulled me inside, quietly closing the door. We sat on the bed dissecting the unexpected turn of events. Ingrid put her head on a pillow while I told her that Ivan Kosnievsky was planning some event at Sheremetyevo Airport, and how I was to phone the radical media. I must have spent ten minutes or more on explaining what I thought he was up to.

“So do you mind if I slip over to Moscow and see what happens myself?”

I waited for the answer that never came.

Ingrid was fast asleep.

I should have known that after eleven o'clock at night, alcohol has this effect on her.

I was speaking to the principal journalist of *Snob.ru*, a political website and magazine. Fortunately, he spoke German, and I was able to explain that this was a tip-off that something significant, and well worth reporting as well as photographing, would occur in Terminal D on Thursday.

“This is not another hoax call, is it? We get these sorts of calls all the time.”

“No it's genuine. If you don't believe me, then don't bother to be there. But will your face be red when you see it on the front pages of newspapers and on TV that evening and the next morning. Still, that's up to you if you want to miss a good story. Bear in mind your editor won't thank you if you are the only ones not to feature the incident.”

I said much the same to a representative of [*Novaya Gazeta*](#), a Russian newspaper, well known for its critical and investigative coverage of Russian political and social affairs. And to the *RBC Group*, which owns a news web-portal, business newspaper; *RBC Daily*, a monthly business magazine;

and *RBC TV*. This is the largest media company in Russia. and highly critical of the authorities.

It is willing to conduct investigations into political scandals that others avoid. With a media coverage of twenty three million people each month, it rattles the Kremlin, and still manages to cling on to its independence.

I got in touch with several more media people, including independent photographers. I also contacted members of the foreign press, prominent among them being the bureau chief of the *Washington Post*.

All in all, there should be a good turn-out for whatever Kosnievsky had in mind.

Roger and I flew out to Moscow on Wednesday.

We took the British Airways morning flight from Heathrow's Terminal Five to Domodedovo Airport, forty kilometres south of the city.

As usual, the fastest, and less demanding way to get into the centre of Moscow was to take the AeroExpress train into Paveletsky Railway Station.

I had reserved rooms at the Marriot Courtyard Paveletskaya, an hotel just a short walk from the station. A glass-faced cylinder of a building, in sharp contrast to the solid, square-shaped structures around it.

Kosnievsky had given me the details of Karppinen's Aeroflot flight. It departed Helsinki on Thursday at one twenty five, and was due to land at Sheremetyevo at five past three.

Roger and I headed for the Arrivals Gate in Terminal D, and took up a position on the concourse.

I looked around. There was a crowd of people meeting new arrivals; and I began to make out the representatives of the media, especially, those with cameras and video equipment gripped in their hands.

Three, then three fifteen came and went. It would take time for baggage to be collected and to navigate through passport control. Then there was the chance Karppinen would be challenged by the authorities.

I should imagine he would have made some kind of ‘arrangement’ with the customs people, or rather his contact in the Kremlin would have done so. The last thing Karppinen would want, was to be confronted by ambitious customs officials. Suddenly, that thought coalesced into reality. Was that Kosnievsky’s ploy? Was that why certain sections of the media had been forewarned?

“Roger,” I murmured. “I think I know why the press and TV are here, or rather the more forthright of the media.”

“So tell me.”

“Kosnievsky wants him caught and taken into custody publicly. In that way he’ll embarrass the President in front of the anti-establishment press.”

“Mm. . .you could be right,” Roger murmured.

Just at that moment a group of men, all in similar suits, rushed by us and entered the Arrivals Gate.

“That looked very much like a contingent of the FSB,” Roger muttered, staring straight ahead, careful not to move his lips.

I adopted the same, bland appearance when I whispered. “FSB. . .what’s that?”

“They, my friend, are the Federal Security Service. They have over-riding powers to take into custody anyone acting against the best interests of the state. They are everywhere, Alan, looking or listening to anyone whom they believe is performing a subversive act.”

“Let’s get a little closer.” I suggested.

Twenty minutes later the incident occurred.

The prelude was a blitz of raised voices, getting louder and louder. Suddenly, the doors slid back to reveal Karppinen holding onto a large aluminium carrying case, being held in turn by customs officials and members of the FSB.

Perhaps he was travelling on a false passport, to hide his true origins, for he was shouting out aloud in German to one of his captors. *“Das geht dich einen feuchten Scheissdreck an, Mutterficker!”*

“What’s he saying, Alan?”

“None of your fucking business, mothefucker!” and to the fellow on his other side. *Verpiss dich, schwuchtl, wichser!* means ‘Piss off, faggot, wanker!’

“Mm. . .it sounds more emphatic when said in German.”

Suddenly, Karppinen dug in his heels and halted. The loose lid of the container fell away, and everyone caught a glimpse of a heavy, ornately-framed painting as it slid out onto the tiled concourse. There were gasps of surprise from the waiting crowd. I could hear the click and whirr of cameras all around me.

As several, same-suited men quickly bent to retrieve it, Karppinen shouted in English.

“I am bringing President Tupolev a gift he has long wanted! He is waiting for me to bring it to him! You can’t arrest me! I’m on a presidential mission!”

The FSB people were in a quandary.

People pressed forward around the unfolding scene.

That’s when Karppinen espied his contact in the gathering crowd.

“Litvinov! Tell them they’ve made a mistake! Tell them the President is expecting me!”

He was shouting at a man standing close to us.

“Sergei! For pity’s sake tell them.”

Karppinen’s gaze shifted just a degree, and his eyes fell upon me.

“Cleverden!”

He switched to English again.

“You bastard! You’re responsible for all this! I’ll get even with you!
You’ll never be able to hide from me!”

As he uttered the words he was bundled out the terminal into a waiting vehicle and driven away.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

The next day, before boarding the British Airways flight to London, I bought a raft of Russian newspapers and magazines at Domodedovo Airport.

In the hotel I had watched the television films of the incident at Sheremetyovo. Though, from what I could gather, the Russian authorities have such a tight control of most of the media, it was portrayed as purely a minor scuffle.

Not so from the pictures in the radical press. However, I would have to wait for Ingrid to tell me what was actually being reported. What was shown in the majority of the papers was a photograph of someone called Sergei Litvinov retrieving Manet's painting and stowing it in the aluminium container. This was the fellow to whom Karppinen had shouted when taken into custody. Who was he I wondered.

The previous evening, Roger had shown me the discreet video he had taken of the scene at Sheremetyevo. He had even managed a close-up of the moment the fake *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère* fell to the concourse floor, exposed for all to see.

I had the strongest feeling the whole affair could not have worked better for my friend, Kosnievsky. It was apparent the fellow was not Leoni Tupolev's closest supporter; and, like others before him, he would have to watch his step.

During Tupolev's reign there had been a trail of bodies of people who had voiced fierce opposition to his policies and to his acquisitive nature. To

many, it bordered on an arrogance that he was all-powerful, and beyond the constraints of ordinary mortals.

Muckraking journalists, rights advocates, opposition politicians, government whistle-blowers and others who threatened that image had been treated harshly — imprisoned on trumped-up charges, smeared in the government-controlled news media, and, with increasing frequency, silenced.

Some years ago, I wrote a lengthy article on the Russian artist, Mikhail Nesterov. In 1938, toward the end of the [Great Purge](#), his son-in-law, Vladimir Schroeter, a prominent lawyer, was accused of being a spy and shot.

His daughter was sent to a prison camp in [Zhambyl](#), and Nesterov was also arrested and held in [Butyrka Prison](#).

Eventually freed, in 1942, while working on his painting, *'Autumn In the Village'*, he had suddenly died. While the Botkin Hospital recorded his death as a stroke, his daughter was convinced he had been poisoned. This prompted my interest, for poison has been [a favourite tool of Russian intelligence](#) for more than a century.

A biochemist, Grigory Mairanovski, laboured in secret from 1928 on the task of developing tasteless, colourless and odourless poisons. In 1954, a K.G.B. defector described a secret laboratory, near to the agency's Lubyanka headquarters, where they conducted experiments on living people.

It was not until 2015 that a botanist was able to identify the principal killing agent most frequently used by the Russian secret services. It was gelsemium. A rare, poisonous plant grown in the Himalayas, and known to have been used in many Chinese assassinations.

To outsiders, it sounded like a paranoid, conspiracy theory. But having read of the catalogue of mysterious deaths, I long ago came to the conclusion that there are too many of these happening to notable Russians, captains of industry, lawyers, and those in the media, for such occurrences to be accidental, or merely chance events.

