

I hope you enjoy this low-tech, full-text edition of *An Upward Draft*.

[Paperback and Kindle editions are available on Amazon.](#)

If the story resonates with you, I would be grateful if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform.

Reviews make a meaningful difference and help other readers discover the book. Thank you for reading.

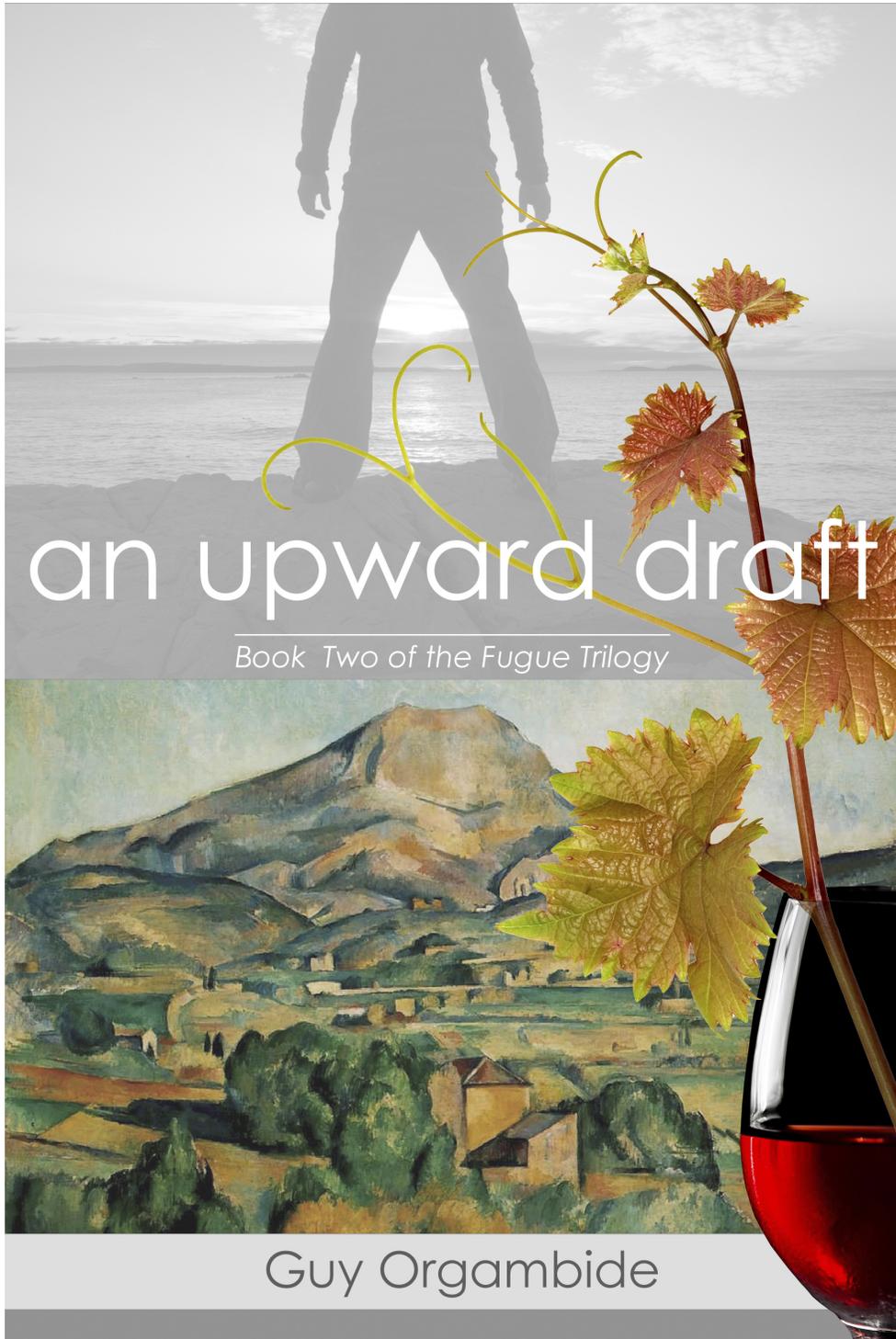
Guy



PS. I am a God-fearing man, but my novels tend to go their own way...

Although this one does not contain excessive violence or sexuality, it does include adult themes—violent situations and light erotica—and is intended for mature readers.

Guy Orgambide



an upward draft

Book Two of the Fugue Trilogy

Guy Orgambide

Guy Orgambide

Copyright © 2013 Guy Orgambide

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1491019557

ISBN-13: 978-1491019559

Chapter 1

August 25, Year 2.

A feeble drift had swept me onto this distant dock; a bright, hot place where all men shouted when they spoke, even the skinny ones. With seven thousand miles of rough waters behind me and a labyrinth of dirty shipping containers as scenery, I suddenly missed my wife—for the first time in months. She was always good under duress; the tougher the storm, the faster she would figure out how to navigate us to a safe place.

I tried using her logic to find the best path off this dock, but it only helped to dig my fear deeper down. A middle-aged man on the run in a foreign land with two hundred dollars in his pocket and no local resources is but easy prey. I had simply escaped one hunting ground to run into another.

I had been sitting on the dock for more than an hour, in the shadow of a bright orange shipping container, less than fifty feet from the cargo ship that had spat me out. The descending sun and an annoyed glance from a dockworker made it clear that my honeymoon period with Buenos Aires had already run out of steam.

I picked up my small backpack and walked toward the dull sound of the city. At the end of the dock, I faced the entrance of a large street that seemed to thrust itself straight into town. *Avenida de los Immigrantes...* At least, the name gave me some sense of belonging; I took the opening. The city was growling all around me but even though it was only late afternoon, the avenue itself was scarcely populated. The tall structures encasing it all seemed to be business or official buildings, and most of the vehicles passing by were large trucks heading to the harbor or returning from it.

I always felt that there was something unnatural about void urban spaces, and it did not take long for me to feel that every step up the street was only bringing me closer to some sort of trouble. I started looking down the side streets at every intersection in search of an elusive sign of life. It was finally handed to me half a mile into my trek in the form of the most powerful symbol of enlightenment known to civilized man, not even a hundred feet down a narrow side street. I walked toward the light; never had the spell of the star-crowned siren been so strong.

I pushed open the door of the small coffee shop with a foolish hope. An older man behind the counter was absorbed by the reading of a thick black book; he ignored my entrance. There were only six tables in the small room—six tables and one customer; an attractive young woman who sat with her hands wrapped around her cup of coffee; no laptop, no cell phone, no book. She looked at me without a smile. Both her complexion and hair were very light. A sexy blond in a Starbucks down the side street

of a South American metropolis... The sight was as unexpected as it was, somehow, reassuring.

I engaged the man at the counter with my clunky Spanish. I showed him a hundred-dollar bill—half my net worth—and tried to ask whether I would be able to pay with it. He shook his head sideways just once, without a word, and dove right back into his book.

“Da le lo que quiere; yo pagare por ello.”

The girl at the table had spoken fast and unexpectedly. The old fellow responded to her voice with an annoyed sigh, and then nodded at me. I had not quite grasped her statement but from the man’s change of posture, I understood that he was now waiting for me to place an order. I said “Cappuccino...” with the candid hope that the word had made it to Argentina with Amerigo Vespucci and pointed at two different brownies in the showcase under the desk. When the man slid a tray loaded with my items on the counter, I handed him the hundred-dollar bill but he did not take it. He just pointed a limp finger at the young woman and turned his back to me. I walked to the girl’s table.

“Muchas gracias, señorita,” I said properly before jamming completely on the rest of my sentence, “Yo la voy a... pay as soon as yo... can make... cambio.”

“You can speak to me in English,” replied the girl with a strong Hispanic accent, before signaling me to sit down. Her gesture might have been kind but her demeanor and her voice were very reserved.

“Thank you for helping me out there. I really appreciate it. I just got off the boat and my Spanish has not percolated yet.”

She arched her eyebrows in response to the word “percolated” but did not ask for clarification; instead she took a long sip of her coffee in silence.

“I’m looking for a cheap place to stay—a bed-and-breakfast, maybe. Do you know anything around here?” I asked.

She did not reply immediately, looking down with an absorbed expression, as if running a sentence inside her head first.

“This is not the right *barrio* for lodging; you will have to take a bus,” she finally said. “The station is less than a kilometer from here. I can take you to it and give you directions to an area of the city where you’ll find motels and B&Bs.”

“That’d be great. Again, I’m very grateful—”

“No problem. It will give me a chance to practice my English.”

“You speak it well; where did you learn it?”

“In school first but I also spent a year in England for my studies. I’m doing a master’s in business here, at UBA.”

I assumed that it was a local university. We went on chatting politely but the conversation that I attempted to drive was dull and disjointed. I was uncomfortable. The last time I had sat in a coffee shop alone in the company of a very attractive young woman was... well, never. The age

difference and the fact that our first interaction had consisted of her rescuing me only added to the awkwardness of the situation.

Anya—she had only given me her first name—was born in Argentina from Ukrainian parents who had come for a one-year sabbatical in a local government institution when she was twelve, and they had embraced the culture to the point of settling there and opening a small restaurant. Anya shared an apartment with two other roommates nearby, in a neighborhood located behind the bus station.

After half an hour or so of polite chat, Anya looked furtively at her watch—twice. I took it as my queue to move on. When I told her that I would now gladly take her up on her offer to walk me to the bus station, she nodded and stood up. As she walked to the counter to pay our bill, her arms floated freely alongside her body; no bag, or purse of any kind. I stood behind her by the counter. She lifted the bottom of her off-the-shoulder light gray shirt and pulled a bill out of the waistband of her white leggings. The man behind the bar caught me staring down and pointed me to the door with his eyes, as to sweep me off his store's grounds.

Twilight was in full mode when we stepped out into the street. The orange glow was splashing over the windows of the tall, glassy buildings at the same time as the night started creeping out of the pavement. Anya was walking briskly ahead of me, in silence. We crossed a large avenue intersecting with the one we had been following and ended up looking in perspective at a long building to which many buses were docking like piglets to their mother's udder. Many buses, but few people in sight.

Anya hesitated for an instant and then turned to me.

"Listen, this is really not a good time for a *gringo* to hang around the station or get on a bus. On a Sunday, by this time, most of the buses have already stopped running and the ones that are still in operation are not going to the best barrios. It would be wise for you to wait till morning."

"But you said that there weren't rooms to rent around here..." I replied, taken aback by her sudden gear change.

"There aren't but I can't leave you here by yourself. See those three guys over there? They have already spotted you. They are just waiting for the darkness to get a bit thicker so the security cameras won't make them out when they jump you."

I looked in the direction of her nod to find, blending into the shadow of a tall billboard, three slim teens—no older than fifteen—with nearly shaved heads and wearing tight jeans, dark T-shirts, and cheap sneakers. On my own, I would not have considered them a threat, even though they were indeed looking at us.

"What should I do, then?" I asked, now unsettled.

"My roommates are not home; they are out to party all night. I'll let you sleep in one of their rooms. You can set an alarm for five tomorrow morning. You'll be out before they come back."

I hesitated. A few buses were coming and going, so there was a way to get out of the area if it was not safe, but on the other hand, I did not have a clue what I would do upon landing somewhere else. Most of all, the thought of the immature hoodlums scouting me scared me enough to hang on to my only local resource. I agreed to follow her. When I offered to pay her for the room, she accepted without asking how much I was offering.

As we walked away from the station and up a new avenue, we passed two cross streets whose sidewalks were as populated as those of the avenue were deserted. These side streets were teeming with people hanging in front of rugged, rectangular one-story structures, many of which did not even have a solid roof. I was not an expert in urban development but for me, these met the definition of shanties as I had always imagined them. My guide did not comment on that. She walked ahead of me, and despite her attractive looks, none of the few men hanging at the edge of the shanty and looking into the avenue made any comment as she passed by.

Just by crossing one more street, we entered a beautiful neighborhood packed with high-rise buildings and fancy hotels. We walked for another twenty minutes before Anya spoke again.

"It's right around the corner..."

As we entered a narrow street, she made an abrupt turn onto the patio of a small, U-shaped building nestled between two high-rises. We engaged into a spiraling outside cement staircase, all the way to the third floor, which was also the last. The apartment doors were close to one another, suggesting that the accommodations were pretty small. It looked like a motel but there were no signs of any kind, not even numbers on the doors.

Anya unlocked the door; I followed her inside. A mild scent of Pine-Sol welcomed us; that put me at ease right away. Even in the grimmest police shows on TV, I had never heard a victim say, "I was assaulted in a place that smelled like Pine-Sol." On the grounds of my conservative upbringing, crime and cleanliness were simply incompatible.

The apartment was bigger than I had expected. The furniture and appliances were quite generic. Children's drawings posted all around the room were the only personal touch.

"Do you have children?" I asked.

"No," replied Anya. "One of my roommates studies child psychology and these are drawings from kids she interviews."

She opened the curtains of the living room even though the night had all but taken over the outside world already. She then proceeded into a long corridor where she opened and closed quickly the first two doors. After opening the third one, she called me.

"You can come this way; this will be your room."

She stepped aside as I entered a small bedroom occupied by simple wood furniture and decorated with a couple of corny picture frames featuring mythological scenes. Anya entered the room and inspected it before going through a side door.

"I will ask you to respect my roommate's privacy and not look at her things in the closet and drawers," she said when she came back into the room. "You will probably want to use the bathroom," she continued as she pointed to the side door. That was not a question and I felt a bit embarrassed. My only ablutions in a month had been done at the tiny sink of my cabin on the cargo ship and clearly, they had not been very successful.

Anya seemed eager to leave the room and her next comment confirmed that she might be having second thoughts about hosting me for the night.

"I'm glad to have a chance to help you out but I'll ask that you remain inside your room until it is time for you to leave tomorrow morning," she said. "Since we are alone here, it would be scary for me to hear you wander about the apartment or to find you in another room in the middle of the night. I'm sure you can understand. Also, the walls are very thin and our next door neighbor is a good friend of mine. He has the keys to the apartment and he would rush in if he heard me scream. And if he did, he'd be quite hard to stop..."

That had the merit to be clear, but in a way, I find her cautious attitude to be reassuring as well.

"I understand," I replied. "I'll leave at five tomorrow morning and since I'm not likely to see you that early, I want to thank you again for your hospitality."

"You're welcome. I'm going to leave you now; I have to study. When you get to the bus station tomorrow, just ask for the bus heading for the San Telmo barrio. There you'll find plenty of cheap accommodations. I hope you have a good stay here in Buenos Aires."

She left the room with a polite smile. It was clear that she would not engage in further interactions with me. In retrospect, hosting for the night a somewhat neglected older man just off a boat was probably not the wisest move for any woman, even young and still full of noble ideals.

I undressed right away and realized that I should have asked for a chance to wash and dry my clothes but since I had promised to stay in the room, I just laid them on a chair and cracked open the window above it. The bathroom was as cluttered as the rest of the apartment was neat. The sink was the only clearing in a forest of cosmetics bottles and tubes of all sorts littering the rest of the counter. Anya was right, the walls were paper thin. I could hear her voice—if not her words—in the living room. She was probably on the phone as no other voice echoed hers.

I took a very long, very hot shower, dried myself up with a small bath towel and slipped into the bed in the nude. I always wore pajamas when

going to bed, or at least my underwear, but the shower had cleansed me of the grime of a month of confinement on a greasy ship and this one time, I just wanted to ride my dream waves freely.

The concept that light travels faster than sound is nonsense. The flash and the scream probably erupted at the same time when the bedroom door was opened, but the scream is what blasted my eyelids open first. I instinctively jumped on the bed in a defensive crouching posture. The tall, plump, middle-aged lady standing in the door frame stared at my nudity with a warlike expression. She rushed back out into the corridor, yelled something very brief, which in turn triggered an avalanche of children's screams that quickly faded away. Within seconds, she charged back into the bedroom and this time without a sound but holding a large pan high above her head. She did not hesitate; she went straight for my face. I dodged the blow by rolling off the bed and scrambled to grab my shirt and pants while she moved around the bed. I could already hear a blend of loud children and male voices coming from outside the apartment.

I grabbed the chair next to me and held it up to keep the woman at bay. That confused her for a second; I threw the chair over the bed and as the woman followed its flight with her eyes, I jostled her and ran out of the room. I bounced off the walls of the corridor, burst into the living room and threw myself out of the front door—stark naked, my clothes in my hands. A man shouted as I ran down the stairs, quickly echoed by calls to arms from the pan-wielding Amazon. My bare feet did not make any sounds on the stairs—as if I were not actually moving—but the footsteps of my pursuers sounded like small drums rolling down the staircase. I jumped into my pants just before hitting the street and wiggled into my shirt as I ran back the way we had come. I had noticed a forested area about two blocks down and I needed to find some sort of burrow—really fast.

Chapter 2

August 25, Year 2.

The small plaza by the park entrance was empty and behind it was complete obscurity; the park was not lit at night. I went straight for the darkness but the moment I stepped off the cemented area, pointy stones planted in the dirt poked the soles of my feet and made it painful for me to keep walking. Yet, I pressed on into the woods but close enough to the street lights to see the shadows of the trees and bushes. In the twilight zone—literally.

I could not hear any voices. My pursuers seemed to have abandoned the chase for good shortly after I had started running down the street; they had just sent me off with a stream of raucous insults. After fifty yards or so in the wooded area, my feet had grown oversensitive to the small rocks and dead branches littering the grounds. I sneaked behind a bushy area to sit down, my back against a tree.

I had gone straight from deep sleep to playing the prey in a very threatening foot chase in less than twenty minutes, and my mind had not had the first chance to adapt. It floated in total surreality, at the interface between the thrill of having escaped my predators and the vague understanding of the depth of trouble to which I had just dropped. I cupped my hands, placed them against my face, covering my mouth and nose, and started breathing deeply into them. My mother had taught me that old trick when I was a teenager and it had never failed to help me focus better in the aftermath of a stressful situation, at school then or at work later. After a few minutes, the pistons of my brain started easing out of their seized state and my first logical thought was to find a way to get out of these woods and find some shoes. I reached into my pants pocket for my watch and found neither the watch nor the two hundred-dollar bills that were rolled around it.

I had been played like a child. One could have hoped that after a year of offbeat endeavors, I would have grown at least an ounce of street smarts, but no, I was just the same lame homemaker I had ever been since I had left college with my wife. Not viable in the wild one bit. And certainly not the type of fascinating man that a beautiful young woman would rush to rescue. No; just the type of man that a beautiful young woman would take to an apartment that was not hers, where she would clean out his pockets while he showered, and leave him to be found by the real owners of the place when they returned. The loss of the two-hundred dollars crushed me. They were my tiny lifeline to a new start in Argentina. No shoes, no money, and nowhere to go; that was one handicap too many for a happy ending. I let myself despair into sleep; there was at least a place for my mind to go for a few hours.

A cracking sound woke me up at dawn. Cold and sore, I opened my eyes on a beautiful pink light diffusing through the tree tops, just before lowering them on ten other eyes, all locked on me—six from humans in uniforms and four from silent German shepherds. I stood up and followed the officers.

The dogs flanking me and pulling hard on their leashes showed no more interest in me than their masters. It was a silent procession back to the entrance of the park; just as if everyone was following a pretty well-known script. Not one word was spoken until two of the policemen pushed me onto the back seat of an unmarked car while the third headed for a white van with the dogs.

We crossed an older area of the city in which the three- or four-story buildings had the quaint elegance of their European counterparts, only with cleaner, whiter façades. I would have loved to embrace a fresh start in that city but it looked like I would only be crossing Buenos Aires—from harbor to airport. I had already decided to call the U.S. embassy as soon as I would be given the opportunity at the police station. That would without a doubt lead to my identification and extradition to the U.S., but even on a global playground, there are two journeys that one should only undertake on their homeland: the one to the cemetery and the one to jail. Even before arriving to Argentina, I had already sorted out that if I were cornered, being jailed in a white-collar American jail was a much better plan than joining in with the crowds of common-law criminals on a foreign soil. I did, after all, have fragile features.

The ride was taking longer than I had expected. Since we only traveled on smaller roads, crossing large avenues, and leaving highway ramps behind us, I had assumed that the police station was nearby. But twenty minutes into the ride, residential homes had pushed back the urban buildings and we now traveled through the suburbs at the same constant speed and in the same oppressing silence. The policemen both had picked the front seats and I could have run away while the car was stopped at a light; the door was not locked. I did not entertain the idea for more than a block. Run away to what? I was actually relieved to no longer be stuck in the bushes like a sick animal. Wherever I was bound, there had to be food, medical help if I needed it, and most likely shoes and toilet paper; a big step up from the bush. One quickly learns to manage expectations when under fire.

Just as I was trying to formulate in my mind a good question for my escorts, the car seemed to slip through a crack in the space-time fabric and we transported instantly from yet another packed suburban development to absolute, open, treeless farmland. I could not help but turn around to look at the last houses that we had passed, as none was on the horizon

ahead of us. The abruptness of the transition and a landscape now incompatible with police matters panicked me right away.

“Adónde vamos?” I asked loudly.

“Cállate,” the officer on the passenger side replied curtly, without turning his head.

“Yo no comprendo lo que se passa. Quién son ustedes y adónde me llevan?” I insisted, my Spanish now flowing under pressure. This time, I did not get any reaction at all, so after reviewing my options, I went with the man’s injunction to shut up. I was after all more comfortable in the back of that car than I would have been bare feet and scared in the park.

It was an all-day ride on the highway—west by northwest. I slept for most of it, rolled up on the back seat like a kid. I was awakened around noon by the sound of doors slamming. When I sat up, I saw my escorts outside the car, heading for a roadside diner; a small wooden shack tagged with a sign that read “Catarina’s” in sloppily painted characters. Our car was the only one on the parking lot and the whole scenery around the building was filled up with dry grass. I stepped out to stretch my legs and use the open skies bathroom in a ditch. The two men returned ten minutes later with brown bags and pointed at the car to signify me to get back in. They started eating from the bags as soon as the car merged back onto the highway. Clearly, I would not be a part of the luncheon; not even for a bottle of water. I lay back down and spent hours drifting in and out of a comatose state. The longer the ride stretched out, the weaker and more light-headed I grew. I was very thirsty and a faint headache confirmed that dehydration was taking hold.

I woke up for good as roaring sounds around the car intensified. When I raised my head to look out of the window, I realized that we were flanked by rows of fast-moving cars on both sides. The highway had broadened as we penetrated the fringe of a city named “Cordoba,” according to the overhead road signs. We never entered the town, though—we just skirted it from the highway, leaving intricate networks of suburban developments on the right and open fields on the left. The fields soon reclaimed both sides of the road as we left Cordoba behind, and headed straight for a range of tall steep hills that would have looked more like small mountains had they not been entirely covered with trees.

As we progressed closer to the range, small, translucent clouds started wrapping around the crest of the hills, and we seemed to push through a gradient of decreasing light. It was getting chilly inside the car and even though the dashboard clock only read half past five, the sky-tall dark shadow beyond the hills seemed to swallow most of the western light. If my recollection of Argentina’s geography was correct, we had probably traveled all the way to the Andes’ foothills and although the overcast weather did not allow us to see them clearly, they seemed to remotely control both the light and temperature of the region.

Half an hour or so after passing Cordoba, we slid from the highway onto a two-way road, and just a few minutes later from the two-way road onto a dirt track that injected us into a small, circular valley whose walls were lined with vineyards still in bare winter mode.

The rows of stakes holding the naked vines, arms spread open, formed an amphitheater of crosses laid against the mountain range like an offering bowl. At the junction between the valley and the mountain was nestled a large *estancia* whose façade was dissimulated behind a long stone archway. From the road, I could distinguish a cluster of detached rooftops behind the main building but only a steeple-like structure clearly towered over the archway.

The car stopped with a brief honk of the horn at the bottom of an irregular staircase made of huge slabs of clear stone bordered by a small, red wall whose levels doubled as pot holders for large, circular clay planters. We all stepped out of the car and with a flick of the index finger, the driver prompted me to go up the stairs. The two men did not follow me.

The staircase led up to the archway and I looked at its impressive perspective on both sides as I crossed it to enter a patio paved with the same clear stones and around which the main building revolved. In the center of the patio stood a seven-foot monk with his arms crossed onto his chest and a bowed head covered by the hood of his Jesuit robe. In front of him, and slightly to the side, was a still, dark-haired woman.

One of them was made of stone; the other was statuesque.

Chapter 3

August 26, Year 2.

She owned the space around and above. Even the dark marble monk towering behind her seemed defeated, trapped in her shadow. She was not a young woman. She was not a soft woman. She was just the most flamboyant woman ever to enter my personal space.

Her pumps' long, thin heels propelled her into the Z-axis while her black pencil skirt fought the same battle constraining her hips in the Y-plane as her tight white blouse did harnessing her breasts in the X-plane. Nature was running short of dimensions for that creature of hers. And if the bolero covering the woman's shoulders and the army of invisible pins holding her black hair into a tight bun had tried to rein in the intensity of the apparition, her heavy gold jewelry at all floors would have readily doomed the attempt. In that ensemble, the lady of the convent defiantly straddled the line between class and crass, a bit like a bullfighter—an extremely female bullfighter. And with me standing in front of her dirty, weak, and barefoot, it was all too clear that the banderillas had already been planted on my back.

"Welcome to *Estancia Puento de Luz*, Mister Keiffer. I trust that the journey was not too much of a bother," the woman said, while scanning me from top to bottom. She spoke clear, academic English despite a strong accent.

"It was long," I replied with cynicism. "Long and nerve-wracking since I had no idea of the destination. Would you care to introduce yourself...?"

Her reply came as bluntly as my request had gone out.

"Where I come from, the proper way to address me would be *Madame*."

Where she came from could have been the topic of a heated debate between UFO proponents and zealous exorcists, but based on the title that she had requested and her accent, France was still the best bet.

"And this is your property?" I said on a more neutral tone.

"Yes, the monastery and the vineyards; it will also be your home for a while. One from which you might not be chased by a pan-swinging fury," Madame said with a mocking smile.

"How do you know about that?" I asked, suddenly more confused than tired.

"The bed with which you took some liberties in Buenos Aires was my best friend's. You're a lucky man. Had you stayed there thirty seconds longer, her neighbors would have lynched you. She called me minutes after you ran away to tell me about the whole ordeal. And then she called me again at three in the morning, very excited. She hadn't gone to sleep; she had been reading your journal for several hours."

In the midst of the commotion, I had totally forgotten about the backpack that I had left by the woman's bed, even though it contained my most precious belonging, the book that I had written on the cargo ship during the three weeks of the journey from San Francisco to Buenos Aires. It detailed all my adventures of the past year and explained how I had abruptly turned from a subdued family man to a fugitive wanted not only by the U.S. authorities but by Interpol as well, according to the last Voice of America broadcast that I had been able to catch off the U.S. west coast.

Madame had stopped talking and clearly expected some sort of input from me.

"And your first reaction after hearing about a criminal was to invite him over for tea?" I said with some acrimony. I hated the fact that she already knew enough to blackmail me while I did not even have a real first name for her.

"I didn't hear anything about a crime. Of course, you wrote the book, so you might have omitted a few details but from what I heard, you are a pretty decent, though elusive guy. An interesting blend of qualities. I thought it might be worth checking you out. You left my friend's apartment without shoes or money; chances were that you would not have made it very far. The dogs picked up your trail right away."

She turned around without warning and while walking away simply said: "I apologize but that's all the time I have for you today. Return to the car; one of the men who brought you here will help you get set up. I'll meet you here tomorrow at six, after your workday. Wear your suit."

There was neither time nor space for me to respond. Her silhouette vanished under an arch and the clicking of her heels on the stones faded out almost instantly. I headed back down the staircase; one of my escorts was still standing by the car, smoking a cigarette. He made an effort to speak slowly in Spanish that I was able to translate in real-time.

"Follow me," he said. "Your room is on the other side."

We walked around the front building to step onto a wide dirt track that bore deep teeth marks from the tires of heavy machinery. The track led past a large orchard located behind the master house and to a semicircular string of five small, single-floor ochre brick buildings connected by metal arches that covered a variety of agricultural machines and tractors. The massive, steep slab of mountain that dove right behind the complex like a suddenly frozen stream of lava made for an oppressing contrast with the tiny habitations lying at its feet.

The man guided me to the rightmost building, pushed open a flimsy door, and turned to me. As I approached the entrance, he extended his arm across it, blocking access to the room behind it, and spoke again without looking at me. This time, I did not understand all of it but enough to figure

out that I was to stay there, that the bed and closet by the back of the room were mine, and that I would be picked up for work at seven in the morning. I tried to ask what work but the man just ignored me and walked away.

I entered a room larger than I had expected but only lit by a couple of weak wall-mounted lamps. It was just a dorm room with two small beds flushed against each side wall. Every bed was paired with a metal locker similar to the one I had in high school. In the center of the room, two men sat at a raw wood table with attached benches, playing cards. A third one just lay on his bed staring at the ceiling. The men were still in their work clothes and the room smelled of hard-working country men in the way that upsets city girls. It did not bother me—I had grown up in a countryside setting—but the silence of the three men did. They all had turned their heads to me when I had walked into the room but without any kind of greeting or even defiance, just mild curiosity. They seemed most puzzled by my lack of shoes. I guess that even the poorest of the poor these days can manage a pair of shoes.

It felt like I would have imagined arriving to jail for the first time, with the major difference that none of the men looked shady or threatening. The two of them playing cards were past fifty and related, with the same short, muscular build and round face. The one lying on the bed was younger, probably in his early forties. He was taller and less burly but as solid as the others. They were men of the land without a doubt, with robust bodies and minimal facial expressions.

I walked to the back of the room to divert the tension and ended up by what was to be my couch, only to realize that I did not have anything to do there. I had a locker but nothing to unpack. I opened the locker anyway and found in it a black suit, a white shirt, and a pair of patent leather shoes. The sight of these garments cheered me up. Whatever my “job” was to be on the premises, it would be a white-collar job. I was not built for manual labor; I would get pimples if I stood in the sun too long, my knees would kill me if I had to stay on my feet for several hours and I was physically weak. My muscles were designed to lug around manila folders, not fertilizer bags, and if I had to plow something, my primary tool would be the “Landscaping” section of the local business directory. I mowed the lawn a few times after my wife and I moved into our first home. On TV shows, it seemed like a fundamental staple of a successful nesting relationship. However, after my wife had to deal every time with my resulting sneezing, knee pain, and small but nagging blisters, she diplomatically hinted that she loved me for my intellectual qualities and hired a neighborhood kid.

Heartened by my new prospective status, I tried to establish communication with my roommates.

“Hello, gentlemen,” I said in Spanish, “my name is Richard. Thank you for receiving me in your house.”

Well, that was the intended meaning. I would never know whether it was right or not though because my speech had the sole effect of making them finally turn their eyes away from me. I lay down on the bed and closed my own eyes. I fell asleep right away as the two men playing cards started talking again to one another.

I was startled out of sleep by a firm shake. I opened my eyes on one of the brothers, still holding my upper arm. He rocked his head to invite me to follow him. I quickly slipped on the patent leather shoes. We all walked out of the house and headed to the one in the middle of the arch, as other workers also converged toward it. I did not have to guess what was there. The smell of cooking was the most powerful pheromone for me, just as it was for the others. My last meal had been on the boat, a day and a half earlier. We entered a brightly lit room occupied with a dozen tables identical to the one in our dorm, lined up in three rows. One side of the room was occupied by a small kitchen made up of three oven ranges pressed against one another and a long wood counter laid onto sturdy trestles. The counter was filled up with food; behind it stood three men already filling up the dishes of two dozen or so workers who formed a long line along the other walls. I followed my roommates and ended up standing at the end of the line. Oddly enough, all men were silent until their plate was full and they sat at a table, at which point they erupted in loud chatter as if they had suddenly been plugged into a power outlet on the bench.

While waiting for my turn close to the end of the line—only a couple of men had arrived after us—I had marinated in the scents and sights of the dishes weighing on the counter. Glistening stacks of pork ribs, whole chickens dismembered into quarters, inch-thick grilled steaks, refried beans, yellow rice, sweet potatoes, and not a veggie in sight. A pagan feast for a stomach that had not seen any significant protein deposit in nearly two days, assuming that I was on the guest list, of which I was not sure yet. When I finally reached the counter, I was immediately reassured as the man serving the beans and rice gave me a small portion of each, along with a thin slice of bread. The second man, who dispensed the steaks and potatoes, gave me a sweet potato but the steak did not follow. I looked up at him and he just waived his head to prompt me to move along. The third man picked a rib from his pile and laid it on my plate— just the one—and then pulled the chicken platter closer to him to indicate that I would not be served from it. I was at the end of the counter but I had been served a measly half-plate of food where everyone else would get so many carbs and meats on theirs that they had to walk to a table as if on a tightrope in order not to spill any. I looked at the plate of the man behind me and indeed, there were at least four ribs, a steak, and a quarter-chicken smothering a mound of rice and beans. None of the men behind the counter had a special attitude toward me; in fact, they seemed rather

congenial. They had simply served me according to a different standard, of which I did not seem to be aware.

I sat at a free table and was to remain alone with my carafe of water. I made a furtive feast of my rib and gulped the rest of the food in minutes, after which I immediately stood up and headed back to my building. The night had now descended fully and dinner had—if not satiated me—finished pushing me into a warm zone of fatigue. I undressed and went to bed clinging to my only hope for a brighter tomorrow: the formal suit in my locker.

Chapter 4

August 27, Year 2.

The slamming of a locker door woke me up. The night was still fighting dawn for ruling of the landscape through the window. My roommates were putting on their work clothes without a word. It was six forty-five. My residual drowsiness, combined with the room's strong, musky smell, made for an uneasy awakening. I lay on my back for a minute or so trying to figure out whether to get dressed as well. I had no idea of what I might do once all dolled up but at least I would be ready for "work"—whatever that might be. I got up and opened my locker. As I pulled out the hanger holding the suit, smaller garments dropped onto my feet: a fine pair of black wool socks, along with ridiculous full-rise, white kangaroo briefs. I just hoped that I would not have to pass a physical examination in those. The shirt and suit fitted me quite well and even my roommates took notice of my change in appearance through furtive glances. I sat on the bed waiting for some sort of signal.

At seven sharp, the loud rattle of truck engines materialized in front of the building. My roommates all grabbed a brown canvas backpack and headed out. I followed the motion and ended up in the door frame facing two safari-style open trucks with tall safety rails holding a black tarp. The workers were hastily coming out of all the buildings and jumping on the back of the trucks. With my suit on, I clearly did not belong to that routine. As I turned around to get back into the building, something hit me in the back of the head—a mix of hard and soft materials that did not really hurt me but triggered an adrenaline explosion along my spine. I turned to find at my feet a bundle of dark clothes wrapped around a pair of boots. A man yelled from the back of the nearest truck, pointing at the bundle. His voice was deep and raucous, in perfect harmony with his strong stature and mustache à la Pancho Villa. I understood that I was to hurry up to put on the clothes and join the rest of the crew. Most of them seemed to be very amused by the situation and a couple of shouts erupted from the other truck, one of which clearly resonated as "Loco Yankee." I had made a signature first impression.

I returned to my room and rushed to put on the plaid shirt and dark green overalls, and lace up the boots. I did not have suitable socks for these and I hated the feeling of hard, used leather on my bare feet. When I came out a couple of minutes later, the men had stopped laughing and barely looked at me as I jumped onto the back platform of the truck. We headed straight for the hills, following a broad, bare dirt track. In seconds, we climbed a steep hill and entered a natural arena whose patches of grapevines mimicked tiers of seats. The ride was over in minutes. Our truck stopped halfway up the hill while the other pushed on. Without any

signal, all the men jumped off; I followed them. Each one grabbed a hoe and a shovel from a compartment located under the truck's platform.

Pancho Villa, who appeared to be the team's foreman, dispatched them in adjacent rows of grapevines—one per row. He then grabbed a hoe and a shovel himself and instructed me to follow him into an empty row. He walked up to a grapevine that was tagged with a red plastic ribbon and explained, in slow Spanish supported by almost comical pantomime, that vines bearing a red tag needed to be excavated and that a new hole had to be dug in their place, which would receive a new plant. As he explained, he actually demonstrated the process. A few powerful strokes of the hoe were sufficient to uproot the vine and Pancho Villa followed up with precise shovel work that created a neat, foot-deep square hole in minutes. He handed me the tools and pointed at another tagged plant just a few yards down the row. He did not follow me—he simply watched me apply the first blows of the hoe and walked back to the truck.

The soil was so dry and hard that the impact of the hoe shook me up more than it did the dirt. I was barely scratching it and the vine that I was supposed to uproot in a few strokes turned from a defenseless victim to a cynical opponent. I took a side look at the workers in the adjacent rows and was distraught to realize that they were plowing the ground with the same penetration and apparent ease as their boss had demonstrated. I tried everything: different impact angles for the hoe, using the shovel to soften the soil layer after layer, pulling the roots of the vine out of the ground one at a time. In the end, it took me close to half an hour to finally free up the whole root system of the plant and another twenty minutes to make a pitiful hole in its place. By the time I finished one vine, the other workers had processed three or four and were now fifty yards ahead of me. I moved to the second tagged plant in my row with the enthusiasm of a hemorrhoidal patient heading for a ride on a cranky stallion.

By nine that morning, I had already run out of both strength and endorphins. I felt light-headed and my arms seemed to have delayed responses to my brain's commands. The winter sun was blinding me, my empty stomach was making me nauseous, and my feet were already swollen in the boots. I struggled inside an incredibly uncomfortable body to continue scratching the soil with my hoe half an inch at a time, pushing and pulling on the dead vines' trunks to loosen the roots up.

Around nine-thirty, a truck roared back up the hill and honked three times as it reached our level. The other workers walked back in my direction, passed me without a look, and headed toward the track in which the truck had stopped. I followed the last of them, hoping with little conviction that the workday was done for a while. It was only a short break, but it involved cold water and solid food; bread, hot salami, and cheese to which the workers helped themselves using a foldable knife with a wooden handle that they all seemed to carry in their pocket. Since I did not have one, I was only able to cut small pieces of bread and salami but I

had a bit more luck with the cheese. Every employee was entitled to a glass of red wine, even me. I was already dehydrated and the wine gave me a buzz in a couple of minutes, but when the foreman signaled the end of the break, I headed back to my row with what felt like a half-charge of energy.

A similar routine took place around one in the afternoon. This time, the food was dispensed at the back of the truck by the same men who had served dinner the previous night. I was not surprised to receive only half the portions of beef stew and pasta that my coworkers were handed. Luckily, another glass of wine raised up my calorie intake a bit. The lunch break lasted about half an hour, after which we all resumed our work. During the afternoon, the foreman came by and pointed out—halfway in words, halfway through impatient gestures—how far behind I was in my row compared to the others. One word came back a couple of times that had some sort of exclamation point after it and that I could not quite figure out—*Perezoso!*—but I was pretty sure that it was not a praise. After he left, I tried even harder, not so much because I was scared but because I was conditioned to respond constructively to criticism in a corporate environment, even if it would come from some guerillero wannabe. I remained slow and low impact all afternoon and never even got back within sight of my colleagues, but I never stopped working either.

Deliverance came around five, shortly after the sun slid behind the mountain. The truck came back a third time and at the honks, all workers converged toward it and boarded it. On the way down, the men were loud and animated as if heading to a party, but if the evening were to resemble the previous one, all they really had to look forward to was a good dinner and a night of sleep. Not exactly a rewarding end to a backbreaking day of labor. The truck dropped us in front of our quarters and as I headed into my building, the foreman came behind me and grabbed my arm with a firm grip. Without letting go, he said in slow Spanish, “Clean up, go eat, put on the suit, and be on the main house patio at six.” It was already close to five-thirty. I managed to ask him where the showers were and he pointed to the building in which dinner was served. Once inside, I asked one of the maids who directed me to the second floor.

The shower room was an open space with a tile floor and six shower heads. I cleaned myself up as fast as I could, using one of the used soap bars scattered over the floor. I did not even have the time to enjoy the warm water on my beat-up back. I slipped right back into my dirty clothes before returning to the dinner room downstairs. Some of the food was already laid out on the counter but the cooks—the same three men who served dinner—were still hard at work over the ranges. One of them noticed me, grabbed a plate and served me my now usual kid portion. I started eating on my way to a table and completed my dinner in less than ten minutes. That left me another ten to jump into my suit and make it to the patio. I got there on time. Any opportunity to get away from field work was well worth an accelerated digestion.

Chapter 5

August 27, Year 2.

The patio was deserted when I entered it. I walked to the marble monk and stood by his shadow. Madame arrived within seconds. So, I had not dreamt her the day before. She was surreal but not unreal. From a distance, the black pant suit could have given the illusion of a greater reserve, but as she approached, it turned out to be a tall wrapper for a push-up—if not sling-up— black lace bra. The bun was still tight; the jewelry still aggressive and the heels still beyond gravity’s reach.

“Good, Mister Keiffer; you’re on time. Come with me.”

She had spoken while turning around and heading back into the direction from which she had appeared, under the archway. I followed her. Three arches down the paved passageway, she pushed a door, which itself opened onto a long corridor. We passed several closed doors on both sides to end up climbing a beautiful hourglass-shaped wooden staircase with carved ramps that led up to a large round mezzanine turned into a classroom. Five arrays of tables, each with its chair held captive by a thick tubing of dark metal, faced a raw oak desk propped onto a foot-tall wooden platform—a classic landscape of learning, except for the vaulted glass ceiling that arched up under the descending night skies.

Madame took her place at the teacher’s desk and invited me with a small gesture to sit down at a student table, right in front of her, on the first row. She stared me down before speaking.

“How was your first day?” she asked without preamble.

“Hard,” I replied, just as directly.

“I heard... But it seems that the problem wasn’t really a hard day. The problem was a weak man.”

“Excuse me...?”

“Some of the men who worked with you today were over seventy and had no problem keeping up. They are still much stronger than you; they can’t afford to let themselves get weak.”

“Maybe, but that’s because they work like that every day.”

“Strength comes as much from personal discipline as it does mere training.”

I did not make sense of her comment. When she saw that I would not reply, she went on.

“My friend in Buenos Aires gave your backpack to my men stationed there, the ones who brought you to this house. You can have it back; you might welcome some extra underwear,” she said and pulled my backpack from under the desk. She reached inside and brought out of it a thick notebook that she laid onto the desk.

“I took the liberty of going through your journal today. My friend had already given me the highlights, but I have to say that it was still quite full

of surprises. A fascinating read on how a meek man managed to survive a mean storm.”

“What gives you the right to call me names? You don’t know me,” I said, trying to keep my cool.

“There’s little to know, Mister Keiffer. I’m afraid that the few paragraphs in which you describe your past life at the beginning of the journal sum it all up. You are a poop picker.”

“A poop picker?”

“Yes, a poop picker. You know, the kind of creature that city dogs drag behind them, tied up to a leash, and whose divine mission is to collect the animal’s waste. To better put the concept in perspective, imagine if you will a man of ages past rushing his horse through the forest, flanked by his hunting dogs, chasing a swift and feisty prey. Can you comprehend how much devolution must have taken place for the fierce hunter to become, over the centuries, such a demure gatherer? Well, actually you probably can; the drop is of equal magnitude as between your teenage dreams and your actual achievements in thirty years of life since then.”

I shook my head with aggravation but that did not affect her in the least.

“From what I read,” she said, “you were in a state of life failure. You had made all the right turns—as defined by modern society’s guidelines—and yet had ended up in a very wrong place by your own measure. Just like your dog, you had been denatured to fit someone else’s need. Your life would only have progressed farther down that path of failure. You were grossly unprepared to stir three kids through the rough waters of teenage years. Too weak to help them structure themselves, you would have been the one deconstructed by their contempt and demands. You may have been under the impression that you were a flexible and modern man, Mister Keiffer, but all you were was a meek man.”

The blow hit under the flotation line and all alarms went off but I was incapable of coming up with a response. She was dissecting me without malice and though her points might have been excessive, I did not really have any argument to dismiss them. Madame had stopped talking, clearly expecting some reaction on my part.

“Go on...” I said with defiance, to mask my lack of suitable repartee.

“I’m not here to dwell on your past,” she said. “I’m here to offer you an alternate path; a path that won’t be one of frustration. A path that actually has a remote chance of turning you one day into a superb man in a tuxedo who stands up in the crowd and screams ‘Bravo!’ at the opera house at the end of a production of *The Ring*. This, however, may only happen at the price of a journey as challenging as Siegfried’s. To be precise, your price tag will be a ten-year crossing to that new life; you will commit—right here and right now—to spend a minimum of ten years with our group. You will be trained to represent our values and participate in specific actions to further them. The training itself will take a toll on you. It

will be challenging physically because we have to turn you from a city weakling into a man fit enough to work the land—”

“You want me to work on your farm for ten years?!” I said.

“No; you will work in the vineyards every day for a year, ten hours a day, from seven in the morning to five in the evening, seven days a week.”

“You must be joking—that’s worse than the gulag!”

“I guess it’s a fair comparison. In a way, you are indeed here to be reprogrammed. And that’s where it gets hard. The purpose of the field work is to reeducate you in the art of abnegation and discipline—two qualities that will become central to your real training, the one that will take place in the evening.”

“So now, I’m also working at night,” I said with open cynicism, increasingly unnerved by the audacity of her statements, which committed me without seeking any approval.

“From six to eleven, every day except Sunday. Here, in this classroom, starting tomorrow. Don’t ever be late to a session.”

“What am I supposed to learn?!”

“What a mature man of quality should know, or should never have forgotten.”

“You will be the one teaching me?”

“I will be one of your teachers, for the most delicate matters. The bulk of your instruction will come from members of our group, most of them based in Europe. Tomorrow, on this desk, will be a laptop with a webcam. You will communicate with your teachers virtually. There will be three hours of teaching, followed by a two-hour homework session every night. I will be your mentor in this whole process. I will coordinate your activities, and make sure that your work is adequate and leading you in the proper direction. I will also test you every month.”

“Test me? As in an exam?”

“Yes. Every month you will be tested on every discipline taught to you that month.”

“Will I get a raise in my allowance if I pass?”

“You should worry more about what happens if you do not pass each and every one of these exams.”

“Which is...?”

“A free shuttle ride to the park in Buenos Aires where we found you. We will leave you there just as we found you, without shoes or money. Your time on this property will not leave any mark on your original trajectory. Argentina is still a developing country, Mister Keiffer, especially for the poor. For someone like you who does not know a soul in the country, has absolutely no resources, and cannot turn to any organization for fear of being arrested, the odds of long-term survival are poor; very poor. I’m sure you figured that out already during your brilliant first day in Buenos Aires.”

"Did you have anything to do with the girl who picked me up in the coffee shop?"

"Nothing at all. That girl just happens to be my girlfriend's niece; a smart kid, promised to a bright future until she fell into drugs. Now it's a constant struggle for her relatives to keep her out of trouble. She had a copy of the key to her aunt's apartment and knew her schedule since she has stayed there many times when in trouble with her parents. That's how she got you in there and robbed you—"

"How do you know about that?"

"A neighbor saw her going in with you. Her aunt confronted her by phone that very night and she ended up confessing everything. Anyway, you are just as much to blame; I cannot believe you fell for that old trick. Why in the world would a beautiful young woman bring home a stranger twice her age and take the chance of hosting him for the night unless she had a shady ulterior motive? Why are men so keen to believe in events that are contrary to the most elementary laws of nature?!"

"I guess I felt lost..." I replied, vexed.

"Well, consider yourself found until further notice, but don't make the mistake of taking any of this lightly. During the course of the past year, two men have stood in front of me just like you do tonight. We had proactively chosen them to join us. You, on the other hand, dropped onto our lap by chance. Like you, they had both run into a zone of few options, but none was as desperate or ill-prepared as you appear to be. Yet, both failed and are no longer with us."

"What do you mean—*no longer with us*—they are dead?"

"One is. As for the other, we just returned him to his original ecosystem."

The scientific term further added to my worries. She was talking about someone who, by her own account, stood in my shoes not so long ago, and was referring to him as she would have a wild animal. This place was definitely not the "Y."

"You'll be allowed a couple of questions and a right-of-refusal before we start the process," Madame said while placing my journal back into the bag. "Once we do engage into this process, it will require your full commitment to change. Without it, you won't stand a chance to make it to the other side. If your desire is to hang on to your old self, then save us all a lot of trouble and decline the offer now."

No details, no signature, no exit clause; my accountant instincts were frantically switching every possible red light on. Yet, my answer came in seconds, "If I am to stand in this classroom in a suit every night, I'll need at least another suit to change and a way to have them cleaned."

Even Faust had hesitated longer.

"I guess that takes care of the right-of-refusal." Madame said with a slight tone of surprise. "I'll arrange for another suit to be placed in your locker tomorrow. Why don't you write down your size for shirts and

pants? For the first suit we went by the description that my friend had given of you. When you need them cleaned, just bring them with you here; my staff will take care of them. Any more questions?"

"I suppose that asking about your organization at this stage would be premature?"

Madame agreed with a small nod.

"Did you bring me here because of the hypnotic program? If you did—"

"We didn't. That technology was intriguing but it was also a very hot potato and it did not align with our strategy. You are not here because of the storm in which you got caught but because of the way you handled yourself through it. You demonstrated unusual adaptation skills, despite a very ordinary past, and a quite unique ability to go into stealth mode, as I said yesterday. These qualities are of interest to us."

I decided not to pursue the matter further. I was getting a bit overwhelmed by the day as it was.

"Are the workers going to continue ignoring me?" I asked.

"Yes. They have received instructions in that sense. You are not here to join their cast. You are here to integrate into ours. The social isolation during daytime will give you a chance to reflect on the teachings you'll receive at night and concentrate on your new horizon. Anything else?"

"Yes, the food. Why am I getting smaller portions than the other workers?"

"You're getting meals in proportion to the amount of physical work that you put out, which right now is not much. Anyway, the small donut around your waist should keep you afloat for a while..."

"I'm not fat!"