Hence my concern for Ivan Kosnievsky, Head of The Presidential Property Administration. Now, I realised the huge risk he had taken in giving me his name and the role he occupied within the Kremlin.

Ingrid had moved into my apartment during my brief absence. Ornaments had suddenly sprouted on flat surfaces; the larder held a host of different foodstuffs; and gone was the plain linen on the king-sized bed. It had been replaced by a much more colourful duvet cover and pillows; and the bathroom cabinet was also full of unknown preparations. The apartment had changed from a bachelor pad to assume a more feminine-friendly appearance in a matter of three days.

“Oh, I’ve put your mail, which arrived while you were away, on the side table in the hall.”

“Right. I didn’t see it.”

“It may be behind the vase of flowers I put there as well.”

I sifted quickly through the post. Most of it was attempting to sell me something. Only three or four items had any relevance. One was from the DVLA, telling me to tax the Range Rover. Another was from the Westminster Boating Base. Having paid the fee, the letter confirmed they were ready to put me through my paces of speedboat tuition. The Base was close to St George’s Square, only a matter of a hundred metres away on the Thames’ embankment,

I had driven powered craft before; but it seemed worthwhile getting a Royal Yachting Association certificate of competence, if I wanted to hire a craft at any time.

The powerboats they used were light alloy assault craft with Yamaha High Thrust sixty horsepower outboard engines.

I put the junk mail in the bin and wandered round the apartment noting the changes. Ingrid followed in my wake. In the main bedroom I expected the built-in cupboards and drawers to contain Ingrid's clothes as well; but they were untouched. Then I discovered she had commandeered the spare room as a walk-in wardrobe.

Later, we were sitting together on a settee while she scanned the Russian newspapers, giving me a liberal translation of the more searching reports, when she remarked, a little anxiously. "You didn't mind my bringing up a few items up did you? After all, I can't keep running downstairs every time I need something."

"Not in the least."

And I didn't mind. . . as long as she was happily installed. Though, it took a bit of getting used to.

"Good."

She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

Then she pointed to one article. "This is interesting. The reporter at the airport is saying that there is clearly some form of collusion between Mr Aarni Karppinen and a certain Sergei Litvinov, whom he has since found out is deputy to Ivan Kosnievsky at the Presidential Property Management Administration.

"What is more. . . Litvinov is known to be extremely close to the President. Doesn't this suggest, despite strong denials issued by the

President's office that Leoni Tupolev was the intended recipient of the painting that fell from the container onto the concourse floor?"

"They won't let this go in a hurry," I said thoughtfully.

"No," murmured Ingrid. "A number of reports are also alluding to President Tupolev's villa on the Black Sea. The rumours are legion that a hundred and forty million dollars of taxpayers' money has been spent on the lavish complex."

"I wonder how Karppinen is faring at the hands of the FSB?" I remarked. "I suppose they'll let him go and keep the painting. Which suggests Tupolev will get the fake to hang on the walls of his Moscow home."

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

We went down to Mead Court a few weekends later to collect the easel and prepared canvas. One of the bedrooms in Ingrid's apartment, where the light was better than on the floor above, was turned into a studio. Once set up, I started in earnest to paint the Hockney-style portraits of her parents.

I had to break off for a week to work with the editor and Peter Soames on creating a forty seven minute programme on Jan Vermeer from all the material that had been shot. This allowed for the hour long slot to incorporate breaks for commercials.

Once the running time was achieved, I did the voice-over narration, then the music was added. By Friday morning we had the complete programme in the metaphorical can.

"I've been thinking," I said to Ingrid one evening. "My mother, McKenna, all my friends, acquaintances, and those I work with know we're engaged, but you parents don't. . .or have you mentioned it to them?"

"Er. . . no. I was going to talk to you about that," she said a little shyly. "I rather wanted you to tell them, or ask my father for my hand. I suppose that's why I read archaeology, I like the old traditions."

"So do I. Right, we should go over to Tallinn and do the deed," I remarked.

"I thought if we waited until the painting was finished, we could take it at the same time."

"No, I think we ought to go sooner. What about this coming weekend?"

I bought the air tickets and spent the afternoon in Harrods, and one shop in particular along the Fulham Road.

A few days later, Ingrid and I caught the Easy Jet morning flight from Heathrow to Tallinn.

Ingrid's father, Enno, was there to meet us, and she briefly lapsed into Estonian whilst embracing him.

He turned to me. "It's good to see you again, Alan," he said in English, with the same slight intonation as his daughter.

He shook my hand warmly. "Come, the car is outside."

I sat in the back while Ingrid and her father occupied the front seats. I let their conversation go over my head. It was in Estonian, anyway.

We arrived at the house in Merivälja, ten kilometres around the bay from the city. When Enno pulled onto the drive, Ingrid's mother, Jaanika, came to greet us. I noticed, as on the previous occasion, how alike they two women were, both in looks, mannerisms and voice.

Enno broke into my reverie.

"They are so similar to one another, aren't they?"

I turned towards him. "Surprisingly so. They could almost be sisters."

He nodded in acknowledgement, and went to the boot to collect our bags.

In my room I unpacked, then wandered down to the kitchen where the two women were chatting. They both looked up and smiled.

Ingrid's mother asked, "Something to drink, Alan?"

"Coffee would be welcome, please."

Ingrid added. "He has it black with no sugar, Mama. He drinks mugfuls of it, especially at breakfast."

Then realising what she had said, her cheeks reddened.

Her mother, pretending not to notice, went across the kitchen to the coffee machine.

I sat at the bar on a high stool while Ingrid's mother busied herself preparing the evening meal.

"Mrs Jakobson, I have something I want to ask you," I looked over my shoulder to check no one was around. "Ingrid has asked me to paint something for Mr Jakobson's birthday."

"Jaanika, please."

I smiled. "Jaanika, she wants you and your husband in the painting. Although I have photos of the two of you, I really need better images from which to work. Tomorrow morning, can you persuade Mr Jakobson to sit with you on the terrace while I use my camera?"

"Of course, Alan. And don't be so formal. He is Enno to everyone."

I showered, changed and went downstairs for the evening meal. It was warm, and a gentle breeze was flowing in through the wide expanse of folding glass doors.

Enno waved me onto the raised terrace. "Help yourself to a drink, Alan. There's wine, lager, and soft drinks."

I poured myself a glass of wine, then sat beside him on a modern-style bench

"Before the ladies join us, Enno, I have something I want to say."

I was immediately nervous. Supposing he rejected the idea, and asked me never to see his daughter again. Supposing he threw me out, disregarding my feelings for Ingrid.

Contemplating such thoughts, suddenly, I was lost for words.

"Er. . ."

"What's on your mind, Alan?" Enno was looking at me curiously.

It came out in a rush.

“I love your daughter very much, sir. And I am seeking your permission to ask her for her hand in marriage.”

He burst out laughing.

I was slightly taken aback by his response.

“I mean it, Enno. This is not a laughing matter,” I said tetchily.

“Forgive me, Alan. Of course you may ask her. And if she accepts, I would delight in welcoming you as a son-in-law. But, isn’t it rather quick? You’ve only known each a few months.”

“Frankly, sir, more than enough time to know she is the one for me.”

“Does Ingrid feel the same?”

“I believe so, Enno.”

“Hm. . .you realise what you’re taking on, do you? She’s headstrong, like her mother. She is also highly competitive, and speaks her own mind.”

“All the qualities I like and admire.”

“Well, if you’re set upon asking her, I expect two things. You do it this evening, in front of Jaanika and me. Secondly, you say it in Estonian.”

My eyebrows shot up. This would be a challenge.

He leaned forward and grinned. “Let me pour you another drink.”

He went into the house still chuckling to himself as to how I would cope with the language.

Ingrid knocked on my door. “Dinner is ready, Alan. Coming down?”

I opened the door, carrying the results of my shopping expedition in London.

“Do you know what your father expects of me this evening?”

“No. . .should I?”

“Never mind, I hope you won’t be too embarrassed.”

A slight furrow appeared on her brow.

“Embarrassed? Why should I. . .”

“There you are you two,” said Enno, glancing up through the glass panels that lined the wide staircase.

“Let me pour you each a drink. I think you’ll both need it.”

Jaanika came into the room and was also handed a glass of wine by her husband.

“Now, I believe you want to say something, Alan,” he grinned.

“Yes. . .but first a small token from me to each of you.”

I handed both of them well-wrapped small parcels.

“Just a little something,” I explained.

Enno tore off the wrapping to find a box of cigars. Jaanika gently prised open the paper covering, careful not to tear it. Inside was a box containing a bottle of perfume.

“Look, Enno, my favourite!” she cried.

“And these are the cigars I really like. Thank you very much, Alan.”

He put out his hand and shook mine.

Then said. “You can’t put it off any longer.”

I took hold of Ingrid’s hand.

“This evening, I spoke with your father, seeking his permission to ask you to be my wife. He agreed, but on one condition, I ask you in the correct language.”

I dropped to one knee. “*Sa täidad mu südame rõõmuga, Ingrid. Kas sa abiellud minuga?*”

“Or to put it less romantically. ‘You fill my heart with joy, Ingrid. Will you marry me?’”

Ingrid just stood there not saying a word. Tears streaming down her cheeks.

Then she launched herself into my arms.

I looked over her shoulder to see Enno eyes moistening, and passing a handkerchief to his wife.

I freed a hand and drew from my pocket a small, blue box.

“I have something I’d like to present to you, Ingrid.”

She eased the pressure slightly, though her arms still encircled my neck when I opened the box, and brought it up to eye level.

She gasped, more tears appeared.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

I removed the ring from its silk pad, and slipped it on her finger.

Once more, I was enveloped in a tight embrace.

We drank a lot of champagne that night, while my future in-laws admired the ring, and congratulated Ingrid and I. Jaanika diplomatically posed the question where we wished to be married, and in an alcoholic haze, I replied for us both. . . here in Estonia!

It seemed only right.

But that got me thinking, where will Ingrid want to work when she achieves her doctorate? We had never discussed it. But it would soon loom large, and decisions would have to be made.

In the morning I felt slightly the worse for wear.

In fact, at the bar in the kitchen it was just Jaanika and I.

“Enno won’t be down for a while,” she remarked, pouring me a black coffee from the cafetiere. “Alcohol sends him to sleep, and he can’t wake up.”

“Just like . . .” I stopped abruptly. “Just like a friend of mine, whom I was going to ask to be my best man.”

I wondered if she realised I was going to say, ‘just like his daughter’.

“While Enno is not here, Alan, can I ask what sort of painting you have in mind?”

“Well, Ingrid suggested I do it in the style of David Hockney. It would be a metre square canvas. Is that all right?”

“That would be wonderful. He very much admires Hockney. Did Ingrid tell you we went to his exhibition in London? I like the design of this house, but there are times I feel it needs a bit more colour on the walls.”

“Colour on what walls?”

We looked up as Ingrid came into the kitchen.

Jaanika lowered her voice. “Alan was talking about the painting you have asked Alan to do for your father. He will be thrilled when he sees it, I’m sure. And I was saying, it would brighten the walls with a little colour.”

Ingrid poured herself a coffee, and added milk.

“Alan hopes to finish it and bring it over from England on the day of father’s birthday. Is that all right with you, Mama?”

“Of course it is, [mu kallis](#).”

Enno took us to the airport on Monday morning for the flight back to England.

CHAPTER FORTY

“So. . .what do you think, Magda?”

She grinned at her husband, and clapped her hands in delight. “Perfect, Leoni. It’s the ideal place for it to hang. I can sit here and take in Manet’s genius without having to visit some stuffy museum or art gallery. I can enjoy it to the full in my own home.”

It had been no easy task to persuade Kosnievsky that the painting, *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*, should occupy wall space in the President’s compound on the the Rublyovo-Uspenskoye Road.

Kosnievsky was such a pain. A stickler for rules and regulations. Perhaps he should have a job that more suited his petty-mindedness. The Tax Office, or Border Customs Department, for example. Yes. . .that would fit his mentality down to the ground. He could even promote Sergei to Head of the Presidential Property Administration. Then he could get Magda whatever she wanted.

What made it doubly difficult were those sections of the media which were aware of even the slightest, modest indulgence. How on earth did they get wind that this fellow Karppinen was going to arrive in Moscow with the painting?

Everything would have been all right, but someone alerted the FSB.

Damn their eyes! That started the whole sorry business of pointing out that he had not only taken occupation of the complex on the Black Sea, but had lavished even more expense on extending the main building once referred to as ‘Putin’s Palace’.

Now the loud mouths in the radical press had started calling it, ‘Tupolev’s Utopia’, for goodness sake!

There must be a leak in his presidential staff. Someone must have tipped off the press and TV cameras. He suddenly came to a decision. That nitpicking bureaucrat, Kosnievsky, would be ideal for the job of screening the President’s members of staff.

He can stay as Head of the Property Administration, it would be the perfect cover for wheedling out the culprit and stopping the leak. That’s it. Then I can enjoy my life here and in my unpretentious dacha on the Black Sea.

Karppinen was still furious with the arrogant, mindless officials at Sheremetyevo. But he was more incensed by what he believed was Litvinov’s indifferent attitude to his plight at Sheremetyevo. Though what really inflamed his senses was that the culprit, the one who brought him down, was standing on the airport concourse openly gloating at his predicament.

There would be no rest until he had avenged his rough handling by Russia’s secret police; his public loss of dignity; and the fact that the President would get his hands on the painting without having to honour his side of the bargain. All culminated in the loss of very substantial fees, and ignominious deportation back to Finland.

“You are all I think about, Alan Cleverden. First, I shall destroy your business. Then I shall wipe you off the face of this earth,” he murmured to himself.

In a few short weeks Karppinen discovered that the other man with him at Sheremetyevo Airport had been his partner. His name was Roger Tamworth. What is more, Tamworth posed as a private investigator, which gave him an entrée into people’s homes and businesses. Ideal for assessing

where hidden treasures might be kept, and how one might more easily liberate them. He lived and worked in a city called Salisbury, in the south of England.

He already knew that Cleverden lived in London. His men had established that he lived in an extremely expensive house close to the River Thames.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

There was a yell from the kitchen, then the sound of bare feet running down the hall.

I was shaving in the bathroom.

The door burst open and Ingrid appeared, and on her face the widest smile I have ever seen.

“I’ve done it! I’ve bloody done it!” she cried. “Look!”

She thrust a letter in my hand, and I read that my fiancée was now to be recognised as a Doctor of Philosophy in Archaeology.

I hugged her close, as we danced round the bathroom.

“That’s fantastic, Doctor Jakobson! Congratulations, we must celebrate! I’ll book a table somewhere for tonight,”

“I must phone my parents,” she said elated at the thought of passing on the good news. “They’ll be over the moon. They have supported me while I’ve been studying. This will mean a lot to them as well. Now, I can get a job and start to pay them back.”

A job where, I wondered. Here, or in her own country. We had never really talked through where we might be living. Though, one thing was for sure, if Ingrid decided it would be better for her in Estonia, that’s where I would be as well.

Finishing in the bathroom, I could hear the animated chatter of conversation between Ingrid and her mother. Then she phoned her father at his office, and the same pitch of her voice was repeated.

She sat on the bed while I dressed.

“They both want to come over for the award ceremony. Is it all right if they stay in my apartment, downstairs?”

“Of course. They can stay as long as they like.”

She jumped up again, and danced around me. “All that work was worth it! Isn’t it great! A Ph.D and you , all in one year!”

I grinned at her. “I think you’re a very clever young lady. That’s why I’m marrying you.”

“Have I not got any other attributes? Or haven’t you noticed?”

“One or two perhaps. I really ought to check more thoroughly. And now is a good a time as any!”

She shrieked with laughter as we fell back on the bed.

The award ceremony was scheduled to take place at UCL’s Senate House and the reception afterwards in the adjacent Russell Square Gardens. My mother and KcKenna also wanted to attend, and so we arranged for both sets of parents to occupy Ingrid’s apartment.

In the meantime, I was writing material for the Art Newspaper, and made several trips to noted art fairs in Basel. While in Switzerland it was convenient to visit ARTE in Strasbourg, which was no more than a ninety minute journey away.

It appeared they were delighted with the Vermeer programme, which was to be transmitted in a couple of weeks time. I was given a copy of the recording, and we discussed the production of another special. This time, they wanted me to review the life and works of Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa – more commonly known as Toulouse-Lautrec. A complex character I would enjoy revealing to the art world.

I also kept in regular contact with Roger. I had learned my lesson.

A week before the ceremony Roger phoned and asked if he could make use of the spare room in the apartment. Apparently, he was attending a

conference in London, and could I put him up for a few days.

I was about to say OK, but then amended my response, mentioning I would check with Ingrid and phone him back.

In fact, she rang him back, saying he would be most welcome. Her parents would also be in the house at the same time; and this would be a good opportunity for them to meet my best man.

With the award ceremony looming, and parents about to occupy the middle apartment, once again the easel, canvas and all my materials were removed, and the bedroom reinstated. They could not remain in my spare room with Roger staying with us, so I stored them in the garage where I parked the Range Rover.