"It's funny how people say that as if it were a major accomplishment. The accomplishment is to be fit. You're not fat, but you're not fit, either."

I looked down at the deflection of my dress shirt around the waist area. The rich food aboard the cargo ship had teamed up with the lack of exercise to refill the pocket that nearly a year of struggle had flushed earlier. I dropped the matter. Fatigue was starting to take me down.

"Now, let's move on," Madame said when she understood that I would not argue further. "For the next three hours or so, you will take a test. The results of that test will help us assess your current level of knowledge in various areas and devise a personalized plan for your education in the coming year."

While talking, Madame had pulled several manila folders from one of the desk drawers and had laid them in a fanned pattern on my table.

"Don't spend more than thirty minutes on each one. If you have time left at the end, you'll be able to go back to any of the topics. I will stay in this room with you but don't try to communicate with me until nine-thirty, the end of the test."

She returned to the desk, opened a book that had been sitting on the table all along, and started reading, her back straight and her head slightly bowed. I grabbed the pencil in the gutter of my small wood desk and opened the first folder. It contained five sheets of questions related to English language and grammar; for each question, five possible answers were suggested. The questions were straightforward but for some of them, picking the right answer was a confusing exercise. I had not seen a multiple-choice quiz in more than twenty years other than for the renewal of my driver's license, and my brain had long rerouted away from that type of fuzzy thinking.

I managed to answer—for better or for worse—all the English questions in less than a half hour and breathed a sigh of relief when I opened the second folder to find math questions. Math had always been, if not a passion, the path of least resistance for me during my studies, which is why I had become an accountant. I flew through the first three pages of algebra questions only to come to a screeching halt at the top of the fourth page. Geometry; the good old buddy from high school whose face you can no longer picture in your head. I had completely forgotten all concepts of geometry except for a couple and had to check most of the boxes in that section haphazardly. Science finished taking me down on my knees, hot and confused, and the hopeful checks kept piling on. Social sciences crowned me with a dunce cap as I wiggled on my chair trying desperately to recall the interconnecting cogs of the U.S. government and started contemplating a plain dictatorship with much greater empathy.

The last folder contained a lone white page with a single sentence of text at the top: "Write an essay on whether violence can be a justifiable means to protect the human condition." I stared at that page with a total block for the remainder of my allotted time and ended up writing a single sentence on it before sliding it back into the manila folder and laying my head back to signal that I was done.

Madame had been reading for nearly three hours without a sound and pretty much in the same posture. It took her a couple of minutes to notice my relaxed state. When she did, she walked to my table, grabbed the folders, and said, "I will escort you out; you must be ready to rest." I followed her out in silence and once we reached the patio, she simply turned around and disappeared beneath the arches with the manila folders under her arm.

As I headed back to my dorm room, my head was buzzing. I was rediscovering the intoxicating feeling of being released from a test's pressure. I knew I had struggled much more than I should have but it was over, and whether I had made it or not belonged to tomorrow. For today, I had done my best.

Chapter 6

August 28, Year 2.

The night had been short. My brain was so wound up after the evening with Madame that it had tossed and turned in its cradle for a couple of hours before finally settling down. The slapping of my roommates' locker doors woke me up just like the previous day. When I turned around to get up, I realized that my body had declared war on me; there did not seem to be a single muscle that had not been drafted. The soreness was strong and dull; an odd combination that, for some reason, made me feel like laughing every time I moved a limb.

I managed to get into my work clothes and found great solace in pulling a pair of padded socks from my backpack. My feet were already inflamed from rubbing against the thick leather of my work shoes the day before. I followed my roommates onto the truck under the belittling stare of Pancho Villa, already perched on the back platform. The light was just starting to disperse the night; it was cold, and I always felt somewhat queasy when forced to get into action before loading up with my breakfast.

The truck chartered us to a different part of the hill where the vines were thin, young plants that resembled the ones that we had planted the day before, only taller. The foreman pulled me and two other workers aside to demonstrate how we were to pluck off small shoots that grew at the base of the plant. I was ecstatic; I could not have handled two days of pick-and-shovel back to back.

This time, I kept up with the other workers; I had a hard time bending over and over because of my aching leg muscles and knees but I made it a point to keep up. If I were to spend my days with these men for a year, I had to earn a minimum of respect from them; that currency might become necessary. The day was not bad. It was just very slow and I found myself counting time until breakfast first, and then until the lunch break. That second day delivered the first lesson of my work in the vineyards. Food was hope, relief, and joy in a laborer's day. Meals were not mere pit stops; they were a time for one to put on hold for a few minutes the constant pressure on the body and connect with others. The men did not talk while working. I had not heard any rule against it; it just did not seem to be a part of their work ethic. When the truck honk signaled the end of the day, I looked back at the rows of vines that I had processed through the day and was quite impressed by the number of individual plants that I had epilated. Today I had not been a meek man but a swift beautician; a questionable step for the brotherhood of real men but a giant step for Richard.

By six o'clock, I had showered, eaten, and changed into my suit. The big tile of sky over the patio menaced to unleash an avalanche of dark, gray waters but I could not hear the slightest hint of thunder. The metronome-

paced clicking of Madame's heels on the archway's stones opened the gate to my evening. The theme of the day was black and white; her below-the-knee dress seemed to have escaped from a film noir, impeccably fitted and innocently tight. I followed her to the classroom in silence and sat at my table. She stood tall on the stage, by the desk, looking at me with an irked expression.

"Sorry..." I said and jumped back to my feet.

I made sure to give her plenty of time to sit down and get settled before sliding back onto my seat.

Madame opened a thin, green folder and pulled out a sheet of paper that she held up while looking at me.

"You did mention in your journal that you graduated from college, am I right?" she said with a neutral voice.

"Yes. I have a bachelor's degree in accounting," I replied.

"Do you, now...? And yet, you failed a high school equivalency test last night. A test whose questions were all pulled out from a GED exam designed in your own country."

"So...? High school was thirty years ago! What does that prove?" I jumped, vexed.

"On a world map, you placed Germany in Switzerland—" replied Madame with a mocking smile. "Even Hitler was never foolish enough to try that one!"

"I was tired. It was just an oversight!" I said with contempt, bothered by the silliness of the mistake.

"There are plenty of jewels like that one in your test. They all point to a shocking ignorance of anatomy, the arts, and even of your own political system, the one to which you nevertheless proudly contribute every four years. What's left today inside the envelope that your parents and your teachers worked hard at stuffing with knowledge decades ago? An ESPN TV guide, a copy of the inspirational business book of the month, a couple of tickets to a traveling version of West Side Story, and a silver golf club pass? What's your greatest intellectual creation? A spreadsheet of college basketball statistics?!"

I had actually worked hard on my stats sheet, but somehow that did not seem to be the right answer.

"What is it to you?" I said. "Are you planning to badger me through andropause like my parents did through puberty?"

"I'm trying to wake you up, Mister Keiffer. You will have to step up your physical and mental games if you are to meet our requirements. After looking at your test results last night, I wondered whether we had made a mistake bringing you here. The only reason why you are still in this classroom tonight is because of your essay, all nine words of it."

For the first time since I had met her two days earlier, I felt a small hint of respect in her words and I kept my mouth shut for fear of blowing it away.

“Tonight,” she said, “you will meet two teachers and have three fifty-minute classes with them; English literature, philosophy, and biology. I will give you handouts for each one; they were provided by your teachers themselves. You can write on them and keep them. There’ll be a ten-minute break at the end of each class that you can use to tidy up your notes and relax. Once the classes are over, you will have the opportunity to study for two hours, right there at your desk, after which you will return to your dorm.”

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders in the same motion to state both my assent and the fact that I did not have much say in the matter anyway.

Madame executed a few commands on the laptop in front of her, which activated the humming of a projector somewhere on the back wall. A beam of dusty light surged high over my head to produce a very large display of the laptop’s desktop onto the white wall behind Madame’s desk. With two more keystrokes, she brought up on the wall a full-screen, live image of a bearded man in his late fifties or early sixties hunched over a massive desk and absorbed in the reading of a document. Behind him, white French doors let through a dense pattern of city lights seen from a high point. Madame coughed politely. The man, who looked like an old giant on the wall, lifted his head and stared straight at me for a few seconds before speaking.

“Good evening, Mister Keiffer. I understand I’ll have the pleasure to take you on the first leg of this journey. I’m Professor Werner and as you might already know, I will teach you several disciplines in the humanities.”

He spoke with a mild German accent and a soft tone of voice. I greeted him back formally.

“You will spend about a quarter of your classroom time with me,” said Werner. “My lesson schedule spans over two hundred and fifty hours. This will not be an interactive process; I believe that a teacher’s mission is to deliver pure, raw knowledge, not share candy nuggets with students. I will speak and you’ll pay attention in silence. Learning when to listen is just as important as learning when to speak. Outside of these two, there’s just noise and I don’t like noise. If you have questions regarding a past lesson, you might bring them up at the beginning of a class.”

Without further ado, he referred me to the first handout, which Madame had placed on my desk while he spoke, and started a lesson on Ford Madox Ford, an English novelist from the early twentieth-century whose name made me think of a limited edition of a Detroit car. Werner’s monologue sounded like the two-minute introduction to a Sunday night broadcast of PBS’ Masterpiece Theatre, except that this time the introduction lasted close to an hour and the movie never started. I had

never enjoyed Masterpiece Theatre and its costume dramas often set in Victorian England, especially since they had the audacity to conflict with Sunday Night Football. I watched them only after giving in to my wife's argument for one romantic night a week, which meant that I would then be able to watch my games during the week on the smaller upstairs TV. Werner's prose, though, had a verve that was somewhat engaging, even on a topic whose appeal to me left much to be desired. I followed his discourse with a fair concentration and took notes. It was not March Madness but it certainly beat digging holes in the vineyards rock-hard soil.

The second class was more painful. A philosophy course about perception and illusion with concepts derived from Descartes' and Kant's theories. I could tell that Werner was trying to simplify the commentary for my first course but even so, I felt like a chicken on a chance encounter with a toothbrush. I tried hard to understand though—Madame's words about the monthly tests and the consequences of a failure at any of those still resonated in my mind with a cavernous echo. I could not afford to disconnect from any discipline right from the beginning. I took as many notes as I could with the goal of memorizing the concepts even if I was unable to understand them. At the end of the class, Werner capped a sentence about Kant by a formal "Good night, Mister Keiffer" and without further pleasantries turned off the camera on his end. The resulting silence prompted Madame to stop reading and ask me whether I needed to use the bathroom. I declined the offer and used my ten-minute break to try to walk my tension off around the room. Madame had gone right back to reading. I had never seen someone with her ability to freeze all bodily expressions for hours while plunged into a book. When time was up, she established the connection with the next lecturer.

My sciences teacher—Dr. Lavlyk—was as eccentric as Professor Werner was stiff but he was equally gifted for long and somewhat compelling discourse. A very British, distinguished fellow, Dr. Lavlyk prided himself into having participated as an engineering consultant to one of NASA's first Mars expeditions. That night he taught an ecology course with a striking blend of academic and outlandish theories. I was, of course, most captivated by the latter, one of which stipulated that all components of our planet, both living and material, had co-evolved all along into a single, massive, self-regulating organism. As Dr. Lavlyk detailed that postulate, Madame raised her head and smiled straight ahead for a brief instant before diving back into her book. At the fifty-minute mark, I was still completely immersed into Dr. Lavlyk's rhetoric and so was he! Madame had to cut him off politely and turn off the connection as the man still spoke.

"Well, that's it for tonight. Tired?" she asked.

"Yes, but it's not that bad," I replied.

She seemed to approve and accompanied me back to the patio before wishing me a good night. I walked back to my building with mixed

emotions. If I was to be sandblasted with particles of knowledge like that every night, I would erode fully in a couple of weeks. On the other hand, something felt new.

Chapter 7

August 29, Year 2.

On the third day, work on the vineyards went back to planting vines. I fell back again big time and Pancho Villa came twice to badger me in what must have been mostly Spanish slang because I did not get a word of it. The windmill action of his arms said it all, though, and I felt like crap every time he left. I may have been a wimp before but never in my line of work.

I was exhausted and feeling down when the truck herded us back to the compound. I dragged myself into our room and crashed onto the bed. I knew that I had tightly measured time to eat, shower, and jump into my suit, but I needed to park it. I drifted in the vacuum between body work and mind expansion for a blessed handful of minutes before standing up and opening my locker. It now contained a second suit and a second dress shirt, and even a pair of khakis, a denim shirt, and casual brown shoes. The finding recharged my soul just like my kids' odd Father's Day presents used to. I had been heard. For the first time since I had crashed in this far away land, I had been heard. I wore my new suit to my evening with Madame. She acknowledged it with a fugitive smile when I appeared to her.

That night I met both my music teacher, Mrs. Fabiola—a strict and lovely older Italian woman whose backdrop was a shiny organ—and my French teacher, *Monsieur* Dubois—whose superior attitude could have extracted pimples from the face of the most libertine suffragette. Professor Werner having been my first instructor, I followed his guidance and paid attention to both teachers in silence. I loved the music class. Mrs. Fabiola was old and grainy on the wall display but she had the passion of a virgin for her subject. She twirled on multiple sticks the personal lives and musical masterpieces of romantic composers like a Chinese circus artist. By the end of her class, I was a talented American smoking and drinking absinth in the Quartier Latin while exchanging chords with my peers. She even made it worth it for me to sit through two hours of *Monsieur* Dubois grammar lesson.

Day four went back to shaving vines—clearly an alternation of physical and tedious tasks in one of the most beautiful sceneries one could dream of as their office. The ease of the task gave me a chance to let my mind wander and, naturally, earth came first. I could not help but wonder whether I might indeed be kneeling on the gut of a massive organism, playing my infinitesimal part to ensure its well-being. No matter how far-fetched Dr. Lavlyk's theory might be, it resonated well within that simple mind of mine. It also promoted the concept of harmony at a higher level, which somehow helped me deal with chaos at mine. From the ecological landscapes, I seamlessly wandered onto the tabloid-like relationship between prodigy composer Frederic Chopin and the androgyny writer

George Sand. I had not grappled many of Mrs. Fabiola's musical teachings during the first lesson but I had connected with the characters' personal lives. How could such forces of genius be allowed to collide? And how could a man with the talent of Chopin do something as corny as saving a lock of Sand's hair in a small envelope tucked into the back of his diary? I even tried to summon a few French words from Monsieur Dubois' class to describe my impressions about that but the only expression I remembered— "Bonjour, je suis enchanté de vous rencontrer"—somehow did not seem to stretch very far.

On day five, I was to meet the person who would be my fifth and final teacher, according to Madame. A minute or so after six, we both took our regular seats in the classroom but instead of turning on the laptop, Madame simply dropped an enigmatic, "Well, I guess we'll just wait..." and started reading her book. And so we waited, in silence. To kill time, I drafted a few schemes to summarize some of the concepts that had been presented to me the night before in ancient arts and earth science classes. Half an hour went by and the burden of a long day outdoors started pushing down the back of my neck. I drifted into a state of light somnolence, pretending to write when all I produced were overlapping black circles.

It was a warm and healing drowsiness until a loud tumbling sound erupted from the staircase. Startled, I stared at the emerged part of the banister. After a long moment and more rattling, a dusky, square-jawed head surfaced, pushed up by a body as imposing as it was vacillating. A very tall, built body enrobed in full priest attire—a black robe with purple buttons and matching silk skull cap and waistband, and a heavy silver cross dangling over the navel like a pendulum—the whole planted on huge feet spread wide apart in worn-out leather sandals. The man, clearly dazed, finally reached the top of the stairs and with a total disregard for us uttered with a raucous voice a resounding "Cojones...!" while looking back at the staircase. That Spanish word, I did know. My friends and I in high school took great delight in including this evocation of a man's most prized attributes into our teen lingo. Madame seemed very upset by the man's theatrical entrance.

"You, sad excuse for a man! You are drunk!" she shouted, in Spanish. The priest's face shriveled into a contrite smile as the man took two hesitant steps back under the assault and nearly fell back down the stairs.

"Madame, you are mistaken, I assure you," he replied in Spanish as soon as he stabilized his position. "*The teacher is in the house!*" The last three words were spoken in English.

"Get out, Bishop Ignacio!" Madame said with a furious expression and a very stiff index finger pointed to the staircase.

The man first staggered sideways while looking at her with the enlightened expression of a week-old tuna on the fisherman's stand, before finding his way down the stairs in a mumble of unintelligible words.

“Well, it doesn’t look like this class will happen today,” Madame said as she sat back at her desk with a stilted attitude.

“That was the teacher?!” I asked.

Madame nodded with a forced smile.

“What in the world could a clergyman teach me!?” I insisted.

“I think I owe you a little explanation about the man you just met,” Madame said after a short hesitation. “He *will* be your teacher and I certainly wouldn’t want you to dismiss him from the start. I will give you, though, that Bishop Ignacio is not someone very good at first impressions. When I saw him for the first time, he was on a bike wearing nothing but a silky purple skull cap on the top of his head and being chased by a bunch of very excited farmhands. That was happening on the main road right outside my property. I was returning from a visit to a neighbor when I came across the scene. Although the workers were just running, they were catching up fast to the bike, so I stopped and told the big naked man to jump on the back of my pickup truck. He barely made it on before his pursuers reached my truck. I drove away and brought him here. It was just a two-minute drive but the man was dead asleep when we arrived. He reeked of sweat and cheap wine. I had my men unload him and drop him on one of the bunks in the barracks until he’d sobered up.

“The farmhands—migrants who stay at a small camp a mile or so from here—arrived shortly after. They were demanding the big man’s head and it took me a while to calm them down. As we hassled back and forth, one of the workers waved with rage a garment that resembled a clergyman’s robe and he pulled out from his pockets the silver cross that went with it. It turned out that the naked drunkard was the new bishop assigned to this diocese and who had already started touring his parishioners. The workers had returned to camp unexpectedly early because of a pending storm and had found him in the storeroom evangelizing one of the workers’ wives in a most unchristian fashion after having eaten half the food reserves in the pantry and drunk three bottles of their wine. Thanks to his stature and the woman’s help, the bishop managed to hold the men back just long enough to run out of the building, and jump on a bike. Needless to say, though, that when the church authorities got wind of the bishop’s little adventure, they kicked him out. They had moved him around three times already after similar misdeeds—this time he got the boot.”

“But how did he become a bishop if he was like that?” I asked.

“Obviously, he wasn’t always *like that*. He is not a young man—he must have discovered the wonders of life on the late. Anyway, all this is history; it took place over two years ago. I would never have dreamt of keeping him here but in a few days, he managed to capture the hearts of my employees who pleaded on his behalf. Most of them are very religious

and it doesn't take long to understand that Bishop Ignacio is as pure in his faith as he is incapable of restraint when it comes to earthly pleasures. He knows by name every maid and every worker, and he genuinely cares about their kids, their stories, and their problems. On top of that, he has a basic knowledge of medicine, which is very helpful here since the nearest doctor is almost an hour away.

"Everyone loves him here. During the past two years, there isn't a single person on this property that he hasn't supported in one capacity or another. The only downside is that the house staff has to constantly watch out for him and protect him from his own epicurean ways, but he still manages to get around them from time to time, which is obviously what happened tonight. I can live with that and as long as he doesn't touch one of my maids, he will be welcome in this house. He knows the line not to cross. Is it a bit clearer now?"

"Yes, but that doesn't answer my question. What can he offer me as a teacher?" I insisted.

"He is a very erudite man all around but his specific job will be to pass on to you some of his knowledge of anatomy and fine arts—mainly painting and sculpture, since music and literature are covered by other teachers. In his third, and maybe most critical assignment, he will be your catechist—"

"Excuse me...?" I said, not sure that I had heard the right word.

"Yes, your catechist. Your diary stated that you grew up in the American South; I'm sure I don't go out on a limb when assuming that you were raised as a Christian?"

"Yes, but catechism ended with my second communion and I haven't gone to church more than a couple of times a year since. I have no interest in being evangelized again now."

"We are not talking about evangelization here, just a reacquainting with your original religious foundation. I'm afraid this is not an option as far as your training goes; all of our members are to embrace and be prepared to defend their Judeo-Christian roots and values. It is a non-negotiable requirement, and I suggest that you commit strongly to it."

Madame's voice had turned cold and cutting. It contained a muted threat and whatever was behind it felt more serious than the prospect for me of being sent back to the park in Buenos Aires. I backed down.

"So tomorrow will be my first class with Bishop Ignacio?" I asked.

"Tomorrow is Sunday; you won't have class. You will have a session with him on Monday and this time, I'll make sure that it happens," Madame replied, still tense. "Now, you only have a few minutes left until your astronomy class with Dr. Lavlyk. Why don't you start reading his handout?" said Madame, and walked the document to my table.

That night, I headed back to my compound under a starry sky and was even able to pick out the Sirius and Canopus stars, whose names I had never heard two hours earlier, but that small achievement did not lift my

spirits up. Bishop Ignacio's startling entrance and Madame's sudden tension on the matter of religion had thrown into my so far very academic evenings a mystical twist that bothered me.

Chapter 8

September 1, Year 2.

On Sundays, only a few employees worked—half a dozen volunteers who needed to earn extra money. Pancho Villa was off and work in the vineyards was more or less self-managed. We just continued the previous day's chore, which was to weed the area between vines with a hoe, where the mechanical tiller could not reach. Food was not brought to us on that day; we had to pick up sandwiches from the cafeteria before heading for the hills. It was a long, silent day; I felt stuck in detention when all the other kids had long gone home to play. When the truck finally came to pick us up, I cheerfully jumped on it before realizing that I did not have anywhere to go but my bunk. No classes on Sundays also meant no distraction of any kind from the workday and no human interactions for me. When I reached my dorm, I realized that I would at least have the room to myself, but without as much as a magazine in it, that was little solace.

I walked to the cafeteria building and indulged in a long shower; for once that I did not have to rush. I grabbed one of the dinner plates left for us on the counter and ate alone at one of the long tables in the empty canteen. I could hear the loud commentary of what appeared to be a soccer game in the TV room, which was in the adjacent building. The other workers all seemed to have gathered there and they cheered and lamented in concert with the announcer. As I finished my roast beef and chips, a loud vehicle pulled up and came to a screeching halt in front of the buildings. Within seconds, shouting erupted in the TV room area; very angry, riotous screams punctuated by rumbling and slamming noises. I peeked out of the door and was hit hard by the violence of the scene unfolding less than fifty feet from me.

A dozen or so men in dirty work clothes, whom I had never seen before, were dragging my fellow workers one after the other out of the TV room and throwing them down onto the dirt where they pummeled and kicked them with a cold rage. Outnumbered, my colleagues were trying to protect their faces and ribs with their arms as they convulsed under the cascade of blows. One of them, a young worker who usually amused us in the truck with childish pranks, saw me. As a large, older man pounded the side of his face while holding him down at waist level with his knee, the young fellow's head bounced against the dirt but his eyes were locked on mine, imploring my help. Terrified that his assailant might notice the direction of his stare, I closed the door and ran up the stairs to the shower area where I hid behind a row of lockers.

A fist-sized ventilation hole in the wall allowed me to continue monitoring the brawl, this time safely from above. It was not receding. Two of my colleagues had managed to stand back up and tried to fight back but

they were just throwing lame punches at one opponent while another was punching them hard from the other side. I was getting sick; sick from the brutality of the moment; sick from my helpless response to it. Just as my two standing coworkers were thrown back down, a tall, broad silhouette emerged from the twilight and rushed into the brawl, throwing formidable punches right and left, single-handedly forcing a dispersion of the assailants. Before they could regroup, a loud bang exploded into the courtyard, from a spot outside my field of vision.

“Déjalos, hijos de puta!” Madame’s forceful injunction resonated, immediately echoed by a second gunshot. I expected one of the aggressors to drop to the ground but they just stepped back from the fight and retreated slowly away from the building while facing the direction of the gunshots. The thunderous revving up of their truck’s engine rapidly evaporated from the scene.

Bishop Ignacio, still riled up from the fight, cheered up the wounded men with a loud voice while attending to them. Madame walked into the scene, double-barreled shotgun still in hand, and helped up one of the workers who seemed less battered than the others. Two maids arrived shortly after carrying a large first-aid kit and a light stretcher. Bishop Ignacio rolled one of the men—who seemed unconscious—onto the stretcher and dragged him alone into the TV room. Madame and the maids helped the other victims walk or crawl inside, depending on how hurt they were. I kept staring through the hole in the wall but I was unplugged from the drama when they closed the door. I had made sure not to fall into that drama but the moment the door slammed shut, I understood that the evening events would not only leave an enduring scar on my pride but that they would also turn me into a coward—at best—or a foe, in the eyes of my coworkers. I rejected instantly the perverse hope that the young man’s memories of the fight might have been obliterated by the punches.

I returned to my building through the back door and sat on my bed for a long time, dreading a visit from Madame, the bishop, or even worse, one of the victims of the assault. Someone did come, after thirty minutes or so—one of the maids. From outside, she took a brief look at me through the open door and turned around without a word. I had now been accounted for on the scene. I tossed and turned all night, reliving over and over the raw violence that I had witnessed earlier and the cowardice with which I had responded to it. At every mental pass, both sentiments were amplified and scarred deeper into my mind. The newly found strength that had grown its roots in the resilience and resourcefulness that I had demonstrated during the past year had evaporated out in a few minutes under the fire of the brawl. I was back to my old self; Richard, the poop picker.

The workers returning from their day off started arriving around six in the morning. I could hear them congregating outside the building, engaging in a loud conversation packed with cussing and exclamations. I got dressed and stayed inside, waiting for my roommates to enter. When they did, right after the commanding voice of Pancho Villa put an end to the outside chatter, they each threw me a nasty look that left little doubt of my chances of getting away with my previous night's shortcoming. They hurriedly changed into their work clothes and left me alone in the room. When I stepped out, a landscape of hostile faces welcomed me and without Pancho Villa's loud orders to get in the trucks, I would probably have become a living spittoon.

That day, I let myself fall behind in the vineyard rows just to create a buffer with the other workers. Even Pancho Villa did not bother to come hassle me. At lunchtime, I overheard from a safe distance that the workers assaulted the night before had been given orders to stay in bed and rest, but that they would be fine in a few days. When we returned to camp, I dreaded heading to the showers; at that time, the first floor of the cafeteria building was empty and if a few of the workers wanted to teach me a lesson, it would be the ideal time. It did not happen. I took a quick shower and ate a piece of bread and a slice of ham on the way to my dorm. When I passed the TV room, I noticed that all the workers had gathered there, most likely to discuss the previous night's events at length. I changed into my suit and headed for the main house.

Madame was on time but she did not greet me on the patio as usual. She just made sure that I saw her under the archway and turned around. I followed her to the classroom. She had already sat at her desk by the time I arrived. I took my seat and greeted her. No response. She was already setting up the laptop; when she activated its display onto the wall, I found a smiling Mrs. Fabiola in it. Madame lunged into her book. During the intermission, I was left to write my notes. Madame did not lift her head until it was time to make the next connection, this time with the French teacher, as if I needed more contempt that night. This class was the first one in which I would actually have to talk and every French sentence I repeated sounded so clunky and childish that it only added to my feelings of inadequacy in front of Madame. At the end of the class, she closed her book and left the room without a word. I sat at my table, disoriented. I still had one class left—supposedly with Bishop Ignacio—but between a muted Madame and a bizarre clergyman, I was abandoned in total limbo.

Bishop Ignacio arrived at nine, right on the dot, and this time after climbing the staircase without noise. Walking tall and straight, he looked even larger than during his first appearance.

"Good evening, my new amigo!" he said with a broad smile as he proceeded to sit at the desk next to mine. After a fair amount of wriggling, he managed to sit down, although the tiny seat and table combo looked more like a golf visor for his butt.

“So, Richard, it didn’t take you long to get yourself into a big mess!”

His jovial voice rounded the bluntness of his approach.

“You must be a lover, boy,” he said, “because you sure ain’t no fighter!”

The man’s attempt at American slang, probably plagiarized from a movie, when combined with his thick South American accent, made for a comical effect but the words still had cut right through the flesh. I was so eager to discuss the matter that I would have done so with a bright goose.

“Is that why Madame is not talking to me?” I asked, doing away with introductions just as he did.

“You didn’t expect her to give you a hero’s kiss, did you?”

“I could not have done anything! They were outnumbered!” “There are many reasons not to fight a man’s fight; reason itself is the most pathetic of all. Whatever the odds were, you had to get into that ring. In the very least, you could have run to the main house for help instead of hiding like a scared schoolgirl.”

“It was war down there! You’re talking like a drill sergeant in priest clothes. God does not condone violence, for any motive.”

“Don’t hide behind God, my friend. God may rule the world, but here, we are on Madame’s land.”

His point hit me; if someone could understand dependency to Madame, it was him. Without her, Bishop Ignacio and Richard the poop picker were left without tomorrow.

“I feel terrible,” I said. “I froze; I couldn’t think; I was unable to help. I can still see the boy’s eyes screaming for help.”

“Let’s not get all mushy here. Yes, you messed up big time and you should not expect the workers to forgive you anytime soon; they live at a higher level of manhood. You do, however, need to talk it out with Madame because she doesn’t play. The only reason why you are still on this property tonight is because I pleaded for you. You come up that short once again and she’ll kick your ass out without a second thought. The lady is stronger than the both of us put together.”

“How am I supposed to approach her about this?”

“Don’t try the bit about the boy’s imploring eyes, that’s for sure. You are not in a position to stand up to her but try at least to show her that you will stand up for yourself, and that whatever happened Sunday night will never happen again. I don’t know how she will react—that battlefield is also for you to cross.”

“I’ll try...” I said with little conviction. “Can you at least give me some background about that fight? What was it all about?”

“It was a punitive expedition. A few miles from here is another hacienda—another winemaker, from a long line of winemakers. His family and the one that used to own this property competed for markets and were at odds for several generations. When Madame bought this estate, she inherited the feud with it. The neighbor, Señor Herango, is polite to her

face but he encourages his employees to bully hers at every opportunity. From time to time on Saturday nights, workers from both farms run into each other in discos of the nearest city, Cordoba. They have been drinking, the hormones run high; they end up fighting. These are fistfights and usually, they walk away from each other with a few bruises and cut lips.

“Last Saturday, though, one of Herango’s men caught a bad blow to the liver and ended up in the hospital in bad shape. From what I heard, he underwent surgery and the outcome is still uncertain. It was an accident—I’m sure that no one here really intended to send that man to the hospital. After all, they all do the same job and they know each other’s families. The victim’s brother decided to take that accident as a declaration of war and he rounded up some of his buddies last night to come here and exact revenge on Madame’s men. They knew that there would only be a few here on a Sunday. You’ve seen the rest...”

I nodded with embarrassment. Bishop Ignacio caught the vibe.

“You must feel pretty alone right now, no?”

I nodded again, my eyes down.

“I wasn’t planning to propose this so early in our classes but would it be inappropriate for us to pray a little together at this point?”

The suggestion just sounded plain silly to me—I hadn’t prayed in decades and religious zeal was about the last kind of support I needed at that moment, but I was grateful to the man. His words had not lightened my burden; he had not even attempted to do so, but he had talked to me without judgment even though he knew what Madame and all the others knew. He had also given me a chance to finally discuss the matter with someone. I accepted his offer to pray as a way to thank him. He did not ask me to kneel; he did not kneel himself. He simply crossed his big hands on the tiny desk, bowed, and started praying out loud.

The words no longer meant anything to me but I respected his fervor. He prayed for a long time; the words flowed out of him freely, casual and sacred alike. A few minutes before our time was up, I found myself drifting into the warm space that his litany had opened up but it came to an end before I could connect with the actual sentiments. We parted on a friendly note and I walked home, if not at peace, less alone.

Chapter 9

September 3, Year 2.

Bishop Ignacio was right—the men would not forgive me. I was now convinced that they had been specifically instructed not to touch me because their very clear, albeit unspoken, hatred of me never translated to any kind of aggression. Madame continued to give me the silent treatment and I did not attempt to break through it; besides not having any argument other than cowardice to put forth in my defense, I also feared her judgment. My teachers, though, were unrelenting in their efforts; they probably had never heard of my ordeal. Every night under the skylight ceiling, I seized each of their classes as a chance to escape into a crisp, warm bubble after a dreadful day in the vineyards. I invested myself fully into their teachings; they elevated me above the filthy sink of emotions in which I felt waterboarded without rest. Education was becoming a destination for me—a place in which to escape from my mediocrity, present and past. My progress was slow; my brain had lost the habit of grappling with abstract concepts. Thanks to my attention during classes and efforts during study sessions, though, it managed to stay afloat in the midst of the unrelenting literary, scientific, linguistic, and artistic riptides thrown at it night after night.

On the second week, Bishop Ignacio taught two classes, both dedicated to artifacts from the Egyptian civilization. He brought with him two oversized books containing high-quality photographs of sculptures and hieroglyphs, and explained in great detail the stylistic and cultural components of each piece. He spoke of Horus, Isis, and other Egyptian gods with the same deference as he showed for his own god, and his academic knowledge on the subject turned each class into a cryptic foray into the Arabian Desert.

I dreaded Sunday evening. I knew that it would reactivate memories from the previous one and I would be more isolated than ever when that happened. When the truck dropped us off at the compound after the workday, I went into my building yearning for alcohol. I would not have my classes to take me away; that was the next best option. The problem was that the red wine that was served to us at mealtimes was locked up in a closet of the cafeteria, and I could hardly imagine the guys in the TV room sharing their beer with me. My mind wandered on downright depressing avenues for a while until being distracted by a knock on the open door.

One of the two maids who had rescued the wounded after the fight the past Sunday stood in the door frame—a short, young woman with a shy demeanor. When I stood up, she brusquely extended her arm to hand out a small piece of white paper. I approached her and as soon as I grabbed it, she walked away without a word. The paper contained a few handwritten

words: *Put on your street clothes and meet me on the patio.* It was not signed. I followed the instructions and slipped into the khaki pants and denim shirt. The note did not say anything about shoes, which worried me. I decided to put the casual brown shoes on anyway; if I were told to remove them, they might at least let me keep the socks.

Madame was already on the patio when I arrived. She was involved in an animated discussion with Bishop Ignacio and kept waving her flattened right hand up and down. They kept their voices low despite the obvious intensity of the argument and I could not understand its subject. When he noticed me, Bishop Ignacio signaled my arrival to Madame with an upward tip of the head.

"You took your time to get ready." Madame said coldly as I approached. "You are leaving for Buenos Aires," she continued on the same tone when she saw that I would not reply.

"So that's it? You won't even give me a second chance?!" I said, filled with conflicting emotions, none remotely positive.

"Shut up! This *is* your second chance. If it had been up to me, there wouldn't have been one. Bishop Ignacio pleaded your case but that doesn't mean that I will let you get away with last weekend's cowardice. We reached a compromise. I need a job done in Buenos Aires; Bishop Ignacio suggested that I assign it to you. He will accompany you, but only as a resource. You will lead this operation, Mister Keiffer, and don't bother coming back here if you fail."

"What's the job?" I asked, already destabilized by Madame's charge.

"You are to find and bring back Anya, the girl who tricked you in Buenos Aires. Her aunt, my friend, wants her to be detoxed once and for all and set on a new path. The bishop and I will take care of that part after you bring her back."

"Why can't you ask the police officers who brought me here, since they seem to be at your service?" I tried.

"They are not police officers; they just like to dress up as such sometimes, it makes their jobs easier. Anyway, I am not sending them because I am sending *you*. Bishop Ignacio has some information regarding Anya's whereabouts; he'll brief you. Now, leave. You should reach Buenos Aires by morning."

Madame shook her head at the bishop with a skeptical frown and walked away. I followed him to the car without a thought in my mind. At that moment, I was just overwhelmed by the speed of the current in which I had just been thrown.

"We'll share the driving," Bishop Ignacio said, as he maneuvered the car onto the dirt road. "Two hours each. That should give us a chance to each catch a couple of sleep cycles during the night."

"Why such a hurry?" I asked. "Anya didn't just fall into drugs. Madame told me previously that she had been hooked for a while."

“She’s been a heavy cocaine user for at least a year, maybe more, but two days ago, her aunt found out that she had moved from buying to dealing. One of Anya’s girlfriends alerted the aunt that a pretty serious drug broker had gotten his claws into her. Anya is young, sexy, and educated—an ideal escort for men with a taste for the high life. He hooked her up with a couple of executives in the entertainment business, who in turn introduced her to Buenos Aires jet-set parties—a great platform to peddle high volumes of cocaine. Anya is out dealing almost every night and is loaded herself most of the time. For several weeks now, she hardly eats or sleeps and she’s losing weight very fast. We have to get her out of that mess before she crashes.”

“Where can we find her? At the aunt’s apartment?”

“No, when she is not out selling, she stays at the drug broker’s place, a fancy house in the suburbs that is protected by two or three armed guards at all times. We can’t get her out of that house; we’ll have to catch her in the wild.”

“In the wild...?”

“Yes, either at a party or in a club. Her girlfriend will tip us on where we can find her at night; she often tags along.”

“And after we find out where she is, then what?”

“You tell me. Don’t forget, you run this show.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right!” I said with contempt. “Then how about this: I show up at the door of the uppity disco all dolled up and wow the bouncers at the door with my khakis and fifteen-dollar shoes. Once they let me in, I walk up to Anya and ask her nicely to follow me; at that point, the guy who is surely there to keep her in line steps in and I tame him with a nice ‘Excuse me, mister drug-dealer representative, but I have to take your protégé away for a few months; please convey my apologies to your boss.’ We drive off and Anya hugs us with gratitude all the way back. How does that sound?”

“If that’s the way you want to play it, then that’s the way we’ll try to play it,” Bishop Ignacio replied calmly, immune to my sarcasm.

“But damn it, can’t you see? You and I—a bishop and a poop picker, as Madame calls me—are supposed to snatch an addicted young girl from some sort of drug gang. There’s a good chance we’ll get killed just trying something like that! I never signed up for this.”

“From the account that Madame gave me of your journal, it looks like you don’t ever sign up for much of anything, Richard. This time, though, the status quo is not an option and if I signed you up for this, it’s because I believe that being returned to the park where you were found would commit you to a much worse fate than this enterprise. We don’t have to die in it; we just have to think and execute carefully.”

I was scared and just to ease my mind up a bit, I started contemplating the option of walking away from the bishop once we got to the city. The rest of the trip went by in silence, except for a few casual words exchanged

as we traded the wheel back and forth. I actually preferred driving to resting in the back seat because my sleep was tormented at every cycle, as my mind struggled to process the fear into a digestible matter. The highway was fairly deserted at that time of the night and it only skirted a few small cities. The last switch at the wheel took place around four in the morning at a rest stop—a tiny island of light by the side of the road, engulfed by a pitch black, chilly night.

I woke up alone in the car. When I sat up, I realized that it was stationed on the parking lot of a strip mall, right in front of what appeared to be a breakfast place, judging by the smiling croissant stickers plastered on the windows. It was a little past six and the night was still in charge but the place was crowded with clusters of dressed-up young people, probably students wrapping up a night of clubbing over coffee. Alone at a table close to the window, Bishop Ignacio—who always wore his purple cassock—looked freakish in that environment, and the other customers would probably never have bought the idea that he was a real clergyman. I stepped out of the car and joined him inside the brightly lit coffee shop.

“You could have awakened me,” I said while sitting at his table. “I’m hungry, too,” I added, realizing that he had ordered a full English breakfast.

“I was going to get something for you to go,” the bishop replied. “You were sound asleep when we arrived; I thought you could use the rest,” he replied before shoving a heaping forkful of scrambled eggs down his throat.

An older waitress walked up to our table; I ordered the same as the bishop: “Lo mismo, por favor.” I did not have any money but assumed that I would at least be allowed to eat during the expedition.

“How did you learn English?” I asked, just to make conversation as I waited for my plate.

“I spent five years in the U.S.,” the bishop said, now attacking a stack of bacon strips, “two as a student—I got a master’s in fine arts at Carnegie Mellon—and I came back two decades later, this time in Tennessee where I was a vicar general for three years, assisting the local bishop. My superiors thought it would be good for me to gain some experience of life abroad. They were right; shortly after I returned home, my work in the U.S. was recognized and I was made a bishop.”

I hesitated on whether to admit to him that I already knew the rest of the story. He did not continue it; I did not encourage him to. We exchanged few words after my meal arrived. Despite the knot in the pit of my stomach, I was starved and jumped on the food. The moment I finished, the bishop paid the bill with cash and we headed out.

The day was just starting to break through when we got back in the car. Bishop Ignacio had taken the driver's side but he did not seem inclined to start the vehicle. Instead, he laid the keys on the dashboard and turned to me.

"From this point on, Richard, as Madame said, you will have to lead the charge. I have no idea how to proceed to get our hands on Anya. I am, after all, a bishop—maybe not a perfect one, but not a daredevil one either. I can manage throwing a few punches in the heat of the moment to help correct a wrong but I have not exactly lived an adventurous life."

"All we have to go on is Anya's friend," I replied. "What's her name?"

"Irene."

"Have you spoken to her already?"

"No, but Madame has alerted her of our plan. She knows that we arrive today and she wants to help. We are supposed to call her this morning around ten; I have the number."

"It's only seven now. Why don't we go take a look at the house where Anya stays when she is not dealing? The drug broker's place. Maybe we'll get lucky if we hang around there; she might come out alone at some point," I suggested.

"Okay," the bishop agreed. "We just need to make sure that they don't spot us until we get a good opening."

"On the way, let's look for some sort of gun shop. Maybe here we can buy small, self-defense weapons without a license, like pepper spray or a stun gun. It may not be much against real arms but at least we won't be totally empty-handed."

The bishop did not respond. He stepped out of the car, went to the rear of the vehicle, and popped the trunk open. He came back on the passenger side, opened the door and laid a long, heavy duffel bag onto my lap. I turned on the overhead light and unzipped the bag. I had an instinctive start when I discovered in it an entanglement of weapons; two revolvers, a shotgun with a cut-down double barrel, one box of bullets and one of cartridges, a black and yellow taser gun similar to that of the U.S. police, a flashlight-shaped device with small, rounded metal points sticking out of the end, and to crown it all, a metallic can of ether nestled in a corner of the bag!

"I cannot believe this!" I said. "Where do all these come from?"

"Madame had the bag prepared for us as a care package," the bishop replied with an amused smile.

"That's insane! I'm not out to kill anyone."

"Just think of these as tools for the job. I don't want to use guns any more than you do but they may come in handy to scare the bad guys back if needed."

I was as afraid as ever but as much as I was averse to violence, I did find some reassurance in the presence of the weapons. At least we would not go up against a bunch of drug dealers like a couple of Victorian maids.

As we drove slowly through a fancy suburban development, toward the address that Irene had given us for Anya's boss, we realized that it would be tricky to mount a stake-out there. Most of the elegant three-story, gray brick houses had a cyclops eye most likely hosting a security camera two feet or so above the front door, and two men sitting in a parked car for an extended period of time would be quickly spotted and reported. Bishop Ignacio was probably reasoning along the same lines as he just drove past the drug broker's house, which was surrounded by a tall cement wall. I just got a diffused glimpse of the residence through the bars of the metal gate; it was much wider than the other houses on the block, but on a single level, looking more like a spread-out compound.

"What now...?" the bishop asked as he drove out of the development.

"Do you have money?" I said in response.

"Madame gave me some."

"Okay, in that case let's try to find a cheap motel that we can use as base camp until we need to move."

"Good idea; that way we won't get frostbite."

Though playful, the tone of the bishop's voice was clearly supportive of the idea. Even though it was not exactly the decision to land in Normandy on D-Day, I felt good about the fact that I had figured out the next step on the fly. Of course, that was still a pretty easy one.

Chapter 10

September 16, Year 2.

Just two miles from the broker's house, we stumbled upon a plain little motel and—despite some initial resistance from the clerk due to the bishop's eccentric outfit—we managed to get a room by the far end of the one-story building.

"Do you really have to wear that robe?" I asked—annoyed—as we walked to the room.

"Yes," replied the bishop curtly.

The room was designed like a log cabin with floor-to-ceiling timber lining. Two small metal beds occupied most of it, and a narrow door led to a tiny but immaculate bathroom. The bishop crashed onto one of the beds and went right to sleep. I headed for the shower. Luckily, soap, shampoo, a small toothpaste sample, and a tiny toothbrush were provided; as for a shave and clean underwear, I would just have to rough it.

I woke up from my nap well after ten and frantically shook the bishop, who snored loudly.

"Wake up, Bishop! I need Irene's number; it's close to eleven already, we may have missed her."

The bishop mumbled something unintelligible and fetched a piece of cardboard from his pants pocket. He handed it to me while yawning as he sat up on the bed. I grabbed the room phone and dialed the number. The call was picked up after the first ring.

"Dígame," a female voice answered.

"Irene?" I asked with hesitation.

"Si, soy Irene. Quién es?"

I inquired whether she spoke English; she replied with a flat, "No." I went on to introduce myself in Spanish, including a reference to Madame.

"You were supposed to call me an hour ago," Irene said with a suspicious tone of voice.

"I know, I'm sorry; we did not pay attention to the time," I replied.

"Describe Madame to me," she said.

I lacked the Spanish vocabulary to pay a proper tribute to Madame's style, but I managed to be convincing enough for her to interrupt me.

"That's fine. Where are you now?"

"We are in a small motel near the drug person's house," I replied, clumsily.

"Good. Stay there. Anya won't come out. She got sick last night—too much cocaine, too much booze. When that happens, she just stays in bed and watches TV all day."

"So we won't be able to approach her today?"

"She'll have to come out tonight. There's a big event at *Prada*, one of the discos downtown. The thirtieth birthday of a telenovela actor who's

very big in this country. Cocaine is going to flow; I'm sure Anya's boss will send her there. I'll confirm with you when she calls to ask me along."

"Can you get us into that party?" I asked.

"Not officially through the front door, but I know that disco very well. I worked as a waitress there for a few months when I was a student. At the back of the building is a corridor. That's where the bathrooms are located. At the end of the corridor is a locked door; it opens up on a staircase that goes down into the basement, where the cases of drinks are stored. The delivery guys park on the back street and go down a staircase that leads to the basement. The basement door is locked as well, but the same key opens both doors and I know where to get it once inside the disco."

The girl had a youthful voice but seemed very incisive and determined. I, on the other hand, was pretty much hoping that she had the rest of the plan laid out but she had stopped talking.

"What happens when we get inside?" I said, trying to prime her back.

"I don't know... I can let you know when Anya goes to the bathroom." Irene said, hesitantly this time.

"Does she have a bodyguard?"

"Yes, there's a guy who follows her everywhere to make sure that she does what she is supposed to and nothing else."

"Will he follow her to the bathroom?"

"Not inside, but he'll be in the corridor waiting."

"Is he armed?"

"Of course; what do you think? He is young, athletic, mean, and I'm sure that he will shoot without a second thought. How many of you are there?"

"Two."

"That's not many..."

"Thank you, Irene; this is good information," I said as a bloating fear squeezed the air out of my thinking again. "Why don't we finalize the plan when you confirm with us that Anya is going to the disco?"

"Okay. I'll call you back at that number."

She hung up. The bishop and I made eye contact, seeking reassurance in one another, but I could tell that he had heard both sides of the conversation and was now as worried as I was. He opened the drawer of the nightstand by his bed, pulled out what looked like a small Bible from it, lay down on his back, and started reading. I lay back down as well and tried to scope mentally the floor plan of the club that Irene had described. The corridor at the back did give us a stage from which to snatch Anya out of the club, but neither she nor her bodyguard would make it easy for us. We had to find a quick and effective way to neutralize them both; if a struggle lasted more than a few seconds, we would soon have the bouncers and customers to deal with as well. I closed my eyes to concentrate and soon found myself charmed by a warm torpor that took me in.

I woke up close to four in the afternoon. The water was running in the bathroom; the bishop was taking a shower. I waited for him to come out and suggested that we grab an early dinner, as we didn't know when Irene might pull the trigger on us. We drove to a nearby buffet that we had passed on the way to the motel and started strategizing before our order even made it to the table.

"Anya is going to fight back when we try to grab her," I said, "but we can't fire the taser at her to knock her out, though; that's way too strong."

"I agree," replied the bishop. "We should keep the taser for the bodyguard, hit him as soon as we see him; we don't want to give him any chance to draw his gun."

"What about Anya, though?"

"There's a stun gun in the bag, the device that looks like a flashlight. I used to carry one of these when I was a priest in a tough neighborhood of Mendoza. That should paralyze her long enough to get her out. Once in the car, we'll make her breathe some ether to get her to sleep."

"That sounds good. Since you know how to use the stun gun and you are stronger than I am, why don't you take care of Anya and I'll cover you as you carry her out? Once Irene lets us in, we can hide behind the door at the end of the corridor. The moment Anya and Irene approach the bathrooms, we jump out. You go straight for Anya. If the bodyguard is already in the corridor, I'll fire the taser at him. If he isn't, I'll just move up the corridor a bit to make sure that he is not on his way. When you carry Anya through the door, I'll follow you and lock it up from the staircase side. How does that sound?"

"On paper, pretty good; let's just hope that no one else is in that corridor when we go into motion."

"That's a big wish; the bathroom area of a disco is always busy. Maybe I should wave a gun around as well just to scare people off."

The bishop nodded.

"Do you know how to fire a taser?" I asked.

"No, but it can't be that hard and I saw a small brochure for it at the bottom of the bag. We just need to make sure it's charged properly."

The food arrived and gave us a diversion. The plan was what it was; there weren't that many options.

We returned to the room around six, as the day was starting to fold down. This time, we took the weapon bag inside and studied the different devices. We figured out how to use the taser and set it up on a charging cradle that we found in one of the bag's side pockets. The bishop tested the stun gun, which crackled loudly as thin, blue electrical waves jumped between the cleats. The shotgun would have been a good candidate to scare bystanders away but it was heavy and I had a hard time handling it with my left hand—the right one being reserved for the taser. I opted

instead for one of the revolvers and started pulling the bullets out of the cylinder.