Ingrid looked every inch the academic in the robe hired for the occasion.

We had collected her parents from the airport the previous day, and I went off this morning to meet my mother and McKenna at Paddington Station.

We all lunched in a local Italian restaurant, where Ingrid and I just sat back and watched the four of them chatter away like old friends.

I grinned across the table at her, delighted that it had not been one of those over-polite, stilted get-togethers, that no one really enjoys.

In the late afternoon we had wandered back to the house in St George's Square; and it was there Ingrid had donned her robe and finery, and given us all a glimpse of how she would present herself the next day.

Later on both sets of parents decided they would dine out, and we were excluded from the arrangement.

"Well, I was sure they would get on well, but not to this extent. Fancy leaving us out." Ingrid remarked.

"I rather think it was to let us relax," I suggested. "They could talk about the pair of us, without causing us embarrassment."

"Oh. . .I hadn't thought of that."

We ate something light, and sat on a settee to watch a television programme I had recorded. .At least, that was the idea. Ten minutes into the Sky Arts film, there was a ring at the doorbell.

I picked up the intercom.

“Hello?”

“It’s me, Roger. I’ve come to stay with you. . .remember?”

He dropped his bags in the hall, and came in to kiss Ingrid.

“Drink?” I offered.

“Have you got a gin and tonic? If you have make it a large one.”

He turned to Ingrid.

“I don’t know how you manage to walk in those high heels all day.”

I heard him say as I went into the dining room.

I poured him his drink, and filled two glasses of wine for Ingrid and myself, and headed towards the sitting room carrying the tray.

From the doorway I saw the oddest sight.

They were standing in the middle of the floor, with Roger attempting to wear Ingrid’s shoes. He managed after a fashion, with his heels protruding over the open backs.

She is tall, in high heels she is near six foot in height, so, I suppose her feet are correspondingly larger than average. But not big enough for her shoes to accommodate Roger’s feet.

He tottered into the hall, picked up a shopping bag and walked past me back into the room.

He then said to Ingrid, “These are what I bought in a sale this afternoon.”

She peered in the bag and withdrew a pair of ladies’ shoes.

They’re too big for me, but they are attractive, may I try them on?” she asked.

“Of course. I bought a lower wedge heel than I’m used to, because your fiancé told me I should dress more as an older woman. As a consequence, I also bought a wig in a bobbed hair style, and blouses and skirt for the forties age group.”

“I’m not trying to pry, Roger, but are you a cross-dresser?” asked Ingrid innocently. “Do you like wearing women’s clothes? I’ve never met someone who did before.”

I was standing there, still holding the tray of drinks. I burst out laughing. I could see Roger was put out.

“He is not a cross-dresser, darling. He occasionally appears as a woman in his role as an investigator. Especially, when he is carrying out surveillance. He has eight or nine disguises, one used to be a young woman. But the younger fashions no longer suit him, that’s why I told him to grow old gracefully.”

“Oh. . .I see. Sorry, Roger. I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“No. . . not really. I’ll have my shoes back now, please.”

The next day, Roger had gone off to his conference when Ingrid’s parents, my mother and McKenna came upstairs to the apartment. I had given him the spare keys to let himself in, and said we, he included, were all going out for dinner in the evening to celebrate Ingrid’s doctorate.

“Excellent. I’ll be back this afternoon, so I’ll have time to get her a little something to signal her success.”

I had ordered a min-bus to take us to Senate House. When she appeared, I could not help admiring Ingrid’s achievement, and how devastatingly beautiful she looked in her official robes.

I stepped forward, held her tightly, and kissed her cheek.

The ceremony, and the reception went by all too quickly.

I could not take my eyes from her when she stepped up to receive the customary handshake and words of congratulations. I clapped the loudest and the longest.

I also took a multitude of photos of the occasion.

We had all been taken by the day, and on the ride back to St George's Square, talked endlessly about whom we had met; the academic hierarchy of UCL and Ingrid's supervisor; the weather, which had played such an important part in the event; and the food and drink at the reception. Mother made a comment, that now she was Doctor Ingrid Jakobson, the world was her oyster.

I was uncertain where that oyster might be. . .in England or Estonia.

We climbed the stairs still talking about the presentation. I reached for the key to the apartment door. . .only then did I notice it was unnecessary. The lock had been smashed, the door was open, swinging gently to and fro, creaking slightly with each movement.

"Stay there," I barked to the others. But McKenna pushed forward.

"What's happened, laddie? Have you been robbed?"

"I'm about to find out."

I crept into the hallway, with McKenna and Enno on my heels. There was no sign of anyone as I passed the bedrooms and the bathroom. In the sitting room several chairs had been overturned, a vase on a table had been smashed, and several of Ingrid's ornaments lay scattered around the floor. Pictures were askew on the walls.

"There's been a fight, Alan, " whispered McKenna.

"Yes. . .it looks like someone attacked Roger. There's his bag by the television."

We made our way into the kitchen.

On one of the counters and on the floor in front of it, the contents of the sugar bowl had been spilt. A mug of lukewarm coffee stood close by.

“Whoever it was, they’ve taken away your friend, “ said Enno. He picked up the mug and dipped his finger in the liquid.

“By the looks of it, not so long ago either. No more than thirty or forty minutes.”

“Aye, but where would they have taken him?” demanded McKenna.

“What’s happened, Alan?” said Ingrid anxiously, coming into the kitchen.

“It looks like Alan’s friend has been kidnapped, [*mu kallis*](#),” murmured her father

I was staring at the sugar on the counter.

“Is that a message, do you think?” I said to no one in particular.

“How do you mean?” said Ingrid sharply.

I moved further into the room.

“Look!” I pointed at some indentations in the covering of sugar. “Could that have been a finger writing a message?”

“ Not very clear is it,” McKenna remarked.

“Enno,” I said. “Could you pass me the torch in that drawer over there. It’s by your left hand.”

“McKenna, can you close the blind, so we are in semi-darkness? And Ingrid can you get your phone and take a picture of the spilt sugar from various angles?”

Enno held the torch low to create deep shadows in the indentations.

I stared at the marks, they seemed to make little sense at first.

“Is that a ‘W’?” I asked McKenna.

He looked at where I was pointing.

“If it is, he has repeated it. For the next letter seems the same.”

“Is everything all right in there?” called my mother.

McKenna answered her. "It looks like Roger has been kidnapped. But he may have left a message, which we are trying to decipher."

"I think you're right. It does look like he repeated the letter. So it could be 'W', 'W'? Then what? Enno, could you lift the torch a little higher?"

"An 'A', perhaps?"

Suddenly the rest of the word seemed to materialise.

"It's 'WWALTHAM'!" I exclaimed. "So what's that below?"

Ingrid was busy leaning over taking photos. She peered at the crude markings.

"Could it be '3F'?" she muttered. "It looks like '3F' on the screen."

"'WWALTHAM 3F'," I said several times to myself. Then it clicked.

"I think I know what he was trying to tell us!" I shouted.

"'3F' stands for three Finns! 'WWALTHAM' stands for White Waltham. It's a private airfield near Maidenhead! His kidnappers must have flown into there, and have taken Roger back to the plane."

"How do you know that, Alan?" asked Enno.

"Because I have a PPL, A Private Pilot's Licence, and I've flown into White Waltham before. But I'll make sure, I'll phone the airfield."

I dashed into the sitting room and grabbed my phone. Quickly obtaining the telephone number, I rang the field.

"Good afternoon, I am trying to trace if a plane is on the field from Finland. It is vitally important, for we and the Border Force must intervene."

Mention of such an authority prompted an immediate response.

"I'm afraid not. . . though we do have one from Norway that is scheduled to take off before we close the airfield at eight o'clock this evening."

It must be them I thought.

"Can you give me the registration number?"

“LN-YRT.”

“Thanks a lot. Now, can you detain them until we arrive?”

“I’ll try, though we have no official reason to do so. How long will you be?”

My God. . .it would take ages by road. Time we had not got.

Then I had a flash of inspiration.

“Within the hour,” I replied, and closed the line.

“Ingrid, can you phone someone for me? I’ll get the number.”

I quickly checked on my phone and said, “Tell them it’s urgent, to stand by and we’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Come on!” I waved an arm at Enno and McKenna.

The three of us ran down to Grosvenor Road and into the Westminster Boating Base.

“John!” I shouted. “Can you run us up river? It could be a matter of life or death!”

He could see by our faces it was serious.

“How far upriver?”

“About two miles! Just past Chelsea Harbour!”

“Jump in the Humber Destroyer, It’s quicker!”

I untied the craft while McKenna and Enno jumped aboard. The take-off was immediate. Almost instantly we were up to and beyond the twelve knots limit, and John was pushing it higher.

We swept under Chelsea Bridge. I glanced behind at the stern wave, as it widened across the river. Next was the Albert Bridge, quickly followed by Battersea Bridge.

The spray was wetting our clothing. While McKenna ignored the discomfort, Enno, a veteran sailor, revelled in it. This was so much to his liking.

The craft, with its two hundred horsepower Yamaha outboard engines, rounded the left-hand bend near to Chelsea harbour; and I pointed where we wanted to land on the south bank of the river.

Slowing, it idled to a standstill by some steps. The three of us rapidly disembarked, climbed the steps and ran into the London Heliport Terminal.

I paid the fees with a credit card, and our pilot escorted us to a machine already on the pad: a Bell 222, ideal for our purposes.

“Where are we heading? I was told Maidenhead” asked the pilot through the headphones.

“More precisely, White Waltham Airfield, sixty kilometres due west. Though, having flown into it before, you’ll have to approach it from the north, around Slough and over Maidenhead, dropping down over the M40 Motorway.”

He nodded and we lifted off, turning towards the late afternoon sun.

Twenty minutes later the pilot raised the controller and requested landing permission. As we hovered over the airfield, I searched for the aircraft. And there it was. Thank God, they had not yet departed.

“Can you put it as close as possible to that twin-engined Piper Navajo?”

He looked round at me, wondering why I had made the request.: shrugged, and murmured. “No problem.”

When the spinning rotor slowed, we jumped out and ran over to the office.

I’ve often wondered why buildings at grass airfields have the appearance of wooden cricket pavilions. Then I recalled many of them started life as RAF stations during the Second World War, and were, then regarded as temporary structures housing pilots, crew and engineers.

Two women were managing flight operations, one of them removed her headphones and came over to greet us. I stepped forward.

“Mr Cleverden, I presume?” she said with a smile.

“Indeed. Thanks for letting us down so promptly. I see the Piper is still here, so none of the passengers has arrived yet?”

“No, as I mentioned, the airfield closes at twenty hundred hours, so they shouldn’t be too long. May I ask why you wish to speak to them?”

“It’s a matter of a kidnapping. They have abducted someone, and it’s my belief they will attempt to take him out the country.”

“They haven’t filed a flight plan yet, but they told us earlier they were en route to Scotland to do some fishing.”

“If you don’t mind I am going to call the police,” I said. “Where’s the nearest main station?”

“It’s in Maidenhead, about five kilometres away. I’ve got the number here.”

I dialled the number, and was put through to the operations room of the Thames Valley Police. A brief explanation of a suspected kidnapping was sufficient for them to direct patrol cars policing the M4 and M40 motorways to the airfield.

As I was finishing the call, McKenna said, “We’ve got company, laddie.”

A blue car had pulled into the airfield and was driving over to the Piper. One of them got out the front seat, and was remonstrating with the helicopter pilot to move his aircraft.

Another was walking back towards the office.

“Tell me,” I said to one of the operators. “Do you, by chance, have anything we can use to defend ourselves?”

She was taken aback by the request. But the other operator called over.

“There are some cricket bats through there,” she said pointing to a door. “They’ll be in the bags ready for Saturday’s game.”

“Come on, Enno,” McKenna said. “Let me show you the finer aspects of the game of cricket.”

I moved swiftly to stand behind the door as it was opening.

“Here’s my flight plan for Scotland,” declared Henrik Virtanen, “and I’ll pay what’s due.”

But the first operator was not looking at him, but over his shoulder.

Animal instinct made him pivot round, causing me to deliver only a glancing blow to his shoulder. He shook himself angrily, and launched an attack with fists and feet. I got in one good punch at the same time as McKenna’s bat caught him across the forehead. He dropped, as though pole-axed, to the floor.

Both women came up with some rope from a store cupboard, and we bound Virtanen’s hands and ankles, then applied a gag before hauling him into the next room amongst the cricket gear.

Under the verbal barrage of the car driver, the pilot eventually started up the rotor blades. The car was moved back while the helicopter rose in the air to land fifty metres away.

With that, the driver got out the car and strode over to the office. He must have wondered what was keeping Virtanen.

He was reaching to open the door when the wailing sound of sirens filled the air.

“Sounds like the cavalry,” murmured Enno.

Outside the Finn started running for the plane, then changed his mind and headed for the car, just as two police patrol cars hurtled onto the airstrip.

Seeing the man fleeing they turned in his direction, skidding to a halt beside the blue car. The fellow had no option. There was nowhere else to go. He slowly raised his hands, until ordered to lie on the grass, with his

arms outstretched. His compatriot emerged from the back seat, and was told to do the same.

I was running towards the blue car. Fearful of what I might find, for I could not see anyone else in the back seat.

I wrenched open the door, and there was Roger, half lying in the well between the front and back seats.

“Stay there,” I said breathlessly, “and put your wig on.”

I was wondering how I would explain the presence of a kidnapped cross-dresser to the police.

Eventually, after we had given our individual statements, we boarded the helicopter. I found it hard to imagine what they made of Roger’s explanation for his kidnapping and his attire.

A thought suddenly struck me. I jumped out and ran across to the office to thank the two operators. They grinned and said they had found the incident entertaining; and by the way, in all the excitement they had forgotten to mention the landing fee for the helicopter. It was twenty eight pounds.

I gladly paid up.

The employees of Aarni Karppinen had been taken into custody; and we had been informed that we would be called upon to attend as witnesses when the trio came to trial. It would not go well for them, for all three were carrying firearms.

Dutifully, I phoned Ingrid to assure her all was well, and Roger had been freed.

Finally, strapped in, the craft lifted off, turned east, heading for the landing stage by Chelsea Harbour. John, in his powerboat, would be there to run us back to the Westminster Boating Base, and my haven in St George’s Square.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

There were quite a few interruptions while Roger explained what had happened.

For my part, I just sat there, drink in hand, listening to the chatter around me. My thoughts were unambiguous. These were the people I most cherished. The women who gave me unstinting support and affection. The men who faced possible dangers to be at my side.

It welled up inside me. So much so, all I wanted to do was silently bask in their company.

Ingrid instinctively recognised my silence. She came over, sat on the arm of the chair, and reached for my hand.

“What I don’t understand, Roger,” said Enno, “is how you came to be wearing women’s clothes in the first place.”

“I think I mentioned, I went shopping in the King’s Road for a new outfit. The more mature look.”

He glanced at me.

“Yes. . .but why?”

“Papa,” interrupted Ingrid, “it is one of his disguises as a private investigator.”

“But private detectives, smoke, wear threadbare suits, and pull the brim of their hat down over their eyes.”

“Papa, you’ve been watching too many old Humphrey Bogart films. They are not like that anymore.”

“OK, they smashed their way into the apartment, but what I want to know,” voiced McKenna. “Is how they got in the front door so easily.”

Ingrid answered that one.

“When things are bought on line, the delivery people ring the first bell and shout ‘delivery’. Invariably, the couple on the ground floor push the door release, and items are left in the hall. Obviously, they watched the house, saw how the system worked, just shouted ‘delivery’, and they were in.”

“So where were you, Roger, when they burst into the apartment?” my mother asked.

“I had changed into the new outfit, put on the wedge-heeled shoes, and was wearing my new wig. I hadn’t fixed it properly, but decided to make a coffee for myself. When the door was flung open, I dropped the sugar bowl on the counter.

“The main man saw me, shouted where is he? and ran back into the bedrooms, while the other two checked the sitting and dining rooms and bathroom.

“Virtanen, the ringleader, then came back into the kitchen, grabbed me by the shoulder, spun me round, tied my hands together. Then he pushed me back against the counter.

“He then pulled a gun from inside his jacket, and placed the muzzle against my forehead. “Right, for the last time, where is Tamworth? We are not leaving here without him.”

There was total silence in the room. Even I tensed up as he recounted the event.

“I shall count to five, my dear, Virtanen said in a soft tone of voice. Then if you do not tell me, I shall shoot you.”

“I remember the next words quite vividly,” Roger said quietly. “One of the others, it could have been Mäkinen, said why don’t we do what we were

going to do with Tamworth. Fly out of White Waltham, and drop her in the North Sea?”

“I had my back against the counter, that’s when I tried to leave a message in the spilt sugar. Thank god you managed to decipher it and came looking for me. That was quick thinking, coming by helicopter.”

“That was Alan’s idea,” remarked Ingrid.