"You can't do that, Richard," said the bishop. "If you want people to be scared, they have to see the bullets in the chamber."

"But what if I press the trigger by accident in the heat of the moment?"

"Just make sure the safety is engaged; there's no risk."

Before sliding the bullets back into the cylinder, I tested the safety, which made me feel a bit more comfortable.

"Now, I guess we just have to wait for Irene's call," I said.

"Yes. I hope that it happens tonight because I don't feel like dealing with this type of stress for another day or two."

"I know exactly how you feel; the fear is eating me up, too."

"Since I'm supposed to teach you catechism and we have a few hours ahead of us, would you like to get started now?"

I agreed. Somehow, the activity seemed perfectly suited to the moment. Bishop Ignacio launched into a very natural, fluid monologue about the Old Testament at a basic level of comprehension. I vaguely recalled the main concepts but had forgotten how rich a tale the testimony was. The bishop skirted the tired parts of the Old Testament, such as Genesis or the flood, to concentrate instead on personal journeys of tormented characters such as Jacob and Saul. As he progressed through his prose, I realized that the bishop was canvassing around the concept of redemption, certainly not by chance. I followed him down that path wholly, in a desperate quest for courage and meaning as we were pushed together down a corridor that only led to combat.

The phone threw us into the arena with a strident scream. I picked up.

"Yes?"

Irene answered me in Spanish.

"Anya will be at *Prada* two hours from now, at eleven. You will come?"

"We will be there. You will open the doors at the back?"

"Yes. Park on the back street and hide at the bottom of the stairs that lead to the basement. As soon as I get a chance, I'll grab the key and I'll let you in. What's your plan once you get in?"

I explained our strategy; Irene did not dismiss it.

"When Anya and I approach the bathrooms, I'll scream 'Yo necesito a un papi!', Anya is used to hearing me say that when I'm drunk."

"What does that mean?"

"Nevermind what it means. When I say that, come out. I'll hold Anya so she doesn't run away. Don't miss the bodyguard with your taser or it'll get really nasty, really fast."

"Will you come with us in the car?"

"No. I live here. I don't want them to think that I had anything to do with this. If the bodyguard sees me holding Anya, I'll just say that I did so because I was scared. Feel free to give me a good push when you grab her."

Irene was a tough, young lady; I wished I had her determination. She gave us directions to the disco and hung up with a sober “Buena suerte.”

We packed up the weapons and headed for the downtown area. The silence in the car was oppressing. Bishop Ignacio and I broke it at the same time, talking over each other.

“I could use a stiff one...”

“Maybe we could get a drink...”

We smiled and within minutes spotted a bar whose windows revealed a dense crowd inside. Despite the brisk temperature, another dozen or so customers were enjoying their drinks in the large, outside seating area. We joined them and ordered two vodkas on the rocks; straight alcohol was what we were after. We sat mostly in silence for over an hour, each staring in a different direction, giving the liquor a chance to untangle the mess of knots that cramped our stomachs. I had not drunk alcohol in months and my body was hyper-receptive to it. After the second round, I felt calm, strong, and ready to head on to the *OK Corral*. Bishop Ignacio was mellowing as well.

“Just as you said,” he said. “The bishop and the poop picker are on their way to kick some bad-guy butt!”

“That’s right,” I replied, “and let’s go do that before the vodka wears off!”

Bishop Ignacio laughed and we headed for the car under the suspicious stares of the other customers.

Prada. The huge neon-light sign plastered onto the façade of a square, three-story structure was visible several blocks away. It made it easy for us to navigate into the back street well before reaching the building. The club was located in a business area and, aside from a small group of customers lining up at its front door, the streets were completely empty at that time of the night. We parked right in front of the staircase that Irene had described. Without a word, the bishop stepped out of the car and opened the trunk. He came back with the bag of weapons and laid it on his lap when he sat back down in the car. By the roof light, he pulled out the taser and a revolver and handed them to me one at a time, without a word. He reached into the bag again, this time for the stun gun, which he tucked under his silk belt.

“It’s ten-thirty,” he said looking at the car clock. “Let’s get into place, Richard.”

I looked at him with a slow nodding motion, as to thank him for taking this risk with me, or rather for me. He replied with a cheerful smile.

The street was only lit by the shop showcases. As we descended the narrow, steep staircase bordered by two flimsy metal ramps, we dove into a gradient of darkness. When we ended up in a walled-up, pitch-dark

recess, the bishop turned on the stun gun—which doubled as a flashlight—just long enough to verify the location of the basement door. From that point on, we just stood there, in silence and in the dark. Within minutes, the cold stripped off the warm layers from the vodka and fear came back with a vengeance, further enhanced by the stereo basses pounding their way through the walls of the disco.

“I don’t think I can do this, Bishop. I’ll take my chances back in the park,” I whispered and started standing up. Bishop Ignacio grabbed my arm and forced me back down.

“This is not about you anymore, Richard. You have been sent here for Anya’s sake by the only two persons who are still willing to take a chance on you. This time, you do not have the option of walking away.” I did not buy his words but I heard his voice. I did not go back up the steps. I was as weak as ever but I started preparing myself to die a weak death if needed. I just prayed—for myself.

It was a long, long wait. The slapping of the lock on the basement door came just as I had found some peace. A whisper came out.

“Are you there...?”

I recognized Irene’s voice.

“Yes, Irene,” I replied.

“Come quickly!”

We entered a tiny basement with a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. It was packed with cases of drinks and the stench of beer was unsettling. Irene was a tall, thin woman with dark, short hair flattened on her head by a shiny gel. She wore a tight, white bodysuit with matching pumps, which made her look like a really bad girl in a very good way. Unfortunately, I was a very good boy in a really bad way. Who was the fool who said that men will still manage to think of sex at the oddest times...?

“You’ll wait upstairs behind the door. Make sure to keep it closed until you come out,” Irene said, handing me a key and putting an abrupt end to my short digression. “The last thing you want is to have drunk people wandering down here!”

I grabbed the key but did not get any of her explanation as she spoke very faintly and very fast. I looked at the bishop. He let me know with a half-smile that he had understood.

“Now, you just wait for my signal, okay?” said Irene.

The bishop and I both nodded and Irene walked up the staircase leading to the first floor and disappeared through the door at the end of it.

“Lock the door behind her, Richard,” Bishop Ignacio said as he ran back up the stairs.

Chapter 11

September 16, Year 2.

While we choked with fear in the dark behind the door, on the other side life was streaming happily. Excited, youthful voices, mostly female, kept coming and going at the rhythm of squeaky doors. I tried to visualize the corridor scene with at least a few bystanders in addition to our target group. I realized that I had not asked any details about Anya's bodyguard and that I would be hard-pressed to pick him out if several young men stood in the corridor. I did not have a chance to devise a strategy. Irene's loud call filled up the corridor without warning.

"Yo necesito a un papi!"

Another female voice echoed hers with laughter.

"One, two, three!" I whispered instinctively as I turned the lock and pulled the door wide open. I jumped out first and ran past Irene and Anya who flattened their bodies against the wall in reflex. A couple that was entering the hall turned around and ran out. I took position two-thirds down the corridor, pointing the taser to its entrance. A quick glance back gave me a snapshot of the bishop leaning down to pick up Anya, inanimate on the floor. Irene rushed behind me and stormed into the women's bathroom to my right.

Just as the door swung closed behind her, a young man burst into the corridor and froze upon seeing the taser pointed at him. It did not stop him long. He smiled at me and slid his right hand to his back, under his sports jacket. I fired the taser, aiming at his chest. The wires jumped out in the right direction, accompanied by a crackling noise, but they inflected their course to end up planted in the boy's right thigh. He cowered with a loud grunt, his face distorted by rage. With great pain as his nerves failed to respond properly, he lifted his hand, clenched on the gun. His muscles were so stiffened up by the electrical shock that he could not manage to point the gun straight at me and ended up firing three shots down the corridor before dropping the gun in front of him with a wince of pain. I rushed to him and kicked the gun away from his knees. He tried to grab my leg but had no strength and I easily broke loose.

As I ran back to the basement door, I was hugely relieved not to see the bishop or Anya on the ground. They had made it out. I locked the door behind me with the key and paused for a brief instant, mesmerized by the three beams of hard light blazing through small round holes in the door. I got a second adrenaline rush just thinking how close a call we had faced and flew down the stairs and out of the building with excitement. As I ran past the rear window of the car, I saw the bishop leaning on Anya's still body, probably administering the ether to her. I jumped into the front seat and started the car with hysterical cheers.

“We did it, Ignacio! We did it! The bishop and the poop picker! We did it!”

“Don’t talk, Richard. It’s not over; they are going to try to run after us,” replied the bishop with a grave voice that sobered me up instantly. “Get us on the highway as fast as you can,”

While at the motel, we had discussed a rudimentary escape strategy, which consisted of making a right turn at every third intersection, immediately followed by a left turn in order to take the first parallel street. The approach was intended to help us lose potential pursuers while still heading in the direction of the right highway. I followed that plan and made sure not to speed. There were at least half a dozen reasons why a police stop would have meant huge trouble for us. After twenty minutes or so, I eased the car onto the access ramp of the *Ruta Nacional 9* highway with a feeling of great exaltation. The rear-view mirror was dark except for a faint single light far back and the highway would take us all the way home in a few hours.

“Well, bishop, can we celebrate now?” I said, ecstatic and slightly inebriated by the vapors of ether in the car.

No response.

“Bishop, don’t tell me you fell asleep at a time like this!” I insisted, louder.

No response. I reached behind the two front seats and slapped one of the bishop’s thighs.

“Come on, bishop, don’t be a party pooper!”

No response; no movement.

I slowed the car down a bit, turned on the roof light, and looked back. The bishop tall frame was still leaning on Anya’s body and his face was buried into the groove of her neck. The position was odd, even for a sleepy, defrocked clergyman.

“Bishop, are you okay?!” I asked, seized by a bad feeling.

The silence that echoed my cry was dreadful. I started looking for a rest area, which I found after a very long couple of miles. It consisted of a small parking lot—totally empty—and a gas station—closed. I drove to the end of the parking lot, turned the roof light on, stepped out of the car, and feverishly opened the back door on the bishop’s side. The cause of Ignacio’s silence lay with three neat, small holes in the purple fabric of his cassock, clustered in the lower section of his back. I stared at them for a few seconds in disbelief before reaching for the bishop’s shoulder and pulling him back toward me. His head tumbled loosely on the back of the seat, as if his neck had liquefied. His eyes were wide open, his mouth closed, and his usually expressive face was devoid of any sentiment. His hands were clasped over a pool of fresh blood covering his stomach area. I checked his pulse both at the neck and at the wrist and did not feel the slightest beat of hope. Anya’s bright yellow dress was soaked with the bishop’s blood as well, almost in a tie-dye pattern. She was still unconscious—her chest

rising up and down steadily—oblivious to the end of a life inches from her shoulder.

I dropped down to my knees and laid my forehead onto Bishop Ignacio's hands. They were still warm, as to comfort me one last time. I cried with the desperation of a toddler and pushed back any thought that might try to break through the pain, especially the kind that would suggest that my friend was gone and that he was gone because he had taken a chance on me. I was pulled back to the scene by a faint sigh coming from Anya's side of the car. As I lifted my head, her arm was crawling up her chest until the fingers touched her face. She was disoriented but she was regaining consciousness. It was not hard to imagine her response if she were to wake up covered in blood, with a cadaver lying by her side.

I stood up, grabbed the bishop under the arms, and dragged him out of the car. I rushed to the driver's side, opened the trunk, and returned to the bishop's body. I tried to lift it but without success; his body was long, dense, and now almost elastic; I only seemed able to pull half of it up. I ended up dragging him behind the car and shoving limbs, shoulders, and hips up one at a time against the car's rear until the whole body finally tipped down into the trunk. I arranged the limbs in a respectful position before closing the trunk.

When I came back to Anya, her head was bobbing and her eyes started to crack open. I had no choice. The weapon bag, which still lay on the floor on the passenger's side, contained several long zip-ties probably intended for the exact purpose that I had in mind. Anya tried to crawl away as I laid her down in the back seat but she was too limp to have much impact. I tied her wrists and ankles and although she was not yet able to scream, I gagged her with a long brown scarf that she had tied around her waist. Every one of my moves was reminiscent of a maniac's routine and even though I tried to tell myself that it was all for Anya's well-being in the end, I felt like a dirty old bastard.

"Don't be scared, Anya," I said as her gesticulations intensified. "I will not hurt you. I will just take you to a friend's house where you will find some help. You will not be raped or hurt in any way. Our goal is only to detox you."

I was trying to be specific to appease her panic but that only got her to kick the door with increasing intensity at every round. I sat back into the car as she kept pounding the door with her feet. Just as I left the parking lot and turned to re-enter the highway, I could have sworn that the car lights had swept over the silhouette of a man who stood immobile by the roadside fifty yards back or so. A tall, thin man wearing a long, nineteenth century-style black redingote... or just an odd-looking shadow. At that point, choosing between optical illusion and insanity was the least of my concerns. I was now obsessed with completing the mission, if only to give Bishop Ignacio's death a greater meaning.

I only stopped twice, for gas; both times, I picked the pump farthest away from the small convenience store. On the bright side, Anya had quickly run out of steam. She had gone from kicking the door to whining continuously through her gag, and finally seemed to have fallen into a comatose state. She was now inanimate despite a steady breathing. On the somber side, I had to go into the trunk and rummage through Bishop Ignacio's pants pockets to retrieve his wallet and credit card to pay for gas. For the first time, I saw his cadaver. His face was now livid and the pungent smell of blood was the only vestige of his once-spirited life.

For the entire duration of the ride, I was unable to align two coherent thoughts. I felt that I had reacted adequately to the bishop's death but I could not see the path ahead, besides delivering him and Anya to Madame. I drove with a robotic persistence toward that one goal, postponing all emotions and analyses. I reached Madame's estancia around noon. She was walking up the stairs, headed for the patio, when she heard me pull up the dirt driveway. She turned around and stood still, halfway up the staircase. I parked the car right below her. She looked through the side window and saw Anya lying down in the back seat.

"Is she okay?" she asked when I stepped out of the car.

"Yes, she is," I replied as I walked around the front of the vehicle and appeared to her. She stared at the brown streaks on my shirt and pants, assessed my physical condition by a quick top-to-bottom scan, and realized that I was not the one hurt.

"Where's Bishop Ignacio?" she asked with a sudden anxiety.

"In the trunk," I replied sternly without moving.

Madame stared at the back of the car for a moment with a look of disbelief on her face, and then sat down slowly on the stairs, her elbows resting on her knees, her hands holding the sides of her face. Her eyes still locked on the closed trunk let two round tears roll out, which tumbled down her cheeks and ended up crashing onto the gray stone.

"But Irene called me..." she said under her breath as if talking to herself, "to tell me that it had gone very well. She saw everything from the bathroom; how you got the bodyguard under control, how the bishop took Anya out of the club..." Madame paused for a brief instant to rein in her anguish. "She mentioned gunshots but said that they just hit a door."

"They went *through* the door," I replied, "and the bishop was probably still behind it when they did. He managed to get Anya into the car but he died minutes after that."

Madame stood up and yelled, "Fernando! Jaime!"

Within seconds, two employees ran out onto the patio. Madame pointed at the car and gave them a set of orders with such force that her words sounded distorted to me. The taller man rushed to the driver's side and popped the trunk open. He then walked to the back of the car and

stood immobile, staring inside the trunk, until Madame encouraged him more gently to take the bishop inside the house. The other man lifted Anya from the back seat and carried her up the stairs as she kicked her legs up and down with little energy. Madame followed the procession and left me there, at the bottom of the stairs.

I stopped by my dorm to change into my work clothes and headed straight for the showers. I did not meet anyone along the way; they were all in the vineyards. When I returned to the room, I crashed on my bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. When the voices of my roommates woke me up, I sat on the bed ready to follow them to dinner but quickly realized that it was dark outside and that they were actually dressing up into their work clothes. I looked at my watch; it was six-forty in the morning. I had slept for more than eighteen hours without as much as a bathroom trip. I started putting on my work clothes but felt queasy; I had not eaten in thirty-six hours. I left the room and hurried to the cafeteria where I just grabbed from the counter a half-loaf of bread and several slices of roast beef under the outraged eyes of the two kitchen employees there. I made it back on time to jump onto the truck with the others.

Luckily on that day, work was not too physical. We had to fill up holes dug up in the alleys by the repeated passage of heavy machinery, so no one would get hurt stepping into them by mistake. It was light hoe and rake work. The morning snack was delivered as usual but the truck never returned for lunch. Around three in the afternoon, my coworkers headed back to the drop point as the truck climbed the hill. I had no idea why the daily routine was altered. I followed the motion and ended up with the others on the truck, heading back to the estancia. As soon as my roommates entered our room, they proceeded to change into their weekend clothes, the ones they would slip on before leaving the property on Saturdays. I did not follow suit; if they were to go out, surely I would not be included, and so there was no need for me to change.

I stood stupidly by my bed, disconcerted by the unusual routine. One of the brothers took pity on me, walked to my locker, pulled the suit out of it, and laid it on the bed. Without a word or even a look, he turned around and went on to shave. I put on my suit, waited for them to walk out of the building, and followed them. When we stepped out, the other workers, all in their weekend outfits, some even in cheap suits, were headed for the track that circled the buildings and led to the front of the main house. When we reached there, we formed a small crowd that pooled around the bottom of the staircase. Everyone was silent. I now had a good sense of the reason of the gathering.

Madame appeared under the archway, wearing a remarkably subdued outfit; a straight black dress, flat shoes, and no jewelry. Stripped of her artifacts, I would have expected her to look older and extinguished. On the contrary, she looked distinguished and innocent—almost fragile. She pointed her arm to the patio behind her and the men started climbing the

stairs in a single file. I joined the line; when I reached the patio, I noticed the coffin, by the monk statue, propped on a table covered by black linen that dropped all the way to the ground. The casket itself was wrapped into the bishop's cassock—which had been cleaned of the blood—and crowned by his massive silver cross, which shone with an unexpected brightness under the gray clouds.

Once everyone had settled on the patio, an old priest, in a plain white robe started saying a prayer. Behind him the housemaids, all dressed in black and wearing lace veils over their faces, sobbed discreetly. Twenty minutes or so into the sermon, the priest stepped aside and Madame took over. She delivered a long, heartfelt eulogy for Bishop Ignacio that seemed to affect even the roughest of the peasants who were fighting tears back. I did not understand all of the statements since Madame's Spanish was dense and fast, but it was clear that the bishop was genuinely loved by all on the property. Once she stopped speaking, Madame looked at the priest who nodded back at her. She proceeded to walk among the crowd, touching the shoulders of selected men who in response would go stand by the coffin. Once five pallbearers had been chosen, she looked around and walked through the crowd straight toward me with a tense face. She touched my right shoulder and waved her head slightly to invite me to follow her. I joined the other men by the casket. The priest and Madame took position in front of it, facing away. The tallest of the pallbearers gave us a signal to pick up the coffin and as soon as we did, Madame started the procession.

We left the patio, descended the stairs, and headed straight for the hills. The dirt track was uneven and the coffin was very heavy. I was at the back and the slope shifted some extra weight my way. We crossed two long plots of vines, heading straight uphill; my shoulder was hurting terribly. We finally arrived in a small clearing within the patchwork of vineyards that I had never noticed before—a green patch of well-kept grass that faced west to the mountain chain and held a dozen plain, cement crosses. I followed the lead of the front pallbearer and we let the coffin down onto the ground next to a long, deep dug-up hole surmounted by a new cross without any name on it. We stepped aside as people were queuing up to pay their final respects to Bishop Ignacio one at a time. I looked at the long line and, for the first time since the ceremony had started, let my emotions permeate. I cried with the same reserve as all the men and women of the land around me, saying goodbye to a man who had given his life to hold the door open on mine. After the ceremony, everyone headed back downhill. I stayed behind with the other pallbearers to lower the coffin into the ground and cover it with dirt.

When we walked back to the barracks, I saw that all the employees had gathered in the cafeteria. I started heading for my dorm but the lead pallbearer grabbed my arm and with a brief head-swing directed me to follow him. I entered the canteen with the other pallbearers but they

quickly spread out, leaving me to stand alone. The other men were sitting at the tables on which clusters of soda cans and snack trays had been set up. They all spoke softly; the name of Ignacio kept popping up around the room like sound fireflies. I sat at the end of a bench. No one ever came to talk to me but I never got a single bad stare either. The boy whom I had failed to help during the fight two weeks earlier was sitting three tables away, facing me. He never looked in my direction. I suppose that by bringing Bishop Ignacio home, I had regained my right to be ignored.

Chapter 12

September 19, Year 2.

The day following Bishop Ignacio's funeral shockingly resembled a normal day at the estancia, as if he had never existed. The workers joked and jostled one another at lunchtime as they always did and the bishop's name was not mentioned once. It was a long, painful day during which we had to lay down rubber tubing along the vines that would drip water by each plant during the dry season. I could barely move the heavy rolls of tubing; a couple of them got away from me and rolled a hundred feet downhill before I could catch them. That had at least the benefit of amusing my coworkers who heckled me—albeit in a congenial fashion—as I pushed the rolls back up the hill. When I dropped out of the truck at the end of the workday, I was exhausted. The rude physical work combined with the emotional drain of the past days had taken a heavy toll on my energy. I even considered going straight to bed. After all, what would Madame do? Drag me out of it? I abandoned the idea when I realized that I needed to see her. She would probably ask details about Bishop Ignacio's death and I was eager to hear how Anya was; after all, I was the one who had brought her there against her will. I pushed myself back into action mode. I showered, ate my dinner in the canteen, and changed into my suit, with minimal thinking all along.

Madame was already on the patio when I arrived. I found some solace in noticing the return of glamour. The colors, the textures, the shapes were all back; insolent challenge to the wake of death. She reminded me of the photograph of a tree that had managed to break through the asphalt of a remote section of the Trans-Amazonian highway and now forced the few vehicles that passed by to drive around its defiant trunk. I followed her to the classroom. As I expected, she wanted to know the details.

"What happened in that disco?" were her first words to me, as she did away with casual introductions.

I described the detail of our expedition: Irene's help, the basement door, the curvy taser, the escape, the blood on the bishop's lap. She listened with an intense gaze but never expressed emotion. She had already sorted out her feelings.

"You're sure that Bishop Ignacio was dead when you stopped?" she asked.

"Yes; I checked two vital points several times and anyway, no one could have survived that much bleeding."

"Then why did you bring him all the way here? If you had been pulled over, you would have been as good as dead. In jail, you would have been lynched twice by the inmates; once for being suspected of killing a man of God and once for kidnapping a local girl. You must have thought of that.

Why didn't you leave the bishop on that parking lot, set Anya free, and drive off? At least now you had a car."

"I did realize I had a car. A car to drive away from the man who died trying to help me and the girl he tried to save from herself. Drive where, Madame? To a place where I could be even more of a loser?"

If there is such a thing as a gentle look, then that's what I received that evening from Madame in response; she did not smile or even relax her face. She just found the most reserved way to let me know that I had not been wrong.

"Is Anya okay?" I asked, taking advantage of the soft spot.

"Anya won't be okay for a while," Madame replied. "We'll be weaning her off cocaine the hard way and it'll be very tough on her, but she'll be under constant surveillance and a doctor will come by every other day to check her out. It'll just take a while."

That night, I resumed my studies. Dr. Lavlyk gave me a steep, two-hour long astrophysics lecture. I tried to scribble down as many anchors as possible so I could remap at least the main concepts later on, during my study session. When Madame announced that the third hour of class would be dealing with Dutch master painters, I looked at her with surprise.

"I'm having an arts class tonight? With whom?"

"I realize that it's very early after Father Ignacio's passing but we have to keep with your original study plan," said Madame. "I asked a friend of mine to help out, Dr. Kudova; she is Russian but teaches at the College of Arts at the University of Glasgow."

"How come all my teachers are from Europe? The others are not good enough for you?"

"That's not the reason. We need you to be educated in a European way so you'll be able to leverage the knowledge that you are receiving when connecting with people there."

"When and for what purpose?"

"Not for a while and we'll discuss that when the time is right. Focus on learning right now."

Madame established the connection on the laptop and a woman in her mid-forties, quite attractive despite a haughty facial expression, materialized on the wall display. She barely greeted me before starting her lecture, during most of which she would bring up paintings on the screen and comment on them while pointing at specific areas with a red dot. Her English was smooth and though the commentary got quite technical at times, it was a pleasant class to follow. The characters featured on the paintings were not very handsome but they were so realistic that by the end of the hour, I felt as if I had gone out to a seventeenth-century party and hung with some real people.

Through the weeks, then months, my work-study routine took hold. During daytime, I witnessed every little step of the cycle in a vine's

development at springtime. The budding stage, the stretching of the shoots, the unfolding of the leaves, the formation of the tiny clusters of green balls that would become grapes—an outburst of spring in the Southern Hemisphere almost as frenzied as on a time-lapse recording. My body itself underwent a remodeling as the weeks went by. My muscles toned up, my stomach flattened out, and I sensed a level of physical strength greater than I would have ever imagined my body able to produce. One day in late November, a full-length mirror was set up on the wall by the showers and I saw my whole body for the first time in over a year. Lean, toned, and tanned; three words that I had never associated before with my decent but sedentary figure. I got quite fascinated with the emergence of that new me but then, I did not get out much. My endurance in the field grew accordingly and I was usually able to keep pace with the other workers, regardless of the job, although most days would leave me exhausted. I did not mind that physical fatigue, though. In fact, I had somewhat grown addicted to it. Toward the end of the workday, it would translate into a light buzz that would sharpen my senses and clarify my mind.

I had been taking evening classes for more than three months, and under Madame's steady baton, the schedule had been unrelenting. I often felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of materials to assimilate every night but I had so far managed to keep up with the pace and pass my three end-of-month exams—albeit with less-than-stellar grades. My teachers were excellent and although they always maintained a clear distance with me, I could tell that they appreciated my efforts. Even the French teacher had mellowed a bit, although he could still burst into formidable screaming spells when I failed to remember basic grammatical forms. During such outbursts, Madame would laugh discretely behind the desk, as the flowery French expletives probably reminded her of home.

Time had not helped me sort out Madame. She had never missed a single meeting with me; she had never been late, either. She was always dressed up—her wardrobe had to be gigantic—even though all she did every evening while I learned and studied was read, write, or process paperwork. I felt increasingly embarrassed by the amount of time that she invested monitoring me and even suggested once that I could have the study sessions on my own but she flatly dismissed the suggestion. Our exchanges were very limited. They occurred during the breaks between disciplines and usually revolved around ancillary matters such as my needs for toiletry or the dry-cleaning of a suit.

Only one exchange broke through the wall erected between us. On an unusually hot evening for spring, I had a hard time studying after my three classes. Madame wore an especially glamorous outfit—even for her—and

she hinted that she had plans to go out later. Her skirt was very tight and in order to sit at the desk, she had to pull it up above the knees, revealing just a hint of thigh. A hint to a man who has not been with a woman in more than a year can turn into a Darwinian voyage. From the helm of my proud man-ship, I stared into her uncharted and glorious landscape for what was probably too long a moment, until I realized that she was looking back at me with an air of contempt. I immediately dove back into my class materials but we parted that night on a fairly cold note.

The next evening, Madame greeted me on the patio with her usual attitude and yet another entrancing outfit, indicating that the past night's incident was erased. I sat through three back-to-back French classes, as my music teacher was indisposed, and before I had a chance to begin my study session, Madame asked me to grab my notes and follow her. We descended the staircase and took a long corridor that ended on a hemispherical wall displaying three tall, closed doors. Madame opened the rightmost door but did not go through it.

"Take a shower and go to bed," she instructed and walked away into the corridor. I stepped into a bedroom. It was small and without a window, but its space was opened up by a large circular mirror affixed over a fireplace and an array of tiny luminaries scattered along the walls. The bed, linens, and two fancy armchairs were of a bright white. The small bathroom attached to the room also included a narrow walk-in closet. I undressed and hastened into the shower; I was not sure how much time I would be allocated for the grooming.

I soaped up and scrubbed down twice. Despite Madame's ambiguous "... go to bed," my intuition wanted to believe that sex was a more likely outcome to the evening than sleep in a fancy bedroom. There wasn't any perfume in the bathroom, so I resolved to rub a bit of the fragrant body soap behind my ears. I was pretty sure that Casanova never smelled of juicy pomegranate and wild cherry blossoms when entering his conquests' boudoirs but I was condemned to innovate. When I slipped into bed and out of action mode, a sudden panic took hold of me. "Come on, now, you've done this before. Eye of the tiger!" I kept repeating to myself in vain. Yes, I had done it before but... Madame?! She intimidated me fully dressed and three yards away! I started feeling like the frail Tiananmen Square student standing still on the path of an approaching assault tank, clinging to his two small shopping bags. And on top of that, smelling like a fruit salad!

Thankfully, I did not have to wait long. The clicking of high heels on the corridor's hardwood floors signaled the launch of the hostilities. The handle of the door pivoted and the door cracked open. A manicured hand adorned with two plain gold rings slid through and flipped the light switch off. The door was closed before my eyes could adjust to the dark. A powerful, complex fragrance immediately diffused through the room and delivered to my senses a commanding promise. I could hear the whispers

of fabric being ruffled, followed by two thumps on the wooden floor. I felt the sheets being lifted up and a very warm, very dense envelope of flesh pushing against my flank. Her owner never spoke but she immediately reached out to me with a form of tenderness that I would never have expected from anyone but my wife. Fired up by the long sexual and emotional abstinence that I had endured as well as by the sheer intimacy brought to me by my partner, I responded with a passion new to me. Only hours later did I end up crashing onto a very far shore.

I woke up on it alone in response to the sound of the bedroom door closing. It was four in the morning. I stared at the ceiling, still immersed in a gentle torpor for a few minutes, and finally resolved to get up, put my clothes on, and head back to my quarters. I barely had a chance to crash-land on my not-so-white sheets there that my roommates started gearing up for the workday. I felt tired and at peace. I wished my lover had given me a chance to thank her before leaving but, in the end, it did not make any difference, as I would probably never see her again. I just hoped that, one day, Madame would at least share with me the first name of her warm friend.

Chapter 13

December 12, Year 2.

By the foothills of the *Sierras de Córdoba*—I had learned from Madame the name of the mountain range behind us—summer never got very hot, but thunderstorms were frequent and impressive in their intensity. When one would approach, usually around mid-afternoon, Pancho Villa would herd us back to the safety of the compound and call off the workday. The guys would congregate into the TV room, to watch soccer or play cards, while I sat by the window in my room and watched the thunderstorm blast the hills, as if infuriated by being held captive on my side of the Sierras by the mountains. These and Sunday evenings were my only times off but I did not yearn for more leisure time, especially since I would not have had any way to occupy it. I actually preferred my studious evenings with Madame.

Since the night she had arranged for my little romantic impromptu—most likely to prevent my hormones from interfering with my concentration—Madame and I had been communicating more. She had made it a habit to leverage my breaks between classes as small conversation platforms. She would throw a question at me, usually on a topic relevant to the class that had just ended, and for ten minutes, we would spar back and forth on the matter. She was clearly trying to gauge my intellectual progress but after a while, I could tell that she enjoyed the quick and increasingly witted exchanges. On a couple of occasions, we even finished a discussion as we headed back to the patio. One night though, just as we were about to part, she dropped a comment that took me by surprise.

“Richard, since we have not found a suitable replacement for Bishop Ignacio, I will step in myself and take care of your catechism classes.”

I remained speechless. The woman who called herself Madame and had just mediated a gallant encounter for me, the carnal creature whose fashion style would have turned Gina Lollobrigida insecure, the instigator of a girl’s kidnapping and sequestration; that woman would now be in charge of dusting off my godliness?! As often when dumbfounded, I reacted stupidly.

“Then I guess, we’ll spend quite a bit of time on Mary Magdalene’s gospel,” I replied, laughing out loud.

I did not see Madame move. The slap came out of nowhere and stunned me more than it hurt.

“How dare you liken me to a prostitute?” Madame said with great contempt. “Because I know that is what you meant, you, chauvinistic peon, even though it is not clear whether Mary Magdalene really was a prostitute or not. And even if she was, she was also the one of Jesus’ friends to stand by him until the end.”

"I didn't mean—"

"Yes, you *did* mean! Just because I enjoy dressing like a woman and I acknowledged once your need to be a man, you have already given yourself license to call me a whore. Did a whore give you shelter here? Did a whore make all the arrangements so you could receive a top education here? Did a whore stand by you every night for months as you learned and studied? Was it a whore, Keiffer?!" she shouted. Within seconds, a man came running under the arches. Madame stopped him by raising her hand without even looking in his direction. I was trashed.

"I am so sorry... So sorry..." I said and slowly walked away. I did not hear Madame's heels on the stones. The raspy "r" in her French declination of "whore" echoed in my mind. I could imagine her standing tall, still in battle mode, watching me leave with disgust.

I slept very little that night. I worked very little the next day. I kept rehashing over and over in my head the past night's clash with Madame. Despite relentless efforts to find a justification for my behavior, I was unable to dig up the slightest extenuating circumstance. I did not want to be that wrong; wrong maybe, but not that much. It was close to the end of the workday that I finally accepted the shame and started thinking about redemption. I had very little time and virtually no resource to work on it.

I stood still on the burning stones of the patio for several minutes before Madame's shadow materialized under the archway. Her arrival relieved and alarmed me at the same time. She walked up to me with a still face. I extended my arms and presented to her an intricate arrangement of leafy vine shoots woven into a rudimentary basket that held a colorful mix of green grapes and wild flowers. She was clearly taken aback by my initiative.

"This is without a doubt the corniest, most childish present that has ever been presented to me," she said with an ambiguous tone of voice. "You are offering grapes to a woman who owns over a hundred acres' worth of vineyards and this in a basket engineered thanks to the mutilation of a couple of her vines," she added without pity. I kept holding out my basket, eyes locked on hers.

"The wild flowers are a nice touch..." she conceded after a long moment as she grabbed the made-up basket and signaled me to follow her. As soon as I approached my table, Madame, standing tall on the stage declared calmly, "Never forget again, Mister Keiffer: I am neither your friend, nor your wife, and much less your mother. You are here for a specific purpose and my only role is to help you achieve it. Respect will never be optional here."

The very next day, Madame held her first catechism class. I was amazed to find in her words Father Ignacio as if he had stood right by us with his mischievous smile. Madame acknowledged that he had been her mentor for religious education and it sounded like the process had created a strong bond between them. After a few minutes, I forgot that I was being

taught of God by a woman in stilettos and see-through sleeves and started following her down that path. One evening, a few weeks later, we did speak of Mary Magdalene. I still suspected that Madame had first-hand experience with the seven demons; an impression further comforted by the fact that her core message was one of atonement and redemption for sinners. Nevertheless, I redeemed myself that night through respect and silence.

Two days before Christmas, the entire staff was invited to a party at the main house. It seemed to be an annual tradition. All the workers had brought suits from home for that occasion and I was amused by the almost girlish care that my roommates—usually very manly and odorous—applied to their grooming in preparation for the evening. Once they finished applying their respective colognes, I was surprised not to see a mushroom cloud rise from the center of the room. Of my two suits, I wore for the occasion the one that fit me best. Around eight in the evening, a small Christmas bell sounding like the Salvation Army one was rung outside the buildings and my roommates signaled to me that it was time to go. As we all walked to the main house, I started perspiring in my suit already. It was close to ninety degrees out there and I had a hard time getting it into my head that it was Christmas season.

The party was staged on the patio and the arches that led to it were all highlighted by strings of pearly lights. The patio itself had been decorated for the occasion in a magnificent manner. Tall white drapes dropped from the walls at regular intervals all around the square space, each holding tiny lights of all colors seemingly woven into the fabric. Several buffets had been set up, each covered with a silver-toned tablecloth. They displayed an armada of stainless-steel containers propped onto food warmers whose candles formed a ring of fire suspended in midair around the patio. The scenery was airy and elegant. On the way to the place, I had noticed a large catering truck parked down the dirt track and I did not recognize any of the personnel standing behind the buffets. The cooks and house staff who usually served us in the cafeteria stood that night in front of the buffets in surprisingly sleek apparel. Madame was already on the stage, working the crowd in an ankle-long sequined dress and very sparkly jewelry that I suspected to be real. She moved from group to group, addressing the workers by name and thanking them for their work over the elapsed year. They responded with some embarrassment but it was obvious that they loved her reaching out to them and that they had a genuine respect for her. Seeing the expensive layout that she would put out for farmhands and housemaids that night, I understood that respect a bit better.

I stood on my own, in a corner of the patio, but every time the tray of champagne flutes came by, I would snag a couple of them, despite the

disapproving look from the waiter. After three cycles of that bubbly merry-go-round, I felt much more a part of the event and started looking at the female guests with growing empathy. One especially held my attention; she was always in the cafeteria preparing the evening service when I ate my dinner before the others. On a couple of occasions, I had caught her slipping an inquisitive stare at me and, with the champagne's help, I was now clearly understanding how mysterious and fascinating a man I might have appeared to her. That night, she had shed her prudish maid uniform for what women's magazines call a "little black dress" and I saw her wear high heels for the first time. I waved at her discreetly but the crowd was in the way. I tried again and this time she noticed me and gave me a polite smile. That was just the encouragement I needed to go on the war path. I walked through the crowd straight to her with fierce assurance. As soon as she noticed that I was heading for her, she walked away with fierce assurance and vanished behind a group of guests. I froze, turned around, and walked back to my corner with fierce assurance. As I tried very hard to pretend that nothing had happened, I caught Madame's glance, projected through the necks of two dozen guests. She probably had seen everything and she actually seemed more worried than amused or upset.

Seeking shelter from the embarrassment, I left the patio and took a few steps under the arches. All the way down the archway, under a roof of Christmas lights, stood a very pale young woman who just stared into the night, her back turned to the celebration. I walked up to her.

"Hello, Anya," I said softly as I approached her.

She reacted with a small start and took two steps back after realizing who I was.

"Don't go," I said, "I'm not here to hurt you. You robbed me; I kidnapped you. We're even as it is."

Anya did not move. I was amazed to discover her new face; a face of hardship, a face of abandonment. Her cheeks had caved in, her eyes were underlined with dark crescents, and her hair looked dry and unsettled. Above all, life seemed to have drained out of her. She wore a baggy jogging suit and flip-flops. She had nothing in common with the dashing young woman who had lured me into a trap in Buenos Aires. She did not even look like a lost young woman—just like a lost shadow.

"Anya, you're a freaking mess!" I said, unleashed by the champagne buzz. "Let's go. We are going to your room."

She looked at me as she would have a Mongolian warrior about to rampage her hut and innocence. I grabbed her by the arm and dragged her forward.

"Come on; show me to your place. We're going to fix this wreck and get you ready for the party."

She resisted briefly and then followed me; she even ended up leading me up a corridor. Once we got in front of what I assumed to be her bedroom, she hesitated and looked back. I turned around and saw a

middle-aged man standing tall at the end of the corridor. He had followed us. I looked straight at him and raised my hand with a smile to indicate that everything was okay. He did not come closer. He did not have to—the stern expression on his face was enough of a warning.

I opened the door and invited Anya to step in. I followed her but left the door open behind us.

“Where’s your closet?” I asked.

Anya did not respond but walked mechanically through a side door that opened into a walk-in closet. There were several garments hung up there, but all very casual—mostly jeans and T-shirts. To the side of the rack hung, on its own, the bright yellow dress that Anya wore on the night of her kidnapping. The brown scarf that she had wrapped around her waist and the pumps that she wore with that ensemble lay on a small shelf close to the floor. The garments had been dry-cleaned and no longer bore any stigma from the bloody night. I hesitated for a brief instant, grabbed them, and laid them on Anya’s bed.

“No, not that!” said Anya with such force that it instantly squashed my buzz.

“That’s all you have here that is remotely suitable for the party, Anya,” I said. “I know what memories are associated with this outfit, but whether they will continue to live on it or not is entirely up to you. You can go on living through the Christmas season looking like a rag or you can walk into that party out there looking like the enchanting young woman I met in a coffee shop just a few months ago.”

I was conscious of how weak my arguments were but I sensed that the yellow dress had a wild card hidden in it. Madame would never have had the blood-drenched garment cleaned up and placed in Anya’s closet without a good reason. To my relief, Anya picked up the clothes and shoes from the bed, walked into the bathroom, and closed the door behind her. *Enchanting* might have been the magic word, or better yet: *rag*; either way, I had managed to push a button.

When she came out of the bathroom, I had already prepared my words.

“Yes, much better Anya; much, much better! Not done, though. Makeup and jewelry, girl! A few months from now, you’ll be able to do without them but for the time being, you still need a little help from these friends.”

In order to pass the message in a softer way, I had mimicked the tone and language of a caricatural gay character on a popular TV show. Somehow, it worked. Anya had a faint smile and returned to the bathroom without argument. This time, she left the door wide open; I caught her image in the mirror. Anya was applying eyeliner with a sad expression on her face, reminiscent of that of an old woman—once beautiful—and who is now without illusion as to the magic that cosmetics may still bring her. The makeup cream and lipstick did make a difference on Anya, though; by the

time she clasped behind her neck a fine gold chain matching her dangling earrings, she had lit a big smile on my face, which she caught in the mirror. She acknowledged it with a timid nod and grabbed the arm I offered her when she stepped out of the bathroom. I escorted her out of the building, under the watchful eye of her bodyguard still standing at a distance.

As we walked through the archway and toward the patio, her grip tightened around my arm.

"Relax, Anya," I said. "You look fantastic; just enjoy the beautiful night and the compliments that will rain on you. Live a little tonight, okay? I'm sure alcohol is still off-limits but fun is not."

Anya's grip did not ease up until we walked into the crowd. I looked for Madame; I needed for her to approve my initiative with Anya. I could not afford another clash with her. She was at the center of a pack of farmhands in suits and seemed to enjoy without reserve the frenzy with which they all competed for her attention. I waved my hand at her several times; she eventually took notice. When she realized that Anya was on my arm, the smile on her face faded instantly. She excused herself and pierced the crowd to approach us.

"I thought that you might enjoy some female company," I said, falsely merry, when Madame reached us.

"You thought right," Madame replied soberly after scanning Anya's outfit. "Anya, it is so nice of you to join us. You look fabulous, *ma chérie*. Are you enjoying the party?"

"We just got here, Madame, but I think I will," Anya replied in English to acknowledge my presence.

"Then, let's make sure of it!" said Madame. "Richard, you know the men around us better than I do. Whose company might Anya enjoy most?"

I looked around and ended up pointing to the young man who had been pummeled the night of the invasion by the neighbors' workers.

"The young fellow over there is very popular with the crew. He is a good worker and quite a funny character."

When Madame grabbed Anya's arm, I withdrew mine and watched them walk up to the young man. Madame introduced Anya to him with some formality; intimidated, he responded with an exaggerated deference. He relaxed a bit when Madame walked away. He offered a coupe of champagne to Anya; when she declined, he went to one of the tables, poured a glass of orange juice, and brought it back to her with a wide smile. I did not start drinking again. I felt a bit like a stressed father chaperoning his daughter's first prom and could not take my eyes away from Anya. The young man—keen on delivering on Madame's assignment—worked hard to entertain the young woman, despite her distant attitude. He even enlisted the help of two other young coworkers

and Anya gradually relaxed. She even laughed aloud a couple of times as the boys seemingly recreated the final scene of *Rocky*, where the boxer cries out “Adrian!” to his beloved wife at the end of the match with a face grotesquely distorted by the blows of his opponent.

Madame was always well surrounded but she, too, often pointed her stare in Anya’s direction. She caught me looking at her and tilted her head to invite me under the archway.

“You took a big chance on that one, Mister Keiffer,” she said without anger when I joined her there. Her eyes were locked on the group from which Anya’s bright yellow dress stood out.

“She looked terrible when I saw her under the arches,” I said. “I couldn’t imagine that being removed from the party would have had any kind of therapeutic benefit.”

“You were right. I tried to get her to dress up and join us but she refused.”

“By the time I approached her, she was all alone. I think that she had already softened up a bit. I just got to her at the right moment. We need to make sure everything stays smooth for her tonight, though.”

“The boys wouldn’t be foolish enough to try anything with her and even if one got drunk and made a stupid move, one of my men is monitoring Anya at all times; he would step in right away.”

“I know; I saw him. Let me ask you: How about the yellow dress? Why did you keep it, and in Anya’s room of all places?”

“It was a suggestion from the doctor who treats her. He said that it would be important for her to face material elements from the night of her kidnapping and Bishop Ignacio’s death. That would help diffuse abstract memories that she might have from that episode and reconcile her with the reality of that night—no matter how grim—so she could start processing the trauma more effectively. Wearing that dress tonight will be a step in that direction.”

At that point, one of the caterers came under the archway looking for Madame. When he waved at her, she excused herself and followed him back in the direction of the patio. My buzz was gone; I was getting tired and decided to head back to my quarters. As I descended the staircase, a taxi stopped at the bottom of it. A beautiful red-haired woman in her mid-thirties exited it, dressed in a long black and red gown revealing generous curves. She threw a confident smile at me as she passed by. I nodded politely. Only when I got caught into her fragrant wake—a very familiar perfume—did I brusquely turn around to watch her climb the stairs. Heading back to my dorm, I grinned and wondered for whose pleasure Madame had booked her that night—the employee of the year, maybe?

Chapter 14

December 31, Year 2.

God, nature, and knowledge. These made up the tripod supporting my new existence. I had distilled my life back down to these three essences that had fueled my early youth and had later been polluted by the sandstorms of adult life. I was now a man of the land by day and a scholar by night, and I was starting to love using my new body to nurture the earth as much as I did using my new mind to reach out beyond it. I had always felt a vague need for more nature and more intelligence in my daily life. Not for faith, however. I had shelved a childish Jesus in my early teens without a second thought and had never looked back. Through patient and inspired catechism teachings, Madame was bringing God back into my life. Not the children's God, but one to which I could relate as a mature man. Though at first I had sat through these classes with a polite and passive attitude, the matter had started seeping in when Madame found a way to connect faith, nature, and science. The ecology, astrophysics, and religion bricks started fitting together better and better and one night, after yet another long day of land work and learning, it had felt right for me to pray before sleep; just a little.

December 31st was on a Tuesday. It was not a day off but work in the vineyards was pretty relaxed and we wrapped up at three in the afternoon so workers would have time to drive home and spend New Year's Eve with their families. I had the dorm to myself by four. Madame, who had plans for the evening, had canceled my classes—for the first time—but I could not stand the idea of being alone in the compound on the last night of the year. I elaborated a quick, easy plan that had the only benefit to me of being, well, a plan for New Year's Eve. In the empty cafeteria, I prepared a couple of roast beef and cheese sandwiches. As I wrapped them in wax paper, the maid whom I had tried to approach at the Christmas party ran into the room and froze when she saw me. She was dressed in street clothes and probably in a hurry to leave the property. To avoid an awkward moment, I gave her a polite smile and headed right out of the door with my sandwiches. As I walked away from the building, I heard a faint "pssst..." and turned around. The girl ran down the short flight of stairs leading up to the cafeteria, holding a wine bottle and a corkscrew in her hand. She handed them to me with a gentle smile and walked right back into the building. My New Year's Eve plan had just gotten a dozen—alcoholic—degrees warmer.

I packed up the food and wine into a small backpack that one of my roommates had left lying around, stepped out of the door, walked around the building, and straight up the steep hill behind it. It was much taller than I had imagined and a hundred yards or so into it, the smooth pasture yielded to the natural forest that covered the hill. I kept going straight

uphill, pushing through brushes and branches, with a single thought: sitting at the top of that hill before midnight—a noble, esoteric, Don Quixote-like goal that seemed well-suited to wrap up a transformative year. It took me three hours and two rest stops to get to the top. I emerged from the forest an hour or so before the summit, as the landscape turned to patchy grass and stone. I got to the top just in time for sunset, just like in a Harlequin book, except that I was all alone there. The sun was blanketed out by an armada of light gray clouds, poked by endless arrays of bright spotlights expanding in all directions from a center that appeared to lie somewhere over my head. In the heart of that scenery, I would not have been that surprised to find a big rock with a mighty sword planted in it, waiting for my hand to bring out its destiny. I settled for the corkscrew in my backpack.

The descent of the night was grandiose; the red wine was strong-bodied. By nine, I was definitely under its spell and I had grown hyper-reactive to my own feelings. Halfway through the bottle, I had engaged into a detailed review of the elapsed year, and I was amazed by the unlikely route onto which it had propelled me. I had inaugurated it as an accountant living and working under a false identity in Detroit before being caught up by my lies—and becoming a stealth parasite in a woman’s basement in San Francisco, scraping by as a bartender in a Vietnam veterans’ hangout. Being chased by world authorities both as an alleged rapist and “patient zero” in a massive wave of disappearances certainly added some spice to the landmark year before I landed in Madame’s hands—being turned into a fit erudite for a completely obscure purpose. It was a very cool year for a very ordinary man, especially after a bottle of red wine. The night was warm and I was burning from the exothermic response to the alcohol. I never saw midnight but I fell asleep with my eyes half open to the most promising starry breach in the cloud layer.

The new year truly felt new. The months preceding it had demanded of me to change and I had been so busy trying to adapt that I had not noticed my own evolution. Now that I had both my field work and my studies under some level of control, I was beginning to realize how rapid a mutation I had undergone. On several occasions in the past—every time I had changed services at my job—I had attempted a willful transformation into a stronger, more charismatic, and even a little enigmatic Richard; the kind of Richard that would elicit respect and admiration from his new colleagues. The shapeshifting had never “taken” and after a few days, I had snapped right back into the good-old Richard’s dull and subdued envelope. This time was different; I could feel that the change was sticky.