He gave me a quick smile, then continued with the tale.

“I said nothing. My voice would have given me away. Four. . .five, counted Virtanen, and hit me across the cheek with the gun. I dropped to my knees and the wig came off.’

“Well, well, cried Virtanen. ‘Look who it is. . . Mr Tamworth.’”

“They hauled me down the stairs, and bundled me into a car. By this time the rush hour had started and it seemed to take ages to reach the airfield. . .thank God! The rest you know. You were there waiting for them.”

“Where are Virtanen, Korhonen, and Mäkinen now?” Jaanika asked.

“The police arrived and they are now in custody, [*mu kallis*](#),” Enno explained.

I nudged Ingrid. “What does, [*mu kallis*](#), mean in English?”

“She smiled down at me. “It means, ‘my love’, ‘my dear’.”

The Jakobsons, my mother and McKenna were taken by Ingrid to see some of the sights of London.

After his ordeal Roger slept late: which allowed me time to finish an article for the Art newspaper. When he finally surfaced, he wandered into the sitting room and dropped onto a settee.

“Coffee and something to eat?”

“Just coffee, Alan, please, and some aspirin, if you’ve got any? I’ve discovered bruises I hadn’t been aware of last night.”

“Sit there, I’ll bring both in to you.”

“Everything is ruined, of course.”

“Sorry. . .what’s ruined?” I put my mug on the coffee table.

“The clothes I bought. Even the wig doesn’t look right, anymore.”

“Send them to the dry cleaners. They’ll sort them out. Anyway, I haven’t told you this before. . .yellow is not your colour.”

Roger laughed out loud.

“You’re probably right.”

Then a rapid change of subject. Typical Tamworth.

“Thanks for yesterday, Alan. I really thought that was it. If they had dropped me in the sea, I’m not a very good swimmer.”

Although said lightheartedly, we both knew what it would have meant.

“By the way,” he continued, after a brief moment of reflection. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you. We’ve been invited to a reception at the Courtauld Institute in a couple of weeks time for the grand unveiling of the restored *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère* !”

CHAPTER FORTY THREE

Jaanka and Enno Jakobson went to stay at Mead Court, and Ingrid and I agreed to join them for dinner on Friday evening.

On the way down I drove first to the industrial estate at Blandford Forum. I wanted to speak with John Fielding: to let him know all that had transpired.

Ingrid accompanied me when we walked into the main office of the haulage company. Everyone looked up from their work, and the chorus of sound prompted John's appearance.

"Ingrid," he called, marching across, and kissing her on both cheeks. "It's wonderful to see you again."

"And you, John."

Almost as an afterthought. "Hello, Alan. How are you? I've heard a few things."

"That's why we are here, John. To give you the full picture, and for you to enjoy this!"

I passed over a bottle of champagne.

"Now what does this signify? Something momentous, or relief at having won through?"

I told him of recent events: dwelling on Roger's cross-dressing perplexing the police when they turned up at White Waltham.

He was still clutching the bottle while he listened intently. "Well, that's a relief with the culprits behind bars."

Ingrid added. “You could say the something momentous, John, was that Alan finally asked me to marry him.”

John grinned, rose to his feet, and kissed her again. Then he shook my hand.

He turned to her. “I don’t know why it took him so long. It was obvious for a long time he was completely smitten.”

Jaanika and Enno were taking pleasure touring the lanes, and beauty spots of the English countryside. They had been everywhere, including the pub in Shaftesbury where Ingrid had drunk a pint of beer. Contrary to her daughter, Jaanika had enjoyed it, and with the second pint had been enrolled in the Society Of Dorset Men, Estonian branch.

“I had not realised you were such an accomplished artist, Alan,” Enno remarked. “I have been looking at your work in the long gallery. Perhaps, one day, you’ll do a painting for us.”

He failed to see the glance exchanged between his wife and daughter.

Early Saturday morning I was sitting in my favourite place, the bench overlooking the lawns running down to a lake framed by a tall standing of trees. It was a bright, sunny start to the day: but I was not fully aware of it. Most of my thoughts were on my future with Ingrid.

We had agreed to marry. I was even prepared to move to Estonia, if that was what she wanted. But little had been said about the date of the wedding, where it would take place, and what she might now do.

Ingrid was a highly qualified archaeologist, but so were quite a few others. Was there a ready demand for her talents? She had a facility for languages, which could lead to her working in any number of countries. I

was not sure I could endure that for long, particularly if she were working on some remote dig.

Suddenly, two arms engulfed my neck.

“Suzanna said I would probably find you here. You were so deep in thought, I don’t believe you heard me walking up behind you. What was on your mind, [*mu kallis*](#)?”

“Oh. . .” Do I tell her I wondered briefly? Or do I hide my true concerns?”

“Cards on the table, Ingrid. I was thinking about our future together. I’m not sure what it is, and where it will be. If you want to return to Estonia, I shall come with you. I want to be wherever you are. Though I would not enjoy living in another country, and then find you’re away working on an archaeological site which occupies you for months on end.”

She came round and sat beside me.

She took my hand.

“I’ve been thinking about that, too. I want to be where you are happiest. That’s why I have been writing, phoning, exchanging emails with a number of universities here in the UK. Now I’ve obtained my doctorate, I would very much like to join a university faculty as a full-time lecturer.”

She had a smart phone in her hand.

“This morning a head of the department embracing archaeology emailed me offering such a position. I need to discuss it with you before making a decision.”

“Which university?”

“Southampton. This is what he wrote.”

I took her phone and read the email through a pale mist. When I looked up her eyes, too, were moist.

“Wow! That’s terrific. You don’t mind staying in England?”

“As long as it’s with you.”

I grabbed at her, and kissed her cheeks, nose, eyes and hair. I could not believe my good fortune.

“My, what brings that on? Such a sudden show of affection?” asked my mother.

“Ingrid has been offered a job here in England. At Southampton University.”

“So how will you manage that, dear? Travelling down from London.”

I’ll sell St George’s Square,” I said. “We’ll buy something near Southampton. She could not possibly make that sort of journey each day.”

My mother nodded thoughtfully. “Have you told Jaanika and Enno, yet?”

Ingrid shook her head. “The offer came through this morning. I’ve only just discussed it with Alan. I’d better go and see them now.”

She stood up, bent over to kiss me, then walked into the house.

“Well, that’s good news, Alan,” remarked my mother. “I should imagine you’re happy with that. Though, I had the feeling you would have followed Ingrid anywhere she went.”

“I would. . .even to Estonia.”

When we sat at the table for lunch Jaanika and Enno said how delighted they were for their daughter. Moreover, Tallinn and Melbury Abbas were only a few hours away.

“You know you both will always be welcome here,” said my mother. “Come to England, and stay here whenever you wish.”

She turned to Ingrid and said quietly. “McKenna and I were chatting before lunch, Ingrid. We were considering how you would manage the journey from London to Southampton. Alan said he would sell St George’s Square. As it is his property he can do what he likes with it. At the same time, having a base in London must be extremely useful.”

She glanced across the table at McKenna, who nodded. Obviously, aware of what she was going to say next.

“We are not getting any younger, McKenna and I. In fact, we have been thinking about down-sizing. This place is getting too much for us. This is not the whim of the moment, we have talked about it, on and off, for some time.”

I wondered what my mother was going to say.

“So. . .and this is just a suggestion, mind, what if we split Mead Court in two? You both live in one part, and we in another. That way you could more easily travel to the university, Ingrid. And Alan, I know, can work anywhere when he is not travelling.”

I did not know what to say. I looked at Ingrid.

Once more, there were tears in her eyes. She got up wordlessly, went round the table and hugged my mother.

Eventually the two of them parted.

“The only stipulation,” said my mother smiling. “Is that I get to keep Mrs Dimmock.”

Jaanika and Enno also came round the table and hugged my mother and McKenna.

Much of the afternoon was spent assessing the division. In fact, it was relatively straightforward. Mother and McKenna would occupy the rear of the house, beyond the long gallery. It provided for two bedrooms with en suite facilities, the present kitchen, a dining room, and a sitting room. There was also the opportunity to build on a large conservatory. The gravel drive went all round the house, so there was ready access.

Ingrid and I would have to convert one of the many ground floor rooms into a kitchen, but we would retain Grandpa Johns’ study and his

magnificent orangery.

“Another thing, Alan,” remarked my mother. “You could rent out the middle floor of St George’s Square, and keep the top floor as it is. That way, Jaanika and Enno would have a place to stay when they visit London, and we could join them.”

On Tuesday, Ingrid took the Range Rover and drove to Southampton to meet the head of the archaeology department.