I used to dread being alone; now I treasured the private space-time that enfolded me for most of the day. It enabled me to reflect on the notions

that were brought to me every night by my teachers and even though some were complex and abrasive, I enjoyed grinding my brain against them. My brain power was growing; that too I could feel. Few concepts or theories would leave me totally hazy, as many had during the early weeks of my night classes. I still struggled with some courses but I was discovering each day new tools and approaches to process knowledge. Madame herself had acknowledged my progress when she returned to me the results of my January evaluation; not one grade was below a *B* and I even nailed a couple of *As* in music and arts classes. The change did not consist only of intellectual progress; it also encapsulated an emerging, virile confidence. That confidence found its roots in a physically stronger body as well as in the reflection of my expedition to Buenos Aires with Bishop Ignacio, during which I had handled both fear and events with some courage.

As could be expected, there was a price to pay for the mental and psychological upgrades; that price was a fast-swelling ego. I was increasingly entertaining elitist thoughts and had begun regarding my vineyard mates as part of a different caste; not necessarily an inferior caste, but a separate caste. I was also growing more and more critical of my own past behavior. I embraced the theory that the man I now referred to as “the Old Richard” was a man who—like so many others—had drifted so far from his true aspirations that he would desperately seek little pockets of artificial intensity in vain and engrossing endeavors such as sports, TV, social media, overpriced cars, or canned resort vacations. That Richard and all the likes who roamed around him then also felt part of another caste; not necessarily a caste of weak men, but not a caste of strong men. I belonged with Madame, with my erudite teachers, maybe even a little at times with Brahms and Kierkegaard. I had somehow switched to a black-and-white life; less saturating, more demanding—a life of greater density and lesser noise. Above all, I was growing an urge to make a difference, somewhere, somehow.

Just as that change took ground, Madame approached me with a new course. She had kept open the third time slot of a torrid evening of classes at the end of February. After opening all the windows of the mezzanine to flush out the muggy air, she sat down at the small student table next to mine. I felt a bit unsettled; I had never been so close to her.

“Do you remember the first night that you sat at that table, Mister Keiffer?” she said casually. “You took a test.”

“Yes, of course I remember. You told me the next day that I had failed.”

“Miserably. I also told you that the only reason why you were still there was the essay that you wrote that night—all nine words of it—do you recall that as well?”

“Yes, that was the end of the test. I had worked in the vineyards all day; I was exhausted. I wrote the first sentence that came to my mind.”

“*Just one year ago, I would have said no.*” That was your answer to the essay; do you remember the question?”

“I think so... The question was whether violence could be justified if exercised to protect the human condition.”

“That’s correct; and your answer told me that the experiences of the past year had awakened something in you. Based on the little information I had found about your past in your journal, you had led a very sheltered and proper life. For you to consider, even for a second, violence as an option suggested that you had begun a transformation. That’s why I decided to take a chance on you.”

“Decadence is what gave me a chance, then?” I said.

“Not decadence; change.” Madame replied as she turned on the laptop. “Tonight, I’ll submit to you a short video presentation. I’ll ask you to watch it and then go back to your compound immediately after. What you will see is not a fiction or a trick of any kind. You will have a full day to reflect on it; a night of unconscious processing followed by morning, which is usually better suited to colder, more analytical assessments, and a long afternoon during which your emotional processing will rise to reach a peak between five and seven. I will collect your feedback in the evening after your first two classes.”

I nodded with circumspection. I did not really have anything to say. I was just curious to find out whether a corner of the curtain would finally be lifted onto the stage for which I was being prepared. Madame executed a few quick commands on the laptop; when a myriad of grainy white dots reminiscent of the prelude to a very old movie started rolling onto the wall behind her, she simply walked away from the stage and disappeared down the staircase. She had never left me alone in the classroom before.

The grainy, dark sheet lifted up after a minute to reveal a succession of very rapid black-and-white shots characteristic of a time-lapse video. No sound. In a jungle-like backdrop, about two dozen men, women, and children—nude except for tiny brown loin cloths—occupied the space under a semicircular roof, made up of long dry leaves and supported by unevenly spaced wood pillars. Each of them had a smooth, tanned complexion, and fine dark hair cut in a bowl pattern above the ears. Several men had their nose pierced with a thin rod of white wood and one of the kids wore yellow feathers at the end of his. Women displayed an array of bare breasts that amused me by their diversity, from shy promises to massive has-beens.

Most men lay in hammocks strapped between the wood poles, while women sat in groups of four or five chatting. Kids chased one another around the different groups with thin, pointy wood spears, screaming with excitement. The frame-by-frame display revealed how each of the boys in

turn sneaked furtive glances at a pretty young girl, nine or ten years old, who sat on the dirt ground and watched their routine with reserved amusement. She burst into laughter when one of the boys tripped and fell, causing the other boys to collapse in a raucous entanglement of arms and legs as they tumbled on him. The group of women chatting by the side of the bare dirt space joined the girl in a concert of laughs and mocking cries. The boys shoved each other with spite as they stood back up and ended up walking out of the scene with a stilted attitude.

The smile of my face stuck around as the following scenes on the video recording portrayed an equal blend of tranquility and fun as the tribe prepared for dinner. When the light started dimming, the women lit up two fires and placed large leaves on the ground around them, onto which they laid a mix of fruits and quarters of darkened meat that appeared to have already been grilled. As they cut the meat, men and children approached, grabbed some food, and sat around the leaf sets.

As the pastoral dinner scene went on by the light of the campfire, I started dozing off but a sudden burst of light pulled my eyes back onto the screen. At first, I thought that someone at the camp had started a new fire but discrete fireballs were rolling away from one another. As I looked more carefully at them, I realized that each ball was moved by spiking fire limbs and was a human body—two large ones and a smaller one—set ablaze on the dirt ground. The other members of the tribe still sat by the leaf pads like frozen shadows, stunned and trying to assess whether the phenomenon was accidental or the expression of a higher power. The answer came from left field, in the form of a small fireball that flew through the air to hit a group of men who were instantly transformed into contorting human torches. The other men started getting up but never had a chance to stand on their feet as several shadows burst out onto the scene and brought down upon them a series of blows with shiny machetes that captured and multiplied the reflection of the flames from the campfires. One of the Indians lifted his arm to protect himself. A machete sliced through the forearm to end up planted into his skull. He fell to his knees and the killer kicked him violently in the chest to extract his weapon back out.

Within seconds, two dozen or so men in dirty shirts and short pants surrounded the whole tribe—most of whom now huddled in small groups—and they moved in swinging their machetes right and left with a pendulum-like beat. They hit men and children at neck and head level, to kill. When they approached women and girls, they aimed at their legs, especially under the calf. I recalled from a documentary about the Rwandan genocide that the killers would sometimes use the same technique to section the Achilles' tendon of their victims in order to immobilize them, so they could abuse them at will later. Within five minutes, the whole tribe was on the ground, its members either still or contorting with pain. The attackers got closer to the fires as they tightened

their deadly ring and I was able to distinguish the facial features of the ones facing in my direction. They were swarthy and dark-haired; most of them wore rough beards, and although the video did not have a soundtrack, I could see their faces distorted by laughs and jubilant screams. One of them held what I assumed to be a flamethrower, a simple tube with a residual tiny orange light still flickering at its end and attached to some backpack unit. Most of the others wore guns at their belts but not one shot was fired; apparently machetes were more fun for these descendants of the conquistadors to rekindle the old tradition of massacring the indigenous people.

The time-lapse video captured the entire night of drinking, singing, and raping into twenty or so minutes of footage, by the end of which I had sworn to myself never to forget a single image of the horrible fate of the shy little girl that all the boys tried so hard to woo. I walked home a bitter and angry man. What I had witnessed was not a grim TV documentary about a distant tribal war that would cross my life for a few minutes and dive back into some alternate reality. No network, no matter how greedy, would ever take the risk to expose its viewers to that level of live inhumanity. I resented Madame for opening that terrible window and somehow I had the feeling that it had not closed for me the moment the screen finally went dark.

Chapter 15

February 27, Year 3.

Neither a subconscious night, nor a rational morning, nor an emotional afternoon would change or add anything to the way I felt when I walked home the previous night. I stood on the patio waiting for Madame, boiling inside from the same revolt. She probably guessed my state of mind and approached me with a pacifying tone of voice.

“Good evening, Mister Keiffer. I won’t insult you by asking how your day was.”

“That would be wise because you served me this day; I hope you have a good reason to throw stuff like that at me.”

“You will be the judge of that. Let’s go and sit down; I took the liberty of moving your classes up one hour this evening. We’ll talk first.”

I followed Madame to the classroom. The moment she sat at the desk, I opened fire. I had been turning the matter over and over in my head all day and the first input I needed was about the who-where-when of the video. She responded to my inquiry with precision.

“The video was shot three weeks ago at a Yanomami camp in the Amazonas, a very remote region of the Brazilian rainforest close to the Venezuelan border. One of our members is a well-known ethnologist. He had been granted by the tribe’s chief the authorization to hide a camera in the bushes to record and study later the social dynamics of the group. The camera was pointed at the central area of the camp where most of the community life took place. The chief was the only native to know about it; the equipment had been set up when everyone slept. A month later, when our friend returned to the tribe to collect the camera, he found the massacre scene as you saw it at the end of the video, after the assassins had left. They had not seen the camera; it was still taking pictures; pictures of still death.” Madame paused and took a deep breath.

“Did the authorities find the men who did this?” I asked.

“The authorities are not aware of this.”

“The ethnologist didn’t tell them?”

“He knew all too well that they would not track the men down. Massacres like these have been going on for a long time and they are actually becoming more and more frequent. They are perpetrated by garimpeiros, rogue gold diggers who come from all over Brazil in larger and larger numbers as the value of gold keeps rising. They bring with them heavy equipment that they use to clear-cut trees and dig massive pits in the forest floor for their prospection activities. They use mercury to purify gold and dump tons of waste of that very toxic metal into waterways. They are to the rainforest around them what an oil spill is to a wild beach. When they come across native Indians who are trying to protect their living space, they either bully them into leaving or better yet exterminate them so

they will not have a chance to go complain to the authorities. They also often raid Indian camps and kidnap young girls to use as prostitutes in their barracks; they send them home after a few weeks loaded with STDs and malaria that they transmit to other members of their community; most natives have very little immunity against these."

"So why aren't authorities and humanitarian organizations stepping in?"

"Most of the massacres and abuses are not reported. They occur in areas that are very remote and garimpeiros move around all the time. It would be a long and costly process to track them down and sort out who did what. Their business provides many underground benefits to region officials; the fate of a few thousand forest natives is not a huge concern there."

"So, what are you planning to do with the video? Nothing?"

Madame executed a few strokes on the laptop's keyboard and came to stand next to me. The video scene that appeared onto the wall was grainy and somewhat dark. It featured a man laid flat on his back at the bottom of a three-foot deep rectangular hole dug up in ochre clay. His hands were folded underneath him and his ankles were tied up with a thick rope. His face was fully exposed and it reflected an animal panic as if he did not quite understand what was happening and what may come of it.

"Do you recognize this man?" Madame asked with a somewhat solemn tone of voice.

"I do. He was one of the most violent raiders during the attack of the Indian camp," I replied without the slightest compassion for the man lying in the hole. "He was also the one who raped the little girl and then strangled her with one hand as he laughed and drank straight out of a bottle of booze."

"You were asking me earlier what we were planning to do about this. We have already done it. We have found the men who destroyed that village, down to the last one. This one's fate will be placed in your hands tonight."

I looked at the man's face. He seemed to have figured out that someone was watching him and was throwing imploring stares as his mouth drooled through a litany of words that his lips were aiming in vain at the deaf camera.

"Should this man be buried alive? Should he be shot in the head before being buried? Or should he be set free? I will ask you to choose one of these three options. Justice will be carried out tonight in proportion of the crimes committed, or it will not be carried out at all. The decision is yours to make."

Madame took a few steps back and disappeared from my field of vision.

I stopped staring at the screen; I knew what was on it. The idea of refusing to make that decision never crossed my mind. I wanted that

responsibility; I needed it for myself as much as I wanted proper justice for the little girl. I took a last look at the man in the pit and said, "Shoot him." Madame walked back to my side and simply pronounced the word "Matalo." Within a couple of seconds, the criminal's head violently jerked back as a dark circle was stamped on his forehead, just over the left eye. Seconds later, shovelfuls of fine red dirt started falling hard into his wide-open eyes. The screen went dark. Madame walked to the desk, sat down, and started reading. There was indeed little room for chatter, but I needed to be clear on what had just gone on and exactly how it had gone on.

"You did not tell me that they could hear us on the other side," I said without contempt.

"Not only hear us, but see us as well. The man in the hole saw you and heard you," Madame responded. I brushed away the image that she had just conjured; I knew I would have to come to terms with it at some point later.

"Who else was there?"

"The ethnologist who brought us the video and three other members of our group."

"Who shot the man?"

"One of the three."

"How about the other gold diggers? Are they all dead already?"

"Most of them died when our team raided their settlement. They fought back. That was a bad idea; the men that we had contracted to capture them are very well-equipped combat professionals. As for the few garimpeiros who were wounded or caught unharmed, they are all lying tonight in graves next to the one you saw. Each one's fate will be decided by a different member of our group in training, exactly like you just did."

"Is that some sort of rite of passage?"

"No. It is a critical part of your evaluation."

"A test of my ability to act like a vigilante?"

"That word was invented by cowards," Madame replied with stinging speed. "The justice you carried out was not vigilante justice. It was relevant justice, implemented by an intelligent man who had all the evidence in hand to deliver the proper sentence. Vigilante justice is angry, retaliatory justice. Did you feel angry when you made your call? Did you have that man executed as payback for something he did to you or a close one?"

"No. I just knew he would rape and kill again if I let him live. You did not leave me much choice."

"You had seen what the man was capable of. You knew he would do it again. You were simply made accountable for his next victims. We are not vigilantes, Mister Keiffer, but rejecting and remediating injustice is at the heart of what we do and we hold ourselves accountable just as we did you tonight. What you witnessed is an extreme case scenario that lies at the most violent edge of our realm of activity. But since we decided to carry out that intervention, it also made sense to take advantage of it to test

novices like you. To test whether they were at a stage of mental evolution that would now allow them to make what we call a 'cleaving decision,' that is a decision of grave consequence that is irreversible and reflective of their commitment to justice."

"What if I had refused to make the decision or had let the man walk free?"

"You must have already understood that your training is designed to restore every key facet of your humanity; your intelligence, your physical fitness, your perception, your spirituality. Tonight you were probed for your instincts—"

"My killer instincts?"

"No, your moral instincts, which tonight powered your decision to kill another human being. Of all the skills that we need you to acquire, that was the only one that we could not have taught you."

As Madame completed her sentence, she brought Professor Werner onto the screen, signaling the end of the debriefing. Ironically enough, the professor's lesson that night dealt with societal advances that had grown out of the battlefields of past wars.

Contrary to my fears when I had gone to bed, I did not toss and turn all night, and I did not experience any distress upon waking up. I felt at peace with the judgment that I had passed the previous evening. More than at peace, actually; I felt empowered. My only concern was Madame's statement about my ability to kill being a requirement for my integration into their group. I was not and would never be a killer. Judge maybe, if the situation was clear enough, but not executioner.

Work in the vineyards that day—removing excess leaves to allow the grapes to benefit from a last month of sunrays before harvest—was fast-paced and it did not leave me much opportunity to think about anything else. When I ended up facing Madame in the evening, I could feel the fatigue pulling back the skin of my face.

"Are you okay?" she asked as we set up in the classroom.

"Yes, Madame, I'm okay. It was just a pretty intense day on the hill."

The peaceful tone of my voice seemed to reassure her.

"Tonight again, we will spend the first hour together," Madame said. "I realize that last night, we asked you to jump over a fire with few explanations. It is appropriate for us to start discussing your place within our group."

I took advantage of a pause between two sentences.

"You always use that word, *group*. It looks to me like you are part of a fairly secret organization or society. Are you afraid of these words?"

"I'm not afraid of any word, Mister Keiffer," Madame replied calmly.

"I do not use these words because they do not really fit the structure of our

party. Most underground societies are heavily centralized and controlled through a hierarchical structure. Our group is designed to be as decentralized as possible and as flat as possible, a bit like modern terrorist organizations. Its members are recruited based on their personal values, which are reinforced during their subsequent training with us. Once training is completed, they immerse themselves back into the normal world and only have one point of contact with the group. I will be that contact for you. As for secrecy, it is not that essential for us because an outsider—say, a journalist—could not move up our organization more than one person before being detected. Our goal is not as much to be secret as it is to be discreet.”

“Discreet doing what?” I pressed.

“You’ll find out about your role once you complete your training, five months from now. In the meantime, every Monday night from now on, I will use the first hour of class to present to you one tenet of our value system. You will be allowed questions but not to question the values themselves. You will be expected to accept them now and defend them in the future. That is the central part of the ten-year commitment that you pledged to us.”

I stiffened up in my chair; Madame picked up the vibe.

“Don’t worry, Mister Keiffer, you will find that the values that define us are for the most part simple, time-tested human values that we feel are threatened. Where we differ is in our approach to defending them, which is very much hands-on, as you witnessed last night.”

“*Hands-on?* Judge and executioner would be more accurate.”

“As I told you last night, the situation with the garimpeiros was an extreme case. Once a gross violation of one of our core values is reported to us by a member—and a member only—a small committee is formed that will decide on a proper course of action to remedy the problem. Terminating human beings only becomes an option when it is the only way to terminate the threat that they pose to people of good will. We will explore other options first.”

“Like...?”

“Applying pressure on the culprits’ fear points to discourage them from repeating the fault.”

“Define *fear points*?”

“For some it may be a phobia involving stimuli such as tight spaces, spiders, dark places. For others, it is fear of losing financial control. For most, though, the greatest fear points are those related the integrity of their body and the safety of their loved ones.”

“You would hurt children?”

“Of course not! Talk about a basic value... We would, however, very effectively convince a mother or a father that great harm could come to their children if they did not heed our warnings.”

“What happens if they fight back anyway?”

“Then, they are simply extracted from the environment in which they cause the problem.”

“To be sent where?”

A blipping sound on the laptop signaled that my next teacher had connected.

“We have a catechism class tomorrow and on Monday night, we will resume this discussion. Now on to Mother Nature’s biology!” Madame concluded with cheer as she launched Dr. Lavlyk onto the screen.

Saturday was a scorching early fall day on the vineyard slopes. Shortly after lunch break, all the way down the row of vines in which I had been plucking leaves, two hazy silhouettes materialized. I quickly identified Madame’s but I had to wait until they got a bit closer to realize that the person walking by her side was Anya. Her appearance had once again changed dramatically since the dismal image of the Christmas party. Her face, full and tanned, had regained a youthful structure and her tight jeans and light shirt highlighted a similar recovery for her body.

As they approached me, both women had mischievous smiles on their faces as they threw furtive looks at me and whispered to one another. I finally realized what the giggling was about. During the summer, I had made it a habit to tie my shirt around my waist and work bare-chested, like most of my coworkers. That had earned me a couple of bad shoulder sunburns initially but I had since built a solid tan to shield me. Feeling mocked, I put my shirt back on and welcomed the women with a cool, “To what do I owe the honor...?”

“We apologize for disturbing you at work, Mister Keiffer,” Madame said, still smiling. “We had to make a quick decision and needed your input.”

“I’ll be glad to help if I can,” I replied.

Madame switched to a serious mode.

“Anya will leave us tomorrow. She has accomplished her goal here and is now ready to move on. She is headed for Tanzania where she will work with a friend of mine who runs a nonprofit organization that helps local hospitals acquire and set up used medical equipment donated by U.S. medical institutions. She’ll fly out of Cordoba Monday morning and her best friend Irene—whom you have met—will drive there tomorrow so they can spend the evening together and say goodbye.”

Madame paused. I arched my eyebrows to indicate that I did not quite see where my opinion might fit in that plan.

“I would be much more comfortable if someone were to accompany Anya to Cordoba tomorrow and stay with her until her plane takes off on Sunday.”

"You think that the drug dealer who was using Anya could have Irene followed?" I asked.

"It's unlikely; Irene will be careful. I'd just be more comfortable if Anya had a little escort. I was planning to send Hugo, the man who monitored her all along here, but she is not very fond of him and she asked whether it could be you instead."

I hesitated. The last time I had come close to Anya's drug-running former friends, my partner on the mission had been shot dead.

"You helped us give Anya a chance here. You and Bishop Ignacio made possible a new start for her. Wouldn't you want to see the new Anya off?" Madame said. Anya was looking at me with a hopeful smile.

"Yes, Madame, you're right; I would want to see the new Anya on her way to a great adventure," I replied with a wink to Anya. "When will we leave?"

"You can come down from work at noon tomorrow and rest for a few hours. Anya should be ready to go around five; she'll come get you. It takes less than an hour to get to Cordoba. That will leave you plenty of time; Irene won't make it there until seven or so."

After we settled a few details, I watched the two women walk away. I felt grateful to be a part of their story, which had brought two unusual and quite intense life paths to intersect in front of me.

I was resting on my bed, in street clothes, ready to go, when a car horn called me out. Anya stepped out of Madame's long luxury car and walked to the passenger side. She wore a tan flannel pantsuit with beige high-heel sandals—and a bright smile. She looked radiant in a natural way, happy in a simple way. She clearly had rewired the connection to her true self. I smiled back at her, got behind the wheel of the car, and drove off.

"I cannot believe I'm going to Africa," Anya said with a mix of excitement and apprehension. "I cannot believe I'm going to now help some people after selling others so much shit. Madame is such a beautiful person."

I smiled at the abrupt transition between "shit" and "beautiful."

"She is, indeed," I replied, proud to be a small component of the beautiful part of the story.

"Did she get you out of trouble, too?" asked Anya.

"More than you could imagine. Unlike you, though, I have never been close to her in the house, so I have no clue who Madame really is, whom she sees, or what she is about."

"She is about...?" Anya repeated, puzzled by the English lingo.

I did not have time to reply to her. I slammed my foot on the brake at the end of the dirt driveway that led out of Madame's property. A man stood still in the middle of it. A man I thought I had imagined seeing near the parking lot on which Bishop Ignacio had died. A man who did not belong in the middle of the road. A man who did not belong in Argentina. A man who did not belong in that century.

He wore a high-collared black tunic opened to a bright white shirt, dark gray pants tucked into riding boots with dark brown cuffs. He could not have been over thirty but everything about him evoked aborted youth. His thick dark hair matched eyebrows that hovered about his eyes like ominous warnings of a stare that could have been the cause of Madame's monk turning to stone. His posture was fierce and though it was not intended as a threat, it carried the status of a thousand years of blue blood. Tall, elegant, dark; even I could see beauty in that man. I was so taken by his apparition that I did not notice Anya sliding out of the car. I last saw her in front of the vehicle walking up to the man without a word. They faced each other for only a few seconds and walked away slowly, side by side, off the dirt track and straight into the adjacent forest. I did not react. I have always been unable to figure out whether I let them walk away out of my own will or I was forced to by some immaterial influence. All I know is that watching them fade away into the forest under a fall southern sky remains to this day the most beautiful seconds of youth I ever witnessed.

I drove back to the house in a warm haze, climbed the staircase, and before I had a chance to cross the patio, Madame rushed in, alarmed.

"I heard the car. What is it? Where's Anya?" she asked.

I looked at her for several seconds, looking for words.

"She's gone," I ended up replying.

"Gone where?!" Madame insisted, raising her voice.

"Taken away by a young man who looks like Julien Sorel."

That was the best I could do to make sense for her of the eerie moment I had just witnessed. The young man in it had conjured up the image of Stendhal's romantic hero as he appeared on the cover of my high school version of *The Red and the Black*. If I had studied the classic French novel, chances were that Madame would know who Julien Sorel was. She immediately understood the reference. She cupped her hands as she moved them to her face until they covered her nose and mouth.

"Oh, *non...*" she said, as tears brightened her eyes.

"What, Madame? Who's he?" I asked.

Madame turned around and started walking away, hands still up to her face. I caught up with her and grabbed her arm.

"No! You're not just going to leave me hanging like that. You are the one who put me in that car. I care about Anya, too!"

Madame turned to me and slowly pried my hand off her arm.

"Anya will be okay. She'll go down a different path but she'll still be okay," she said, trying to be cheerful.

"Who's the man?!"

"Again, Mister Keiffer, Anya will be fine. I was hoping to keep him out of it but he decided otherwise."

"One more time," I yelled. "Who is he?!"

“He has no part in your purpose here,” Madame said, forcefully this time, before walking away for good. I was left alone by the stone monk. We now had something in common. We had both been petrified by a past man.

Madame and I would not speak again of Anya for a long time. I sensed that there was a line there not to be crossed again. I was, however, mesmerized with the man in the tunic. He had established a beachhead in my life just as he seemed to have dug up a whole compound into Madame’s.

Chapter 16

March 3, Year 3.

“In Western cultures, when people turn forty-five, they magically disappear from the center stage of society. Characters in their age range take second seat in TV shows and movies, when not portrayed as obsolete, out of touch, or plain goofy. Few musicians write for them, even fewer clothing lines are designed for them, and the only marketing campaigns targeted to them come from drug companies. Their *Field of Dreams* is shrunk, their *Sound of Music* is dated, and before their *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, they are exhorted to down a bunch of pills. Almost overnight, they are relegated to the mere rank of support staff for their children at home, or their younger colleagues in the workplace.

“These are experienced men and women, most of whom are still strong and healthy, and will continue to be for at least two or three decades. They should be driving society, not merely assisting in powering it while the young play sorcerer’s apprentices at the wheel. These early seniors become irrelevant at a time when their desire to make a difference is most keen, because they are becoming aware that the bottom part of their hourglass is starting to run tall. That results for many in a great sense of frustration; it is the hunger of these men and women to change the world—as well as their frustration—that we want to tap. We will offer these persons the opportunity to stop defining themselves in reference to an hourglass and to enter a caste in which their experience will translate into influence.”

These were the opening words of Madame’s first class on the governing values of her group. She had elected to introduce me to her organization by describing the type of members that it sought to federate, organize, and set into motion.

“One of the key responsibilities of our existing members is to identify suitable candidates for us to approach, recruit, and train. The men and women in whom we are interested have a strong intellectual foundation—if not education—and have consistently demonstrated age-old, basic moral values such as honesty, honor, courage, and decency. Among these, we look more specifically for persons with little tolerance for foul behavior and a readiness to stand against it. We, as a group, embrace the much-maligned philosophy that all that is required for evil to prevail is for good men and women to do nothing. We observe many societal trends that we consider to be deviant and dangerous and we set out to combat them with as much energy as they deploy to install themselves.”

I listened to Madame with a blend of fascination and concern. She juggled clear morals and veiled threats with great ease, and when I thought that her rhetoric might have all the tenets of an ultra-conservative activist movement, she would change topics and swing to the other end of the

political spectrum without any tear in her rationale. I shared that observation with her at the end of the class. She smiled.

"I'm glad you noticed, Mister Keiffer. You're right; we do not have any affiliation or even affinity with existing political movements. Like most people, we stand in the middle and look in all directions for solutions. The *Middle People*—middle-aged, middle-class, middle-of-the road in their opinions—work hard in silence, bear in silence the brunt of federal taxation, and support their families and communities in silence. They also watch—helplessly—their values being picketed every day by social and financial special interest groups who need to cut them off from these values in order to force them into their agendas. Society has become so polarized politically, socially, and religiously that there's little space left in the middle for men and women of good will and simple human values. We aim to give the Middle People a voice. A loud voice that will be backed up by the necessary logistics—"

"Logistics?"

"Actions. We are not some illuminati society trying to advance its cause through covert political manipulations. We are very pragmatic and action-oriented; we work in the field."

"Is your goal to gain political power?"

"We do not seek power. We will support those seeking power who carry our values and slow down those who don't."

"Just to help me better understand your beliefs, would you mind if I asked your group's position on specific issues?"

"Not at all; that's an excellent idea."

Since I suspected a conservative and religious foundation to Madame's group, I picked a topic that was most likely to bring it out.

"Ok; let me start with a simple one: What's your stance on homosexuality?"

"We do not have a stance on homosexuality; it is an integral part of human sexuality," Madame replied casually. "We have a stance on sexuality in general, which is that it is a beautiful experience that should be kept private within the couple. Unfortunately, it is also a cheap and easy way for mediocre writers, singers, movie directors, and clothing designers to create the much-coveted buzz about their products. Those who push for the evermore pervasive diffusion of sex beyond the bedroom remind me of the medieval alchemists who boiled wine in an attempt to concentrate its happiness-enhancing properties. The end result was that the alcohol—the spirit of wine—was lost, and all they were left with was a pitiful organic goo. We deplore the endemic spread of sexual infatuation in Western cultures, but fighting it is not one of our priorities at this time. We will only intervene in that area against those who try to angle their products and lewd thinking toward children and teens."

Madame had paused a brief instant in the middle of the sentence before dropping the word *intervene* with a glacial tone of voice. I decided to switch to a less thorny topic.

"You mentioned earlier that your group's structure was very flat. Does that have anything to do with a communist influence?"

Madame relaxed instantly.

"Lord, no! We are into flat structures, not flat thinking! On the contrary, we are very keen to restore the processes that create elites—education being at the top of the list—and destroy the processes that erode the influence of elites."

"Such as...?"

"It is now nearly impossible for elites to rise because as soon as a man or woman of quality attempts to change the workings of society, journalists and comedians will instantly set out to destroy their credibility, just for the cheap thrill of a good line. Too many buffoons and too few statesmen have spelled disaster for many cultures past."

"You can't say that elites have disappeared. High-end educational institutions produce thousands of them every spring," I objected.

"It may be so, but elites are losing their influence gradually, as emotions replace knowledge as the engine of social evolution. On matters of health or nutrition, most people will listen to the advice of a trendy talk show host before that of scientists, who are generally pegged as nerdy and confused. Media and businesses have engineered together the perfect storm of societal management. They want to keep people swirling in a hyper-present of disposable news, fashion fads, and childish activities in order to better manipulate their beliefs, and through them, their wallets. Recent media strategies are designed to glorify the expression of basic emotions, at the expense of reflection and analysis. Under the pretense of *social networking*, online media are turning human communication into hedonistic brain spasms, or thumbs up-down gesturing for those who can't even muster the spasms."

I shook my head with some disapprobation in reaction to Madame's tirade. That only threw oil on her fire.

"But, Mister Keiffer, if the educated, the community leaders, the so-called white collars find it appropriate to wear the same grotesque bright-colored plastic clogs as their toddlers, or to broadcast on a social network the color of their underwear, then who are our elites going to be?!"

I took a second before replying with a teasing smile.

"I guess stiletto-wearing persons whose underwear is only hinted through expensive lace."

Madame responded with an explosive laughter.

"Touché, Mister Keiffer! Well done!" she said. "I will confess that the examples I picked were not exactly right out of our group's chart; they are

personal hot buttons. Remember, forty-five or so, frustrated, and eager to make a difference. You just saw one of our poster members in live action!”

“So I’ll take it that in your organization, women do not walk three steps behind men?” I replied with the same cheer.

“Not unless money is dropping out of their pockets and there’s a mall nearby!” Madame replied on the fly. We paused for an instant, bringing about the end of the short recess.

“How about abortion?” I asked.

“There again, we are pragmatic. We will encourage behaviors that reduce the odds of unwanted pregnancies, including abstinence for teenagers, but we will always support the woman’s choice in the end. And we will definitely stand in the way of those who use violence to scare women away from that choice.”

Again, the end of her answer had turned a bit chilly. We finished the session with a casual conversation about the need for the Christian church to take a more realistic approach to sex education and the promotion of contraception. I was somewhat reassured by that first class on the values of the organization. Although Madame could get quite fired up about them, she had not stated that first evening a single position that I could not embrace. As for the means that the organization would deploy to defend its “core values,” I had a sense that the topic would not be addressed until the final stages of my training.

It did not take very long for the matter to become more challenging for me, though.

The following Monday, Madame tackled head-on a difficult subject to manage in any open discussion; the issue of cultural identity.

“Our group is primarily based in Western Europe and it is deeply rooted in the values, the history, and the Judeo-Christian roots of its cultures. It is our goal to preserve and enforce that heritage, just as it is our desire to support members of other cultures to preserve their own heritage. Diversity is essential to nature—as you have learned from Dr. Lavlyk’s classes—but globalized markets and massive migrations destroy diversity by homogenizing proud people and rich cultures into a porridge of a society. Deglobalization of human societies is as urgent today as decolonization was last century.”

“Are you questioning the fact that the blending of cultures is a source of enrichment for all?” I asked.

“Ironically enough, that statement has long been a common key argument of both tree-huggers and colonizers,” replied Madame. “Why do you have to blend the cultures? Why can’t the enrichment be achieved while preserving diversity and cultural integrity? Why can’t cultures continue to flourish separately and benefit one another through interfacial

exchanges? Why such a drive for global cultural homogenization? Other than marketers—who will be able to push the exact same products all over the planet—who will that forced homogenization benefit?”

“If ethnic groups mix, they may eventually understand each other better.”

“That’s the common belief and a reasonable assumption; unfortunately, behavioral sciences say otherwise. One of the most decorated political science experts—Robert D. Putnam, who teaches at Harvard University—conducted a study involving more than twenty-five thousand individuals in forty American communities, which established that the higher the cultural diversity *within the same community*, the lower the trust *between and within* its ethnic groups.”

“I never heard of that study,” I said, somewhat skeptical.

“Just as you probably never heard the fact that, of the top ten colleges that graduate African-American students who go on to earn Ph.D.s or medical degrees, nine are historically black colleges and universities. Data like that goes against the grain of multicultural harmony. Neither the media, nor public officials are keen to acknowledge—let alone leverage—that type of information. Putnam himself hates the fact that his research—and especially the part that concludes that lower trust was associated with a lower sense of happiness and perceived quality of life—has on occasion been used to make the case that diversity is bad. His study never questioned the benefits of diversity; it only highlighted the potential pitfalls of an inadequate management of diversity.”

“So what do you, as a group, do with that kind of information?”

“It drives our goal to protect the identity of every single ethnic culture—no matter how small—and reverse the processes that aim to dissolve it into another one. I won’t speak for the whole world but where we come from, all over Western Europe, cultural tensions have been rising for several decades. They occur between different ethnic groups in each country but always for the same reason: A reaction against attempts to force unnatural mergers between cultures and religions that have evolved on separate tracks for hundreds—if not thousands—of years.”

“You are starting to sound to me like the leaders of xenophobic organizations.” I said, afraid of the slippery slope onto which Madame was leading us. She did not take offense to my comment.

“I can see why you would think that, Mister Keiffer,” she replied calmly. “That’s because we may target the same problem. Thank God, we differ greatly in the way we propose to address it. We will stand in the way of both tree-huggers—who power the media’s drive for cultural homogenization—and the extreme right-wing parties, which gain traction all over Europe just because they offer the only alternative to frustrated citizens who struggle with cultural abrasion in their daily lives.”

“In your own country—France—the government enacted laws preventing Muslim girls from wearing head scarves in school and women

from wearing burqas in public places. That surprised a lot of Americans, including myself. What's your take on that?"

"That's a perfect example to illustrate the problem that I was describing. Separation of church and state is a founding principle of the French constitution and we are very protective of it. The hijab on school children and the burqa on women are perceived in my country as ostentatious religious signs and as such, undesirable in public institutions. Proponents of the laws also received strong support from feminist organizations who consider these garments signs of the submission of women to men."

"You did not answer my question."

Madame smiled.

"No, I didn't. That's because our group has yet to formulate a position on that issue. We have a committee studying that specific problem, which includes several of our Muslim members. I understand that the debate is thorny and they have not yet reached a common ground."

"You have Muslim members?"

"The members of our group are almost exclusively from Europe and Christian, but a non-negligible number of them are first-generation immigrants, mainly from Africa and Asia. Most of them are non-Christians but they respect our religious foundation and share our goals to federate—rather than homogenize—societies through a common value system independent of cultural and religious beliefs."

"But one of your group's core values is Judeo-Christian beliefs," I said, confused.

"Yes, indeed, but it's not incompatible. We work on improving societies with Judeo-Christian heritage using a Judeo-Christian foundation. Those of our members who are, say, African and Muslim plan on going home one day and applying our group's value system using a Muslim foundation. For instance, for a woman to wear a burqa in a Muslim country is of course perfectly fine as long as it is her choice to wear it, whereas it might be more appropriate for her to go with a more understated expression of her faith if she lives in a country with a strict laic belief system. There are many compromises to be found—again, in the middle of the road—to do away with the frictions that arise from inflexible positions on both sides. Don't worry; we are not planning to conquer the world for Jesus once more!"

I laughed along with Madame.

"So you are not really crusaders? That's a relief!"

"Oh well, even if it came to that, I can ride a horse and I'm pretty sure I could still squeeze into an armor, after a few fashion tweaks of course!"

Each of the following Monday nights delivered its new payload of values for me to assimilate. Most of them were rules of ethical conduct that my parents had taken great care in passing on to me but that had somewhat faded under the many tides of grown-up life. Courage in the face of injustice, solidarity with the less fortunate, pursuit of knowledge, loyalty to close ones, hunger to excel, expression of faith... So many basic human qualities that I had never questioned but had left behind on the dock of youth when I had embarked on my adult journey. It felt great to listen to Madame stating clearly and firmly the need to bring these qualities back to the center of human societies. Her ethics as well as catechism sessions, combined with all my academic classes—which continued six nights a week—washed away years of oily deposits from my feathers to restore to life the Jonathan Livingston of my teenage years. A heart with ambition; a soul with an edge. Maybe only in my dreams, but at least, I dreamed again.

The rise of the seagull coincided with that of the fall season at the foot of the *Sierras de Córdoba*. As a reward for attending to her day in and day out for the whole growing season, nature handed us a live rendition of Cezanne's "La Montagne Saint Victoire vue de Bellevue," a painting that I had discovered with great excitement under Professor Werner's guidance. An explosion of earth tones to celebrate the coming of age of the grapes after months of nurturing. I finally understood the definition of *terroir*, a term that illustrated how a myriad of specific geological, environmental, and biological processes would eventually be distilled down to a unique wine. The harvest would be plentiful and the nectar of prime quality; everyone on the property was in great spirits.

To add to the ambient euphoria, at the beginning of April, two buses unloaded by our compound a contingent of young men and women—college students from Cordoba—who would earn some money before heading back to school by assisting the resident crew of workers with the grape harvest. They set up colorful tents in two concentric circles in the field adjacent to our compound and brought with them the enchanting lightness of student youth.

Contrarily to all other activities that we had carried out since my arrival, the harvest was not handled by one person on each vine row but by two, one on each side of the vine. I was paired—probably not by chance—with Michel, a French student who had come to Cordoba to pursue oenology studies to supplement the teachings of his father, himself a winegrower, so he could take over the family property later on. Clearly, Michel had not been instructed to give me the silent treatment and he was as eager to learn about the American ways as I was to practice my fledging French. That synergy of needs translated into day-long conversations—

literally through the grapevine—during which I would explain what used to be my way of life to Michel and he would reciprocate by educating me on the French ways. He was also quite a gossip king and every day, I got a briefing on the dangerous liaisons woven and unwoven during the past night between students around the tent settlement and the campfire marking its social center. Regular workers were not allowed to mix with students after work hours; a quick glance at the skimpy outfits that the girls wore to ward off the autumn heat was assumed by all to be okay, though.

It took us three weeks to swirl around the entire bowl that the vineyards formed on the mountain foothills, one vine at a time, one grape at a time. I remember that harvest with great fondness. It felt as if I were graduating—in an atmosphere of youthful exuberance—in the earth sciences; the real ones, the ones only farmers can teach. The dismantling of the tents at the end of April took place under a heavy gray sky; it marked the beginning of winter on Madame's estancia. A couple of days after the departure of the students, most workers followed suit. Madame explained to me that the next stages of vine-caring would consist of pruning them, and that could not happen until the sap had descended and the leaves all fallen off. For the month or so that it would take for that to happen, the older employees would take a vacation and the younger ones would look for daily gigs in the city.

As for me, Madame informed me that during that month of idleness in the vineyards, I would become a full-time student. My schedule was daunting. It included one class each day for each discipline except for French, which was promoted to a whopping three hours a day; one hour of physical exercise—which I was to execute on my own terms— and two hours of study time. All this was to be done before dinner, since I was also booked every day for "*Evenings with Madame.*" When Madame handed me the daily schedule, I was so overwhelmed that I had thought it wise not to add more stress by asking what the evenings with her might entail. The night before my new schedule took effect, I found in my closet a third suit, a second pair of dress shoes, five new white shirts and three new ties. The suit and shirts were nice but department store-nice. The ties, on the other hand, were all expensive designer brand items and very elegant.

For my first "*Evening with Madame,*" I wore my new suit, new shoes, and one of my new shirts and a tie that had instantly become my favorite. Madame was already on the patio when I arrived; she checked me out with an amused smile as I approached.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Keiffer. Vous êtes bien élégant ce soir," she said.

I formed the sentence in my head before replying.

"Merci Madame. Vous êtes toujours très élégante."

I knew that my French accent was pathetic but I was quite sure of my grammar. Madame approved the effort with a nod and the compliment with a grin. For once, I did not feel in front of yet another Madame in

spectacular apparel like a kid in a hand-me-down suit headed to his first communion. My designer tie seemed to conjure up my male hormones and give me a little pizzazz in front of her. Pizzazz that quickly fell apart when Madame's tailored wrap skirt and peep-toe heels headed in the direction opposite to the classroom.

"Should I wait here?" I asked, confused.

"No; come along," Madame replied as she already headed down the staircase leading to the front park. I followed her. Her car was parked at the bottom of the stairs. She stood by the passenger door, waving the keys at me.

"Tonight, you will be my escort," she said. "I have an errand to run in Cordoba that can also double as an educational field trip for you. Once I'm done, we'll have a good dinner there."

She handed me the keys and waited until I opened the car door for her. As I walked around the back of the car to take the driver's seat, I noticed that her handbag was already on the back seat. When I drove off, Madame said with entrain, "By the way, the main purpose of our evenings this month is to improve your conversational French, so from this point on, parlons français!" And so, as we cruised toward Cordoba, the curtain of my first "Evening with Madame" was lifted onto a blazing sunset cast over a little shroud of intrigue.

Chapter 17

May 2, Year 3.

"Please speak slower; I don't understand everything you say," I said as Madame and I attempted to carry on a basic conversation in French.

"Don't worry, we are just chatting," she replied. "You won't be getting any important instructions tonight. You will be there mainly to observe."

The night had swallowed Cordoba wholly by the time we entered it. The city offered the same gridline road network as most American cities and I did not have any difficulty navigating it under Madame's turn-by-turn guidance. It was a larger city than I had imagined and at the early evening time, its downtown area was packed with restaurant-goers and students on the loose on a Friday night. We ended up parking at the curb in front of an artfully lit, three-story building whose broad windows were surmounted by arches.

Madame waited for me to lock up the car by the tinted glass of the restaurant front. I opened the door; she walked in first. The place was a wine bar with fancy light fixtures and cozy leather booths hosting low coffee tables. Most of the place was still empty; only the bar area was enlivened by a group of young men and women dressed in office attire and who appeared to be on a happy-hour outing. Madame scanned the room as we sat in one of the booths.

"Is someone joining us?" I asked.

"Not us—me," Madame replied. "We'll order our drinks and when we get them, I will let you enjoy yours while I go sit down with the gentleman over there."

The "gentleman" to whom Madame had pointed with a curt head-swing was a man in his late fifties whose stomach threatened to blow away the button of an ugly brown suit vest. His eyes were scanning Madame up and down with the airy delicacy of a boxer dog sniffing the behind of a poodle to assess its romantic potential. The dimwitted smile on his face left no doubt as to the fact that, along with an oversized glass of wine, he had chosen the one of his two brains most sensitive to jock itch to enjoy his happy hour. I threw a silent "Why-in-the-world?!" stare to Madame.

"After a few minutes, the man and I will go upstairs," she said, ignoring my silent inquiry. "Room 217. You will join me there at eight."

Our drinks arrived before I had a chance to sort out the confusion of my sentiments. Total disbelief topped off the list; in the eight months I had known Madame, I had never seen her associate with a man other than an employee or Bishop Ignacio, so for her to "go upstairs" with an obvious imbecile was unfathomable. The other dominant feeling was not so much jealousy as it was a protective sentiment for Madame.

She excused herself with a simple smile and walked up to the libidinous man's table. The way he handled himself suggested that it was

his first encounter with Madame; hesitating between handshake and hug, overly eager to engage the conversation with her, his forehead starting to shine with sweat. Madame played the upper hand with an economy of words, letting him paddle desperately in his teen-like nervousness. She put him out of his misery after five minutes or so, though, by pointing her hand to a cast-iron staircase leading upstairs. She preceded him on the stairs; he followed her with his eyes glued to her legs. I looked at my watch. It was just past seven and I had already gulped half of my glass of wine. I immediately ordered a second one. My brain had just seized up and a little alcohol might help lubricate it back on.

“Room 217... room 217...” I repeated as I climbed the stairs nearly an hour after Madame and the sweaty man had gone up. As I walked down the dark red carpet lining a long corridor and approached the room. I could hear Madame and a man chatting casually. The door had been left ajar and I peeped in just as I raised my hand to knock. I never knocked; I just pushed the door slightly to broaden my field of vision and make sure that I was not subject to an optical aberration. Even with wider perspective, it took me several seconds to recognize the man from the bar.

He lay on the bed on his back, relaxed, legs crossed and arms folded behind his neck with a silly grin on his painted face. “Painted” is the exact word, as his makeup resembled more the crayoning of a three-year-old than the work of a cosmetologist. At least, though, the bright pink lips matched the shade of his size 12, high-heel pumps and the splattering of metallic blue eye shadow agreed quite well with his short, low-cut summer dress. Even in spite of the long black hairs covering his legs and the exposed part of his chest, he could possibly have pulled the fashion risk in some very tolerant circles. Where it all fell to pieces, however, was in the accessorization. The huge pink bow on the top of his baldish head was flanked on each side by large, round, black discs obviously intended as mouse ears. Forming with them the bottom of a triangle was a small black sphere clipped on his nose and as much as I would have loved to be wrong, I was quite sure that the long, thin, black rod of rubber coming from underneath him and forming a squiggly on the white sheets was a tail. The man was Minnie; yes, Mickey’s Minnie! And judging by the highly un-mousey devices lying on the bed—which would have had both the animal activists and proctologists up in arms—he was a very, very naughty Minnie.

Madame’s appearance was not altered; she was just fixing her hair in the mirror. Her chatter with Minnie-Man was amazingly mundane considering the circumstances and she only interrupted it when she noticed me standing by the door.

"There you are!" she said, turning to me. Her loud call triggered an instant panic on the bed. The man rolled over and dropped heavily onto the carpet in a desperate attempt to hide behind the bed. Ironically enough, his ears and pink bow still showed above the bed line, pivoting right and left as their owner likely looked for some escape path.

"Ponte de pie, puerco!" Madame yelled at the man, this time with a scolding voice. The man, who had just been promoted from mouse to pig if my Spanish was correct, stood up with hesitation.

"Just look tough," Madame told me in English. "Don't worry; he is a sissy in more ways than one."

And so I adopted a West Side Story-style posturing, one thumb passed through a front belt loop while the other hand formed a fist. The guy took my measure with a quick glance and although my body language was probably tiptoeing on the frontier between retardation and Alzheimer's, he decided to play it safe and did not move. He just stood there like a rejected old drag queen, grotesque and pitiful. Madame grabbed her handbag and lifted it in front of the man's eyes, pointing at a small hole in the leather on one side of the accessory. She then lowered the bag, reached into it, and pulled out a palm-sized camera with a pulsating red light on the top. Still without a word, she placed the device back into the bag, handed the man a white envelope, and said with a nod at me as she walked to the door, "We are done here."

We left the wine bar in silence and once we drove off, the only exchanges between Madame and me consisted of her giving me directions and me nodding silently in response. I broke down as we sat through a long traffic light.

"Did you have sex with that man?" I instantly regretted the bluntness of the question, but I was disturbed beyond courtesy.

"He had sex. I didn't," Madame replied with a controlled voice in which I could still detect some tension.

"But you were with him when he did..."

"I was there with him and I assisted him."

"Did you use the—"

"There's no need for details, Mister Keiffer. We both know what went on in that room."

"But why...? And you, of all people?!"

"I'll take the *of all people* as a sign of progress since our little spat about Mary Magdalene," Madame replied, trying to lighten up the mood.

"Please, Madame; this is no joking matter to me. Don't expect me to accept that the woman, who helped me reeducate myself night after night for months, could just go upstairs with some bastard and indulge him in his sexual deviations!"

My voice betrayed my anger much more than I would have wanted but Madame responded calmly.

"Do you consider yourself the kind of man who walks away from his wife and children, Mister Keiffer?"

"Of course not," I replied, on the defensive.

"Yet, that is precisely what you did," Madame said, undaunted. "Just because I *went upstairs* with a man tonight does not make me a prostitute."

"I know you're not, so please explain."

A honk alerted us that the light had turned green; I took off.

"I was assigned to this task because I was the local member of our group best suited to it," Madame said. I waited for her to continue.

"The name of the man in the bar is Emilio Hilez. He is a member of the local government. For years, he has been using his position of influence as a way to further his wealth. Bribes, shady city contracts with friends' companies, little arrangements with the local mafia; you name it. That alone should have provided grounds for us to step into his way but at this point, we just don't have the resources to intervene against every corrupted official on the planet."

"So what was the deal with him tonight?" I asked impatiently.

"The man is rich—very rich—and he has purchased a flurry of businesses in the area that he runs with the same ethics he displays in his official functions. One of these businesses is a retirement home on the outskirts of Cordoba—a place for the parents of wealthy kids who have no interest in caring for their relatives other than through monthly checks. If you're one of these, you just drop off your mother or father at Hilez' facility and write a big check. You'll get a tour of the front building, which is a state-of-the-art nursing structure with delightful resident rooms, sophisticated entertainment areas, and sharp-looking personnel. That's where your mom or dad will live for the first month. After that, they'll be moved to one of the five buildings behind the front one.

"What's there?"

"Three-story compounds that used to be part of a psychiatric ward for severely ill patients whose sole treatment consisted of a chemical straitjacket. Each room in these buildings is the size of a college dorm room; it was intended for one patient but now contains two mattresses, directly on the floor; no sheets, just a sleeping bag on each. On each mattress, a resident. On each floor, one toilet and one shower for about thirty-five elderlies. Each floor is monitored by two guards; you could not call them nurses since their job is primarily to herd the tenants to the cafeteria on the first floor at meal times and make sure that they remain in their rooms for the rest of the day."

"What about the kids who pay the bills for these seniors? They accept seeing their parents treated like that?!"

“They never see them *like that*. When you first bring your relative, the facility director will give you half a dozen reasons why you should give a couple days’ notice before you visit your mom next. For instance, to give her a chance to get her hair done—you know how sensitive old ladies are about their appearance, yada yada? In fact, that notice is to give Hilez’ staff time to move the patient to a room in the front building, give her a makeover, and threaten her just enough so that she won’t complain when you visit. And if she still does, a very caring staff doctor will always be close at hand to convince you that your dear mother is unfortunately suffering from increasingly severe dementia.”

“It’s hard to believe that a scam like that could go on for more than a few weeks,” I said, still a bit skeptical.

Madame reached into her bag, pulled out an envelope, and drew from it what looked like a stack of photographs.

“Abuse of elderly residents in institutions happens every day, even in the most socially conscious countries,” Madame said, flipping the photographs one by one slightly to the side of my eyes. “In France, where you cannot move a glass of water without having a government official show up to measure how many centimeters the glass was moved and in which direction, we still manage to have a couple of appalling reports of such abuse every year.”

My eyes bounced back and forth between the road and the faces of these old men and women, faces of depression and hopelessness on top of bodies embedded in scenes of filth and indigence. One of the photographs hurt me even more than the others; it portrayed a very small-framed old lady standing in a narrow toilet, her feet encircled by streaks of human waste while her eyes looked to the side as in a pathetic attempt to escape the scene.

“Who took these photographs?” I asked, now engaged.

“The son of one of our local members. He had been out of work for two years; he was young and without any real skill, so when he got a chance to work at Hilez’ facility, he did not ask any questions. He ended up becoming one of the ‘guards.’ It didn’t take a day for him to understand what was going on but as soon as he started work, he was warned never to mention anything on the outside. Everyone in Cordoba knows of Hilez’ connections to the local mafia. The pay was good and leaving right away would have been very risky, so the boy stayed on, and as a way to deal with his shame, he started taking pictures. His dad discovered them in his room one night, found out where they came from, and brought the situation to our attention. We took it from there.”

“You taped your session with Hilez tonight...”

Madame nodded.

“Mister Hilez has a little weakness, as you just witnessed. I have some connections in the Cordoba underground; it was not hard for me to find out about it by asking my friends. From there, it was even easier to arrange

a little session between me and kinky little Emilio. Tonight, during that session, I assisted him and encouraged him to fully express his most private fantasies. All of this, of course, in front of a video camera hidden in my bag. Of course, I made sure all along to keep my back turned to the camera so I could not be identified on the video. When we left, Hilez received very detailed instructions on how to upgrade living conditions in his retirement facility for all his patients: remodel each room with nice furniture, a TV, and its own bathroom, have the meals designed by a dietician, organize weekly outings for the guests, and have a walk-in policy for visitors, among other things.”

“And if he doesn’t comply, you’ll blackmail him.”

“Without a second thought. You were surprised that I could spend an hour indulging a man like that. The photographs that I just showed you gave me the courage to go through with it. If Hilez does not comply immediately with our demands, the video of his performance tonight will be exposed online for all to see and all the local media will be alerted to it.”

“That’s a terrible humiliation.”

“It is, and it may destroy him altogether, but one of our key principles is to hold people accountable for their actions. The elderly in his institution are ours to protect. In the weeks to come, their lives will be transformed—we’ll monitor the changes, of course—and they will finally be treated in a decent, caring fashion. That’s why I wanted you with me tonight. I needed you to understand how we function and realize how much good can be done with just a dash of evil. With the garimpeiros, we had to go to an extreme; what you saw tonight is much more typical of the way we operate.”

“How much good can be done with just a dash of evil...” I repeated, reflecting on the comment.

“Yes, if I had to coin a defining statement for our group’s philosophy, that would be pretty close.”

Madame guided me back into the downtown area and directed me to an underground parking structure. From there, we took an elevator whose doors opened directly into the lobby of a restaurant; a fancy French restaurant, judging by the decoration. A plump, friendly maître d' greeted Madame in French and from the few sentences they exchanged, it was clear that they knew each other. We sat at a table by the window, whose glass instantly embedded a reflection of Madame onto a skyline view of Cordoba by night. As soon as we placed our drink order, I rekindled the discussion.

“I still have a hard time understanding how members of your group—whose ethics and education you have praised so many times—could ask you to carry out a mission as sordid as tonight’s was,” I said.

"I have explained to you how we despise emotional thinking as a passageway to decisions," Madame replied. "Tonight, an hour of mild discomfort was a small price for me to pay for the opportunity to better the lives of more than three hundred abused seniors. Like you say in your country, it was a 'no-brainer' and for me to let my repulsion to the man interfere with that opportunity would have been spitting on the pain of those elderly."

"But you did it so... naturally."

A fleeting expression of annoyance swept over Madame's face but she reclaimed her smile before replying.

"What is it you are fishing for, Mister Keiffer? You want to know if I've done this before? If I've *gone upstairs* with other men before?"

"Please don't feel insulted; by now you know how much respect I have for you. I'm just confused by the thought of my education—and catechism—mentor being connected with people in the local sex underground and sticking very unchristian artifacts into a public official."

Madame laughed loudly.

"I can see how that may seem a little odd. When I mentor you, it is who I am, and these days, when I play with artifacts, it is only as a means to advance a worthy cause."

"These days...?"

"My causes have not always been worthy." Madame paused for a brief instant. "They did, however, give me access to men of power and eventually a certain influence on some of them. One of the primary objectives of my... *function* was to discover men's weaknesses and feed into them. By doing so, I also learned to recognize their strengths and that is very useful to me today when I guide someone like you."

A furtive waiter laid two wine glasses in front of us in silence. Once he disappeared, I complimented Madame on her outfit and we tacitly agreed that the subject was closed. We spent the rest of dinner sparring over literature and music amidst a debauchery of fine cuisine. Since I did not have any money, I deferred to Madame to pick the dishes, from the *Coquille Saint Jacques* to the *foie gras* and roasted duck, to a fantastic *millefeuille* for dessert. After months of reduced food portions, the avalanche of rich dishes gave me a wonderful buzz that the final cognac *digestif* capped with honors.

Shortly after we drove off, Madame closed her eyes to reopen them only when we pulled in front of her estancia. I was still feeling quite warm and fuzzy when I escorted her through the patio, but although she had enjoyed the full sequence of wines that accompanied our dishes at the restaurant, she walked tall and straight. I dropped the car keys that I was nervously twirling around my fingers and scrambled for a few seconds to locate them on the ground by the dim light. When I stood back up, Madame had already vanished.

Chapter 18

May 31, Year 3.

There were twenty-five more *Evenings with Madame* that month of May and Madame picked for each one a theme that served as a launch pad for animated discussions and heated debates. Since she was a well-read opponent, I was pushed every night to draw upon the teachings of the past months for ammunition and stimulated to upgrade my French in order to stay in the thrill of the exchanges. The themes ranged from literary readings to the study of early explorations, from the theory of evolution to the adventurous wanderings of Arthur Rimbaud, or from the military strategy behind D-Day to a review of gentleman's etiquette.

Madame brought props to every session; illustrated books, maps, videos, music recordings. On one occasion, she even arrived with a tray of French cheeses for me to study. On another, she laid on the table four hosiery items and launched the session with a mischievous commentary as she pointed to each item in turn.

"At twenty, you see your future as full-fashioned stockings reaching up to fine-lace garter belts. By thirty, you have already settled for comfortable pantyhose. By forty, the sexy slit at the bottom of your skirt only reveals knee-length socks that make you look like an overgrown little girl. As the years continue to go by, your life eventually drops down around your ankles and ends up as sanitary nylon booties stupidly sticking out of your designer pumps. My goal is to get you back into the kind of hosiery that dreams are made of, Mister Keiffer!"

My favorite *Evening with Madame* to this day remains the one that she opened by bringing in a small wooden trunk with a rounded cover and metal latch. "Imagine that one day, while playing in the attic, one of your great-grandnieces discovers this coffer," she said. "In that coffer, your legacy: letters, photos, valued objects, voice recordings... etcetera. Your job tonight is to make a list of what it contains had you died a year ago, and another list containing what you would want your great-grandniece to find in it."

Through these evenings, not only had I regained a personal life but I discovered one of quality. I had never before experienced such a high level of communication with another person, never felt that much matter being exchanged, never felt more "intelligent" than during my evenings with Madame. Softened by a delightful, three-hour long discussion about nineteenth-century French music composers—one of my newfound passions—I expressed that feeling to Madame in unguarded words. She hesitated for an instant before responding.

"How was communication with your wife?"

Her sudden skid into my personal space took me by surprise.

"We knew each other since childhood," I replied. "Communication was always quite easy and friendly."

"'Easy and friendly' is what I expect from my dealings with someone in whom I have little interest, like the manager of my favorite shoe store. The quality of your interactions with your wife—or your friends for that matter—was the measure of your expectations from one another."

"What are you saying? That we were a lame couple?" I asked. "Does love count for anything in your assessment? Or maybe that is yet another nefarious emotion that interferes with one's judgment?" I continued, now openly sarcastic.

"What's your description of love? Not definition—description," Madame insisted.

"Caring without reserve... supporting without question... building togetherness..." I babbled, confused by the question.

"What you're describing is not specific to love. To stand by one's side day in and day out is not love; it is a laudable endeavor but it does not amount to more than a form of fortified friendship. True love is to displace the other into a space that they have never entered before. Remember what happened to Anya when she tried to leave here?"

"That didn't make any sense!" I reacted. "A guy comes out of nowhere and she walks away with him into the forest. Is that your definition of love? Lunacy?!"

"There wasn't any lunacy in that moment, Mister Keiffer. It was not Anya's first encounter with the man. She made a conscious decision to step back into the space he had opened for her."

I had been so impressed by the eeriness of the moment that I had never considered the possibility that Anya might have acted under her own free will.

"It wasn't the first time that I saw him, either," I said mechanically, as my mind was still chewing on the new information. Madame looked straight into my eyes and replied very quickly, almost aggressively.

"Where did you see him before?"

"Standing by the side of the highway, near the parking lot where Bishop Ignacio died, just as I was driving off. At the time, I dismissed the sight as being a figment of my imagination since I was pretty shaken but when I saw him again here, on the property, I recognized him immediately. Will you finally tell me who he is?"

"I will, but not today; I'm tired," Madame said with a tense voice as she grabbed her handbag.

The silence that cocooned us as we walked out and onto the patio felt as a wake for my *Evenings with Madame*. May was over. I would be off the next evening since it would be Sunday, and on the following day, the whole crew would return to work in the vineyards and I would join them again. I would be returned back to interacting with Madame only a few hours a week and for formal sessions. My private life would be shelved

back; only now, it would have a face. And it was not the face of the red-haired lady whom Madame summoned for me once more on that Sunday night.

I aced all my exams in June, and again in July, despite a heightened pace in all my courses. These were the tenth and eleventh months of my one-year curriculum and I could feel that the sprint to the finish had begun. I had no desire to wrap up that cycle of education. I had grown an addiction to the constant influx of new knowledge and the feeling of my brain eagerly feeding on it every day. Through these months, I had also established a personal connection with each of my teachers—yes, even the gritty Monsieur Dubois—and I was beginning to dread the day when I would be cut off from them and led out through the gates of Madame's estancia. My apprehension was keenest when I contemplated the prospect of having to walk away from Madame.

By dissecting for me, week after week, the values that defined the foundation of her organization, she had made me realize that I had long yearned for these moral and behavioral standards but had been too subdued to defend them in the face of a society set on bleeding them slowly. Thanks to her, I was reclaiming these values just as I was reclaiming my faith. She had done for my soul what physical labor on the hills had done for my body: restored its native functionality. Madame had taken me into a different space. Unfortunately, even though the clarity and liveliness of our May evenings had redefined our interactions by bringing a personal component into them, I realized, as time ran out and to my great frustration, that I never had a real opportunity to take Madame into a different space.

August brought with it cold, rain, and sticky mud weighing down our boots as we pruned the naked vines under a low, somber sky. The ambient gloom also affected my companions' mood; truck rides and meal breaks were no longer lively. Even human spirit took a break from life in the dead of winter. Just before the end of the workday, I cut my hand with the shears, at the fork between the thumb and the index finger. The wound was narrow but deep and it bled quite a bit. I reported to Pancho Villa, per the instructions that we had been asked to follow in the event of an accident. He instructed me to walk down to the estancia and get the wound cleaned and dressed by one of the maids.

Violent gusts of wind sent the rain crashing onto the hood of my rubber raincoat in a loud rattle that smothered all other sounds as I walked around the estancia, a blood-stained handkerchief wrapped around my hand. I climbed the front staircase hunched over to push against the wind but stopped short of crossing the archway to enter the patio. Instead, I hid

outside, just behind the archway, to take in a scene that could have dropped straight out of Thomas Hardy's imaginary world.

There were three: Madame, the marble monk, and the dark young man. If I had not known better, I could have sworn that the monk had tilted his head down ever so slightly to witness the scene between the couple. Madame wore a simple, knee-length white dress and matching low-heel shoes. She was without makeup or jewelry. The rainstorm battered her as she stood in her true nature at the frontier between young and old, untamed and beautiful. Of the same unsettling beauty as that of the young man who stood in front of her, still wearing the timeless outfit as the last time he had appeared—a black tunic over a white shirt, dark boots over gray pants. He stood fiercely tall, impervious to the rain, his face inches from Madame's. They were exchanging words that I could not hear; I could only read the intensity of the moment in the wincing altering furtively the side of their faces. The passion in Madame's stare hurt me; I had never seen, never elicited such fire in her eyes. Her relationship with the man clearly happened at a higher level—or as she would have put it, in another space.

The young man took a step back as Madame shook her head sideways with an air of great distress. She reached with her hand for the side of his face but he took a step back before she touched it. They were no longer talking. Madame's hand remained suspended in midair as they stared at one another for a long moment, each seemingly imploring the other in silence. The man finally breached the deadlock by turning around and walking away, his head held high and still. I hid behind the arch; he walked by without noticing me. I watched him descend the staircase and walk away. An immaterial sponge of twilight rain and pulsating wind ended up absorbing him. When I turned back toward of the patio, Madame stood right next to me, looking in the direction in which he had disappeared. The contraction of her jaw left little doubt about her state of mind. I took her arm softly.

"Let's go, Madame; you can't stay here."

She pulled her arm away and walked back in the direction of the patio. I followed her to make sure that she got inside the building. Once she did, I headed back to my dorm. My hand no longer bled; the rest of me did.

I did not know that day would be my last "normal" day at the estancia. The next morning, as I was about to join the other workers on the truck's platform, Pancho Villa—I had never learned his real name—stopped me by raising his hand.

"This is the end for you," he said with an unusual amiability. He smiled, extended his hand to me, and just said, "Gracias, amigo," when I shook it. The truck took off as soon as he jumped on the back and several other workers, including my roommates, waved at me as it drove away. I was left standing alone in front of the compound under a faint drizzle as I watched the rear lights of the truck slide up the hill.

I knew that day would come but I had not prepared myself for it and even though my coworkers had never really spoken to me, with them on the hill is where I had belonged during daytime for a full cycle of nature's life. Before I had a chance to dwell further on the end of that cycle, one of the maids turned the corner of the estancia, tiptoeing around the puddles and carrying a black leather suitcase. She instructed me to pack all my clothes and belongings and to meet Madame in the classroom at eight. Since I had an hour ahead of me, I walked up the hill to Bishop Ignacio's grave. I had paid him a visit every Sunday evening since the day of his funeral and I had never felt a need for him to respond to my words or prayers. The example that he had set during the week I had known him encapsulated his entire legacy to me. After saying my goodbyes to him, I walked down the hill as all the grapevine rows in the small bowl-shaped valley wrapped around me in a final hug.

Since I had not received any instructions regarding the dress code, I stood in the classroom wearing my favorite suit, as I sensed that the day would be one of some importance. Madame arrived right on time, dressed to kill in a black tailleur, her face enhanced by elaborate makeup and the pulling of her hair in a high bun. All traces of the past night were erased; victim she would never be for long.

"Good morning, Mister Keiffer," she said cheerfully. "You probably have guessed by now that this day will take you away from my land."

I nodded with a somber expression.

"You should feel very proud," she continued, "you have completed your training here with great success, physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Of course, the bar will be raised but I am now confident that you will continue to meet the objectives that we have set for you."

"So, I'm leaving today?"

"You are leaving the estancia but not leaving Argentina, or me for that matter, until Sunday. You and I are flying to Buenos Aires from Cordoba in a few hours. We will spend the next two days there. Now, it is time for you to say goodbye to your teachers, at least for now. Since you will be in Europe, you will probably meet them in person at some point in the future."

As Madame was about to activate the laptop, I asked her to hold and opened a side pocket of my suitcase from which I pulled out several pieces of paper.

"I was a bit shocked when I had to watch my coworkers go this morning because I had not prepared myself for that, but for the teachers, I am ready," I said, as Madame stared with curiosity at the papers in my hand. Over the past month, I had spent several hours every Sunday night drafting for each teacher an elaborate thank-you letter that would not only

highlight the value that I had drawn from their teachings but also feature a short essay dedicated to the teacher and dealing specifically with his or her specialty area.

“Who’s first?” I asked.

In response, Madame launched the wall display onto Dr. Kudova, who opened by congratulating me warmly on my progress in her classes. In response, I read her an essay that drew parallels between her knowledge of arts and the mastery demonstrated by Michelangelo when he sculpted his masterpiece *Pietà*. Although a fervent atheist, she had once mentioned with great passion that representation of the Virgin Mary holding the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. She harbored a melancholic smile as she listened to my essay; I could tell it had reached her.

The description of a fictitious outer space ecosystem for Dr. Lavlyk, a cookbook-like recipe for a cultural Tour de France for Monsieur Dubois, a lyric poem depicting the Teutoburg Forest battle for Professor Werner; each educator’s reaction indicated that I had reached my goal to acknowledge them in a truly personal fashion. These men and women had worked with me several times a week deep into the European night—four to six hours ahead of us—in order to deliver my evening classes.

In that respect, I often felt particularly guilty to have kept up so late at night Mrs. Fabiola, my music teacher and the eldest of my coaches. For her I had composed an original song that compared her with several famous muses of past composers. The combination of my ill-sounding singing and the genuine compliments crafted into the song had her bouncing between laughter and tears for a good two minutes, after which we closed with emotional goodbyes. Seconds before we left the classroom, Madame switched off the projector, closing the window on the wall display that day after day for twelve months had catalyzed my complete reeducation.

Chapter 19

August 15, Year 3.

We landed in Buenos Aires that Friday evening around six. A stiff limo driver, whose sign just read a hastily scribbled “Madame,” received us and escorted us to our hotel—a small building whose delicate Spanish colonial design put to shame the wall of high-rises that encircled it. The lobby was long and narrow, capped with a high, vaulted glass ceiling supported by thin white beams. A brilliant white was the dominant color of the lobby, from the leather of the seats to the balusters of the two staircases flanking the lobby area. We were invited to enjoy the coffee bar while a hostess took Madame’s driver’s license to the front desk and handled the registration process for us. Ten minutes or so later a bellboy accompanied us to our rooms, adjacent on the top floor, just a couple of flights up.

Before I even had a chance to close my door, Madame walked in.

“I guess this will be a little step up from your dorm,” she said as she scanned the room, an elegant case for solid wood furniture and embroidered linens that smelled of jasmine.

“You certainly have a way of whisking me through social walls,” I replied on the same tone. She smiled.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to abandon you for the evening. I have some business to handle but after that, I’ll be all yours, I promise.”

“I’ll be very comfortable here,” I said, hiding my disappointment.

“You are a free man, Mister Keiffer. If you feel like exploring the neighborhood, it does get quite lively at night. If you prefer to stay in, then make sure to enjoy the hotel’s dining room, at the back of the lobby. It is magnificent and the food is first rate. Have a fine dinner, a couple of cognacs, and even a little flirt if you feel like it. Live grand; it’s all taken care of. No need for mini-bar and sexy movies here.”

“Don’t worry, my stay at your place has raised my standards a bit!”

Madame walked out on a laugh but popped her head back in after a few seconds.

“I forgot...” she said. “Don’t shave tomorrow morning,” she finished and disappeared.

I took a short nap and a shower, and then dressed up; my best suit did not look quite as well-fitted in that fancy environment as it did by the estancia. Madame was right—the hotel dining room was gorgeous. A place of perfect harmony between gold and silver reflections and earth tones, lit at just the right intensity to bring out each decorative artifact while still maintaining a sense of intimacy. Very much intent on following Madame’s instructions, I started with a French “aperitif,” Pernod, an anise-flavored liquor that she had ordered for us during our dinner in Cordoba. It looked and tasted like absinthe or at least what I had read about that mystical and

now-banned favorite drink of many paramount artists such as Verlaine, Hemingway, van Gogh, or Satie.

A four-course meal followed, supported by three different wines, concluded by two desserts, and—again per Madame’s instructions—crowned by two large cognacs. By the end of it, I was drunk, but not stupid-drunk—bright-drunk. My mind seemed able to feel the subtle molecular photosynthetic tremors within my leaf of lettuce just as sharply as it did the massive cosmic motion of the stars swirling over my head through the glass ceiling. I commented mentally on each dish of my meal in French, identified most of the classical music pieces playing in the background, and readily dismissed the poor copies of John Constable’s landscapes scattered over the walls. I was one with style and class. I was blue blood spurting out of red neck. I was anew and too shiny still to risk a mud stain from the elegant and inviting siren sitting on a high stool at the bar. I walked out of the dining room an elite man—though a seriously wavering one—man and crashed onto my bed with my clothes still on.

I was still half asleep when Madame entered my room and pulled the curtains wide open on a very bright morning. I sat on the bed and discovered that I had at some point managed to undress and was now just wearing a sleeveless shirt and pajama bottoms.

“You could have knocked,” I said, somewhat embarrassed.

“The door was ajar; I thought you were waiting for me,” Madame replied with a lively voice. She was holding a small plastic bag and took it with her into the bathroom without any explanation. She came back a minute later carrying a tray on which were displayed a wet face towel, a silver bowl filled with water, a shaving brush, a tin cup full of white foam, and a straight razor whose blade had been slid out of the wooden handle and shined a bit too much for comfort.

“Hold on, Madame!” I said half amused, half worried. “If this is some sort of rite of passage, I’m afraid I’ll have to push back...”

“Relax, Mister Keiffer; I’m just going to shape your facial hair,” Madame responded with a grin.

“But I don’t have facial hair!”

“You will when I’m done. Come on, sit straight on the side of the bed and look toward the window. I started mumbling as I got into position but Madame shut me up by slapping on my mouth the shaving brush loaded with a thick, mint-scented cream. She ran the brush in small circles all over my cheeks and chin before reaching for the razor.

I stared, still as stone, at the curtain rod, mentally cursing peripheral vision for still allowing me a faint glimpse of Madame’s cleavage, from which emanated her favorite perfume as she leaned over to shave my cheek with slow, meticulous care. As she worked around my face, I noticed that she was using very short strokes on specific areas, especially around my mouth. Our eyes crossed for a brief instant when she leaned back to take a look at her work. She did not make any comment and resumed her

sculpting. She finished by wiping the cream off my face with the wet towel and then fetched a small hand mirror back from the bathroom that she held in front of my face.

"Now you are a true *hidalgo!*" she said. "Well... you'll be in a few days, that is."

It was but a promise, the hesitant sketch of a new me—a circular, beard-shaped shadow actually forming more of a neatly trimmed square around my mouth. Though faint, it did alter my image enough to make me question the deviated identity that came with it. Madame seemed so excited though that I decided to join her in the moment.

"Well now, hide your hens, there's a new rooster in town!" I said, mimicking a redneck accent.

"Oh Lord! How ungentlemanly a comment that is. So much work to do with you, still, and yet so little time!" Madame replied with fake reprobation and a broad smile. "So, you like it?"

"I do, but I thought that facial hair was not cool for men nowadays."

"Says who? The same fashion magazines that think men Capris, mandals, and Fedora hats are cool? Fashion assumes that beauty is the rule, when it is but the exception; what may be true for beautiful people no longer applies to regular people—"

"So, I'm regular people?" I interrupted teasingly.

"No; your body has already been raised into the ninetieth percentile for your age range. All those days on the hills really paid off."

I blushed as Madame scanned me from head to toes with a surgeon's bluntness.

"As for your face," she continued, "just like for most people, it is neither ugly nor beautiful. It is awaiting structure; it is an unpainted mask. Women can sculpt their faces with smart makeup, fancy hairdos, shapely glasses, and sharp jewelry. For men, though, the only possible remodeling is through facial hair, but since like you most of them heard that beards and mustaches were no longer 'in,' they walk around calling attention on their faces to droopy cheeks, pencil-thin lips, a platypus nose, or a chicken-butt chin. Wouldn't you rather look like an anachronic, horny musketeer than your next-door neighbor?"

"Okay, okay, you sold me! I'll get some safety razors today."

"Safety razors... please! Keep this razor and handle it like the man you aim to be. Make the beard your own, reshape it if you must, but always keep it short and crisp. Now, go get ready so we can continue!"

I had no idea of what Madame had in mind but after she stepped out, I showered and slipped into a suit. When I knocked at her door she popped it right open. She wore a flaring marine-blue dress that swirled around her calves as we walked down the staircase. Once outside, she headed straight

for a long black car whose brand I did not recognize. Before she reached it, the driver came out swiftly and opened the back door for her. I followed her inside.

“Did you rent this car?” I asked when we got settled.

“I always book it together with the hotel. It makes moving around town much easier.”

She instructed the driver to take us to *Palermo Soho* and explained that while Palermo was the trendiest neighborhood in Buenos Aires, the city’s best clothing stores could be found in a small section of that barrio, named “Palermo Soho.” The neighborhood was delineated by rows of traditional houses, most of them converted into stores and bars. It was lively and eclectic, stirring yuppies in expensive suits around hippie-style street artists and droves of young men and women sipping coffee at outside tables despite the cold.

Madame sent the driver away with instructions to pick us up at the same spot at six in the evening. She led the way to a men’s clothing store whose entire façade was made of tinted glass. Once we stepped in, I was more impressed by the amount of open space than by the cohort of mannequins displaying fancy suits at every turn of the eye.

“You’re not going to buy me an Armani suit, are you?” I joked to diffuse a certain embarrassment.

“Not unless you insist on the rapper-going-to-the-Grammy’s-ceremony look,” she replied on the same light tone. “What we are looking for is not hype, it is discreet elegance—quality suits that will each be perfectly tailored to your figure.”

“This is awkward; I can’t let you buy me clothes.”

“Relax and go with the flow, Mister Keiffer. In a couple of days, you will fly to Europe as a distinguished gentleman; you need the appropriate wardrobe. The group is taking care of this; don’t worry, I’m not in the habit of playing sugar mama, even for a good pupil!”

And so I started playing Ken to her Barbie. Madame monitored the vendor as he took my measurements, and then launched me into an endless series of fittings. Light suits, dark suits, business suits, leisure suits, even a tuxedo! She would sit outside the dressing room reading a magazine while I changed but would stand up as soon as I stepped out to inspect me under all angles. The sales assistant, probably on commission, stood by her quietly at all times as she piled on the selected garments, likely praying in silence that Madame’s credit card not bounce in the end. She explained to me the basis of her choices and rejections in order to educate me and as time went by, I started getting it—the fabrics, the patterns, the cuts. I even picked the last suit myself with an approving nod from both Madame and a now very excited sales assistant.

We spent more than two hours in the store and came out with eight different suits and, yes, the tuxedo! A similar scenario took place just two doors down the street as we picked shirts and ties with the support of a

delightfully plump young lady who could not take her eyes off Madame, though she could very easily keep them off me. I found solace in the fact that she had not seen me “optimized” since I had put my old suit back on while the new ones would be altered and delivered to the hotel in the evening.

We took a much-needed break for lunch at a small restaurant, nothing fancy but the grilled beef on skewers was delicious and the student crowd festive. In that environment, Madame stood out like an orchid in the middle of a sunflower field but no one seemed to mind; she just received many intrigued stares.

The afternoon consisted of another four hours of shopping for my wardrobe; shoes for all occasions, a winter coat, a leather jacket, casual and exercise clothes. Madame still picked most of the items but in a much more fun spirit than in the morning as we tried to figure out how the cool, relaxed Richard should look when not dashing to an exclusive literary salon or headed to a dinner with members of a local Masonic lodge. I modeled the most audacious clothes with the fake attitude of a runway star while Madame burst into loud laughing spells.

The only stage of the fashion expedition in which Madame did not chaperon me was the underwear one. She waited for me in an adjacent store while I picked my briefs and undershirts, but only after leaving me with the instruction to only pick garments that a sensuous woman would enjoy discovering. Coming from a lady raised in a country where the speedo was still kicking strong, that opened a puzzling range of options.

The short winter afternoon was already starting to wind down as we made our final stop in a luggage store. Madame had two leather suitcases and a large travel trunk sent directly to our hotel, just as all the other items that we had purchased throughout the day. Our car was already waiting by the curb when we retraced our steps to the start of our shopping spree. I almost fell asleep on the way to the hotel. I could handle a rough day of physical work in the vineyards but I was no longer used to dense crowds and street noise. Madame herself was quiet. When we reached the hotel, she suggested that I take a shower and a short nap before meeting her again at eight for a night out on the town—in my tuxedo. The shower cleared the city tumult from my head and I fell asleep with just a faint buzzing in my ears.

Chapter 20

August 15, Year 3.

I knocked at Madame's door at eight sharp after a series of checks in the mirror. I had just met in it the man to make all men cry, and he was ready to conquer France and all its colonies in one magisterial sweep. That is, until the door opened, Madame appeared, and blew him away. I was used to her looks after a year of ever-changing outfits and styles, but I had yet to see her in that dress—an ankle-long, strapless black gown with delicate silver embroideries and a gray lace top embraced her body with a passion only tempered down by a long, narrow shawl. Her thin necklace and dangling earrings fired a million tiny supernova explosions all around her artfully made-up face.

"Whoaa..." my reptilian brain farted.

"Mister Keiffer, when raising your eyes upon a beautiful woman, *Whoaa* stands all the way up there as an appropriate reaction as *Ouh la la!*, or translated in your native language, *Yabadabadoo!*" Madame replied with a half-smile.

"Madame, you have been my muse for a year," I replied after long reflection, as serious inside as I smiled outside. "You have raised my hand to Galileo's stars and guided Van Gogh's light into my eyes. You have taught me love for a two-thousand-year-old guide and passion for a slice of perfectly aged Roquefort. But never, ever, during these twelve months have you prepared me for the beauty that is yours tonight, so please forgive me if I am without words beside it."

"Better... decidedly better," Madame said with a slight blush and a stare whose intensity I did not expect either. She handed me her coat and proceeded down the corridor, her back—nude to the waist—undulating under a thin film of sheer black gauze.

The car dropped us amidst a thick, elegant crowd in front of a massive gray building with the type of complex architecture that I had always associated with old European buildings. I escorted Madame inside in silence and found myself into in the hall of an opera house, *Teatro Colón*, according to the header of a rigid program poster propped onto an easel. If my Spanish was correct, we would be treated to the final round of an international competition during which young lyric singers would be vying for a handful of future engagements in some of the most prestigious opera houses in the world.

The crowd surrounding me produced ever-changing patterns of warm colors, fine fabrics, and sparkling jewels. Currents of perfumes flowed over and around me as silhouettes brushed lightly against my tuxedo. Madame was unusually quiet as we stood in line to enter the actual theater area. On a couple of occasions, I caught her taking a furtive glance at me, as if to make sure that I was still standing by her side.

Madame had reserved balcony seats from which we had a perfect view of the stage and a panoramic perspective of the theater. The competition was as entertaining as it was harrowing at times, as some of the young talent rose to a state of near possession for the occasion while others destroyed months of arduous training for the event with a split-second slip of the throat. Madame relaxed progressively and seemed to enjoy the show. Nestled in that cocoon woven with delicate lights and powerful voices, she stood out in the crowd, despite some serious female competition. She even received during the intermission a bunch of flowers from an older gentleman three rows up to whom the attendant pointed when he delivered the flowers, and who in return stood up and bowed in Madame's direction. She responded with a nod and a reserved smile.

"Do you know him?" I asked, annoyed that the man would send flowers to my escort and just a tad jealous as well.

"I do not; he is just being courteous," Madame replied as she plucked the man's business card from the bouquet and handed it to me. I took it, stood up, and turned in the direction of the man. I bowed to him with a broad smile while making sure that he could clearly see the card in my hand. He responded with a stiff nod and looked away. Madame laughed discreetly as I sat down.

Our car was already waiting by the curb when we came out of the opera house, both elated that our respective picks in the competition had managed to land a contract. I amused Madame with the line that while I might have forgotten to jump onto my feet and scream "Bravo!" during the performances, I was delighted to have made it all the way to the opera in a tuxedo. The driver took us a few blocks down to a restaurant that Madame had described as "married to the opera." The place indeed looked more like an operatic stage than a restaurant. The dim light came from a large crystal chandelier that dropped from the high ceiling. It created discrete areas of light and shadow throughout the room from which stood out bewitching wall-mounted Venetian masks while others seemed to lurk in the darkness. The red table linens brought out the shine of the silverware and glassware. Madame requested a table in a corner from which we could see the entire place, which was quickly filling up with other opera-goers, judging by their attire.

Madame remained silent until our drinks arrived, scanning the restaurant crowd with a distant expression.

"Is everything fine, Madame?" I asked. "You've been very quiet all evening. Don't tell me that you are sad to lose me." I added, trying to lighten up the mood. She did not smile.

"Everything is how it's supposed to be," she replied. When she realized that I expected her to elaborate, she continued with a business-like tone of voice.

"Tomorrow, you will receive a suitcase that contains everything you'll need to get started in France. I'm sure you have figured out for a while now that it would be your destination."

I nodded, now eager to hear about my new path.

"I recently bought back my father's vineyards—the land on which I grew up in the southwest region, very close to Spain. He had lost the property to a bank two decades ago because even though he was a passionate winemaker, he never was much of an administrator. You will be the property superintendent. You will live on the premises and make sure that everything is run to the best of my interests."

"But I don't know the first thing about winemaking," I said, excited and worried at the same time by the unexpected prospect.

"You are an accountant, and a high-end one if I remember correctly; I'm sure that you'll find your way through French financial management practices. That's all you'll need to master. I have already asked a local friend of mine to put in place a new staff, from the farmhands to the winemaker, and I know he'll pick fine people. You'll just need to make it clear from the start that you are the boss and if you run into a problem that you can't handle, I'll be at hand to assist you."

The last part of Madame's sentence snapped the thick rubber band that had been compressing my stomach since we had left the estancia. For some reason, I had always assumed that I would be severed from her the day I left Argentina.

"We will still be in contact after tomorrow?" I asked, craving for confirmation.

"Every Sunday evening. The suitcase you will receive will contain a satellite phone."

"Why a satellite phone?"

"Because such phones can't be monitored as easily as the regular ones, and some of our conversations will require some degree of confidentiality."

"I assume these won't be about the vineyards."

"You assume right but for the first few months, that's all we'll discuss. You must first establish yourself in that new role and gain a solid foothold in the local community. You must become *un notable*, an upper-class, respected member of the local community who frays with the top bourgeoisie—hence the education you received."

"That will expose me to the light quite a bit. What if someone tries to research where I come from?"

"You will be Richard Harris, a common Anglo-Saxon name combination. It will make it hard for people to dig up specific information about you from the Internet. You will find in the suitcase a document outlining information that you can share with others regarding your past—

where your family was from, where you studied, your past positions, and so on. All made up, of course, but we have seeded that data online just in case. If someone were persistent enough to verify this information, the web seeds all lead to members of our group who would confirm the data, of course."

"Richard Harris..." I repeated sadly. Madame understood what was going through my mind.

"I know you have worked very hard at bettering Richard Keiffer but don't worry, that is who you will always be. Richard Harris is only a character that Richard Keiffer must bring onto a stage. You know that we can't use your real name; Interpol is probably still keeping an eye out for you."

"I suppose that Richard Harris' passport will also be in the suitcase?"

"Along with a checkbook and two credit cards issued by a bank in a city close to my French estate. The silver lining might be that Mister Harris is actually more affluent a man than Mister Keiffer." Madame said with a comforting smile.

"That is not as important to me as the fact that he is a free man. I have been either hiding or hidden for two years. I think I will enjoy coming out into the light even if it's in another man's shoes."

All dinner long, we discussed technical details regarding the estate, its surroundings, the do's and don'ts of the local lifestyle, but never the true reason of my dispatch to France as a now-trained member of the "group."

"This is all very nice but what about my mission?" I asked. "How long before I get an assignment from the group?"

"That won't happen anytime soon; as I said, aside from managing my estate, your top priority for the coming months will be to introduce yourself into that community in order to become one of its prized and respected members. Only when you have achieved that status will you be considered for a mission."

"Is your friend there—the one who is recruiting the staff—a member of the group?"

"He is not. I will be the only member of the group with whom you will interact for the foreseeable future and obviously the only person with whom you should discuss our organization. As far as my friend is concerned, I have recruited you on the advice of a business acquaintance and we only met once for an interview."

I waited for the waiter to take away our empty dessert plates before replying.

"I can't tell you how glad I am that you and I will continue to be in touch. I thought I would lose you tonight," I said with candor. Madame's eyes reached into mine but she did not express any emotion other than an enigmatic tightening of the lips. The long silence that followed brought about the conclusion of dinner.

I escorted Madame to the front door and opened it for her. I had not taken two steps behind her on the sidewalk before a man's silhouette burst into the side of my field of vision. In response to his arm reaching for Madame's neck, I threw an instinctive punch that landed on the man's temple. Projected toward the ground by the blow, he crashed head first onto the bumper of our car, already waiting by the curb. The man—a young fellow with a muscular chest wearing a tight black T-shirt and matching jeans—grunted and shook his head before standing up and staggering away in haste. He had left a small streak of blood on the bumper.

I turned to Madame; her breathing was fast and her facial expression hardened, as if ready herself for a fight.

"It's alright, Madame; he was going for your necklace but he did not touch you," I said while nudging her toward the car whose driver had already opened the door with the speed of a bodyguard. Madame got in without a word.

"Thank you, Mister Keiffer," she said after a couple of minutes and remained silent for the rest of the short ride to the hotel. I was myself trying to process the adrenaline discharged during the incident. Split between the guilt of having hurt someone in their flesh and the thrill of having responded to a physical threat "like a man"—at last—I was not quite ready for conversation, either.

The tension dissipated the instant we entered the hotel and Madame lightened the mood.

"Now, yes, I *am* going to miss you, Mister Keiffer. I knew that you had made much progress but I had no idea that I was out with Richard the Lionheart tonight!"

"Behold, my queen, for you I have turned the paltry razor you handed me this morning into a mighty sword, and that is just the beginning!" I replied loudly.

Our laughs echoed into the hallway and our smiles lingered all the way up the stairs but they vanished at the same time when the doors of our rooms came within sight, just at the end of a short corridor. I followed Madame; when she grabbed the knob of her door, I covered her hand with mine. I was so close to her that her body's warmth was already embracing me. She did not back down; she just stared at me with an empathy that she had never granted me before. I rotated the knob through her hand to release the door open and wrapped my other arm around her waist to bring her body into contact with mine. She reacted by placing both her hands flat on my chest and pushing herself away gently.

"Madame, this is our last night and my last chance to reach you," I said as a final plea.

“You have already reached me, Richard,” Madame replied, “but as far as I know, you are still a married man. Even if your wife had divorced you by now, I could not be with you tonight. To me, intimacy is embarking on a train with a very important person, not a way to wave at him from the dock as the train takes him away.”

I lifted her hand away from the door knob and brought its palm to my lips.

“Thank you, Madame, for creating both a train and a destination for me over the past year,” I said and released her hand. After opening wide the door of her room, I stepped aside as she entered, and pulled the door closed behind her. I returned to my room, undressed, and took a last look at the mirror before lying down. My beard had gained a shade in intensity during what in retrospect would remain the day I fell out of the chrysalis and took my iridescent new life to the air.

I woke up very early that morning. My plane for Paris was to take off around noon and I was tense. I packed my new wardrobe into the travel trunks and though I did not have that much extra room, I also pushed in my old suits, shirts, ties, and shoes. They had accompanied me through my year by the foothills of the *Sierras de Córdoba* and I needed them to bring at least some familiar vibes along into my new world.

During dinner the past night, Madame had informed me that we would attend together the Sunday morning church service and asked me to meet her in the hotel restaurant for breakfast at eight. She was already standing by the buffet when I arrived, in a long-sleeve, knee-length dress whose deep black tone was mellowed by the soft flowing of the fabric that smoothed out her generous curves. The heels of her shoes had been kept at church-approved height.

“I apologize for starting without you, Mister Keiffer. I was starving!” she said cheerfully as I approached.

We sat down at a small table after filling up our plates. I noticed that she had already hung a black hat on her chair.

We chatted casually through breakfast, as often do those who are about to part, have already said their goodbyes, and for whom it is too late for anything other than platitudes. When we came out of the hotel, our driver took us a few blocks down to a church unlike any I had ever seen. Despite being planted into the city, the church was covered in green vines. Its old gothic arches and columns barely managed to push their contours through the vegetation. The whole building looked like the artifact of an ancient civilization buried deep into the rainforest. Though the church was already crowded when we arrived, we managed to land a couple of seats by the center aisle.

The service was formal and powerful. I embraced the worship and loved being in church for the first time since I had reconnected with my faith. I also seized the opportunity to give my thanks. Just one year earlier, I was hiding bare feet and scared in a park just a few blocks from the

church; thanks were quite relevant, indeed. On several occasions, I turned my head toward Madame. She had lowered the short black veil from her hat so it only shadowed her eyes. She could have been a beautiful bride—only in black. When the time came to walk down the aisle for communion, she went first and I yielded to a group of old ladies before joining the line.

I watched Madame receive communion and walk to the side of the church before heading back toward our bench. Her face was pale and absorbed in the ritual. I received the host a minute later and followed the old ladies back to our section. When I reached my seat, Madame was not in hers. Instead, on the bench was laid a brown leather briefcase. In the seat just behind it, our driver stood tall in his uniform, eyes on the altar. The service finished shortly after and I followed the driver with my briefcase in hand. He took me to the airport with little chatter; that suited me fine. I was upset at Madame for not giving me a chance to say goodbye. Just as the airport came into sight, though, I ended up letting out a soft smile as I realized how much value meeting Evita in Argentina had brought to my life as compared to meeting Merlin in Ireland.

Chapter 21

August 18, Year 3.

“Bad culture enters the vessels of a good mind just as saturated fats enter the arteries of a good body, through a million tiny moments of deferred judgment.” That excerpt from one of Madame’s lectures hovered in my mind as a bus hauled me from Paris’ Charles de Gaulle airport to the smaller Orly aerodrome, where I was to catch my connecting flight to the south of France. The hour-long ride took us through some congested areas of the city with all the charm of a northern coal-mining town in November. Dirty buildings defaced with sinister graffiti as high as the arm could reach, small colorless houses with neglected backyards, long cement tunnels lit with hard orange lights, the whole smothered by a low gray sky that sputtered a slow drizzle. My first impression of France was that of a surgeon discovering the insides of a once-vibrant body now polluted by decades of neglect. After thirteen hours of cramped restlessness on the plane, the unexpected scenery rattled my nerves more than the crossing of the immigration line upon my arrival, which had stamped in Richard Harris without a hitch.

Luckily, I had little time to ponder that unexpected image of my new homeland; I had to run to catch my connecting flight in Orly. The moment the plane ripped me out of Paris’ coat of gray, the blaze of the sun through the window warmed me back up and went on to cheer me up all the way until we began our descent onto Pau. As we approached the city, France finally presented to me a sunny landscape more in sync with what I had imagined. The plane hovered atop a hilly countryside in which fields had colonized all the valleys, while small patches of forest still retained control of the higher grounds. No city in sight, only tiny villages and dispersed clusters of red-roofed houses connected by narrow, leisurely meandering roads. And in front of us, forming an impressive backdrop to most of the scenery, were the tall, brilliant Pyrénées Mountains. After my Parisian disappointment, I was relieved to drop into such a peaceful and open landscape.

I stepped off the plane tall and proud, per the instructions in Madame’s notes. Yet, I felt disoriented. She had not written any other instructions regarding my arrival; all I had was the name of the small town where her estate was located and a crude hand-drawn map to get me there from the airport. The Pau airport was tiny and cute. A handful of locals were waiting for arriving passengers while a group of lively nuns hurried through the hallway to pile onto the escalator leading up to the departure area. I grabbed my travel trunks and suitcase from the luggage carousel and piled them onto a cart before heading slowly toward the front doors of the airport. I was looking for some sort of a welcome smile or sign but after a few minutes, it became pretty clear that no one was there for me.

It had been a long trip; I needed to step out of it mentally before moving on. Rather than exiting the airport, I headed for a small open-space café located by the information desk and ordered a glass of cabernet. Teaming up with the fatigue, the wine quickly ironed out the mental wrinkles caused by the uncertainty and I started basking in the thought that I had just again become a free man with money in his pocket and a home to rally. I smiled at the waitress behind the counter who returned the favor. I was, after all, Richard Harris, an elegant American on his way to manage a French wine estate.

After a half-hour or so, I was ready to take on the last leg of my trip and chose to rent a car rather than take a cab. The last thing I needed was to get dropped in an unknown place with no means of leaving it if needed. As I drove out of the airport, I mentally blessed my father for forcing me to learn how to drive a stick-shift car when I was a teenager. Thirty years later, it finally came in handy. A small array of commercial buildings quickly gave way to open farmland as I navigated onto a narrow road that hit a traffic roundabout every couple of miles. I had no idea of the proper way to drive through those but since there was hardly anyone around, they were more exotic fun than stress. The map that I was using as a guide was not that simplistic, after all; the place was just simple—green, open, of human dimension. Each village I crossed, no matter how small, had its old stone church, complete with steeple. It could have felt a bit like a sacred land but the only mystical creatures I encountered rode bicycles in brightly colored spandex skins.

The drive to Cazaubielle, Madame's hometown, took less than a half-hour. From there, the map simply stated "Follow the *Clos Rémi* signs." I drove around all the exits to the village a couple of times before finding one, but after that, they were posted at every intersection. The narrow road wandered between two hills, both decorated with a patchwork of small vineyards, open pastures, and patches of forest. A few large houses popped out of the scenery, usually in the middle section of the hillside. One of the *Clos Rémi* signs instructed me to turn right onto a tiny—albeit paved—side road that cut through a patch of forest and curved up to climb the steep hill.

A hundred yards or so into it, the trees yielded to long, transversal rows of vines in full foliage mode and loaded with unripe grapes. The vines ran up the hill all the way to a small park that hosted a massive two-story house. Its light-gray façade was pierced with an array of windows whose white wood shutters had all been opened. On the dark tile roof, three dormers with pointy hats gave the old house a little air of nobility. The vineyards spread on the left and back of the house all the way to the top of the hill, but a dense, native forest claimed control of the right side, also covering the tall hill all the way to the top.

I parked on the lawn of white gravel laid in front of the house, stepped out of the car, and stretched as I turned downhill to admire the scenery. The residence was quite high up on the hillside, which gave me a wide angle on the opposing, parallel hill, with woods and vine rows almost mirroring the ones surrounding me. It was a place of great tranquility, both for the eyes and the ears—a corridor of gently edited nature that smelled of late summer and in which droves of small birds chirped away their last calls for romance. After impregnating myself with the atmosphere of the place, I walked to the front door and knocked several times without triggering any kind of response. I turned the handle and pushed; the door was not locked.

Scents of laundry detergent and wood polish rushed out as the door opened onto a large dining room. A long, shiny oak table escorted by six matching chairs with woven rattan seats occupied the center of the space; it matched the tone of the flooring slats that formed the ceiling of the room, which were supported by massive, transversal wood beams. A tall cupboard and a brown leather armchair placed right in front of a wide fireplace were the only other pieces of furniture. I smiled, smitten by the image of my aristocratic self wrapped into a smoking jacket and reading the paper in front of the fireplace.

I climbed the wooden staircase that led upstairs with a slight sense of guilt, even though Madame had made it clear that the house would be mine to take over. It led to a wide square of freshly waxed parquet from which I could see three bedrooms whose doors had been left open. Each room was painted with a different pastel color and outfitted with comely rustic furniture. A narrow corridor to the right led to a bathroom and a fourth bedroom, this one larger and furnished with more expensive oak furniture. Three windows gave that room a brilliance in hard contrast with the semi-obscurity of the corridor that led to it. The side window, by the head of the bed, overlooked the forest while the two others opened on the front scenery of the house. I lay on the bed for a moment rolling my eyes back and forth between the thick tree tops and the crest line of the opposing hill, highlighted by the dimming blue of the late afternoon sky. Though I had not entered the other bedrooms, I already knew that this would be mine.

As I rolled off of the bed to stand back up, my eyes were arrested by a very pale face that seemed to float in midair in the dimly lit corridor. A brutal discharge of adrenaline projected me onto my feet. Fired up by the fight-or-flight hormone, my mind quickly picked out from the shadow the silhouette that went with the head: a short, frail body frame that propped up the emaciated face of a man in his seventies, with beady eyes and a remarkably full head of hair. The man stood still, staring at me with an odd intensity.

"Can I help you?" I said instinctively in English, trying to fold my nerves back in.

The old man shook his head sideways with some contempt to indicate that he did not understand.