Roger and I met in London, and went to the reception at the Courtauld Institute. For once, he was dressed normally for the occasion.

Much was made of the theft, the recovery, and the formidable task of restoring it to its pristine state by the Institute’s conservators. Fortunately, no names were mentioned, nor the manner in which the painting had eventually been retrieved.

Then spotlights came on, the cloth screen removed, and there was a collective sigh of appreciation for Manet’s masterpiece.

We stayed another hour. Met with a few of Restitution’s hierarchy, who discreetly praised us again for the safe return of *Un Bar Aux Folies Bergère*.

We had dinner at Rules, just off The Strand near Covent Garden. Claimed to be the oldest restaurant in London. it serves traditional British food, specialising in classic game cookery, oysters, pies and puddings.

A taxi ferried us back to St George’s Square, and a good night’s rest.

In the morning I went to the supermarket for the essentials – milk, bread, butter and marmalade. I also bought copies of the Times, Guardian and the Telegraph.

There were reports and a number of photographs of the previous evening’s event, including one that featured both Roger and myself in the background. Slightly out of focus, but recognisable to those who knew us.

Roger strolled into the kitchen as I was doing the toast , and picked up the Guardian. It was not long before he saw the photo of us in the background.

“Damn! How did we miss turning away when whoever it was turned his camera in our direction.?”

“It’s not worth worrying about. Very few will look beyond the celebrity in the foreground.”

I could not have been more wrong.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR

“O, святые! What are you showing me? It cannot be true, we have the real one!” he shouted.

“Unfortunately, Mr President, that may not be accurate,” explained Kosnievsky. “Not, at any rate, according to the Courtauld Institute in London. They are in the press, TV and social media as having had the real Manet worked upon by their conservators, reframed and once again, on display in their art gallery.”

“O, святые! What am I going to tell Magda,” he said under his breath.

“There is even online coverage of the unveiling of the restored painting in the British newspapers.”

“That’s it! Leave! Go! Don’t say anything more! Get that worthless second in command of yours in here, now!”

“Well, what have you got to say for yourself? Eh? Do you know what you’ve done? You promised, the last time there was a cock-up, you would get me the real thing! I don’t suffer fools gladly! I don’t tolerate idiots who let me down twice!”

“It’s Karppinen’s fault,” Litvinov shuddered. “He assured me it was the real painting. I don’t know anything about art.”

“You didn’t have to! All you needed to do was use the right person, someone who knew about paintings. It was your responsibility. You chose Karppinen. You chose someone who is as bigger fool as you are!”

Tupolev stopped mid-flow.

“Or was he? Was he hoping to deceive us both by passing off a fake?”

The President's anger was again boiling over. He was incandescent with rage.

"No one gets away with that! Do you hear me? No one!"

He leaned across his desk and pointed a bony finger at Litvinov.

"This time choose carefully. This time make sure you use the right person! Do you understand me?"

Aarni Karppinen was staring at the screen in disbelief.

The first online report gave few details, other than to mention that three foreigners, believed to be Scandinavian, had been apprehended by the police at a private airfield when in the process of kidnapping a British citizen.

He had wondered why he had not heard from them. Hell! the world was tilting around him. He so much believed that the three of them, Virtanen, Korhonen, and Mäkinen, would carry out his orders efficiently.

Remove the key component of Cleverden's organisation, and it would disintegrate. Then he could deal with the man himself. It would be like a lamb to the slaughter.

But they had failed.

He would have to deal with Cleverden himself. A thought crossed his mind. There was someone who might help him. Someone he had used in the past. Even though he would want a great deal of money, it would be worth it to rid himself of the constant thorn in his side.

He opened another British newspaper online.

And gasped when he read of the Courtauld Institute's unveiling of the restored, genuine, *Un bar Aux Folies Bergère*.

His heart raced. His vision blurred. It could not possibly be true. He looked at the colour image of the painting. Then his gaze shifted to those

attending the event. My God! There he was again! That bloody Cleverden. The bane of his life.

Then he was taken by an even more powerful thought.

What would be the reaction to the news in Moscow? The Russian President had threatened him when he delivered the wrong painting last time. The sooner I move against Cleverden the better. Remove him, brand him as the instigator of all that had happened, and return half the monies he had been paid so far. Even though he would be substantially out-of-pocket. That should counter any thoughts of retribution.

Yes, that's what I'll do he decided.

He made a lengthy phone call from his home on the island of Kulosaari.

CHAPTER FORTY FIVE

I've decided I have an aversion for blue cars.

Whenever I see one in my rear-view mirror, the feeling I'm being followed wells up. It did so on the journey to Dorset.

The half-finished painting for Enno's birthday was currently at Mead Court. Ingrid had returned to Estonia with her mother and father, and would stay there for a well-earned break until I came with the painting to celebrate Enno's birthday.

I had two weeks in which to finish the canvas, and drive to Tallinn. I was taking the Range Rover, for Ingrid wanted to bring some of her belongings back to England. I wondered idly what they might be. The middle apartment was already well-stocked, and a good many had found their way up to the top floor.

There it was again. A blue Ford Mondeo.

Stop it Cleverden, you're getting paranoid, I told myself.

Anyway, I never saw it again after I turned off the A303 and headed for Melbury Abbas.

I wrote several items for the Art Newspaper, and rang Peter Soames to discuss the next special. The success of the Vermeer, was such that ARTE in Strasbourg were quite content for Peter and I to work together on the next one.

However, other than for meal breaks and phone calls, much of my time was devoted to the painting, getting that finished and framed. There was a particularly good framing company in Shaftesbury, which I had used in the

past; and we had discussed the type of frame best suited to the ‘Hockney-style’ painting.

Almost with the last brush stroke, even before it was fully dry, I rushed it into the studio. Somehow, they managed to frame it, and it was packed into a substantial packing case which fitted nicely into the boot of the Range Rover.

The following morning, early, I drove across country to the Channel Tunnel, declared the painting was mine own work to Customs officials by showing photos of its creation at various stages. I boarded the train, and was driving north to pick up the motorway to Ghent by eleven o’clock.

All would have been well, except for the sight of a blue car in my wing mirror. Thankfully, when I increased speed it was left far behind.

I was heading for Hanover in Germany. In all about nine hundred kilometres, far enough for the first day.

It was late when I booked into the Novotel on Podbielskistraße, and went straight to bed. Tomorrow would be an even longer day. I was heading for Kaunas in Lithuania, over a thousand kilometres to the north-east.

Route 2 took me around the cities of Poznan, Lodz and Warsaw. I knew progress would be slow at times, for in checking, there were reports of a series of roadworks on this major trunk road through the heart of Poland.

After driving for twelve hours, I was dog-tired, and took a room at the first hotel I came across, which happened to be the Europa Royale. A pretentious name for unpretentious accommodation. But it did not matter: the bed was comfortable; the service welcoming; and the water hot.

The last leg, Kaunas to Tallinn. A mere distance of five hundred and seventy kilometres. Fortunately, it was the one road, the E67 through Latvia and Estonia, all the way to Tallinn.

I slept late. Predictable after the previous day. I was, eventually, on the road after breakfast. An eight hour journey stretched before me. I would not get to the Jakobson's home until at least seven that evening.

I phoned Ingrid before I set off, and her first words were. "Where are you?"

"At this moment I am in the car park of a hotel in Kaunas in Lithuania. I should be with you, all being well, between seven and eight o'clock tonight."

"Oh. . .well drive carefully. Love you, bye."

I stopped for lunch at a place called Saulkrasti, on the Gulf of Riga, and again, once inside Estonia, on the outskirts of Pärnu.

I finally came to a halt on the Jakobson's drive in Merivälja at seven thirty. Turning off the engine, I watched Ingrid come running down the drive towards me.

It was worth the three-day drive just to see her beaming smile.

I was too tired to notice a car parked further down the road. Or, as we entered the house, its occupant making a call on his cell phone.

The next day, while Enno was at work, Ingrid helped me unpack the painting in the garage. When, at last, freed from its wrappings, I stood it on the workbench, and Ingrid called her mother.

"Cover your eyes before you go through," she said to Jaanika. "I'll guide you."

The pair came haltingly up to the bench. Ingrid stood back.

"Now you can open them," she exclaimed.

Jaanika was motionless for several minutes in front of the painting. When she turned towards me there were tears in her eyes.

"It's. . .it's remarkable, Alan. . . quite outstanding. My God, what a present. Enno will be so thrilled, as much as I am."

With that she enveloped me in an embrace, and burst into tears again.

“Give him back, mother. He’s mine,” Ingrid said laughingly. Then she, too, pulled me to her, and gave me a hug.