"Qui êtes vous?" I asked, in French this time.

"Qui êtes vous?" He replied with a dissonant accent and a suspicious tone of voice.

"Je suis Richard Harris."

"Le nouveau boss?"

"Oui, le nouveau boss."

"Je suis Victor, le gardien. Vous me gardez?"

I had not been there for ten minutes and the guy was asking me whether I would keep him on as caretaker of the property.

"Oui," I said by default.

The man nodded without any kind of gratitude and just walked away. I stood by the bedroom door somewhat frozen until I heard the man's footsteps on the gravel of the front park. I moved to the window and watched him descend the alley between the rows of vines. He walked briskly despite his age. I had no idea where he was going by foot. None of the big houses that I had seen on the way seemed suited as a caretaker's home. Well, at least he did not live on the premises, which was a relief considering his welcoming attitude.

I went back down and dragged one by one the tightly packed suitcases and bulky travel trunk up the stairs. The effort rattled my empty stomach and before unpacking, I went on a food-gathering expedition. The kitchen was adjacent to the dining room and nearly as large. Its centerpiece was a long rectangular table with an inch-thick marble top; the walls were lined with pantries and appliances.

The pantries were empty; so was the fridge. Not a can of beans, not a box of rice. I pushed a small door in a corner of the room that opened into a pitch-dark room with a pungent smell that I could not quite make out. I felt the wall all around the door for a light but did not find any kind of switch. All I could see were a couple of stone steps going down. I backtracked into the kitchen and opened the drawers tucked under the marble plate of the table. They both hosted silverware and cutlery—no flashlight or candle of any kind. I scanned the room and noticed that the oven range was gas-powered; there had to be matches or a lighter somewhere. I finally found a box of matches stuck between the back of the range and the wall.

The first match strike by the entrance of the dark, smelly room caused me to jump back and slam the door closed. Though very brief—since I had dropped the match in panic—the flash of light had been bright enough to blast me with the snapshot of dozens of black objects hanging from the ceiling of the small room. On the other side of the door, my heart was racing. I had a near-phobic fear of bats and although I was not sure of what I had seen, the array of hanging dark sheaths was pretty suspicious. I tried

to simply walk away but turned around after a few steps. This was my house now; whatever else was in it without my assent was for me to confront. I walked back to the small room and kicked the door wide open before jumping to the side. Nothing came out, not even the slightest sound. I bundled several matches between my fingers, struck them all at once, and extended my arm into the room.

This time, the burst of light lived long enough for me to get a good look at the ceiling; I burst into a nervous laughter. The objects hanging from the ceiling were salamis, at least two dozens of them, probably set up there to dry. There were even a couple of hams hung in the same way by a corner of the room. Just underneath them, on a wall-mounted rack, three hunting shotguns hung, alongside several boxes of cartridges. I used one of the shotguns to unhook a salami by the kitchen light. All I had to accompany it was a half-bag of chips in my suitcase but I was too tired to drive back to town for groceries. The rudimentary meal gave me a little spike of energy, which allowed me to unpack my clothes as the night descended slowly over my French home. I lay down and turned my head toward the window that faced the forest. The smell of clean linens and the scattered firefly sparks in the forest tree tops immediately swept me into the boundless sleep of a feverish child.

Chapter 22

August 18, Year 3.

The village's boundaries seemed to stretch out widely but the town itself was small— five to ten thousand inhabitants at most. A large central square was host to city hall, a massive two-story building supported by an array of stone arches. The first level of the structure was actually an open space in which vendors were setting up tables on trestles for what appeared to be a farmers' market. It was still early; the produce had not even made it out of the vehicles yet. I entered what seemed to be the main street—a narrow paved road border by small shops, all still closed. The activity seemed to be concentrated around one house down the street, whose first floor was a bakery. Drivers would park on the street, leave the engine running, and dash into the shop from which they would run out less than a minute later with a couple of baguettes in a white paper bag.

When I entered the bakery, I received intrigued top-to-bottom eye scans and a polite nod from two customers. When my turn came up, I was left alone with the woman behind the counter, a plain-looking woman with ugly blue glasses but a friendly attitude. I fired the first social shot in what was to be my new language.

"Hello, the place smells wonderful—I'd like two baguettes and four croissants please."

The lady smiled in response to my accent but did not ask me to repeat the order.

"You must be the new owner at Clos Rémi—the American?" she said handing me the baguettes as another customer walked in.

"Richard Harris, at your service; but I'm only the owner's representative. I'll manage the property for her."

The woman's smile faded instantly.

"Oh, I see... So what they said was true; the daughter did buy the property back," she said, looking at the other man in the room. He nodded several times while pinching his lips, as to acknowledge a disturbing piece of news.

"You know her?" I asked, more determined than ever to learn more about Madame.

"We were in school together but she left the area before even finishing high school."

"On her own?"

The woman shrugged and handed me my bag of croissants with a forced smile. I thanked her and left the bakery. First contact: Poor. Lesson learned: Don't refer to Madame lightly.

I drove home with a trunk-load of groceries and fresh vegetables from the farmers' market. I had performed an account-balance check while at the ATM machine and had discovered that if I had yet to become a *notable*, I

was definitely now a *bourgeois* who could afford the finest food around. Aside from the lady from the bakery, everyone had been quite pleasant with me and I enjoyed the provincial ways of the villagers.

A white pickup was parked in front of my house when I pulled up in the front alley. Sitting at the back of the platform, swinging his legs and smoking a cigarette was a tall, middle-aged man with a big mustache whose ends pointed up, giving him a most affable air. He jumped on his feet and walked up to me as soon as I stopped the car.

"Richard?" he called with a cordial tone of voice and a candid grin.

"Yes...?" I replied with some hesitation as I stepped out of the car.

"I'm Paul. Madame must have told you... I have been helping her staff up the property."

"Oh, yes; nice to meet you Paul. She did explain that part to me," I said, relieved to finally find a handle on the place. "You call her Madame, too?" I continued without thinking.

"Not when I meet her face to face but here, on the property, that's how she wants to be known by all the personnel." He did not give me a chance to reply. "And talking about the personnel, they have already gone to work in the vineyards but you will meet them at lunchtime. They usually go home for the lunch break but since this is your first day, I thought that it'd be good for all of us to sit down together. Victor has already made arrangements with one of the local restaurants; they'll deliver the meal here."

"Victor?" I said, only having a vague recollection of the name.

"He is the caretaker; you met him last night. He is the one who told me that you had arrived. I'm sure you have plenty of questions but we can deal with those after lunch. I have to run to an appointment at the bank."

He jumped back into his truck and drove down the hill at great speed.

I brought the groceries in and fixed myself a huge *café au lait* in one of the colorful bowls piled into one of the closets. I shamelessly dunked my croissants into it; when in Rome... The breakfast fired me up; I organized my groceries in the pantry, loaded up the small fridge to the gut with fresh meats, veggies, five types of cheeses that already started to breathe some local atmosphere into the house, and several ready-made soups and cooked dishes from the farmers' market. I was home! When finished inside, I stepped out and walked around the house to explore the long building that I had noticed at the back, while looking through one of the upstairs windows. It paralleled the house; the stones of its front walls and the tiles of the front pane of the roof matched those of the house. It was devoid of any window and the rear of the structure thrust itself directly into the hill, as if the soil had slid onto it.

I walked up to the low, narrow door in the center of the building and pushed it. Lights automatically turned on inside. I immediately realized that it was a cellar that had been buried in part into the hill to help control humidity and temperature year-round. One wall was covered with wine

barrels stacked over three rows; the other was lined with shelf after shelf of wine bottles, thousands of them, from floor to ceiling. In the center of that wall, an arch opened up onto a large, tall cave dug directly into the hill and whose walls had been cemented. It hosted six stainless-steel tanks—each more than ten feet tall and four feet wide—two pumps, and a long table covered with scientific glassware and small electronic instruments. On the ceiling of the cave, a metal box hosted a slow running fan whose purpose probably was to exchange some air with the hill above, but it did not let through any natural light.

Before exiting, I walked up to a counter set up in the front part of the cellar, which displayed shapely glasses and several previously opened bottles of wine, all bearing a “Clos Rémi” label. I tasted each of them making sure to spit out the wine every time into the black spittoon placed by the counter; it was a bit early for wine. The white wines were rich in flavor but too sweet for my taste; the red wine was round and pleasant, and as for the rosé, I did not have the courage to spit it out. I stepped out of the cellar with the wonderful prospect of opening each of my evenings on my *terroir* with a glass of the rosé it had raised, a marvel of balance between crisp fruit aromas, natural acidity, and gentle sweetness.

The terrace in front of the house was fitted with a set of white cast-iron outdoor table and chairs. I sat there with the local newspaper I had brought back from town. I needed to gather some intelligence about the indigenous population and their habitat. Though named “La République des Pyrénées,” the paper dedicated the top half of its front page to an event that had occurred in Marseille, on the opposite southern corner of France. The article described how a drug gang operating in the northern part of the city had been decimated the night before by a rocket that blasted the warehouse where they had gathered to celebrate the birthday of one of its leaders. According to the reporter, shootouts and executions in that part of town were common as a result of territorial disputes between rival drug gangs, but the use of a rocket launcher had the police forces on edge. Drug lords usually stayed away from warfare-like weapons for fear of seeing police special units, or the army itself, invade their space and interfere with their more or less tolerated business activities. The wiping out of an entire gang—albeit rival—was not standard practice in that world and it spelled bad news for everyone in the local *milieu*.

I had not expected to open my first French newspaper on that type of violence; however, the feeling of national shock conveyed by the journalist confirmed my sentiment that this was a very unusual event in an otherwise mellow country. I moved on to the local news and found them to be irrelevant to me, but I needed some seeds for casual discussions with the villagers. The severe loss by the local rugby team the past Sunday and a

controversial project to revamp the center plaza of the village seemed good places to start.

The arrival of a van blasting American hip-pop music put an end to my peaceful reading. A shaggy young man descended from it and extracted from the back seat a stack of aluminum food containers.

“Hi, where do you want these?” he said with a sluggish voice while carrying the containers to the front door. I directed him to the kitchen.

“How much do I owe you?” I asked as the man was preparing to leave.

“I don’t know... You’ll sort it out with the boss,” he replied, and slid back into his van. It took a good minute after he drove off for the pounding of his woofer to clear out of the valley.

Just as I was about to return inside to investigate the food containers, whose saporous smells already seeped out of the front door, several voices arose from the backyard. Their owners soon materialized around the corner of the house and walked straight up to me; three men and two women, all in work clothes and wearing hats ranging from a large straw one to a flimsy John Deere golf visor. I immediately introduced myself and they returned the favor with some deference, assessing me physically through not-so-discreet eye scans. I remembered two nuggets from Madame’s advice: “Always offer an *aperitif* when someone comes to your house close to meal time,” and “You are the boss on my land; if you forget that, so will my employees.”

I invited the workers into the dining room and fetched from the pantry my brand-new Pernod bottle, along with water and ice. The girls immediately took it upon themselves to serve the drinks, after which they went into the kitchen and started unpacking the food without any prompting on my part. The men had sat down upon entering the room and seemed content to just enjoy their drinks at the table; I decided to go with the macho flow until I understood better the local rules of engagement between genres and sat down with them. They were stout men between thirty-five and fifty with tanned, wrinkled skins and reserved demeanors. If it had not been for their different language, they could have been my roommates on Madame’s estancia. The girls were younger—both in their twenties—and they were a novelty to me; aside for the students who had come for the grape harvest, I had never seen a female farmhand at Madame’s. Both of them were slim, suntanned, and though no beauty queens, they were quite attractive in their sleeveless shirts, shorts, and youth as they fluttered around us laying down plates and silverware onto the table.

I was inquiring about the work being carried out in the vineyards that day when Paul’s pickup pulled up in front of the open door. He disappeared from my field of vision after stepping out of it and only walked through the door a couple of minutes later carrying three bottles of *Clos Rémi*, two reds and one white. He joined us at the table and served

himself a Pernod, while the girls each helped themselves to a glass of white wine. Paul proceeded to introduce to me each employee; their personal details did not differ all that much, men's and women's alike. They had all lived in the area since childhood and also had in common that they had grown up on farms that were too small to be sustainable from a business standpoint, so they either leased the few parcels of land that they owned or worked them on the side.

The three men and one of the girls would be year-round employees of *Clos Rémi*, while the other girl would come in as needed. I spoke little; another trick I had learned during my *Evenings with Madame* was to limit my communications when in unknown territory. I could tell that it made the personnel slightly uncomfortable, but that, too, was designed to establish a basis for control. Paul did a great job driving a lively conversation and mediating the relationship between the workers he had picked and their new boss. By the end of the meal, a good blend of socially delimited congeniality had been achieved that would only be disrupted by a mild incident.

As the employees were standing up to return to work, the caretaker—Victor—popped into the door frame, frail and stiff, with a feverish stare that scanned the whole audience with impudence.

"Victor, where were you? You were supposed to join us for lunch!" said one of the girls with an affectionate contempt.

"I had lunch already," the man replied with a grumpy attitude, still scanning the room as in search of a hidden guest.

"Why don't you have a piece of *Péché Mignon*?" the girl insisted. That was the name of the local specialty dessert, the "cute sin."

Victor disappeared from the door frame just as he had appeared and none of the employees bothered to comment on his behavior as they walked out. After they turned the corner of the house, I shared with Paul my excellent impression of them and thanked him for picking such quality personnel—to which he replied with a smile, "Anything for Madame." His smile evaporated though when I asked, "But what about Victor?"

"Victor was not a pick of mine. Victor worked here before Madame and I were even born. She insisted that he be kept on." I did not push the issue; I would discuss the matter with Madame directly.

"I did not see any machinery around the property; where is it parked?" I asked Paul.

"Good question!" he replied, amused. "All you'll see here is a small tractor and a few attachments that are used for routine tasks year-round. All other equipment is pretty much seasonal, and local winemakers have formed a cooperative that purchases machines and lets members use them in turn."

After a few more minutes of friendly chatter, Paul left to return to his own property, less than a mile away, on the opposing hill.

Lunch had been rich and I was not used to drinking in the middle of the day; with jet lag providing the third strike, I ended up spending a hazy afternoon in the house. Though a lazy day on a southern French wine estate in late summer seemed like a lovely idea, I was so used to the relentless work-study schedule that had been mine for a year at Madame's that I felt more empty than relaxed. I realized that the new life that I had been handed on a platter was a pretty but empty shell and that I would have to figure out how to fill it up.

Around six o'clock, the workers' voices echoed again from the trail that led down from the upper vineyards to the house. I walked to the open door and wished them a good evening as they passed by; they responded with cheers. They walked down the gravel alley to their cars, stationed on a large, flat grassy area fifty yards or so from the house, probably intended for customers to park on open-door days. The silence that took over the property after their cars rumbled away was almost magical. Even the birds seemed to have wrapped it up for the day as the light wavered and the temperature dropped.

The house faced east; I thought for a second of climbing to the top of the hill to catch the sunset on the other side but my body was still sore from the trip and my mood suddenly melancholic. Instead, I took a seat at the outdoor table, poured a glass of rosé, and held it up above the rows of vines adjacent to the house and beyond the top of the hill, in the southwest direction. That was the time of the day when Madame would greet me on the patio, by the marble monk.

Once the night had filled up the valley, I went inside and made two sandwiches for dinner; one with real ham, the other with brie, both with a baguette that I could have eaten alone as a pastry. The clock only indicated eight o'clock when I gave up on battling jet lag. I went straight to bed and did not even see the fireflies in the tree tops before crashing into a massive sleep.

I woke up at the crack of dawn, not so much because of the jet lag as a nagging sound of clicking metal. I tried to ignore it but since my brain was fixated on trying to imagine what the source of the noise might be, I ended up getting up and opening the window facing the woods. The sound did come from inside the forest and now that it was no longer muffled by the window, I could hear some human groans interspersed with the rapid clicking. I quickly put on my clothes, stepped out of the house, and walked straight into the forest. The intensity of the metallic and grunting sounds grew in concert as I navigated around the thorny bushes. When I started discerning the scene taking place in a small clearing in the canopy, my first response was to stop and take a deep breath to steady up my perception.

In the pale glow of the early dawn light, two young men were engaged in a fierce fencing match, their thin rapiers flying around and onto each

other with blue-streak dexterity. Both men wore riding boots over tight dark pants and ample high-collared white shirts. Their swords were not capped at the end by a button; they were not sparring, they were dueling. Had the tension on their faces not been enough evidence to that effect, the imploring stare in Anya's eyes would have left no doubt. Straight and stiff, in a black T-shirt and tight matching pants, she leaned forward, held back by two other young men who were dressed like the duelists but with redingotes over their shirts. They each held one of her arms to prevent her from interfering with the combat. Her eyes were locked on one of the contenders, the dark young man who had taken her away from me on Madame's property in Argentina.

Hidden from the group by a thin layer of tall bushes, I watched the whole scene with an eerie fascination, tip-toeing at the edge of a warm madness. The scene was of another time; its actors were from another space. In the end, a blanket of dark abruptly extinguished the dream and returned me to deep sleep.

Chapter 23

August 20, Year 3.

The sunlight was blazing and a tractor roared up on the hill when I woke up for real. I felt rested and somewhat nauseous at the same time—probably sleep hangover. The fumes from the dream that had tormented my long night had not yet fully dissipated from my mind. I looked at my watch and immediately sat on the bed. It was close to eleven in the morning; the last thing I needed was to slip into a lazy mode right from the start. The shower was a bit weak but it did bring me into the day. When I walked back to the bedroom, I picked one of the outfits from the collection that Madame had branded *Richard Casual*—straight black pants and a white linen shirt.

It was too late for breakfast. While doing my grocery shopping the day before, I had walked by three different restaurants, all around the village's central plaza. Lunch in town sounded like a reasonable place to start my social campaign. I stopped by the bakery to grab a fresh baguette for the evening and this time, the lady behind the counter was more relaxed, especially after I asked for her opinion of the town restaurants. She encouraged me to try them all but suggested that I start with the cheapest one; it offered a "menu du jour" that would attract more customers on weekdays.

Just as I was opening the door to leave the store, the woman called me back.

"Excuse me, but you have a little blood running down the back of your neck; it's going to stain your shirt. You must have scratched yourself," she said amiably.

I turned to present my back to the large rectangular mirror occupying the wall behind her and looked over my shoulder. A thin streak of blood was indeed starting to diffuse into the collar of my shirt. I rubbed the scalp and hair above it and brought back reddish fingers. I thanked the lady and walked back to my car. Once inside, I proceeded to wipe the blood off my neck; as I moved up the skull and into the still-wet hair, I reached an area sensitive to the touch; not really painful but irritated. The finding puzzled me; my night had been restless but if the agitation had me rubbing my head against the headboard to the point of scarring my scalp, it should have awakened me.

Lunch in the restaurant did not do much for my social life. I ended up alone at a table for two by the wall, conspicuous in my expensive leisure shirt, lost among small groups of coworkers sharing their lunch breaks. Anyway, my mind was no longer on socializing. Though the bump at the back of my head did not hurt, I was bothered by the thought that I had at some point met with an event that had altered my body and had not been recorded by my mind. The rich lunch and the large éclair that capped it

helped me mellow out of that worry and leave the restaurant on perkier footing.

While most people would have dreaded my afternoon chore, I looked forward to my appointment with the *notaire*, Mr. Delpoux, which I had set up the day before according to the instructions contained in my walking papers from Madame. Mr. Delpoux had been representing her interests in the acquisition of *Clos Rémi* and had handled all the administrative paperwork related to it. He had also worked with Paul to manage the day-to-day operations of the estate since the sale. I was excited by the prospect of being handed the accounting files and all other asset records; it would be my own little inauguration as *Clos Rémi's* official administrator and the opportunity for me to flex again my accounting muscles and to start giving back to Madame.

Mr. Delpoux looked nothing like the part. Where I had expected a low-key, somber man, I found a restless character, quite amusing, though probably not on purpose. His head bobbed constantly and his limbs seemed unable to stay in the same place for more than a few seconds. He was a congenial man probably close to retirement but whose passion for red tape was still evident. During the three-and-a-half hours that we spent together, he went through a small mountain of files and documents, one at a time, with much application. He finished with the accounting books and took great pain to explain to me the way they were structured, which appeared to me as unnecessarily complicated but still manageable for a seasoned number-cruncher.

Once all materials had been packed for me to take home, the notary pointed out that it was nearly five o'clock and that his day was over. He pulled from the closet in his office a cute drop-shaped bottle of Armagnac, a liquor that Madame had described during one of our sessions as a strong brandy—and poor cousin of cognac—produced exclusively in a small area of southwest France. Mr. Delpoux got even more agitated as he poured the amber liquid into large balloon glasses.

"This is a *Bas-Armagnac millesime*; you'll give me news of it."

I had no clue what any part of the sentence meant; I responded with a silly smile and shadowed him as he lifted his glass.

"Au nouveau manager de *Clos Rémi!*" he said with enthusiasm as he clinked my glass with alarming vigor.

I took a small sip of the brandy. Despite its pleasant blend of wood and fruit aromas, it was too strong for my taste; I was more of a wine person. Mr. Delpoux, on the other hand, was taking massive gulps of the spirit and that, almost magically, quelled the agitation of his body within a few minutes. Taking advantage of the slowdown, I decided to inquire a bit about Madame's footprint on the place. The documents bore her real name but it did not mean anything to me and, like Paul, the notary had been asked to refer to the new owner of *Clos Rémi* as Madame when talking to the employees or locals.

“Did you, like Paul, know Madame from childhood?” I asked.

“No, not really; I was older. She just hired me as her solicitor after Paul recommended me. Oh, I forgot to mention... Your *maître de chai*, the head winemaker who rears the wines until they are ready for sale, is my son, Olivier.” He continued as if the subject change in mid-flight had made all the sense in the world. “You have not met him yet because he is attending a wine fair in Paris—he also handles most of the marketing—but he’ll be back the day after tomorrow.”

I did not insist with my inquiry. We chatted through another glass of Armagnac—for the notary only, as I slowly sipped the remainder of my first serving just to be polite—after which I took three boxes full of *Clos Rémi* documents into my car. Just as I started the engine, Mr. Delpoux ran out of the house with a manila folder.

“You’ve forgotten the sales records for last year!” he said, walking up to the car.

“Thank you, I would definitely have looked for these!” I replied while rolling down the window and grabbing the folder. “It must be the Armagnac playing tricks on my mind already,” I continued. “Good thing I didn’t have another one or tonight I would have seen double the number of fireflies!”

“Fireflies...?” The notary seemed perplexed, as if looking for a joke in my comment. “Do stop drinking right away if you start seeing some,” he finally replied on a teasing mode. “I haven’t seen fireflies around here since I was eight or nine years old—the pesticides wiped them out a long time ago!”

A Magritte blue sky strewn with bubbly white clouds arched itself across the hills as I meandered along the road cradled at the bottom of the small valley. I drove slowly with open windows to imbibe my senses with the atmosphere. I was still in the middle of my honeymoon phase with the place and could not believe that I actually had a home in it. As I drove uphill toward the house, Victor’s flimsy body frame, planted in gaping rubber boots, suddenly popped out of a row of vine, crossed the road without haste, and disappeared into a row of vines on the other side. Even though I had slowed the car down to a near stop to let him through, he did not gratify me with a look or sign of any kind. His rudeness instantly flushed out my Magritte state of mind and I responded to it by revving up loudly the car engine until I reached the house.

Luckily, a few minutes later, Paul showed up at my door and I had a chance to relax again as we chatted while seated at the table in front of the house. I took advantage of his visit to quiz him on the history of *Clos Rémi*; the notary had been more than specific about the administrative intricacies of the business but had eluded its human aspects. Paul explained that *Clos*

Rémi had belonged to Madame's family since her great grandfather had purchased it from the landowners for whom he had run it as a sharecropper. He and the owner's son had grown up side by side and forged a tight friendship; the son eventually gave him the chance to acquire the property under favorable terms. From there on, the vineyards were exploited and developed with great savvy until Madame's father let the business fall to pieces.

"How come?" I asked. "Had he not been trained by his own father?"

"He had—he was actually a brilliant winemaker and a shrewd businessman until he started drinking his wine instead of marketing it. He became an angry man; customers abandoned him one after the other," Paul replied. I waited for him to continue but he did not.

"If he was on top of his game, why did he start drinking like that?"

Paul looked at me amicably but with a faint squint, as if trying to size me up.

"It happened around the time Madame left; I don't know..." he finally said.

"I think you do, Paul," I insisted.

"What do you mean?"

"Every time I mention Madame or Madame's departure from this place, people close up like a Venus flytrap—the baker's wife, the notary, my employees. I can't figure out why such a great woman would trigger so many adverse reactions here."

"I think you're misreading signals, Richard. You don't know yet how the people here function. Once you do, I'm sure you'll realize that you were under a false impression."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not."

"In that case, you may want to bring up the issue directly with Madame," Paul replied snappily before leaning back on his chair and taking a deep breath. "Isn't the air a pure wonder here?" he resumed after relighting his grin. I smiled back and oriented the discussion onto a different track, dealing with the winemaking approaches of the new *maître de chai*.

Our lively conversation resumed for a couple of hours and two glasses of red wine. Paul had brought with him a couple of bottles from his own vineyards, *La Colline Rouge*. It was a strong and yet smooth red wine that enchanted my palate but also quickly warmed me up. To prevent overheating, I grabbed from the kitchen the baguette, a hard salami, a camembert in its charming, round wooden box, and *cornichons*—tiny pickles that a farmer had shoved into my basket as a welcome present. We made an earthy picnic dinner of these on the outside table now lit by a powerful spotlight above the front door until Paul started shivering from the light brume descending upon us, called it a day, and left. I lit a fire in the wide stone fireplace in the living room, dropped into the armchair, and

read the paper from cover to cover until a weaker but still functional jet lag started whispering its siren song into my ear.

I noticed a tiny smear of dried blood in the center of my pillow when I got into bed and felt a diffuse pain on the back of my head when I leaned back onto it. The night found me alone and took full advantage of the situation to play its favorite game: exalting unresolved issues and magnifying fears. The disconnect between the bump at the back of my skull and my memory was the unresolved issue; my latent fear was to be isolated in a big house half a mile away from any help if I were to somehow lose control of a situation.

After half an hour of tossing and turning, I sought comfort by looking at the forest through the window by the side of the bed. All I could distinguish was the outline of the tree tops against an only slightly lighter night sky, and of course the handful of fireflies, with the same intensity and coordinates as the night before. The same fireflies that went extinct in the region decades earlier, as Paul had confirmed during dinner. I sat on the bed to take a closer look at the tiny cluster of light flickers; though fairly distant from the house, they were neither an illusion nor a reflection onto the window's glass. My body was tired but my mind was racing in circles over these unsettled matters and would probably continue to do so for a while, so I just got up and put my clothes back on. There was at least one issue I had a chance to put to rest: the fireflies.

I grabbed a flashlight from a drawer of the living room's cupboard and a wood stick hung to the wall for decoration that ended with an inch-long metal point; I had no idea what it was for but it made me feel safer as I stepped out of the house and entered the forest with a vague sense of *déjà vu*. I lost sight of the flickering lights several times and had to retrace my steps for a few yards to find them again, always anchored high up in the air. I got entangled twice in thorny bushes and had the hardest time breaking loose.

I was about to retreat when I got the clearest view yet of the lights. They were not actually moving; the tree leaves in front of them were, waving slowly under the cold caress of a weak breeze. Adrenaline started dripping down my neck when I realized that I was walking toward three partially hindered flickering lights incrustated somewhere above a massive tree trunk. I approached the tree and found on the opposite side of it a rudimentary ladder made of two sturdy wood branches connected with an array of rungs, themselves made of smaller branches cut in half and nailed to the side poles. I pointed the flashlight up; the ladder disappeared into the tree's imposing crown; from that position, I could no longer see the light flickers. I kicked back my best judgment and stepped onto the first rung.

I paused every four of five rungs for a few seconds to digest the fear in small lumps. The ladder kept creeping up, bending around the thicker branches; I was now well into the tree crown. By now, the specter of a

hungry giant at the top of that beanstalk no longer seemed all that outlandish a thought. I finally reached the edge of a platform made of untreated wood slats—on the platform, a wooden cabin, poorly hindered under cut branches whose leaves had long been dead. The cabin was not more than eight feet wide but it was sealed with a door; a pale, golden light pulsed through the clumsily assembled planks that made up the door. Holding tight to the branches surrounding the structure, I climbed onto the platform and faced the door for a moment before knocking. Yes, knocking! Faced with a shack built on my property... in an oak tree... at least forty or fifty feet from the ground... I knocked! And of course, I did not get an answer. I pushed the door; it gave in.

Chapter 24

August 19, Year 3.

Anya—immobile—her shadow vacillating behind her as if looking for an escape, cast by the three flickering candles set on the ledge of a large rectangular opening in the tree house. She was sitting on a camping bed, facing the door—facing me. In the same black outfit as in my dream, her straight blond wrapping her shoulders. In her eyes, a great distress but not one hint of surprise. I scanned the room: a gas range, a bright-orange camping table with four matching canvas chairs, a metal closet, several coolers, and even a portable camping shower in the corner. I returned my eyes to Anya, still frozen.

“So, this morning, when I saw you, it was real, wasn’t it?” I said, not really expecting any answer; I did not receive one. “The duel...?” I insisted. Anya stared at me with a disturbing vacuity in her eyes. I sat on one of the orange chairs and felt very little and lost, as if playing house with a distant cousin in her imaginary world.

“Are you feeling okay? Your head...?” Anya finally said with a timid voice.

At first I did not make any sense of her question but I quickly connected the dots.

“It’s just bruised on the back. What happened? Something fell on my head while I was watching the duel?”

“Yes... Victor,” she replied after a short hesitation, pronouncing the old caretaker’s name in Spanish, *Bictorr*.

“He hit me?!”

“He saw you walking into the forest and followed you. No one was supposed to see us. He knew there’d be a duel; Aurélien had mentioned it to him. He panicked and hit you with the handle of his hoe. It has a rubber coating; he was not trying to hurt you; he did that instinctively to protect us.”

“How come I woke up in my bed?”

“We carried you back there. Best-case scenario, you’d think it had all been a bad dream. And if you did remember, we were confident that you would not talk; you knew two of us were connected with Madame.”

“Who are the three other young men?”

“They are friends of Aurélien’s.”

“Aurélien...?”

“The man with whom I left that day on Madame’s property,” Anya replied with a slight blush.

I nodded to encourage her to continue.

“The four of them are childhood friends; they grew up together, in this village—”

“Aurélien is from here?” I asked, now losing my time-space markers again.

“Yes.”

“If they are such good friends, why were they fighting? I could tell the duel was real.”

“It was a duel to first blood, not death.” Anya responded, suddenly defensive.

“It had something to do with you?”

Anya looked at the candles in silence. I was about to ask another question when she decided to reply.

“In the morning, one of Aurélien’s friends made a disparaging comment about me in front of him. They argued and decided to resolve the situation in their own way.”

“That way was abandoned a couple of centuries ago,” I commented instinctively.

“Not for them. They live by the honor code of that time. It’s not just the clothes; it’s an entire way of life. They reject the modern world and its values.”

“They were brought up that way?”

“No, based on the story that Victor told me when the others were away for the day, Aurélien and his friends come from ordinary local families. They were always very imaginative kids, well-known in the village for creating their own little worlds to play in, but nothing out of the norm. They did fine in school and weren’t more troublesome teenagers than any others. The problems started after college, when they were supposed to enter the real world. Somehow, they could not transition out of their prolonged childhood fantasies and instead of looking for jobs, they all moved in together in a small apartment and started scheming.”

“What kind of schemes?”

“Harmless plans, at first—launching their own business for fast fortune and glory. They were just dreamers; they weren’t cut out for business. After they failed a couple of senseless ventures and all the money invested into them by some of their relatives, they got bitter and frustrated with their lives. That’s when they started planning more *serious* stuff.”

“Serious, as in illegal?”

“Small robberies mainly, but with a lot of panache of course, Robin Hood-style. The first time, they took the night train to Paris and once there, each purchased from a costume store several nineteenth-century outfits, which they now wear every minute they spend together away from other people’s eyes. Close to the Notre-Dame cathedral, wearing these costumes, their faces covered with scarves and daggers in hand, they boarded a bus of Chinese tourists—who are well-known to carry large amounts of cash when traveling—and they robbed them. As they ran away, they dropped large bills in the pans of beggars on the street. They changed and took the next night train back here. Of course, the audacity and style of their

robbery made them instant celebrities in the news. They had in one day restored the shine on their dreams of adventure and fame.”

“You said ‘the first time’; there were others?”

“Yes. A month or so later, when the agitation around the first hijacking had settled down a bit, they went out again. This time, they targeted a hotel in Biarritz, an uppity, small coastal town about an hour’s drive from here. The hotel was hosting an international exhibit of antique watches—not exactly the type of event that would attract the attention of criminals or justify a heavy security setup. The thing is, though, most of the pieces on display were worth tens of thousands of dollars each and some hardcore collectors won’t hesitate to buy ‘hot’ watches from an underground source if they can authenticate them.

“Aurélien and his friends waited until the day after the end of the exhibit, when everyone was packing and leaving the hotel for the airport. At that point, there was no security left at all. Once the baggage handlers had loaded the suitcases of a large group of exhibitors into the trunk of a bus, they boarded it, again dressed in their costumes, and forced everyone out. They drove off with the bus and a mile or so later, on a side street, they transferred all the suitcases to a small truck. They returned here with more than two-hundred thousand dollars’ worth of watches. It was a slow news week; they again received a lot of press. This time, they claimed the robbery with a newspaper, along with the first one, under the name of ‘*Ceux du Doyenné*’—”

“A tribute to 3 Impasse du Doyenné,” I reacted out loud.

Anya looked at me with surprise.

“You know what that means?”

“Yes, I learned about it during a French class at Madame’s. It is a reference to a famed building in Paris where a group of nineteenth-century artists gathered. Despite their talent, they lamented the emptiness of their existence and sought to remedy it through artistic exchanges and extravagant costume parties in that hotel.”

“I didn’t know; that makes sense, though. It matches the spirit of Aurélien and his friends.”

“So what happened after they claimed responsibility for their actions? I suppose the more the media talked about them, the cockier they got?”

“Yes, exactly; they wanted more. That’s when they started planning a live heist during the *Nuit des Molières* event—the French equivalent of the Tony Awards ceremony. The show is broadcast live on national TV; a perfect theatrical setting for a spectacular coup that would turn them into living legends. Their actual target was the front row of the audience where some of the wealthiest sponsors of the French theater were to receive special recognition during the evening. Needless to say, the ladies on that row would be wearing their best jewels for their primetime TV appearance.”

“Wouldn’t the security have been very tight for that?”

"I asked Victor the same question; he just said, 'That was Paris; there are rich people at fancy events there all the time; no one in recent times had tried heisting one.'"

"So what happened?"

"Nothing; they never made it there. Two days before the event, the girlfriend of one of Aurélien's partners overheard a discussion between them and panicked. She was so afraid that her boyfriend would get hurt during the holdup that she confided to her father, who is a *gendarme*—a village policeman. He did not take kindly to the idea that his daughter was dating a criminal, even from the village. The same night, Ceux du Doyenné were arrested in their house, except for Aurélien who had been invited to dinner by Victor, with whom he seems to have ties that go back to childhood. They found out about the arrests by chance when a friend of Victor's called during the evening on an unrelated matter. Victor hid Aurélien in this tree house and since he had always stayed in touch with Madame, he contacted her to see if she could help Aurélien. She used her group's connections here and in Spain to arrange the passage of Aurélien to Argentina. There, she set him up at a small guardian house on her property, which is just behind the forest in which you saw Aurélien and me disappear that day on Madame's property."

Anya's body frame shook violently in response to a chill; I was getting cold, too.

"Is Aurélien meeting you here tonight?" I asked.

"We don't meet here; we live here at the moment."

"In the tree?!"

Anya nodded with a frustrated pout.

"Are you expecting him to come back soon?"

"Not for a few days; Victor will supply me with food in the meantime."

"Nonsense! You will stay at the house with me. Come on, grab what you need."

Anya did not push back; she just started packing toiletries and a few garments into a small duffel bag. I stepped off the platform and onto the ladder first, and I pointed the flashlight down, which was not really a smart idea. It was a long, winding way down.

"Wait until I go down a bit and I'll light the way for you," I said, stepping down onto the second rung while gripping the side poles of the ladder. "Who built this tree house, anyway? Victor?"

"Yes, but he explained to me that it wasn't a tree house," Anya replied from the darkness of the platform above. "It's called a *palombière*, after the name of a steel-blue dove—*palombe*—whose hunting is a passion around here. Hunters build their palombières on tall trees close to the top of a hill and camouflage them with cut branches. There's an entire network of these on the hills around here. In late fall, when the palombes migrate in droves from northern and eastern Europe to cross the Pyrénées and spend winter

in Spain, the hunters use captive pigeons to trick them into flying lower until they can shoot them from their palombière."

Blasting a symbol of peace out of the sky from a tree house... that seemed the kind of wrong that only tradition could try to rationalize, just like bullfighting.

I shone the way back to the house with my flashlight while Anya followed with a hand on my shoulder. Just as we made it to the front of the house, I heard a third set of footsteps on the gravel and turned around. Victor stood just a few yards behind us, his emaciated face rendered even more dismal by the hard white glow from the porch light.

"Anya, are you okay?" he asked, just as she turned as well.

"Yes, Victor, I'm fine; I'll just spend the night in the house, it'll be warmer," she replied softly.

"How about him?" the old man insisted with a defiant voice as he swung his chin in my direction. I did not give Anya time to respond.

"Get the hell off of my property!" I shouted at him and pointed my finger to the driveway. "You may come back and work here tomorrow since that's the way Madame wants it, but stay out of my sight from now on!"

The man's beady eyes stared bluntly at me but did not reply; he turned around and walked downhill in silence.

"He doesn't speak English..." Anya said with a slight tone of reproach. I had not realized that, in my anger, I had forgotten to switch back to French after speaking with Anya.

"Well, it looks like he got the point regardless, and from now on, maybe he'll think twice before hitting me on the head."

When we entered the living room, it was still warm and cozy—only glowing red embers were left in the fireplace but they instantly fired up small flames when I threw thin logs onto them.

"Take a seat by the fire, Anya. I'll make something hot—tea okay?"

She nodded as she squatted in front of the budding fire and laid her hands above it. Her face had regained some color by the time I returned. She was now nestled in the armchair and had taken her shoes off to offer the soles of her feet to the flames.

"I like your beard," she said with an amused grin as I handed her a large cup of tea.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all. It works for you."

Unsure of whether she was teasing me or not, I acknowledged the compliment with a reserved smile.

“So tell me,” I said, eager to learn more about the sequence of events that had landed her into the palombière, “I suppose that you first met Aurélien in Argentina?”

“Yes,” she responded, instantly reverting to a serious mode, “Madame had organized a party at her estancia and had invited my aunt from Buenos Aires—”

“The one I met?”

“Yes. Madame did not know me at the time but my aunt insisted that I join her so I’d keep her company during the long drive. I went along without much enthusiasm but I didn’t have anything better to do that weekend. The party at Madame’s was an all-day affair and it was grand. The entire local establishment was there; everyone was dressed to kill and the food and entertainment were first-class. I enjoyed myself for a while but I soon got tired of mingling around with older people. One of the rare young men there had approached me two or three times during the afternoon; he had as much conversation as a cataleptic sea bass but he was built like an Olympics swimmer and he looked quite spectacular in a tux. Just to have a little fun, I decided to lure him away from the party. After sending him an insistent stare through the crowd, I walked off of the patio and started strolling around the estancia.

“After a few minutes, I ended up walking along the forest that flanks the trail to the house. It was a warm evening; the light was softening; I felt wonderful. I was so relaxed that I did not even react when a long rectangle of white silk appeared four inches in front of my eyes, held by beautiful tanned hands with long, straight fingers. In perfect silence, the scarf slowly moved toward my eyes until it covered them and was tied at the back of my neck.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“Why should I have been? I had lured the boy there myself. I was just pleasantly surprised that the dull fellow would pull such a romantic move. I got a bit nervous when he swept me off the ground without warning and cradled me into very hard arms, but he just gently pressed his head against mine to reassure me. Every one of his moves was slow and gentle; there was no hint of a threat.”

“Where did he take you?”

“I could hear branches cracking under his feet; I think he crossed the forest. After five minutes or so, he put me down and removed my blind. We stood side by side next to a tiny stone house, just one floor, one door, one window with blue shutters, and a cute wooden bench painted in the same blue underneath it. Had it not been for the old cast-iron water pump planted a few feet from the door, it would have looked like a playhouse for a dreamy little girl. I watched the man walk to the bench, stunned to realize that he wasn’t the boy from the party.

“He was a tall, slender young man in an outfit from another time. He turned around, sat down on the bench and for the first time since he had

approached me, I felt fear. His face was that of a fierce man with a tall forehead, a square jaw, and a straight nose but it was pale and balanced like the face of a beautiful woman.”

“Why would the fact that he was beautiful scare you?” I asked.

“His form of beauty was unusual, unsettling, and then there were his eyes—oddly intense, like those of a child burning with fever. My first thought was that he was an ill young man but I could not sort out whether the illness was rooted in the body or the mind.”

“Did you try to walk away?”

“I didn’t think of it. He was looking at me, silently, his head slightly tilted to the side. For some strange reason, the situation made me think of Beauty and the Beast—the part where she visits him at the castle for the first time—with the young man on the bench playing both Beauty and Beast.”

“He wasn’t saying anything to you?”

“‘I was wondering why I had been thrown across a whole ocean and into this doll house. I’m so glad you finally brought me the answer.’ These were Aurélien’s first words to me, spoken in Spanish with a strong French accent and a soft smile of extreme, candid sincerity. I think that’s when I first sensed that I would love the man. Because he spoke his truth—however corny it might be— and I had just landed in its core. Looking back, that was without a doubt the most intense moment of my life; I was afraid, I was excited, I was overwhelmed; I was already... under his spell.”

“It’s a nice story,” I commented without irony.

“It was a nice moment,” Anya replied without joy.

“So I guess you didn’t leave.”

“We spent three hours talking on the blue bench, for the most part in complete darkness, just feet from the forest. I couldn’t tell you what was said. I just recall him mentioning that he had spotted me earlier at the party, as he looked from the edge of the forest since he was not to be seen. After that it was... you know... first-night lovers’ talk.”

“Lovers?”

Anya blushed and replied hurriedly.

“No, nothing like that; we didn’t even kiss!”

I smiled at her embarrassment.

“Three hours you said? It must have been getting late. No one was looking for you?”

“Yes! My aunt was so upset that I’d vanished that she had called a small search party to look around the estancia. We heard them calling my name; Aurélien picked me back up and carried me through the woods again but this time he asked me to hold a flashlight. We parted where we had met, at the edge of the forest. He just said ‘I’ll see you next weekend.’ He had never asked for my name.”

Chapter 25

August 20, Year 3.

"The next Saturday morning, my aunt called me and asked me to come over to her place immediately. She sounded worried; she said she'd explain. I rushed there. When I knocked at the door, Aurélien opened it. He had totally seduced my aunt with our story, and convinced her to play that little game on the phone before lending us her place for the day. I don't know how he got her information—Madame, I guess. That is the day on which we did become lovers."

"How did he get to Buenos Aires?" I asked, to divert from the personal nature of her last statement.

"He had bought a motorcycle."

The pieces started falling together for me.

"The motorcycle he used to follow me and Bishop Ignacio when we went to Buenos Aires to kidnap you?"

"Oh... you know about that. Yes, Madame had instructed him not to get involved but he disobeyed her and followed you all along, he told me later. Between the day I met him at my aunt's and the day you kidnapped me, many things had happened, though."

I nodded with a soft smile to encourage her to continue.

"It's a long story and I don't have the energy to go through it right now," she said.

"Just give me the short version, Anya, so I can form a better picture of the whole story."

She hesitated for an instant before complying.

"The relationship between Aurélien and me grew very intense, very quickly. We would only see each other during weekends. I was in school in Buenos Aires all week and he could not take the chance of hanging around in a big city. With his unusual clothes and behavior, he would have been rapidly spotted by the police. So, he would fly me to Cordoba every Friday night and we would spend the weekend in the small house on Madame's property. That lasted a couple of months—true rapture for both of us. One day, one of my college friends told me that he had to drive to Cordoba for a family reunion. I accepted his offer for a ride and skipped classes for the remaining two days of the week so I could surprise Aurélien. My friend dropped me by the entrance of Madame's property and I ran to Aurélien's place. When I got a hundred feet or so from it—I was still inside the forest—I saw them."

"Them?"

"They sat on the little blue bench in front of the house; Madame had laid her head onto Aurélien's shoulder; she was holding his hand to her cheek. They weren't talking. They just seemed happy, very happy together."

I knew about Madame and the young man since I had witnessed their exchange months earlier at the estancia but seen through Anya's eyes that moment of bliss between them hurt me just as much as it did her.

"Did you confront them?" I asked.

"No; they never saw me. I left them there—together—and ran off of the property immediately."

"How did you get home?"

"I was lucky to hitch a ride to Cordoba and my college friend drove me back to Buenos Aires the next day. But I never really *got home* after seeing them; I was madly in love with Aurélien. Losing him threw me down into a severe depression. I dropped out of college and right into the wrong hands; you know the rest..."

"Aurélien never tried to see you again?"

"I sent him a letter the moment I returned to Buenos Aires—a letter explaining that I had fallen in love with someone else and ended my relationship with him quite harshly. I knew he'd be too proud to chase me; I was right."

"But what about your detox at Madame's? You were both on the property at the same time..."

"Aurélien did not know that I was there. Madame did not tell him—for obvious reasons. In all fairness, though, she was really intent on helping me and very secretive with everyone else about my presence in her house as well. She didn't want any interference with my treatment."

"You never saw him while there, even outside, by chance?"

"He very seldom came to the main house in those days. He just stayed in the guardian house."

"What did he do with his time?"

"I had asked him that earlier, when we were dating. He said that he had to lay low in Argentina for a couple of years, so most of his time was spent between riding his motorcycle in the area, walking in the forest, and writing something he referred to as his *manifeste*."

"A manifesto?"

"He was very evasive about that and at the time, he only said something about a political program in preparation of his return home."

"A political program for a man now hiding here, in France, in a tree house?!"

Anya did not respond but looked at me as if trying to pass a silent message. I did not get it.

"Continue, Anya. Somehow I get the feeling that you and Aurélien could use a new friend right now."

She hesitated for a brief instant before replying.

"How much do you know about Aurélien's stay at Madame's?"

"Until tonight, I had no idea he had ever stayed there; I just knew that's where he had snatched you away from me."

"He was not just with Madame," Anya continued. "She also coached him, just like I overheard her train you some nights at the estancia. She spoke to me about that. She didn't know that I was aware of their relationship; she had just presented him to me as the son of a friend in France, a young man in need of guidance."

"How come I never saw him around the estancia? My training spanned several hours almost every day; we should have crossed paths at some point."

"Madame was no longer coaching Aurélien by the time you arrived. She told me that he was not a suitable scholar, that he had no interest in academics and that, on the other hand, he was devouring a certain part of the training and distorting its meaning by taking it to an extreme. That's why she stopped mentoring him. In retrospect, I think I know what she meant."

"Which is...?"

"I got really bored sometimes in the evening at the estancia, especially toward the end, when I was better. I would sneak into the space underneath the staircase that leads to the classroom where you were being educated to listen to some classes. I sat there the night Madame spoke to you for the first time about her organization."

"How much good a dash of evil can achieve..." I commented.

"Madame never said those words that night," Anya replied, surprised, "but Aurélien has—many times—with me and with his friends, especially since we came here. It's as if they were consumed by them. They also often use the word *restoration*."

"In what context?"

"The restoration of old values."

"Yes; I see the link with Madame's group but what part did he take to an extreme?"

"He took the message as also embracing the restoration of old means to defend the values."

"Nothing like a good crusade..." I joked to counter Anya's increasingly bleak tone of voice. In response, she stared at me in silence, pinching her lips and nodding repeatedly.

"You mean... They are actually planning a crusade against infidels?" I asked.

"They have already started." Anya replied, still staring at me with an odd insistence.

"How?"

"This past weekend, in Marseille—"

"The blasting of the drug gang?!"

Anya's eyes turned to the fire; the pulsating shadows of the flames painted unsettling reflections on her pale face.

"I read about that in the paper," I said to keep her engaged. "Why did they hit that specific gang?"

“Aurélien explained to me that when he was in Argentina and being trained by Madame, she introduced him to a French member of her group, who was visiting for the day. The two men instantly connected and after Madame dismissed Aurélien, he stuck around to eavesdrop on her conversation with the visitor. It turned out that the man was touring leaders of the organization—of whom Madame was apparently one—to lobby them into embracing more aggressive methods to enforce the group’s values. Madame rejected his proposal, arguing that systematic violence would discredit the organization and discourage high-quality individuals to join. She sent him on his way quite bluntly but Aurélien stopped him as he drove away and invited him over to his house for coffee.

“Aurélien long felt that he was bound for a great destiny but his life was at a dead end. The visitor’s theories resonated with echoes of past French grandeur and extolled the need to fight fire with fire in order to restore the country’s culture and values. Aurélien had an epiphany—his own words—that day and he immediately offered the visitor his help. Before leaving, the man gave Aurélien his card and asked him to contact him as soon as he returned to France. That’s when Aurélien started writing his manifesto, planning his return to Europe, and spooking Madame with his radicalization. She stopped coaching him soon after, though she kept hosting him on her land, unaware of his plans.”

“And somehow,” I said, “Aurélien learned about your presence at the estancia or he would not have stopped my car the day I was taking you to Cordoba.”

Anya nodded.

“That afternoon, he was walking up to the estancia to ask Madame for a safe passage back to France. Before he reached the house, he saw me from a distance, all dressed up, jump into Madame’s car to drive around the building, where I was going to pick you up. He retreated to the forest and just waited there, close to the road, for us to pass by.”

“Why did you go with him? You had managed to stay away from him for months.”

“It’s the way the light hit his face at that specific moment... I finally saw him for who he truly was—”

“Did you come straight here when you arrived in France?”

“Yes. We stayed with Victor for a couple of days but it was risky; his house is close to the road and people visit him all the time, so he came up with the idea of hiding us in the palombière until we’d figure out a better plan. He would just bring us food and other supplies that we might need.”

“You have been in that tree house for six months?!”

“No, just a week. We only left Argentina ten days ago. After being reunited, we moved to Buenos Aires and rented an apartment there. The first couple of weeks were pure bliss again but then Aurélien got increasingly restless. He did not have any papers, couldn’t work; he missed France, and most of all, he had completed his manifesto and was eager to

put it into practice there. I bought a few months by stressing how the police were probably still looking for him in Europe, but eventually Aurélien ended up losing patience and decided to move back to his homeland. It did not take much effort for him to convince me to come along. He asked Madame for help and she arranged again a clandestine passage, this time for both of us."

"What kind of plane would take *clandestine* passengers?"

"The same kind that had brought Aurélien to Argentina in the first place," Anya replied curtly.

"And in just a week here, Aurélien and his friends have already managed to blow up a drug gang?!"

"It has gone very fast. The moment we moved into the palombière, Victor let Aurélien's three friends know he was back and where to find him."

"Weren't they in jail?"

"They had been freed after a year or so. They were all first offenders, had never really hurt anyone. Their sentences had been relatively light and French jails are overcrowded; they were first in line for early release for good behavior."

"They came to visit you in the woods?"

"The moment they heard. Aurélien was like a god to them; he was the group's leader. They stayed day and night in the palombière, catching up with Aurélien and listening to his new philosophy for hours on end. They embraced it, just because it came from him. They had been idle and aimless ever since their release from jail; Aurélien was bringing back with him the heart and soul of the group, and most importantly the promise of a new round of adventures, even more exciting and meaningful than the first ones."

"But where in the world did they find a rocket launcher and why did they cross the country to hit a gang in Marseille?"

"The answer to each question rests with the French man who visited Madame in Argentina and fed all the violent theories to Aurélien. I only know him by his pseudonym: Monsieur Armand. Last Thursday, Aurélien and his friends went to visit him in Bordeaux where he lives, a couple of hours drive from here. They stormed back here on Friday very excited, just for a few minutes to grab some clothes. They asked Victor to take them to the train station. All I know is that Monsieur Armand gave them both the target in Marseille—a large drug gang identified by his group as a major culprit in the degradation of the city—and a contact there that would provide them with the best time and place to hit them, as well as with the rocket launcher."

"And they didn't even think twice about killing people? That was a major step up from Robin Hood-style robberies!"

"Monsieur Armand gave them that assignment to test their commitment to his group's ideals; they were so eager to join that they'd

have walked on fire to prove themselves. Also keep in mind that the guys they killed were not exactly innocent bystanders.”

“But Madame’s group does not condone direct violence as a standard approach to dealing with the problems that they decide to take on.”

“I thought about that; Madame more or less kicked Monsieur Armand out of her house when he approached her with his theories. All I can think is that he now uses information from Madame’s organization to feed his own satellite group, which has strayed toward much more radical and violent methods.”

“Where are Aurélien and his friends now? I saw them this morning at the duel, so they’re back...”

“Yes, they returned from Marseille by train yesterday. They spent the night at the palombière. They were exhausted and very tense—I guess they were finally realizing what they had done—but their resolve to join Monsieur Armand’s group was stronger than ever. Early this afternoon, they drove back to Bordeaux to report to him. Aurélien said that they might be gone for a few days as they had to plan their next steps with Monsieur Armand and get the proper gear to carry them out.”

“Gear? You realize how bad that sounds, right?”

“That’s the word he used. I tried to reason with him, especially after hearing from him what they had done in Marseille, but he’s out of my reach. I don’t know what Monsieur Armand told them, but they are now completely under his influence. I’m scared. They have already killed; I don’t even want to think about who pulled the trigger on that rocket launcher. They are in huge trouble already and running toward much more of it.”

“Do you know where that Monsieur Armand lives?”

“Aurélien had me memorize his address. If I didn’t hear from him for a week, I was to go there for information.”

“No phone?”

“No phone calls under any circumstances, with Aurélien, his friends, or Monsieur Armand.”

I hesitated for a few seconds.

“Listen Anya, it is late and we are both tired. Let’s get some rest and we’ll try to figure out the road ahead first thing in the morning. I’ll show you to your room.”

After setting up Anya in the mauve bedroom, I went straight to bed and fell asleep without difficulty. The path ahead was not one to agonize over; if Madame cared for Aurélien, so would I.

Chapter 26

August 21, Year 3.

Anya and I left for Bordeaux early in the morning after a quick breakfast. The weather had turned stormy and muggy and my rental car did not have air conditioning. I was not exactly in a sunny mood myself; my first order of business after getting up had been to saw off two-thirds of the double barrel of one of the house shotguns. I remembered how impressed I had been when discovering one such weapon in the bag that Madame had given us for our expedition to Buenos Aires. A shotgun is a regular guy's grown-up toy; cut its barrel down and you turn the man behind it into a really bad guy. I had tucked the shortened shotgun into my briefcase and placed it into the trunk of the car before Anya had come down for breakfast.

"Do you know anything at all about Monsieur Armand that we could leverage?" I asked Anya as we drove over a long highway bridge.

"Just what Aurélien mentioned. He is a middle-aged man, lives in a nice apartment in downtown Bordeaux with his mother. He is very active politically and is running for local political office under a right-wing label. That's about it. What are you planning to do?"

"Improvise. All I know is that we don't have much time for planning. At the speed at which Aurélien and his friends are moving, we'd better find them fast before they raise hell again and get hurt by it. Let's hope they'll still be at Monsieur Armand's."

Luckily, Anya did not ask me what I would do if they were; I had no answer to that whatsoever. Without any kind of lever on the boys or their mentor, waving an amputated shotgun at them was about all the plans I had.

Bordeaux was a large city but with the placid and quaint attitude of a small town. We stopped several times to ask for directions, including twice at the exact same spot since I was driving in circles through the narrow streets, of which many were one-way. After some frustration on my part, we finally arrived at the address that Anya had memorized; we were greeted by an archway cut out into a tall stone wall and that opened onto an interior patio. We parked on the street; I grabbed my briefcase from the trunk before we walked into the cobblestone courtyard.

Each side and the rear of the patio hosted a staircase that disappeared into the second floor of the structure. At the bottom of each staircase, affixed to a cement pillar, a small metal mailbox bore an adhesive tag with the name of the tenant. Of the three mailboxes, only one displayed an "A" in the name, "A. Lamont." We climbed the corresponding staircase to end up in front of a tall, finely carved wood door whose circular copper handle was unusually high, as if intended for a small giant. I looked at Anya; she

shrugged her shoulders and opened wide her eyes in an expression of hesitation. I took a deep breath and knocked.

The man who opened the door was made of circles. A circular bald spot flanked by two circular patches of hair on the temples, surmounting a round, flabby face mounted on what seemed to be the sculpture of a body for an African goddess of fertility. The whole was packaged into a fancy suit that made it almost distinguished. He scanned me from top to bottom and acknowledged my own tailored suit with a courteous smile.

“How can I help you?” he asked with a deep voice in total opposition with his look. He never took as much as a glance at Anya.

“I come from Argentina. Madame sent me,” I replied with as much poise as my wrenched gut could muster. That was as far as my plan went; it got me through the door. Anya shadowed me without a word. The apartment was a pearl of classic European style. The floor was patterned with large geometrical arrays of woods of different shades; the walls were lined with shelves and shelves of leather-bound books. The center of the room was its focal point; a lounging area made up of black leather seats and an all-glass coffee table.

“Who is it?” asked the whining voice of an old woman from somewhere down a long corridor.

“A friend, Maman; don’t worry.”

In five words, Monsieur Armand handed me the leverage I had been craving.

“So, Madame sent you,” he said with a poorly contained excitement. “She reconsidered my proposal, then?”

“Yes and no,” I replied while laying down my briefcase onto the coffee table. I opened and rotated it to expose to the circular man the sawed-off shotgun. This time, Anya shadowed Monsieur Armand and leaned backward into her seat. The armchairs were as limp as Monsieur Armand’s body; he ended up in an awkward, half-leaning back posture.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he said, with a voice that had climbed a couple of octaves.

I turned the suitcase back toward me and took two or three seconds to savor the fact that I now knew exactly where to go.

“Well, Madame was indeed wondering whether your approach might be worth a try.” I said with a candid smile. “She asked me to visit you, test it with you, and report to her. See, she’s identified a problem for the group and that problem is, well... *you!* It seems like you have decided to use our information network to run you own little operation. That’s bad, Armand, very bad...” I paused for a brief instant to feed the man’s accelerated breathing. “You can’t just leverage the group’s intelligence to start your own little rocket-firing business. By going rogue on us, you are threatening our entire operation. That’s bad, Armand, bad to the bone...” I paused again. “Madame is very concerned with you, my friend, but intrigued too—I have to say—by your theories. So, she sent me to kill two birds with

one stone if I may be so bold as to use that expression. According to your reasoning, the best way for the group to handle a problem and defend its values is... —help me out here, Monsieur Armand.”

“Violence...?” he said, still leaned as far back as the soft leather would let him.

“Bingo! Madame was right, you are a smart cookie. Let’s see if you can follow this one. On the table, a fine shotgun; my baby, dare I say,” I said with a grin. Monsieur Armand looked to Anya for help but she was staring at me with her mouth half-open, as if struck by a sudden mental black-out.

“Inside the cute shotgun, two shells. One for Monsieur Armand and one for Maman—poor thing—because in this *violence* business, witnesses are never your friends, are they now?”

To his credit, the round man raised his bulge a bit when hearing his mom being threatened.

“You can’t be serious! I was just making a suggestion to Madame. I didn’t mean—”

“And outfitting four young men with a military-grade weapon so they could start blowing people away, did you mean?” I said now deadly serious while standing up and taking two steps forward to tower over Monsieur Armand. The shotgun was still on the table, now behind me. The man was scared just the same.

“They ca—, came to me.” He stuttered.

“Shut up!” I shouted, now totally caught up into my homemade good cop-bad cop routine.

“Armand, what’s going on?” the whining voice down the hall dripped into the living room.

“Nothing, Maman, my friend is just fooling around,” Armand yelled back, surprisingly cool-headed when it came to reassuring his mother.

“Maman is getting agitated, Armand. Maybe we should start your ‘violence’ theory with her, what do you think?” I said, back to an unsettling gentle tone of voice.

“Madame is mistaken! I never meant to undermine the group,” Armand blathered. “I’m a loyal member; I can prove that,” he said trying to roll back up on his seat. I just had to point my finger at his chest for him to lean back down.

“Ok, Armand, much better. I might be able to work with that new attitude. Two things though—”

“What are they?!”

“I have been mandated for two missions. The first is to stop you from bringing any kind of blemish to the group with your stupid initiatives; the second is to cut the blood supply to any organ you might have spun out.”

“What does that mean? Tell me! I’ll help you; I will!”

“Number one: You resign from the group. You send a resignation letter to Madame and make it clear that you commit never to speak of the organization to anyone. By now, I’m sure you have understood that we can

get to you anywhere, at any time, even in a maximum-security prison. You may get one break; you won't get two."

"Yes, I know, I know," he replied eagerly.

"Number two: You tell me where the four boys are, right now."

Armand opened wide his eyes as if expecting additional instructions. I just stared back at him. He straightened up, as if suddenly inflating back. I stepped back, sat down, and put my hand down onto the shotgun. The air came back out of him instantly.

"They are in Garrocq," he said with a defeated voice.

"What's Garrocq?" I asked.

"A tiny village in the Pyrénées," he replied, "three hours south of here, near the Spanish border."

"What are they doing there?"

"They are meeting a friend of mine, a former ETA operative."

"ETA?"

"The Basque separatist organization that has been fighting the Spanish government for decades through bombings and executions."

"What do they have to do with your little clique?"

"Nothing; aside from their activities, they provide consulting and training services to other disruptive organizations that may one day in turn support their interests."

"They provide weapons, too?"

"Sometimes; they've long been well financed and connected with other violent groups in the world."

"Why are the boys meeting a man like that?"

"For training..." Monsieur Armand said hesitantly.

"Training for what?"

"Sniping."

"What the hell does that mean, *sniping*?!" I screamed again, conscious of the effect my sudden mood swings produced on Monsieur Armand.

"They'll go after drug dealers; that's their assignment," he rushed to answer.

"An assignment you gave them."

"Yes. The idea is for them to fan out and to travel around France sniping at drug dealers in large cities. 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee', you know..."

"To what end?"

"To light up the wick on gang wars for one and to unsettle drug dealers all over the country. No one bothers them right now, you know..." Monsieur Armand said, fishing for empathy.

"That's probably true," I replied, "but that doesn't change a thing. If the group decides to take on that problem, they will, in their own way. You have no business preempting their rule."

I emphasized the word *rule*, but in a way, I knew what Monsieur Armand meant and I could not bring myself to disagree with him.

"Where in Garrocq are they?" I asked.

"A chalet half a mile or so east of the village, in the forest. It's named Laberou; just ask any villager when you get there."

"Who exactly is with them?"

"Just my friend, the ETA guy."

"Aside from training them, is he giving them weapons?"

"Yes, precision rifles."

I was getting a bit overwhelmed by the fast-growing dimension of the problem.

"How in the world did you convince the boys to go down that path?" I asked.

Monsieur Armand looked around the room for some way out of the situation, and then answered the question with resignation.

"I suppose that you know about Marseille?" he said.

"Yes. What's the connection?"

"When Aurélien came back from Argentina and visited me with his friends, he gave me an overview of his manifesto, in which top priority was given to fighting drug trafficking, using guerilla warfare tactics. He was going to do it anyway, so I offered my support."

"Why would a man like you get his hands dirty in such a high-risk venture? You don't exactly live like a desperado," I said looking around.

"What Aurélien proposed to do was in perfect alignment with the theories I was trying to push on the group."

"Fight fire with fire..."

"Yes. It's the only effective way in a society where the politically correct has anesthetized all instincts of preservation in people. Aurélien's actions, if properly implemented, could have proven my point. That's why I offered some advice and logistical support."

"You didn't care a bit about the boys' lives."

"They are not boys; they are men."

"Why sniping now? Weren't explosives effective enough?"

"They were too effective and they had a serious downside; they stirred up way too much police activity. Sniping drug dealers on the street has two advantages over rockets: first, the police will think that the hits are coming from rival gangs and won't interfere much; and secondly, if there are enough hits in enough cities, the dealers will start getting edgy. That's exactly what Aurélien wanted to achieve; he wanted to turn drug dealing back into a high-risk activity, as opposed to the easy way to make fast money that it has become."

"Where are they going after the training?"

"I advised them to split and criss-cross the country discreetly using public transportation. The targets aren't hard to find when they get to any city. Hit and run to the next place. A great strategy to create paranoia among drug gangs; with a little luck, they'll start retaliating against one another as well. It will also force the police into their territory more often, if

only to make reports on the executions. Overall, it could be pretty disruptive for the drug business nationwide, at least in the short term.”

“And you could take all the credit within the group without ever having set foot out of this comfortable little nest,” I said with contempt. Piled up onto a flabby wave of leather, the man looked at me with sheer fear.

“Anya, we are leaving,” I said, heading to the door. Monsieur Armand wiggled his way out of the armchair and followed us.

“Your letter to Madame announcing your withdrawal from the group should reach her seven days from today at the latest. Clear enough?” I said.

“Yes, clear enough,” the round man replied hurriedly.

“And by the way, Armand... I did not introduce my charming colleague,” I added looking at Anya. “She is in training, you see, and she is the one assigned to you if things don’t go the way we agreed. So, if you fail to deliver your letter to Madame on time or if you try to contact the boys before we get to them, it’ll be her responsibility to come back here and close the file on you, you see...? You should really have said hi to her in the first place; that wasn’t very polite of you.”

“Hi,” said Monsieur Armand as he turned to Anya with the wishful submission of a lost pet.

“Hi, Armand,” Anya replied with an amused smile that seemed to panic him all the more.

I took two steps away, turned around, and held the door that Monsieur Armand was closing behind us. His face leaned into the opening, frazzled.

“I almost forgot, Armand.” I said casually. “Please say goodbye to Maman for us. So sorry we didn’t get to meet her. Maybe next time...” and I pulled the door closed on him.

Anya and I did not exchange a word until we got inside the car. I was incredibly wound up inside; both disturbed and exhilarated. She broke the silence the moment I drove off.

“I cannot believe you did that,” she whispered, as if speaking to herself. “You did not have anything going in...” She turned to me. “Is that what Madame does?”

I reflected a long moment before answering.

“I guess it *is* what she does.”

Chapter 27

August 21, Year 3.

I did not speak much for the first hour of the drive back down to the Pyrénées. My mind was the stage of serious clashes between tall waves of exhilaration and hard boulders of guilt. In a matter of minutes, I had managed to unhinge a dead-bolted situation, but at the same time, I had threatened to kill an elderly mother with a sawed-off shotgun. After a few brief exchanges, mostly about directions to exit Bordeaux, Anya had understood how tense I was and she just looked at the scenery in silence.

We retraced our steps to Pau on the highway, crossing the gentle countryside and passing by small towns and villages. Quaint little farmhouses, though always a fair distance from the road, tended to hold my attention. I found myself envying their occupants who, nestled in the middle of a placid landscape and miles from life, could leave it to fools like me to rush by at eighty miles an hour. They would never be faced with the responsibility of extracting four misguided young men from a very thorny situation. I did not even have a chance to enjoy my own country estate for more than a couple of days!

We exited the highway near Pau. By that time, I had relaxed and resumed communications with Anya. We had been trading suggestions in an effort to put together some sort of strategy to catch up with Aurélien and his friends. I stopped for gas and purchased a local map.

"I agree that going to the lodge in Garrocq is our only option," I said, sitting back in the car. I unfolded the map and looked for Garrocq on it. "There it is—close to the Spanish border. It can't be more than an hour and a half from here."

"I can read you directions," Anya said reaching for the map. I folded it away from her hand.

"I don't think that we should drive there right now. Aurélien and his friends are not going to be thrilled with our surprise visit, especially if they are in the company of some sort of guerilla expert and surrounded with guns."

"But I'll be with you..."

"They are on the war path, Anya; I doubt that there's much room for warm and fuzzy feelings at this point. I need them to listen to me and for that, I have to be in charge of the situation for at least a few minutes."

"You mean... You're going to run in there with your shotgun?"

"I'm not planning to fire it; I'll try to surprise them at night so we don't start a shootout. We can't get there too early, though; someone may alert them that we are hanging around. It looks like a tiny village; we can't just sit at a bar unnoticed for hours. Let's go home for now."

Anya nodded after a worried glance at me.

We left Cazaubielle in late afternoon, traveling along a narrow, winding road in an orange bubble of dusk light and late summer colors. By the time the night started closing down on us, the road had narrowed even further and its turns kept tightening up. I looked up and understood instantly why there was hardly any traffic on the road. We had entered a very tight valley onto which seemed to close down the tallest, sharpest, most jagged mountain walls I had ever seen. By the end of the valley, the road curved straight up into the realm of night; I cursed myself for not having traveled earlier in the day.

We kept climbing in silence atop the spine of a live snake of a road. The headlights never allowed us to see more than a hundred feet of road ahead due to the constant turns; I could physically feel the steep incline of the road through the pressure of the seat on my back. The left side of the road was an uninterrupted wall of asperous rock; the right side, most of the times, just consisted of a few inches of grass diving into a dark abyss—no guard rails anywhere. Some of the turns were so tight and so long that they often seemed to run for more than a full circle.

Anya was staring down at her feet, her hands clenched onto her lap. I had turned on the ceiling light of the car to help diffuse a bit the fear that had seized us. I almost stopped on a couple of occasions, overwhelmed by the tension, but there just wasn't any safe place for me to park the car. By the time a road sign finally announced the entrance of Garrocq, I was nervously exhausted and—based on the livid tone of her face—Anya was moments from throwing up.

In Garrocq, the gray stones of the house façades replaced the mountain on the side of the same narrow two-way street that had brought us up there. The orange glow of the windows warmed up my heart; there was normal, modern life there. I stopped on a four-spot parking lot bordered by a stone wall and faintly lit by the neon sign of a tiny grocery store across the street. I went in while Anya took some deep breaths by the car.

"I have directions to the chalet," I said as I walked back to the car and opened the driver's side door.

"Are we going now...?" Anya asked while biting her lip.

"Yes; we need to stop the boys before they start fanning out. If we don't, chances are that their venture will not have a happy ending."

Anya nodded twice with a tense face and then walked to the car.

It was a short drive, uphill all the way. The moment I detected faint lights ahead, I started looking for a spot to park the car. This time, I was lucky to find a small paved recess in front of a groove in the rocky façade that hosted a small statue of the Virgin Mary. I welcomed the omen just as much as the parking space.

"Are we there?" asked Anya.

"Yes; the clerk in the store said that it was the first house that we would meet on this road."

We got out and I grabbed the shotgun from the trunk.

"It's not loaded, is it?" Anya asked.

"It *is* loaded. I know how you feel about Aurélien, Anya, but we are not on our way to meet four boy scouts and their troop leader here. Inside that house probably are five men who all have blood on their hands. We can't just play pretend."

The wood house was planted into the slope just underneath the road. The driveway hosted a sport utility vehicle and a small sedan. Only two adjacent windows on the first floor were lit. When we reached the flanks of the cars, I grabbed Anya's arm.

"Listen, Anya," I whispered, "I'm going to walk to the front and try to peek through a window. If there are five men in the room, I'll just storm in and point the gun at them; hopefully, they won't try anything. Once I have them in check, I'll try to talk to them. I'll leave the door open so you can hear what's going on. I may or may not need your help; you'll have to be the judge of that. If a fight breaks out, just run for a safe place to hide and go back to the village when it's safe, okay?"

"Please don't shoot at Aurélien..." Anya said very fast.

I patted her arm and followed the wooden walls of the house to one of the front windows. There were five indeed, sitting at a long table, having dinner. I immediately recognized the four boys. The fifth man was older and wore a thick beard. He sat by the end of the table, talking while the young men listened attentively. I could hear the mumble of his voice but not the actual words.

I had learned from one of Madame's classes that once a goal has been established that requires perilous action to be attained, thinking should be placed on hold. That's just what I did. I walked to the door, turned the knob slowly, and pushed the wood panel just a few millimeters in to verify that it was not locked. It wasn't. I slammed it wide open and took position two feet inside the room, shotgun pointed at the older fellow.

"Stay just as you are," I said with some assurance as soon as I realized that they would not move. "Hands flat on the table; I'm just here to talk."

The boys obviously recognized me and seemed more confused than worried. The bearded man laid his hands onto the table but stared straight at me, unimpressed.

"Have you gotten paid for the guns?" I asked him bluntly, trying to keep the upper hand.

He seemed surprised by the question and nodded in response to it.

"Then, your business here is complete. I'm going to ask you to leave. Don't try anything foolish; I have a man outside who will keep a gun pointed at you from the moment you step out." Outside, Anya punctuated my words with two slow hand claps—a fast thinking girl, clearly not a stranger to edgy situations.

"Just get in your car and return to where you came from. What happens here next is between these boys and me; they will not be hurt." I finished, my eyes still glued to the man's face despite a wrenching fear that he might override my command. He did not. He nodded to the boys, stood up, and slowly walked toward me. I stepped aside to let him through. Within seconds the roar of a big car engine flared up and rapidly faded away.

I looked down at my shotgun; it had been a brilliant assistant twice during the day but it now had come to the edge of its sphere of influence. I could not force the boys to listen to me with a gun pointed at them; they had not even complied with my order to lay their hands on the table. They did not look threatening; I decided to take a chance, walked to the table, and laid the shotgun on it, barrel facing in my direction.

"You are four adventurous young men; you are not mass murderers," I said as I stepped back from the table.

Three of the boys looked at each other, unsure of how to respond. Aurélien, facing me across the table, pulled out from underneath it a rifle with a long scope mounted onto its barrel. Barrel and scope pointed at me and his finger was on the trigger as he drew the gun out but he turned the weapon around and laid it onto the table next to the shotgun with the butt toward me.

"I saw a shadow behind the window. You're lucky; I recognized you when you stepped in..." he said with the same matter-of-fact tone of voice that I had used. I was frazzled; I had never really been in control of the situation and could just as easily have been killed if Aurélien had not reacted with cool-headedness.

"Did Madame send you here?" he asked while pointing at the chair left empty by the bearded man.

"Not for you," I replied while sitting down. "I had no idea that you were in France until I saw you in the forest."

"How did you know to find us here today?"

"It's a bit of a story. Can my partner get in? It's cold outside."

Aurélien nodded. One of his friends, a long-nosed man who was visibly more uncomfortable with the situation than the others, laid his hand on Aurélien's rifle as he turned his head to the door. An undressed, two-inch long fresh scar ran across the top of his hand all the way up to the wrist.

"You can come in!" I shouted. Anya walked in after a few seconds, squinting to adjust to the light. Aurélien's face instantly softened upon seeing her.

"See, I told you!" The man with the hand on the rifle shouted at Aurélien. "We'll never be safe with her around. She's the one who brought him here!" he continued, pointing a raging finger at me.

Aurélien stood up and went on to wrap his jacket around Anya's shoulders. The younger fellow and the fourth member of the group—an athletic, stout man—did not seem bothered by Anya's entrance and welcomed her with discreet smiles. After Anya sat into a beat-up armchair next to the wood stove, Aurélien returned to his chair and raised his chin at me to encourage me to talk.

"Anya did not tell me where to find you. It's only after I discovered her in the tree house that she confided in me how worried she was about all of you. Your hit in Marseille has stirred up a lot of turmoil; the police are on edge all over the country. Anya knew me from Argentina; she was aware that I had been trained by Madame; she knew I'd help if I could."

"The police are looking for us specifically?" asked Aurélien.

"Not that I am aware of. I haven't heard anything tying you to the rocket attack. Hopefully, you covered your tracks."

"Monsieur Armand will be there for us if trouble comes our way," the long-nosed man asserted with a grave voice.

"You mean he'll protect you like he protected you from me?" I replied with the same assurance. "I walked into Monsieur Armand's apartment at nine-thirty this morning; I walked out of it at nine forty-five with the confirmation from him that you were behind the Marseille hit, your current location, and details regarding your upcoming sniping rampage. How is that for unconditional support?"

The four young men looked at each other, visibly disturbed by my statement. I took advantage of the opening.

"Marseille never happened. If you continue on the path onto which Monsieur Armand has thrown you, you will never meet again with adventure or glory—just a sordid death, at the hand of a drug dealer or that of a police officer. Even if you're lucky enough to be arrested alive, the jails are full of the kind of men that you were set on sniping down. They'll get to you easily and it won't be a pretty death."

"He's right, you know..." said timidly the youngest-looking of the four men sitting next to Aurélien. "I've been thinking about all that, and it hasn't felt right since Marseille. I wish I had never pulled the trigger on that rocket launcher."

Aurélien turned around quite brusquely to face his friend and grabbed his collar. I braced myself for the breakout of a fight but instead Aurélien took a deep breath, his hands relaxed on his friend's chest, and slid up to end up resting on his shoulders.

"It hasn't felt right since Marseille for me either, Téo," Aurélien said. "You were the one who pulled the trigger only because we drew straws for it, but we are all equally responsible." The weak light of the cabin carved deep furrows of fatigue on the young faces of the four companions.

“You’re right; none of us is a killer,” Aurélien said as he turned back to me, “but we made each other a binding promise when we were teens. That promise is that we, as a group, would make a difference; that our lives would matter, even if they had to be harsh and troubled for it.”

“There are many proper ways to make a difference,” I interjected.

“We do not have any legitimate handle to make a difference on people’s lives at a significant scale,” Aurélien replied. “We have tons of energy but no path to influence. We are all educated but not enough to gain access to decision-makers, to the levers of power. The only high-impact way for us to affect the course of the society in which we live is by taking radical actions against what we feel are malfeasant forces in it.”

I could almost hear Madame’s voice underlining Aurélien’s words; the only difference being that, with Aurélien, “radical” seemed to be a way of life and not a tool to be used under special circumstances, as Madame believed.

“So, your answer is to criss-cross the country sniping at drug dealers—killing more and more for the greater good until you yourselves get killed?” I said.

Aurélien’s face contracted with aggravation.

“What do you think, that it’s a game for us?! We do what we feel is needed; inertia is not an option for us as it is for most people. We are men of good will and we will not let evil prevail!”

Despite Aurélien’s loud voice and extreme words, he sounded anything but fanatical—terribly determined, terribly sure of his beliefs, but not of unsound judgment. The conversation took place in French and Anya did not seem to understand a word of it. She tried hard to read our faces as we exchanged arguments. I stared at her to force Aurélien to look as well and see the angst in her eyes. As soon as he did, I launched my banderilla.

“What if I offered all of you a chance to operate under the umbrella of Madame’s group? That would give you access to a strong network of resources and to powerful levers, since that’s what you are missing.”

Aurélien swung his head toward me and replied with contempt.

“Madame did not deem me good enough for her group, surely you must know that.”

“Yes, I do know that. I also know why. You chose violence as your main path forward; the group has a very different approach to effecting its goals. Anyway, you would not be integrated into the group until I could convince Madame that you would bring real value.”

“You want us to work for you?”

“Not work for me; work with me. I am now a member of the group. I would try to sponsor you to join it eventually, but first I would need for us to be assigned a mission so we could prove your worth to the group.”

“This is all bullshit!” said the long-nosed man burst and jumped to his feet, kicking his chair back in the process. “First the girl, now this fool! This has nothing to do with Ceux du Doyenné anymore, Aurélien! You are

selling us out to these people; they'll end up deciding everything for us and we'll obey like dumb little dogs!"

"But it's no different from Monsieur Armand—" Aurélien said with a pacifying voice.

"It is very different!" The long-nosed man continued, unabated in his wrath. "Monsieur Armand was a resource to our group; *they* are coming into it and between us; they will destroy it!" He pointed his finger at Anya, then me. "No, in fact, it is *you*, Aurélien, who messed up Ceux du Doyenné since you came back with all your theories and your stupid girlfriend. You know what?" He added scooping his rifle from the table. "We just agreed on a plan and I'm taking this show on the road. Let's go snipe down some slime! Come on, guys!"

He stared with confidence at the two other young men but when he realized that they looked down in response, he snatched his jacket off the backrest of his chair and stormed out, leaving the door wide open behind him. He revved up the car engine several times—as if throwing a final call—before driving away in a roar that long echoed against the mountain walls.

Everyone in the room stared at Aurélien to assess his reaction. His face was flushed; he had clearly taken to heart his friend's diatribe. He looked at the door as if expecting him to return. When the noise from the car completely faded out, Aurélien stood up, walked to the door, and closed it. Instead of returning to the table, he sat on the arm of Anya's armchair.

"You didn't have a chance to finish explaining your offer to us," he said to me with a tired voice.

"First, let me tell each of you that I have no intention of taking over your group, and neither does Anya, obviously," I replied, looking at each of the young men in turn. "I just want to give you a chance to go back to the spirit of Ceux du Doyenné; Anya explained to me what it was and what it meant to you. I want you to go back to operating with brains, not weapons. Your first actions as a group may have been illegal but they were cleverly designed and well implemented, with minimal violence. That's what I mean by you returning to the true spirit of your group."

"Why would you help us?" asked the huskier fellow without malice.

"For two reasons: First, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Madame and I know that she cares greatly about Aurélien." Aurélien dodged my stare; Anya looked up to him with sadness. "By protecting him, I am protecting her interests, which is my primary function here," I continued. "Secondly, sooner or later, I will receive an assignment from Madame's group. At that point, I may need help and you are a resourceful and daring bunch."

The three men seemed to accept my response but Aurélien was clearly not keen on relenting control in front of his friends.

"Fine," he replied forcefully, "you have twenty-four hours to come to us with a specific mission that will be in line with the spirit of our group, as

you say. If you don't, we will proceed with our initial plan. As I said earlier, inertia is not an option for us."

I nodded but worried by the short deadline. Yet, having gone further with them than I would have dreamed, I did not try to push my luck.

"There were two cars when we got here," I said casually. "Two cars have left; how are you going to return to Cazaubielle?"

"With you," Aurélien said just as casually.

I did not say a word as the men packed four precision rifles back into hard cases. They cleared the table, swept the floor, and locked the front door before we all headed downhill to my car in the most complete obscurity, to the flickering guidance of a cigarette lighter.

Chapter 28

August 21, Year 3.

The return trip from Garrocq was just as scary as the drive up. The stuffing of a small sedan with five silent adults did not do anything to lighten up the mood. Anya did much better though. For most of the descent, she had her hand laid on her own shoulder, covered with Aurélien's, who sat behind her. The two other men at the back seemed to have dozed off, their heads laid back. They only woke up a few miles before Cazaubielle and asked to be dropped off before we reached the village; they would walk home across the countryside. It was past midnight when we arrived at Clos Rémi. I offered Aurélien to stay with Anya in the house; he accepted with a surprising embarrassment and they went upstairs after preparing sandwiches in the kitchen.

I was exhausted and struggling to scrape off the bottom of my emotional reserves. I was the Tour de France rider who had somehow managed to climb two mountains in one day only to realize that an even taller one was scheduled for the next day. I walked to the partly buried cellar at the back of the house, sat at the wine-tasting counter, and opened a brand-new bottle of rosé. A glass of wine on an empty stomach sufficed to comb my nerves back into place. I reviewed the day with disbelief, feeling as if I had lived it through someone else's consciousness. I had delivered two great acts in it but I was also aware that the outcome of the play was entirely contingent on the third, for which I needed to open the satellite lifeline to Madame.

"Richard, is that you? It's not Sunday. What's wrong?"

Madame's voice, though tense, blended so well into the aftertaste of my rosé. If only the circumstances could had been a bit mellower... I had to remind myself that I was breaking a cardinal rule, which could only be justified by an emergency.

"It's Aurélien," I said with an exaggerated gravity.

"*Mon Dieu...*" Madame reacted in a whisper.

"Don't worry; he is not hurt," I added quickly. Madame only replied after a few seconds.

"I knew through Victor that he and Anya had made it there but Aurélien wouldn't allow Victor to say more. He and his friends are at it again, aren't they?"

"Yes... Badly at it."

I went on to explain to Madame how I learned about Aurélien from Anya and then described to her every minute of the past twenty-four hours. She listened to me without interruption, except for a couple of distraught "I cannot believe this..." when I spoke of the Marseille hit and the sniping project. In the end, I submitted to her my plan for Aurélien and his friends, as well as my request for an assignment from the group.

“But you just got there...” she said. “You’re not even grounded in France yet; our missions are complex and require an extensive knowledge of the local environment.”

“I realize all that but the pin has been pulled out from these guys; they’ll blow up one way or another. Either we control the explosion or we’ll be crying on their graves before the end of the year. When you start playing with rockets and precision rifles, your life expectancy drops really fast. All I’m looking for right now is a channel in which these boys”—I emphasized *boys* out of petty jealousy—“will be able to release their pent-up tension without losing their lives. There’s got to be something...”

A long pause followed my words. Madame finally replied with hesitation.

“I’m high enough up the group’s ranks to execute or sign off on a couple of punctual missions every year, provided that the higher decision committee has approved their principle beforehand. That’s what I did with that public official in Cordoba.”

“Anything that can be launched here in France and this week?”

“I need to make a few calls. Get some sleep, Mister Keiffer; just keep the satellite phone close by. I’ll call you back in a few hours.”

I slept late; it was close to noon when I rose back to the surface. A hard node formed in my gut the instant I saw the satellite phone on the nightstand. I had blocked the whole ordeal from my light nighttime wanderings. I ran the water of the shower at half-strength to make sure that its whooshing would not cover the sound of the phone ringing. The biggest part of my twenty-four-hour allocation had already evaporated and I did not have the first line of a plan to present to Aurélien and his friends.

Anya came down shortly after me and went straight to the kitchen, where she proceeded to fix a large chicken and pasta salad. We exchanged a few casual considerations, just as roommates would; not a word about the past evening or the looming deadline. She parsed the salad into three plates, handed me one, and took the two others upstairs with a bottle of water. They did not come down in the afternoon.

Hours went by with haste despite the fact that I was not really doing anything other than waiting for the satellite phone on the living room table to ring. It did just as I was stretching my legs outside; I ran back in and caught it before the third ring.

The call lasted less than twenty minutes. Madame made it clear from the start that she would not be able to give me too many details by phone. I would receive minimal directions and it would be my responsibility to design the specific steps to carry out the assignment with *Ceux du Doyenné*. I could sense that Madame was worried about the whole plan.

“Do you have a clear understanding of the purpose of the mission?” she asked as the conversation wound down.

“I do.”

“Watch yourself, Mister Keiffer. My prayers will be with each of you.”

When Madame hung up, I felt as if deep bass notes had just been dumped onto my life's soundtrack—the kind that pound the root of your neck at the movie theater during an action movie. They freed up my adrenaline and unsettled my stomach at the same time. When I laid the phone back down and turned around, I noticed Aurélien and Anya, standing halfway down the staircase, immobile.

"Do we have an assignment?" asked Aurélien.

"We do," I replied.

"One of influence and thunder?"

"One of influence and thunder," I repeated with a tense smile.

"Should I ask the others to meet us here?"

"Yes, in an hour."

I spent the hour preparing my presentation of the plan to the group. Though it was likely to meet their expectations, I did not want them to walk away because of a weakness in my argument, especially now that I had forced Madame to launch the mission prematurely. When I finally exposed that mission to the three young men, around the living room table, I spoke with solemnity. I tried to play into their apparent fascination for mystical endeavors and grand schemes.

"In accordance with the strategy of the group who is mandating us, in the course of the next five days, it will be our mission to throw a grain of sand into the vicious machine that drives globalization. It will not grip the whole machine but it should seriously damage one of its modules," I started. The three friends listened attentively to my whole presentation without interrupting me, even nodding at each other with stern approval on a couple of occasions. When I finished, they asked to be left alone for a few minutes in the living room. Anya and I stepped outside and I translated the mission plan for her since all my explanations inside had been in French.

"This is total insanity..." she whispered after hearing the scope of the assignment.

"Hopefully insane enough that they'll go for it," I replied under my breath as well.

"If it isn't, I'm sure they'll take their sniper's guns on a road trip first thing in the morning."

Anya, too, was nearing the end of her emotional rope. She had tears in her eyes—tears of frustration, tears of impotence. We stared at the twilight landscape in silence for a while. The three young men came out after less than half an hour and sat with us at the iron table.

"So you will be the leader of this mission?" the burly fellow asked without preamble.

"I will be accountable to Madame and her group for the outcome of the mission," I replied, "so I will definitely be involved but to put it in business terms, it is your skill sets that will be most critical to its success—not mine—so I count on you to figure out the details of the plan. At this time, all I'm asking as you plan the mission is for you to always think of covering your tracks at every step; we must vanish without a trace once the mission is accomplished. Obviously, no costumes and no bravado this time; the 'Romanesque' will lie in the audacity and impact of your mission, and as for credit, I'll make sure that you receive it from the group."

"Why only five days to execute the mission?" Aurélien asked.

"Because there's a major meeting of the European Union Food Commission in less than a month and we need for our action to have spawned its full range of consequences before then."

"We'll have a detailed mission plan for you tomorrow by noon. Is it okay if my friends spend the night here?"

"Of course; bring me into your brainstorm at any time if you hit a wall or need more details."

The young men nodded with determined faces. I was not sure at all that I had done the right thing by handing them the reins of the planning but I did not want them to think for a second that I was taking over their group. At least, the expression of relief on Anya's face highlighted the fact that I had managed to stir them away from their little sniping project. Aurélien took Anya for a walk while the other men got back into the house. I grabbed the satellite phone and called Madame.

"They agreed," I said when she picked up.

"Thank God, for now. Keep me informed," she replied soberly and hung up.

Ceux du Doyenné never brought me into their meeting, which took place behind closed doors in the small office at the back of the house. They only came out twice: the first time to raid the kitchen, and the second time to ask me for the password to the Internet connection on the office computer. Anya was exhausted; she had retired to her room without even eating dinner. I stuck around the living room for a couple of hours, reading the paper and writing in my journal the sequence of events since my arrival in France. When I understood that I would not be asked into the meeting at the back, I went to bed with some concern but no regret; for the second day in a row, I would close the curtain on a stage that I had myself designed, though with trembling hands.

The creaking of the corridor parquet alerted me before I had a chance to fall asleep. I sat down on the bed just as the door of my bedroom was slowly pushed open. By the faint night glow coming through the windows, I recognized Anya's silhouette, wrapped into a dark shiny robe. I reached

for the night lamp; she stopped my hand in midair and pushed it down onto the bed cover.

“No light, please,” she whispered. “I just want to lay down by your side for a moment.”

And so she did, before I even had a chance to explain to her how bad an idea that was and at how many levels. If Aurélien was to find her there, I would have a hard time getting away with the excuse that Anya was on top of the covers and I was under them.

“Anya, this is not reasonable,” I said. “It could jeopardize everything that’s been done in the past two days to prevent Aurélien and his friends to carry on with their sniping road show.”

In response, Anya laid her head on my shoulder. Her hair smelled of flowers that only grow on the labels of western shampoos. Her body heat was starting to permeate through the covers.

“Anya,” I insisted, “this is not appropriate. Please return to your room.”

She reached for my hand, which I had safely tucked away from her body, and found it.

“You have been great these past two days, Richard,” she said, turning her head toward me and delivering warm words to my cheek. I skewed away slightly in a reflex. “Don’t worry,” Anya continued, firming up her grasp on my hand, “I am not here to compete with Madame; I already fight that battle every day on another front. I just wanted to be next to you for a few minutes because since I left Madame’s estancia in Argentina, you are the only person with whom I’ve been who seems to be in control of his path. I’ve been smuggled into this foreign country; I’ve lived in a tree; in just a week, I’ve already been left behind several times by a man I love but who is going on the war path and does not even realize how isolated I am here without him. I’m so tired of all this mess—so scared for Aurélien. I just need a little moment in a good place.”

I rotated my hand to reverse her hold and wrapped it around hers.

“Just a little moment then, Anya—just a little moment.”

The nagging tickle of fine hair on my face brought me out of what I thought was a brief snooze. By the glowing handles of the alarm clock, though, several hours had gone by! Anya was lying on her stomach, under the covers! Her head rested on the right side of my chest, her right hand was flattened over my left breast. I grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back to the side in a vigorous move.

“Anya, it’s three in the morning!”

It took a couple of seconds for the words to register with her numb mind. When they did, she surged into a sitting position.

“Oh, no...” she said, palming her forehead with her hand and staring at me with an air of panic.

“If the guys already came up, everything has already fallen apart,” I said, riled up. “Let me find out; stay here.”

As silently as I could on the creaking wood of the parquet and stairs, I walked down to the first floor and slipped into the hallway leading to the office. The young men were still locked up in there, Aurélien's voice and that of his athletic friends were calmly debating the merits of different itineraries to cross Hungary. I exhaled a long stream of air before rushing back to my bedroom.

"Quick, Anya, go back to your room. They're still working; I don't think that they noticed anything."

Just as she passed the door, Anya turned around with a naughty smile.

"That was a close call, wasn't it, Richard?"

"In at least two too many ways," I replied with a similar grin and watched hurry down the corridor.

Chapter 29

August 23, Year 3.

I came down at dawn and, after a quick breakfast, drove back to the airport to trade in my rental car for a minivan camper with four seats, two small beds, a kitchenette and a tiny bathroom with sink and toilet. The attendant at the car-rental place had offered it to me when I had first arrived from Argentina thinking that I was a tourist visiting the area with wife and kids. On the way back, I stopped by a supermarket to load up with food, water, cookware, and other prime necessities for a short trip. It was close to noon when I returned to the house. I found the three young men eating long baguette sandwiches in the kitchen. They greeted me with a poorly concealed excitement.

“We’ll be with you as soon as we’re done with lunch,” said Aurélien cheerfully as he engulfed a big chunk of his sandwich. I sat down with them and fixed myself a *charcuterie* plate that consisted of sinfully cholesterol-rich pork products—ham, salami, and pâté. I managed to save half a baguette of the fresh bread I had brought back from the young fellows’ scavenging arms.

During lunch, Aurélien finally introduced his friends by name, Téo for the round-faced, younger-looking fellow, and Fabrice for the husky one. In the discussion, Téo was as bubbly as Fabrice was understated. The three young men took turns to ask me questions—especially in respect my association with Madame’s group—but quickly understood from my evasive answers that the matter was not really open to discussion. The moment we finished eating, Aurélien switched to business without warning.

“We’ll have the blood by the end of the day if we leave before two. After that, we can head east directly. The Italian, Slovenian, and Hungarian borders are part of the EU’s Schengen Area; we’ll be able to drive through without any control. The Romanian border is the only one where we’ll have to go through customs; hopefully, we won’t raise any suspicion—”

The long-case clock in the living room interrupted Aurélien as it rang the twelve strokes of noon. “Listen, Richard,” he resumed after confirming the time by a quick check of his wristwatch watch, “it’s a thirty-hour drive to our destination; since we have very little time to execute the mission, I propose that we leave within the hour and I’ll fill you in with all the details on the way.”

I approved with a nod of the head.

“Good,” Aurélien continued. “Then, let’s all get packed and go look for transportation.”

“It’s already outside,” I said with an amused smile.

The young men jumped onto their feet as one and rushed outside. They inspected the van in and out before giving their seal of approval and

going upstairs to grab their bags. A few minutes after they came back down and loaded their bags into the van, Anya descended the stairs, her own backpack hanging from one of her shoulders. Aurélien immediately walked up to her.

“Anya, we discussed this... You are not coming.”

Anya looked at each of us in turn.

“How many of you speak Romanian?” she said with a defiant attitude.

A total silence answered her question.

“You guys are planning a coup in a country where you can’t even say hi in the local language. Once you get past Italy, you might as well be deaf and dumb.”

“And *you* speak Romanian?” Aurélien said with impatience.

“Of course I do. I grew up in western Ukraine where people speak a mix of Hungarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian. I can manage a basic conversation in each of the three languages.”

I was not keen on exposing Anya to the hazards of the mission but she had a valid point and I loved the idea of having a third power-center within the group; that would reduce my isolation in case of conflict.

“She has a point, Aurélien,” I said with a conciliating tone. “If things get hectic, we need to be able to communicate with the locals.”

Aurélien was clearly vexed to realize that he had not taken that aspect into consideration, but he yielded without too much drama.

“Fine, Anya, you can come along but you will have to play by our plan, okay?”

Anya responded with a reserved smile.

The three young men went back upstairs for a final luggage trip. I waited for them by the door while Anya boarded the minivan. When they walked back down the stairs, each man was carrying a rifle case. An adrenaline surge rattled the back of my neck; I raised my hand in an opposing gesture.

“Gentlemen, the guns stay here,” I said, as calmly as I could.

“They are coming. Our plan, our tools,” Aurélien replied with the most casual tone of voice and kept walking toward me. I lowered my hand but took a side step to stand in the door frame. Aurélien walked straight to me with a defiant stare and stopped abruptly as his face came inches from mine.

“I have not heard your plan yet,” I said. “So far, I have trusted your instincts and I will continue to do so as long as your actions are not contrary to the ethics of Madame’s group.”

Aurélien did not move or lower his eyes.

“This mission is tricky,” I continued, “very tricky, not only in its execution but also in the way its consequences will be interpreted by the public if they somehow become aware one day that we were behind it. If we carry out the plan smoothly, we may be perceived as a militant but laudable humanitarian organization. If we produce any kind of collateral

damage, we will instantly be branded as a terrorist organization. The guns are not negotiable. If that's a real problem for you guys, maybe you'd like to take a few minutes alone to discuss it?"

Aurélien's face was so tense that I thought he was going to force his way out. He opted instead for an angry verbal charge.

"In five minutes, our leadership in this mission has been challenged twice and we haven't even left yet! This is not acceptable."

I sensed the finality of his statement and immediately recalled a comment that Bishop Ignacio had made as we discussed the raid from Madame's neighbors' farmhands, "If one party in a dispute gave the other a single way to save face, two-thirds of conflicts would instantly collapse on themselves."

"You are correct, Aurélien," I replied. "These two challenges are not questioning your leadership, though; they just stem from the fact that neither Anya nor I have had a chance to hear your plan. If we had, we would have discussed these issues openly with the three of you and I'm sure that we would have reached a common ground."

Aurélien assessed for an instant my sincerity and chose—albeit with obvious frustration—to take the opening.

"Maybe... We'll explain the plan to you on the way to Toulouse," he said with a snappy tone of voice before heading back to the staircase and waving his friends along with his head. I had no idea why we were going to Toulouse—a large city in the middle of southern France—but it was a moot point; I had run out of wild cards to play anyway. The friends came back down within a couple of minutes without the gun cases but with a stilted attitude. I locked the front door and we all boarded the van.

"The simpler way to get the blood is to lift it from a blood-drive truck at the end of the collection day," Aurélien started after a good fifteen minutes of dreadful silence on the sinuous country road that led to the highway. "The organization that runs all the blood collections in France has trucks in operation all over the country every day except Sunday. They have an online calendar that features every donation; today, one takes place at the university in Toulouse, where we all went to college. We know the campus and its surroundings by heart; I even used to donate blood when I was there."

"That sounds good," I jumped in to encourage him. "On a campus, they must get quite a few units in a day."

"At least a hundred pints," Aurélien said with renewed excitement. "We just need to snag the truck."

"These blood-collection trucks are huge; how far will you guys drive it before transferring the blood units to the van?"