“Tomorrow is his birthday, so we ought to hang it somewhere where he won’t see it until the day,” murmured Jaanika.

“Why don’t we just hang it on the wall in the living room,” proposed Ingrid. “Tell him he is not allowed in there until tomorrow. Keep him in the television room all evening.”

“Shall we do that?” queried Jaanika. “We’ll let Enno watch one of his favourite programmes for a change. Alan, could you give me a hand to put it on the wall. I bought a couple of battery-operated picture lights to set above it, as well.”

An hour later it was done.

I must admit it looked particularly striking in the place Jaanika had chosen. Being a large canvas it seemed to lift the room, to rob the walls of their neutrality. Now the white surround and the painting were in harmony, with the portraits of Jaanika and Enno the focus of attention.

“To make sure he doesn’t see it, perhaps we ought to cover the painting with a suitable cloth,” I suggested. “Just in case he comes in here.”

Jaanika went off to fetch one, and Ingrid slipped her arm round my waist.

“That is the best present daddy could ever wish for,” she said softly. “Aren’t you clever, Alan. I can’t even draw a straight line.”

She kissed me proudly on the cheek.

Enno did not go to work the next day.

“Let’s take the boat out,” he proposed at breakfast. “Do you sail, Alan?”

“Not a great deal. Not really since my student days, Enno. But I would enjoy going out in the boat.”

“Good! We’ll take a picnic, something light, for Jaanika has told me we are eating in tonight, and it’s something special.”

We cleared away the breakfast things , and shortly afterwards had coffee and the opening of presents on the raised patio overlooking the sea.

Enno opened the presents from his wife, and something small from Ingrid.

“It’s a token really, Papa. My main present is in the living room.”

I had already turned on the picture lights, which glowed softly under the cloth.

I could see the quizzical look on Enno’s face when the four of us stood in front of it.

“Right, just pull the cloth away gently, be very careful” murmured Ingrid.

In fact, one small tug and it slipped off the painting.

Total silence.

Enno stared at the painting with a sharp intake of breath.

Then started shaking his head.

“Don’t you like it, Papa” asked Ingrid anxiously.

She got no answer.

Then he turned, eyes moistening as he hugged her.

“No words can express my feelings,” he murmured. “It’s absolutely wonderful! And I think I know who the artist is.”

Enno put out his arms and gave me a manly hug, patting me on the back.

“I don’t know if I want to go sailing now,” he grinned. “I’ll just sit here and delight in the painting.”

We did go sailing, eventually.

Enno had a Hunter Legend 335 in the Pirita Marina about three kilometres away. This was a yacht built by Hunter Marine in 1989, and I had sailed on one similar when in my twenties. Renowned for their sturdy construction,

though nearly thirty years old, it was in excellent condition and had obviously been lovingly maintained by Enno.

We eased out the marina, on the diesel engine, set the sails, and headed north-west for the island of Naissaar. We did not land, but circumnavigated the island and turned for the marina shortly after we had eaten our sandwiches.

It ended all too soon.

But I knew Jaanika wanted to be home in good time to welcome the outside caterers who were providing Enno's celebratory dinner.

I have never drunk Estonian wine before.

I was not even aware Estonia produced wine. I thought the country was too far north. What did I know?

Throughout the meal I drank both white and red; and was fast developing that glow of bonhomie one feels when in good company, eating good food, and allowing alcohol to cushion the senses.

In the background I could hear the faint sounds of the caterers' departure; and feel the breeze of open doors as they carried containers, plates and cutlery out to waiting vans.

Jaanika rose from the table.

"I must thank them for a delightful meal, and for the fact I haven't had to do a thing towards it," she said, laughingly.

Enno, Ingrid and I carried on chatting against a background of vehicles starting up, and their slow exit down the driveway. There was a brief roar of an engine then silence.

Her father leaned forward and was pouring more wine into Ingrid's and my glasses when Jaanika returned.

Our backs were to the door. All we witnessed was the sudden draining of colour from Enno's face.

"Oh mu jumal!"

"I suggest you stay calm," said a voice I had heard before on a recording machine.

I swung round, knowing whom I would see.

Aarni Karppinen was pointing a handgun at me.

I looked at his companion, who was holding onto Jaanika. A gun against her right temple.

"Good evening, Captain Siren. Or should I say, Sirén. That's how it is said in Finnish, is it not?"

He bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement.

"We meet again, Mr Cleverden. When the painting on the Sea Empress went missing, when did you realise I was involved, that I was working for Karppinen?"

"A series of little things led to you. The last pieces of the jigsaw were when we discovered you were not only Finnish, but lived virtually next door to your sponsor. I presume he paid you well for your part in the theft."

Sirén grinned. "Of course, I only ever work for money, and always for the highest bidder."

He pushed Jaanika away with the order. "Go and sit next to your husband!"

At the same time he moved closer to Karppinen, standing slightly behind him.

"Well now, Mr Cleverden, it is perhaps unfortunate you are with these good people," said Karppinen in English, a suggestion of a smile on his lips. "You will appreciate I cannot afford to leave witnesses."

Ingrid rose to her feet, and stared at Karppinen. “I will not allow you to shoot my fiancé or my parents! Alan, stand behind me!”

“You don’t understand, do you? I am quite ready to shoot you first. You mean nothing to me. Nor do your parents. If you wish it, then so be it!”

There was movement behind me as Jaanika and Enno both rushed forward to protect their daughter.

But Anton Sirén was even quicker.

Even as Karppinen’s finger was tightening on the trigger,, he plunged the hypodermic syringe into the art dealer’s carotid artery, just below his ear.

Time seemed to stand still. He turned slowly towards Sirén, the syringe now hanging limply from his neck.

“What have you done, Erik Anton?” he murmured.

The gun dropped from his grasp.

Ingrid, Jaanika and Enno and I just stared at our would-be executioner, as he slipped to his knees, rolled sideways, and lay full-length on the floor. Gradually, the twitching of his limbs eased. . .Karppinen was dead.

“Sorry, you had to witness that,” remarked Sirén blithely. “But, in the circumstances, it seemed the right moment to perform the deed.”

All three Jakobsons dropped into their chairs. Still staring dumbly at the body.

“He was going to kill us,” said Enno hoarsely.

“Mr Cleverden, will you help me move the corpse out to the car?” Sirén asked politely.

I nodded. I doubted that my voice was up to answering him.

“Let me remove this first. We don’t want any accidents, do we?”

Sirén gently pulled the syringe from Karppinen’s neck, and placed it in something akin to a reading glasses case.

“Right, I’ll take the shoulders, you take the feet.”

Karppinen was not a heavily-built man. It was done swiftly and with no undue exertion.

“Lay him on the grass while I open the trunk” he said.

We heaved him in, and Sirén shut the lid of the blue Audi.

I found my voice.

“Where is he destined?”

“You’ve no need to know, my friend. Let us just say a watery grave.”

“Tell me, why did you save us in there. I thought you were working for him.”

I nodded in the direction of the car.

He grinned, I saw the white of Sirén’s teeth in the half-light.

“I mentioned I worked for the highest bidder. Someone approached me before Karppinen with an offer my neighbour could not match. It was a most handsome sum to remove him for all time.”

“Who?”

He shook his head, and walked to the car.

I stood there while he slowly drove past me. Out the open window, Sirén called. “I doubt, Mr Cleverden, our paths will ever cross again, so I wish you well. By the way, Ivan Kosnievsky sends his regards!”

I walked back to the house, concerned that my fiancée and her parents had been subjected to such an ordeal. But, I was also relieved the threat to me, and my loved ones, had been erased.

Ingrid came running down the drive towards me, and literally jumped into my arms. Kissing me with a warmth of affection that took away my breath.

In the house Enno was standing in front of the painting, he turned round to me. “Are you all right, Alan? For a moment, I was worried for you.”

I walked over and gave him a manly hug, which he returned.

Jaanika came into the room and also clasped me in an embrace. Then, with more aplomb than I could muster, said. “I think we could all do with another drink, Enno. Something much stronger, I would suggest.”

I am going to be part of this family shortly, I thought to myself. Who could wish for better in-laws. Not only for being so understanding, but also allowing me to marry their daughter.

Ingrid, at my side, again knew instinctively what I was thinking.

She squeezed my hand. “All is well, Alan.”

In a restaurant in the back streets of Moscow, a waiter was standing at a table, ready to take the diners’ orders.

He leaned forward, and said to the host in a low voice. “What you really fancy, sir, are the Russian dumplings stuffed with venison and cabbage with a delicate mushroom sauce.”