"Just two blocks," Aurélien replied with a grin immediately echoed by his friends. "The collection will take place in front of the administration building, which is very close to the edge of the campus. We'll drive the truck off the campus right away to sidetrack any witnesses, then we'll take

the next entrance to get right back in and we'll drive the truck to the wastewater treatment plant that's located in a far corner of the campus. It's an automated plant; no one actually works there and students don't even jog by that place because it stinks. You and Anya can wait for us in the van at the back of the plant, hidden from the road; that's where we'll transfer the blood bags."

"What about security cameras? Any chance they have some there?" I asked.

"We thought about that. It's unlikely but before you get stationed there, we'll send Fabrice to run through the wooded area that backs up to the plant. He'll check with binoculars."

"Good. How will you go about snatching the truck?"

"We'll wait for the blood drive to be over. At that point there should just be a couple of nurses and the driver inside the truck. We'll just gas them."

"Gas them?!"

"Yes—tear gas. We'll discreetly throw a tear-gas grenade through the back door. They won't even know what's happening. Once they leave the truck, we'll jump in and drive off."

I smiled, mostly from relief; the plan did not involve gunpowder or direct violence. The boys took that as a tribute to their strategic skills.

"That'll work?" Fabrice asked with pride.

"That'll work. Well done, gentlemen. Let's see if you can execute as well as you planned."

The two-and-a-half hour ride to Toulouse went by quickly. The atmosphere in the van had soon relaxed, though long periods of silence clearly indicated that everyone was mentally preparing for the challenge ahead. I took advantage of one of these lulls to put to practice a little trick that I had picked up from Madame: she called it "the hummingbird view." It consisted of looking at yourself and your immediate surroundings from an outside perspective, just as a hummingbird suspended in midair a few yards away would see. I looked in from outside the windshield and what I saw swept away years of commuting from work, on a highway not all that different from the one to Toulouse. There were countless times when I felt that at forty-something, I had already seen every movie plotline there was to see, heard even my favorite songs once too many times, and doubted that any kind of fresh breeze would ever blow through my life again. What the hummingbird saw that day was a fit middle-aged man in a fine suit who dashed toward a bold enterprise in the company of three intrepid young men and a sexy young woman. All this to the sound of their "epic music," which felt like the score of an action movie. I did get my fresh

breeze in the end, even if I had to smash the windows of my family's house to feel it.

"Let's look for a party store," Téó said to Fabrice, who was at the wheel. "We need to get the masks."

"Don't you guys have scarves that you could use to cover your faces?" I asked, reluctant for any of us to be seen in a store and possibly be captured on a security camera.

"We can't use scarves," Téó replied. "We don't want the police to make any kind of connection with outfits or accessories that we have used in the past. Anya can buy the masks for us, no one will suspect her."

Fabrice eventually recalled the location of a party store close to the university campus and Téó briefed Anya in detail before sending her into the store. I was amused by the little strategy that they had concocted. Since we were nearing Halloween, they would purchase and wear vampire masks for the heist to lure the police into thinking that they were just a bunch of rowdy students stealing blood for use in a wild Halloween party. Since the blood-collection truck would be retrieved on the campus undamaged, they might not be as keen to launch an in-depth inquiry. Not a bad stratagem at all; the boys were starting to think again with their brains and not with their trigger fingers.

We approached the campus around four and decided to park the minivan by the end of the parking lot of a large supermarket while Téó, after changing into a jogging suit, would run to the wastewater treatment plant half a mile from there. To divert the tension during the wait, Fabrice amused Anya with the laughing vampire masks that she had bought, which looked actually more goofy than scary. Aurélien was in his bubble, staring out the window with concentration, probably running through the plan in his head.

Téó returned after half an hour; as expected, there were no security cameras and the plant surroundings were deserted. While he changed back into his street clothes, Aurélien asked me to get behind the wheel. He guided me past the wastewater treatment plant, and then to a side entrance of the campus where the three young men exited the vehicle with the masks and a couple of other items in a plastic bag.

"We'll meet you at the back of the plant," said Aurélien with determination as he stepped out. "It's almost five; if we are not there within an hour, just go home," he added as he walked away, oblivious to the timid "Good luck!" thrown at him by Anya through the window.

The wait at the back of the plant was nerve-wracking and as the minutes went by, Anya and I could not prevent our confidence from leaching out any more than we could stop the putrid plant fumes from seeping into the van. We did not speak; there was no room for words, just the loud ticking of the van's clock. At five-thirty, Anya leaned forward and buried her face into her cupped hands.

“They should be here by now,” her muffled voice lamented. “Maybe we should drive by the administration building just to see what’s going on there.”

“No, Anya; we’ll be here until six as planned,” I said firmly. “They may just be waiting for the best moment; there’s still time.”

Twenty minutes later, most of that time had been consumed and Anya was a wreck, now prostrated, her head against the window, her eyes drained empty by the long angst. I was not much better; in minutes, we would have to retreat and I had no contingency plan to help the boys out, or Anya for that matter.

The clock never reached six. The roaring of a large motor down the service road leading to the plant stopped it. Anya jumped to her feet and leaned toward the windshield. In seconds, a long white bus charged into the back parking lot and came to a screeching halt right next to the van. Ceux du Doyenné still had their silly masks on but they were all business the instant they jumped out of the bus. They formed a human chain to transfer the plastic bags containing the blood units from the bus to the van. Fabrice was third in the chain and just threw the blood bags onto the floor of the van, which Anya shoved toward the back with great excitement. The transfer was complete in less than two minutes; the three men jumped in and Aurélien screamed “En avant!” before slamming the door closed and jumping into the passenger seat. I took off so roughly that Anya was projected onto the thick pile of blood bags by the back door of the van. That triggered an explosion of cheers and laughter in Anya and the boys alike, as I drove us away from campus with a similar excitement. Within minutes, we were back onto the highway heading east at the maximum allowed speed.

“The nurses were running late,” Aurélien started explaining to Anya after the initial burst of celebration deflated a bit. “We were observing the bus from a bike shelter on the side of the administration building, out of sight. When the last donor left, we put on our masks, ran to the back of the bus, and threw the tear-gas grenade through an open window. The nurses and the driver never even saw us. As soon as they started running out of the bus, we boarded it on the driver’s side. It was a perfect execution of our plan!”

Anya’s hand came into my peripheral vision after slipping through the front seats and landed softly on Aurélien’s forearm. He lifted it to his cheek and held it there for a few seconds before standing up and calling his friends to join him at the back of the bus to put away the blood bags through a trap on the floor that opened into a luggage compartment. The cargo was in; its drop point, though, was still a long way east.

Chapter 30

August 23, Year 3.

Aside from a couple of pit stops for gas and sandwiches, I drove non-stop for the four hundred miles of Mediterranean coastline leading from Toulouse to the Italian border. I never really saw the sea other than on the GPS display, though its scent often sneaked through the van's air vents. As for the French Riviera, the traffic signs pointing to Cannes and Nice would remain the only landmarks that the busy highway would allow me to see. We had the radio tuned to "Sud Radio," a station that broadcast from Toulouse; by the time we crossed the Italian border—shortly before midnight and without even having to slow down—we had not yet heard on the news anything regarding our little blood heist at the university.

For three hours straight after we had left Toulouse, Ceux du Doyenné, fired up by their initial success, sat on the beds in the back, feverishly refining their plans for the second part of the expedition. I listened to them with a growing admiration; they were smart young men, very keen on analyzing all the potential approaches and hurdles in great detail and with great patience. They traded points and counterpoints with relentless energy and each voice had an equal weight in the discussion unless a topic started running in circles, in which case Aurélien would make a final decision that his friends would accept without argument. They were now all quiet. They had reclaimed their seats while Anya had gone to sleep on one of the beds. When we hit San Remo, the first Italian town after the border, I announced that I was tired of driving and Téo immediately offered to take my place. We switched at a gas station and I fell asleep a couple of minutes after lying down on the second bed.

Aurélien was behind the wheel when I emerged from a surprisingly sound sleep at seven-thirty in the morning. Téo and Fabrice were still fast asleep, the first on the front passenger seat with his feet on the dashboard, the second stretched across the back seats.

"Where are we?" I murmured in Aurélien's direction.

"Two-thirds of the way down," he replied in the same mode. "We just passed Maribor, on the east side of Slovenia; we'll enter Hungary soon."

"Have you slept at all?" I asked.

"Yes, five hours while Téo was driving."

Anya turned around in her bed and greeted me with a sleepy smile before heading to the bathroom. I dressed while looking at the landscape; a dense, hilly countryside with few houses in sight.

"How long until we reach the Romanian border?" I asked.

"About six hours, according to the GPS, and another three inside Romania to get to Keva. We should get there in late afternoon, which is good timing. That'll give us a chance to explore the surroundings of the meat-processing plant by daylight."

“Have you been able to learn anything about it?”

“The people who run it seem keen on getting business from Western Europe; they have set up a great website with tons of information, including a video walk-through of the plant. It seems to be a state-of-the-art facility.”

“I’m not surprised; Madame said they were a top meat provider for food chains in France, Germany, and the UK. They provide them with traditional meat cuts for direct sale as well as with something that they call ‘meat ore’.”

“The most valuable meat?”

“That’s what one would think based on the name but it’s actually quite the opposite. Meat ore is a conglomerate of fat, gristle, and pieces of meat too tough or too unappetizing to be sold directly. All these pieces, which can represent up to twenty percent of the animal’s total weight, are usually ground and frozen in blocks of twenty to fifty pounds.”

“That’s gross. Does that go into the manufacturing of pet food?”

“Not at all; meat ore goes into the preparation of frozen dinners for humans: lasagnas, raviolis, meat balls, spaghetti Bolognese, anything that contains ground meat.”

“What’s the interest for the food chain? Isn’t that ore going to give a terrible taste to their products?”

“The primary component of meat ore is the best taste-enhancer there is: fat. Combine that with a tasty sauce and plenty of salt and you’ll have a delicious meal that you can sell for a huge profit margin since you used a very cheap meat product to make it.”

“I suppose that the stuff at least passes food-safety tests.”

“The conglomerate as a whole is nontoxic, if that’s what you mean. It is an awful feed for a human body, but it does pass safety tests. Aside from being unhealthy, since it is a composite meat product that’s eventually ground up, it is also the best material in which to dispose of just about any kind of meat for even more profit.”

“Like what?”

“Worn-out dairy cows, old pigs, donkeys, and even in some places wild horses captured for the sole purpose of being sold to the slaughterhouse. Nothing looks more like meat ore from a mammal than meat ore from another mammal. The slaughterhouses might be state-of-the-art but in countries with loose regulations, they will buy and process just about any farm animal that is not diseased. They’ll even buy in bulk and process meat from other countries where production costs are low and regulations flimsy, to blend it with their local meat-ore production. In the end, you’ll eat in confidence your brand-name beef lasagnas when in fact they may not contain a single speck of beef. That’s why they are brand name and cheap at the same time.”

“How do you know all that? You worked in that field?”

“The only times I got close to that field was through the hundreds of frozen dinners I have ingested over time. I learned all this from Madame yesterday. She herself learned it from the member of the group who came up with the idea for this *intervention*. He is an officer for a branch of the European Union Food Safety Committee. The EU has known about this meat-ore business for many years but they won’t touch it with a ten-foot pole. The food companies run powerful lobbies and demand from customers for cheap meat-containing foods is very strong. Their hands are tied.”

“A bad situation...”

“A very bad situation, indeed. Meat waste of the worst kind is recycled into an edible material and shipped across Europe to be incorporated into cheap food products that will deceive and eventually hurt consumers; consumers in the same countries where local farmers are going bankrupt because the costs of producing prime, quality-controlled cattle will no longer allow them to compete with cheap, low-grade products made abroad by exploited labor. This is precisely the type of shocking situation brought about by globalization that Madame’s group is set to remedy.”

“I’m starting to see where the blood fits...” Aurélien said with a low voice, as if talking to himself.

The crossing of Hungary was painstakingly long. The scenery would have been beautiful had we been on a vacation but we were far from a tourist’s state of mind. Each mile that brought us closer to the Romanian border also brought us closer to the first stage of the mission that we could not control. According to what Ceux du Doyenné had read online, some Romanian customs officers were corrupt and could go to great lengths bullying tourists for some fast cash. I was concerned that in doing so, they might search the van with extra zeal and find the blood.

“Anya, any suggestions for crossing the border?” I asked.

“It’s a throw of the dice there,” replied the girl. “I would suggest that Aurélien and I sit on the front seats and everyone else just remain out of sight in the back. I’ll try convincing them that we are on our honeymoon.”

“What passports are you going to show them?” I asked, suddenly struck by the fact that Anya had entered Europe illegally and Aurélien was wanted there.

“I still have a Ukrainian passport—I have dual citizenship with Argentina,” Anya replied. “Aurélien has his French passport; there’s no reason to think that they’ll recognize his name so long after the international warrant was issued.”

“What if they inspect the van anyway and find us in the back?”

“Then, we’ll improvise; you can’t control what you can’t control,” Anya replied with a cutting tone of voice. She was as stressed as I was but clearly had more experience with life on the edge.

We arrived at the Romanian border in early afternoon and took our place at the end of an infinite line of cars. Traffic was pretty much halted. Anya instantly took charge, opened the side door of the van, and stepped out. She walked to the car in front of us and spoke for a brief moment with the driver before jumping back into the van.

“It looks like the customs officers are being overzealous because someone published an article this week in the country’s most-read paper accusing them of being lame and greedy. The guy in the front heard that on the radio,” Anya said. “We don’t know how long the line is but just to be safe, why don’t you guys move to the back and I’ll take the passenger seat.”

Everyone complied without a word. For the next two hours, we just felt the van moving in tiny increments; every time it seemed that we were going to pick up some speed, Aurélien would slam the brakes as the procession came to yet another abrupt stop. I was about to fall asleep on my half of the bed, which I shared with Téo, when Anya announced, “They are searching every third vehicle. Shit... that means us!” I leaned toward the front of the car to take a peek at the scene. We were just a dozen cars away from the border-check booth and moving up. If Anya was correct, then we were right on track for a full search, which the officers were now inflicting on a couple in a sedan.

“Okay, we’re good for it; we need to come up with something quick,” I said very fast, despite my efforts to hide my fear.

“We’ll push through; we don’t have a choice,” Aurélien replied with a determination that only aggravated my worries. The officer waved two cars through and stopped the third one in the line; Anya was right; we’d be next.

Or not. Fifteen seconds or so after the customs officer started talking to the driver of the car stopped in front of him, a little girl with long black hair surged out of the back door of the car just behind it. She could not have been more than five or six years old. She ran as fast as she could into an adjacent field, screaming to the top of her lungs.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“She thinks that the customs officers are police and are going to take her away; she’s scared by their uniforms,” Anya replied.

The two customs officers who were inspecting the car in front immediately ran after the child. The fastest one grabbed her by the hair and started dragging her roughly back toward the customs booth. The child’s father—a husky bold man in his fifties who had just stepped out of the car—did not take kindly to seeing his daughter handled in that way. He charged toward the officer and, without even slowing down, head-butted him. The officer went flying backward and crashed on his back. Two of his

colleagues rushed out of the customs booth; one tackled the father who fell down onto his knees. The second officer violently hit him on the back of the head with a nightstick; this time the girl's father collapsed flat on the ground; the officers grabbed his arms and legs and started carrying him toward the booth; the little girl followed them without a word, her hand clutched onto the hem of her dad's pants. The officer who had been head-butted made it back up onto his feet. He staggered to the father's car, got into it, and slammed the door closed before moving the vehicle to the side of the road. When he came back out, he started angrily waving through cars at the front of the line, probably eager to get eyewitnesses away from the scene. I looked through the rear window of the van; we sat close to the top of a hill and I could see the end of the car line all the way down in the valley. In seconds we were through, but no one celebrated. We had just locked ourselves inside a country from which exit would probably be just as dicey as entry.

We reached Keva later than predicted. The long delay at the border, combined with two wrong turns on the way due to the fact that the GPS did not have proper road data for the country, conspired to hold us back. It was night when we entered the city, a bleak industrial town. The streets were lined with the red brick walls of cookie-cutter row houses and flooded with a ghastly white light dropping from lamps stemming out from the flat roofs of the buildings. It was a little before eight in the evening and yet the streets were deserted, except for a few small groups of teenagers whose heavy metal-style T-shirts were a bit too angry for their young age.

"Let's try to get out of the city center," I told Téo, now behind the wheel. "The less this van is seen, the better."

We had muddied up the license plate shortly after entering the country to make it unreadable but in empty streets, the van itself was still too conspicuous.

"Okay, but where do I head?" replied the young man.

"On the map of the city we saw last night, the factory was on the north side; take any side street on your right," Aurélien said.

We navigated through narrower streets for five minutes before Anya suddenly pointed her finger at a small gray sign only a foot or so above the ground.

"Look there! The sign says 'something carne something.' *Carne* is meat in Spanish and I'm pretty sure it's the same in Romanian."

"Good call, Anya!" Aurélien replied with excitement. "I hadn't seen that one. That's not the name of the plant but chances are that's a sign for it. Téo, let's follow it; hopefully there'll be more."

There were three more signs; they took us out of town and into a very dark countryside.

Fifteen minutes or so into it, just as we were getting concerned, an island of light appeared up a hill on the right side, a hundred yards ahead. It consisted of a large warehouse-style building planted in the center of a brightly lit, empty parking lot. Téo spotted a small dirt track on the right side of the road and turned onto it. We were stopped fifty or so yards in by a wooden barrier that barred the entrance to a field. Téo turned off the lights.

“Perfect,” he said. “The van should not be visible from the road and we can cut through the fields to get up to the factory.”

Fabrice turned on a flashlight and pointed it to the floor of the van. Aurélien pulled the backpacks that they had brought along and shook them empty onto the beds before laying them down on the floor. Fabrice and Téo opened the luggage compartment and started shoving blood bags into them. Anya and I remained seated, out of the way; the three men worked with a coordination that suggested that they had already discussed these steps. I waited until the bags were all filled up with blood bags to raise an objection.

“Are you guys actually planning to execute the mission tonight? How about scouting the place first?”

“You asked us to make sure to cover our tracks. The hit-and-run approach is best for that. We can’t afford to hang around for another day; it would just increase the chances of us getting noticed. Plus, it’s Sunday night; that’s always the time of week when you have the fewest people in a workplace and the cleaning crews are usually off. We’ll take the bags up there and leave them by the edge of the parking lot while we recon the place. Don’t forget that we found tons of information about that plant online.”

“But what about security cameras? You said you weren’t sure about that?”

“That’s precisely what we need to recon. Chances are there are cameras outside but the video walk-through that we watched online did not show any inside. We just need to figure out the best path around the outside ones.”

“What makes you think that you can approach the building without being seen by those?”

“We are not talking about the Pentagon here, Richard,” Aurélien said with a mocking voice. “Don’t worry; we’ve done this before. We just need one more piece of information from you that you haven’t shared yet: the exact nature of the target.”

“It’s the meat ore that has not yet been ground. They collect the components throughout the workday and grind them all at once first thing the next morning. That means the meat-ore materials collected on Friday should be in there and, according to our informer, they should be stored in

very large stainless-steel containers on wheels; there should be several of them in the walk-in coolers. Make sure you mark down the lot number written on stickers of each container. That's critical; our informer will use these lot numbers to track the human blood-contaminated material down the food-chain path. Try to distribute the blood more or less evenly among the different containers."

"That's a lot of blood; much of it will end up pooling up at the bottom of the container; won't they see it when they pour out the contents?" Aurélien said.

"They shouldn't have a chance to notice. Still according to the informer, the stainless-steel containers are picked up by a forklift and emptied into a hopper that's ten feet above the ground. The meat ore bounces around in a tumbler for a few minutes and then drops into the grinder. Excess blood drains out of the grinder and into an underground tank. It is later recovered from the tank to be used as a component in animal feed."

"If it's going to drain out of the ore, why are we putting it in?" Fabrice asked.

"There'll be plenty of it mixed into the ground meat ore and, on top of that, many of the blood components—such as blood cells—will have gotten stuck to the meat before the grinding. There'll be plenty of human blood materials in the ground meat ore, you can be certain of that. Any more questions?"

"Just to make sure," Aurélien said. "There's no chance for people who will eventually eat dishes made from the blood-contaminated ore to get AIDS or hepatitis, right?"

"I asked the exact same question to Madame," I replied with a smile. "The answer is no; even if one of the blood units happened to contain a virus, it would be destroyed when the meat ore is cooked into a dish. That's actually one of the reasons why the group picked that plan; their goal is to produce a scare, not an epidemic."

The young men nodded at one another in response to my answer. Aurélien leaned toward Anya and planted a quick kiss on her forehead before turning to Fabrice and Téo.

"Gentlemen, let's go and spill some blood!" he shouted with a big grin—illuminated by the glow of the flashlight—that was instantly reflected on the faces of his friends. There was little doubt that these were the moments for which they lived and breathed. They geared up and exited the van without another word, each arching his back under the load of the backpack.

Chapter 31

August 24, Year 3.

The boys had burst into a singing spell the moment they boarded back into the van and Aurélien had thrown an exalted “Let’s go home, Richard!” The singing seemed like a familiar ritual to them and they had been at it for the whole twenty minutes since I had driven us out of Keva and back toward the border. Their jubilant mood was the only indication I had as to the outcome of their mission; they had not said a word to us. I finally took advantage of a lull in the live concert.

“Guys, there are a couple of bottles of wine in the closet. I take it we have something to celebrate?”

Fabrice immediately pulled one of the bottles out, opened it, and handed glasses all around. Aurélien brought me one filled halfway and sat next to me in the front seat.

“It went off without a hitch, Richard,” he said, his voice trembling with excitement. “There were security cameras but they had not been positioned smartly; it was easy to find blind spots between them. We moved through one of those to reach the building and climbed onto the roof using a service ladder; we didn’t even have to use our ropes going up, which was a good thing because the backpacks were very heavy.”

“Your plan from the beginning was to get inside through the roof?”

“Yes; it’s always a better way to control penetration into an unknown building. On the online video tour of the facility, we had spotted a sort of round chimney that went all the way up the building and through the roof. I’m still not sure what it’s used for. Fabrice and I rappelled down that chimney; Téo lowered the backpacks down to us and remained posted on the roof to help us back up if needed.”

“No one was inside the warehouse?”

“There were two security guys sitting at a reception desk close to the front entrance. They were eating and watching the Sunday night soccer game on the screens of the three security monitors. We could probably have walked right in front of the outside cameras and they would never have known.”

“And you easily found the walk-in coolers?”

“Yes, there were three at the back of the building and the stainless-steel containers full of meat ore where inside one of them.”

“You’re sure that was meat ore.”

“Absolutely; just as you had described it. A mush of fat, brownish meat, and cartilage. Disgusting! I would not even feed that to a vagrant dog.”

“How many containers of it were there?”

“Eight. We dropped the contents of twelve to fifteen blood bags into each one.”

"The blood didn't pool on top of the ore, did it?"

"No, it just seeped inside nicely. By the time we left, the top of the ore looked just the same as before we added the extra blood to it."

"Great. No problem coming out of the building?"

"None whatsoever, we just climbed back up the chimney with all the empty blood bags inside the backpacks and ran back down to the van. In and out in less than forty-five minutes! No one should ever know that we were in there."

I nodded at Aurélien with an approving smile, and raised my glass of wine as I looked into the rear-view mirror.

"To you, gentlemen, in recognition of a beautifully executed mission on all fronts!" I cheered.

The young men yelled back something that translated loosely as "Long Live Ceux du Doyenné!" Anya clumsily echoed the cheer after the fact. Fabrice came behind me and asked me if he could drive, as he felt wound up from the adventure and it would help him relax. I sat at the back with my three other companions-in-arms, as Téo repeated to Anya with many details the account of their expedition inside the meat plant. The second bottle of wine went around and by the time it gave up its last drop, we were all in a very elated—and relieved—disposition.

The elated mood simmered down as we got closer to the border, as fatigue started setting in and the prospect of facing the customs officers again became more imminent. We were making sandwiches at the back of the van when a loud bang came from the front end.

"Shit! What was that?!" Fabrice shouted as he slammed the brakes in response to a metallic rattle coming from under the van. As soon as the van came to a stop, we all stepped out, flashlights in hand.

"Oh... no!" said Anya when she reached first the front of the van. We all rushed to her side and discovered the badly twisted frame of a bike wedged under the thick front bumper. We all had the same instant reaction and pointed our flashlights to the road behind the van. The crisscrossing beams of light only swept over asphalt and grass.

"Maybe the bike dropped out of the back of a vehicle and was just lying on the ground," said Téo with little conviction as we kept moving up the road side by side.

"There!" yelled Fabrice before jumping into a ditch to kneel by the side of a man's body lying face down, motionless, and in an awkward position, as if disarticulated. We all formed a circle around the man as Fabrice checked his pulse at the neck.

"Is he dead?" I asked, uneasy to realize that I instinctively wished for a positive response.

"He's not, but his pulse is very weak."

The three young men and Anya turned toward me as one, without a word. I looked down at the man for a brief instant.

“We can’t leave him there to die,” I finally said. “Let’s load him up into the van. The next city is twenty minutes or so ahead; we’ll drop him by the hospital there.” My voice was not exactly filled with conviction; everything inside me was telling me that the man was going to die anyway and that by trying to help him, we would compromise the entire mission. The team seemed to agree with my call, though; they immediately started moving in response to it.

Fabrice backed up the van; luckily there was no traffic at all on that small country road that we had chosen over the main highway to the border. Anya and Aurélien laid down a blanket by the victim’s side and rolled him gently onto it. The man was an older fellow; probably past seventy. The exposed parts of his body—including one side of his face—had suffered severe bruising and abrasion, but there was no sign of external bleeding. There didn’t seem to be much blood inside him, either; the gray shade of skin on his face was almost as pale as that of his beard.

“I didn’t see him at all,” said Fabrice with a guilty tone of voice as he helped pull the body out of the ditch. “I was fiddling with the AC, trying to turn the darn thing off...”

Once the old man was loaded into the van, I checked his pulse again; it was not too late to change strategies. Luckily for him, though, the blood waves were still ever so slightly swelling his carotid artery at regular intervals. We closed the doors and took off.

“We can’t park in front of a hospital or carry the guy into it,” I said, as I tried to assess the situation for myself. “Seeing how bruised he is, they’ll contact the police on the spot and if we run away, they’ll still have plenty of time to alert the officers at the border checkpoint before we reach it.”

“That’s right, Richard,” Anya said with surprising poise. “I’ll take him in. I’m the only one who can communicate with hospital staff. You guys drop off the old guy and me around the corner of the hospital building. I’ll run in and tell them to come help me bring him inside.”

“No way, Anya!” Aurélien reacted. “Do you think they’ll just let you walk away like that? There may not be a policeman on the premises but at the very least, they’ll have a security guy there whose job it is to sniff out possible foul play, and this one stinks!”

“I won’t try to leave,” Anya replied calmly. “I’ll explain that the man is my father and that we were involved in a car accident. I’ll stick around for an hour or so and play the concerned daughter until they start paying less attention to me, then I’ll sneak out and meet you back in an adjacent street. By the time they worry about me, we’ll be out of the country without having left any real trace behind.”

I jumped in just as Aurélien was gearing up to respond with vehemence.

“Listen, Aurélien; Anya makes a lot of sense. Her plan gets the old man inside the hospital with minimal risk of us getting noticed or for her to be suspected once inside the place. I’ll second it. We trusted you guys with

the two most critical parts of the mission; now it's time for you to trust Anya and me."

Aurélien turned to his friends who shrugged their shoulders with facial expressions that indicated that they did not have a better plan.

"Ok, Anya," Aurélien finally said as he gave the young woman a concerned look. "Your play, but I swear, if you're not back inside the van within an hour, we're coming to get you."

Anya responded with a tense nod. Per her suggestion, we dropped her and the old man—still unconscious—off on a narrow street flanking the hospital. Since the area was deserted at that late hour, we watched Anya until she reached the front door and then drove down one block to park on a poorly lit street that she had picked herself as the rendezvous point. For the third time in two days, I was left cooped up inside the van while others ran our plays just a few hundred yards away. On the first two instances, Anya had been an anxious and subdued waiting mate. With *Ceux du Doyenné* caged up by my side this time, the situation was much edgier. They were restless. Not even fifteen minutes into the wait, Aurélien started talking about walking down to the hospital to take a look around. I talked him out of that plan, with some support from his friends. To his credit, he made an effort to remain quiet afterward and we stared without a word at the entrance of the street, in a heavy atmosphere further thickened up by the loud epic music on the car stereo.

"You guys are so easy..."

Anya's mocking voice startled us. I flipped on the ceiling light as we all turned around to discover her lying down on one of the beds in a pinup-girl posture, a kittenish smile on her face.

"Don't look at me like that!" She exploded in laughter in response to the men's confused stares. "I just came from the other side and sneaked inside the van through the back door. Talk about the magnificent four, there, standing guard for the helpless village girl... With that racket on the radio, an entire battalion of police could have boarded the van without you noticing!"

Aurélien jumped onto his feet, grabbed Anya under the arms, and lifted her off the bed in a tight and twirling embrace. Until that moment, I had more or less assumed that Anya was following Aurélien like a love-sick puppy. I understood then, from the shine in Aurélien's eyes and the amused expression on Anya's face, how two-sided their love was.

As we drove full speed ahead toward the border, now on the highway to blend in with the bulk of traffic before the crossing, Anya explained in detail her little adventure at the hospital.

"At that time of the night, they only had a small staff in the emergency department. One of them and the security guard carried the old man into the building and he was immediately sent into an operating room. I sat down in the reception area and instead of going back to his post at the front door, the security guard sat by my side and started flirting with me.

My dad is clinging to life just two doors down the corridor and the guy puts the moves on me!" Anya waited for our laughs to subside before continuing. "I had no idea how to shake him off so when a nurse came by to tell me that Dad would be okay, I asked her if I could lie down somewhere until he came out of surgery. She was very nice; she opened an empty patient room for me and left me there. I waited a little while to make sure that the area was clear and sneaked out through the back door, on which I had seen a sign for a smoking area outside. No sweat at all!"

"It could not have been better handled, Anya," I said. "We left the old man in good hands and did not leave any trace, just as you had planned."

Aurélien approved with a sober nod directed to me as his friends high-fived Anya with loud cheers.

We reached the border crossing at one in the morning; despite the late hour, the line of cars piled up ahead of us was still quite long but it moved in faster bursts than during the day. Anya got behind the wheel and Aurélien took place next to her, while we all shifted to the back of the van and drew the privacy curtain behind us. Our turn came sooner than I had expected. Anya's voice put an end to the long silence in the van; I could not understand any word, so I concluded that she was talking to a border agent. At some point, Aurélien blurted a timid "Salut," and Anya immediately resumed answering the officer's questions, with some language difficulty and an increasing tension in her voice. If I could hear that tension, chances were that a trained border patrol agent probably would as well. Either he did not or something distracted him because after a few more exchanges, the van started moving, very slowly at first but it rapidly picked up speed and Aurélien's voice put an end to our wondering.

"Shit, I thought he was going to pull us over. What was the problem?" he asked Anya.

"He didn't buy the story that we were newlyweds on our honeymoon. He didn't see a wedding band on your finger. I had moved a plain band to my ring finger, but I didn't expect him to check yours," Anya replied.

I pulled the privacy curtain open.

"How did you get out of it?" Aurélien asked.

"Poorly and the guy sensed it. I told him that the ring had been sized too small for you and that we had not even been able to slip it on past the first knuckle in front of the priest. When I saw that he was getting increasingly suspicious, I did what a real woman should do when she feels bullied."

"What's that?"

"I started tearing up!" Anya said chuckling.

"I cannot believe that still works!" Aurélien said laughing in concert with the rest of us.

“It can work if the guy is nice and you’re sincere, and believe me, I wasn’t acting; I was scared to death!” Anya chuckled as she sped up further on the highway home.

Chapter 32

August 25, Year 3.

The trip home was very quiet. Moments after the last burst of pressure was released, following the crossing of the Romanian border, everyone's energy level had collapsed. When not taking their turn at the wheel, Ceux du Doyenné and Anya slept or played chess in silence on a small portable set. I took advantage of the down time to record the details of the expedition in a brand-new notebook while they were still fresh in my mind. Madame might ask for a report. Still keen on minimizing our footprint along the journey, we never drove over the speed limit and only stopped for gas and fast food. We did, however, take advantage of one of the pit stops in Slovenia to discreetly throw all the empty blood bags—which Fabrice had already packed inside two black trash bags—in a large dumpster located in a corner of the gas station's parking lot.

Part of the subdued mood also arose from the realization by all that now that the curtain had dropped on the action stage, the luckiest of us would be returned to a dull routine while the others—without a legal status in the country—faced a very foggy future. After six or so hours of sleep in relative comfort, stretched across the back seats of the van, my eyelids popped open in response to the nagging of a sun ray. In the back, Anya and Aurélien were fast asleep on one of the beds while Fabrice read on the other.

"Where are we now?" I asked Téo, who had the wheel.

"We just left Montpellier behind; in two hours or so, we'll pass Toulouse, and another couple will get us home."

"Why don't you pull over and get some rest. I'll take it from here," I said, trying hard for a casual tone of voice. In fact, I was keen on driving the last leg home and closing the loop on a mission that I had catalyzed and overseen from end to end. Téo handed me the wheel at a rest stop and I "took the kids home" at the heartening sound of their epic music.

I had never felt home the way it felt when I stepped out of the van and made the gravel grit under my steps as I walked to the front door of Clos Rémi house. Maybe because I had actually earned the right to call this place my home. While Ceux du Doyenné and Anya unloaded the van, I got on the phone and called the village restaurant that had catered my first lunch on the property. Although it was already eight-thirty in the evening, they agreed to put together for us a three-course dinner and promised delivery in less than an hour. In the meantime, I fetched five bottles of wine from the cellar; three reds, one white, and one rosé and invited the crew around the living room table for a serious round of *aperitif*.

Dinner was a joyful and naïve celebration between odd partners; three idealistic young men who just a week earlier were blasting a warehouse full of people, a freshly detoxed young lady, and a middle-aged M.I.A.

father. All bound by the success of an enterprise with uncharted ethical boundaries, and yet all filled with a sense of redemption and personal validation. We relived each step of the mission with delectation, not neglecting any detail and finding at every turn reason to laugh or cheer loudly.

Ceux du Doyenné had now adopted Anya into their group and already started hatching future plots in which the contribution of a woman would be bring added value. They also seemed to have accepted—if not my authority—my guidance and appeared to now expect further assignments from me.

“But what happens now with the tainted meat?” asked Aurélien. “Do we still have a role to play?”

“No; your mission is complete. As soon as I report to Madame, she’ll inform her contact, the officer at the European Union Food Safety Committee. He’ll be able to track the lot of meat ore that we contaminated with human blood at each step down the food chain. He’ll know which food-processing group will acquire it, to which food chains the products made with that ore will be sold, and precisely when these products will hit the supermarket shelves. In the end, he’ll be able to pinpoint specific trays of frozen dinners, specific cans of raviolis, or specific hot dogs that have been prepared using our meat ore. All he has to do then is to make sure that the local sanitation authorities perform DNA testing on any of these.”

“DNA testing is used for foods?”

“Yes; it’s a standard technique to verify that a given food product contains only the meats stated on the label. For instance, a hot dog claimed to be one hundred percent beef should not contain chicken or pork. DNA tests are the best way to verify that. They are usually performed on a random basis in an attempt to keep the food industry in check but violations are so frequent that their authors are seldom charged with anything else than a modest fine.”

“How is the guy going to convince the local authorities to test specific products?”

“I’m assuming that an anonymous phone call will do the trick. Once they find human DNA in a single product, you can be sure that all hell is going to break loose in those services and that they’ll rush to test thousands of others. Our contact at the EU will be privy to the results the moment they come out; at that point, he’ll just leak them to the media.”

“I can’t wait to see the paper that day!” Téo said. “Since our part is done, when will you let Madame know about the success of our mission?”

“Right after dinner. I will report to her and make a formal request that Ceux du Doyenné be recognized by the group for their contribution to the mission.”

“We won’t have to take classes in order to join the group, will we?” Fabrice asked with an exaggerated frown.

"I don't think so; you are too young to be trained as full members. Most likely, though, the group could use resourceful and more action-oriented fellows for field missions like the one we just carried out. That's the angle that I will pursue when pushing for your inclusion as a resource to the group."

"What do we do in the meantime?"

"You stay in shape and out of trouble. I need to hear from you that you realize that you have executed a complex mission that will likely redefine the way Europeans approach their food, and that you have done so with your brains and without a single act of violence."

"We have also redefined ourselves in the process, Richard," Fabrice said. "We have gone back to the roots of Ceux du Doyenné and that feels really good. I'm sure my friends will agree with me." His statement was immediately seconded by supportive smiles from Aurélien and Téo.

"Very well, then." I said. "It is too early for me to promise you anything but I'll do my best to convince Madame—and through her, the group—to leverage your talents again and for the time being, to help you find day jobs, so from the outside it will look like you have settled down. I would just advise you to remain discreet about all this, including when talking with that edgy friend of yours who walked out on the group in Garrocq."

Everyone agreed with a serious nod and I invited Aurélien to join me outside for a private chat.

"When I spoke of jobs, you realize that I was talking to Fabrice and Téo, don't you?" I asked without preamble after Aurélien and I took a few steps away from the front door and into a chilly autumn night.

"I wasn't sure," Aurélien replied. "I thought that maybe you had a plan for Anya and me here as well."

"I do have one to suggest, Aurélien, but it is not an easy one."

"Go ahead; anything is better than continuing to run and hide, especially with Anya."

"I agree. Neither one of you has legal status here. Anya entered the country illegally and as for you, you may not be at the top of police priorities, but I'm sure that there's still a warrant for your arrest in a drawer somewhere."

Aurélien nodded curtly and did not comment.

"These threats will always hang over your heads," I continued. "You guys are not in a good place to start as a couple, even an adventurous one."

Once again, my point was only met with silence and this time, a sad smile.

"There's a way to get you and Anya back into a space where you can live and grow freely, but it will bring you both some pain in the short term."

Aurélien looked straight at me; the glare of the floodlights on the façade of the house magnified the tension on his face. He already knew what I was going to say.

"I think it will be best if you give yourself up to the police, Aurélien. The charges for which they are after you are getting old; Fabrice and Téo were released after a year for the same felonies. I'll make sure that you get a good lawyer; hopefully, he'll get you in a low-security jail nearby and a year from now, you'll be free to finally start a proper life with Anya and work with us."

"A year..." Aurélien murmured to himself. His voice was already consenting; most likely, he had already run the same analysis for himself and just needed to hear its conclusion from someone else. "What about Anya?" he asked.

"She needs to leave France the way she entered it, so she can come back through the proper channels. I'll coordinate with Madame for the trip back and I'll ask her if she can set Anya up with a job and a place to stay in Argentina until you get out of jail."

"She may not be too keen on Anya since we ran away from her."

"Madame is anything but a petty person," I replied bluntly. "She agreed to fly you both here, didn't she?"

Aurélien nodded with a contrite pinch of the lips.

"How long will it take to line up a lawyer for me?"

"It should happen tomorrow. Mister Delpoux, Madame's notary, mentioned that he had worked with a good lawyer in Pau when going through the acquisition of Clos Rémi for her. He used to be a criminal defense lawyer and in a serious situation, he can make himself available on short notice. I'll call him first thing in the morning. I'd suggest that you say your goodbyes to the rest of the group tonight," I said to avoid citing Anya's name directly. I walked by his side as we headed back to the house. Just before we passed the door, Aurélien grabbed my arm.

"I hope you're as right for this as you were for the mission, Richard," he said somberly but with a tone of voice that sounded almost like a thank you.

When we walked back into the living room, Anya had already gone upstairs and Fabrice and Téo were getting ready to leave. I grabbed the satellite phone and walked out to the wine cellar behind the house to give the three young men some privacy.

"Richard, at last!" were Madame's first words.

"It's only been three days—"

"So... is everyone okay?!"

I reassured her and went on to speak nonstop for the next fifteen minutes to give her a chronological account of our expedition, emphasizing

at every opportunity the diligence and sense of initiative of Ceux du Doyenné, as well as Anya's. I was surprised that Madame would let me go this long without reacting, and I stopped briefly on a couple of occasions to make sure that her light breathing was still perceptible on the other end of the line.

"We have packed the gunpowder into the musket; now it will be up to you, Madame, to pull the trigger," I said with some cockiness after finishing my story with the exchange that I had just had with Aurélien. In response, Madame finally broke her silence.

"Well, Mister Keiffer, it looks like you have come a long way since your basket-weaving days at my estancia," she said with a serious tone of voice that did not align with the teasing nature of her words.

"Why such surprise, Madame? You're the one who chartered the train for me."

"I knew you'd try your best out there, but I had no idea what your best would be out in the open and under pressure. You were fresh out of training. From what you just told me, it looks like you made an excellent sequence of good calls and as a result, you've achieved a very clean success in your mission. This is one of the highest impact actions that the group has undertaken so far; if we finish it properly, we will have reached a major milestone in our development."

"You know I'll be glad to help with the next steps."

"Your part is done and well done. The rest of the plan should be easier to carry out. I will not inform you of the next stages of the process as they happen because we should from now on keep communications about this to a minimum, but when the musket actually goes off, believe me, you'll know."

"For Aurélien, you agree with my advice?"

"I do," she responded curtly, "and as for Anya, just get her on a train to Bayonne, on the coast; once there she'll know what to do to hitch a ride back to Argentina. I gave them instructions before they left in case they'd have to return here discreetly."

"Will you make sure that Anya resettles safely in Argentina?"

"I did not detox that girl to let her fall back into the wrong hands once more. Just tell her to go to her aunt's when she reaches Buenos Aires and to contact me from there."

"Thank you, Madame."

"It's not for you to thank me; it's for *them*. Tonight, I am the one to thank you, Mister Keiffer—"

She took a shallow breath in as if she was to say something else but after a brief silence, she just hung up.

I decided to stay in the cellar for a while, to give Aurélien a chance to say his goodbyes with some privacy. I lit a plain white candle sitting on the counter and turned off the ceiling neon bulbs; inside the candle's warm womb of light, I wrote down in my journal the final part of our adventure.

When done, an hour or so later, I felt drained and elated, as if my life force had been distilled down to a still and fragrant essential oil. Looking around at the arrays of Clos Rémi bottles, I sensed that I had finally earned, at least in part, my spot in Madame's realm.

Cries welcomed me back into the house; cries from Anya, coming from upstairs, behind a closed door. She blended words of anger with words of love in a whirlwind of choked tears. Aurélien's pacifying voice was trying to enter her storm at regular intervals but with little success. Her litany accompanied me all the way upstairs and to my bedroom but it died down shortly after I got into bed.

I turned off the light and looked out of the window. The forest was still and dark; the fireflies were no more.

Chapter 33

September 15, Year 3.

“ALL CANNIBALS!”

The musket went off exactly twenty-one days after we returned from Romania; nineteen after Anya and I accompanied Aurélien to the police station, and eighteen after I hugged the very distraught young woman goodbye on the dock of the train station.

After finally getting a couple of weeks of downtime, which I used to acquaint myself with Clos Rémi’s operations and administrative functions, I drove down to the village one evening to have dinner at one of the three restaurants I had not yet tried. When I stepped in, the place was quite busy for a weekday but no one was talking. In response to the squeaking of the door behind me, the barman impatiently placed his index finger across his lips to signal me to be quiet. I was aware of the French’ devotion to the eight o’clock newscast—I had myself made a recent habit of watching it every night, for obvious reasons—but the intensity with which they stared at the TV still seemed a bit extreme.

As I sat down at a small table, I noticed that the big-screen TV hung on the wall behind the counter displayed the front page of the country’s top newspaper—*Le Figaro*. They had been the recipient of a “leak,” and judging by the massive cannibalistic headline and the six-page insert from which the news anchor claimed to be reading entire passages, *Le Figaro* had immediately realized the magnitude of the scandal handed to them on a platter.

“To date, random quality control tests have detected human DNA at significant levels in six lots of frozen dinners and one lot of canned foods,” the newscaster read as the names of the products and corresponding brands scrolled on the sidebar of the screen. *“The levels of human DNA found in these dishes by the health safety services are significant and experts have already dismissed the possibility of a contamination of the foodstuff with flesh or blood from a small wound on an employee upstream in the food processing chain. They did not have any clue as to the possible origin of the human material. They just admitted that since the contaminated lots were distributed by three distinct food brands in multiple supermarket chains across France and the southern part of England, it was likely that the problem was much more widespread than the initial testing might have revealed.”*

A long series of interviews of street-goers in different French cities ensued, whose horrified faces and angry comments left no doubt as to the intensity of the shockwave in the population.

“My eight-year-old son ate the spaghetti marinara two days ago! What am I supposed to do now? Get him tested? For what?! And on top of everything, one

day, I'll have to tell him that he once ate human... something; how do you think he's going to feel?!"

"We all knew that these cheap imported foodstuffs from places with loose sanitary regulations were going to hurt us sooner or later, but who would ever have imagined that we'd end up with human flesh on our plate?!"

"I am beyond rage; I feel that the sanctity of my body has been violated. I will never be able to forget that I ate parts from another human being and make peace with that thought."

"I'm never buying anything that has ground meat in it again. From now on, it'll be real meat, guaranteed local by the butcher around the street corner; I don't care how much more it costs!"

Branded by other news media as the "Human Meat Scandal" the following day, the affair rose within days to the status of small societal tsunami. Under tremendous pressure from the French authorities and very angry customers, food manufacturers rushed to promise that they would, from that point on, primarily source their meat in France and make publicly available the tracing of all meat they used back to its specific source. The cattle growers' association immediately wedged itself into that commitment by proposing to develop an official "Grown in France" label that would tie up the manufacturers to their promise. The dynamics of supply and demand translated into an instant increase in the value of domestic cattle meat, which in turn pulled many French growers out of near-bankruptcy.

The Human Meat Scandal shocked French customers back into the ethics of spending a little more for quality food and—powered by fear—the trend would soon extend to fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Local farmers, butchers, and small grocers seized the opportunity and rapidly set up direct-to-consumer channels, either through direct delivery, food co-ops, or ambulatory farmers markets. News media and "green" associations touted daily the virtues of this local economy engine, especially as horror stories regarding food chains in other countries came up at every turn since controls had been reinforced. These did not involve human materials but revealed chronic issues such as one hundred percent beef frozen burgers consisting *entirely* of horse and donkey meat, and supposedly halal kebabs containing twenty percent pork meat.

As the priority for national food sources intensified, the French government was accused of protectionism and unfair trade practices by the European Union central authorities. The trade and health ministers both hid behind the excuse that they had not passed any laws to favor the consumption of French products and that exploding sales of these was simply due to customer preference. Having long been accused by their own people of having bled the country's sovereignty on the altar of EU construction and sacrificed millions of domestic jobs to globalization, public officials rode the nationalistic wave with enthusiasm, especially since it stimulated a lame economy and boosted the morale of their

constituents. Since the same consumer trends and political responses had already spilled over into other EU countries after the French scare, little could be done in fact to reverse the process, and the change took root.

Months after the emergence of the Human Meat Scandal, the investigation of its causes remained confused and inconclusive. The step-by-step journey of each meat-ore sample found in a contaminated dish on the shelves of a supermarket was recreated thanks to its lot number and a somewhat detailed paper trail. The example of a frozen lasagna was often cited by journalists to illustrate the convoluted process by which the product had ended up landing on a consumer's plate. A British supermarket chain had originally ordered frozen beef lasagna from a food manufacturer in the north of France. The food manufacturer asked his subsidiary in Luxembourg to prepare the lasagna dish because business taxation there was lower. The subsidiary ordered beef from a meat supplier in the south of France known to source cheaper meat products. The meat supplier put in an order with a trader in Cyprus, himself known for his ability to identify good deals. The Cyprus trader subcontracted the order to a colleague in the Netherlands. The Dutch trader placed the meat order with the Romanian slaughterhouse that we had visited, which offered the most competitive prices—if not the best ethical guarantees. The slaughterhouse delivered the meat ore—now contaminated with human blood by *Ceux du Doyenné*—to the meat supplier in the south of France who sold it to the food manufacturer in Luxembourg; the latter in turn prepared and conditioned the lasagna before shipping it packaged and frozen to the British supermarket. Six different business entities in five countries were in the end involved in the making of simple lasagna, with the meat ore itself traveling through four countries.

To further muddy the waters, the director of the slaughterhouse more or less admitted that the meat used in the incriminated lot of meat ore had been acquired from at least two countries other than Romania: another central European country and an Asian country. Nearly all of the contaminated food products were found to have been produced through a similar convoluted process. A bewildering multiplication of contacts, intermediates, haggling, and corner-cutting driven by one purpose and one purpose only: higher sales margins on the final product—the holy grail of economic globalization.

Because of the international nature of the transactions that had led to the contaminated food products, Interpol had been mandated to head the inquiry. The human DNA sequences present in the meat ore had been analyzed, but the police services were never able to match them up with specific individuals. The hypothesis of a terrorist act was readily dismissed, as the contamination of the meat ore had not been designed to really hurt anyone. Another possibility set forth was that the Romanian mafia might have used the meat grinder to dispose of some uncooperative business partners but the fact that the DNA found in the ground meat belonged to

dozens of different individuals and the complete absence of organ or limb tissues in the meat ore were inconsistent with such a grim scheme.

Though it was pretty clear that wrongdoing was at the root of the Human Meat Scandal, the multiplicity and multinational nature of the potential entry points for the blood into the meat ore made it nearly impossible to get a fix on a specific culprit. In the end, regulations were tightened, meat traceability increased, and since no one had really been hurt, the investigation was all but abandoned as more pressing new affairs demanded the attention of European police services.

I had at first felt uncomfortable hearing the reactions of people who had eaten meals prepared with the contaminated meat ore. However, after witnessing for several months the durable societal changes that our action had catalyzed, that guilt progressively shifted to pride—albeit a pride acquired at a cost to my personal ethics.

I was further comforted in that feeling by the weekly visits from Patrice and Téo, who would dwell at length on any positive change that they had read or heard about that could be remotely tied to our action, such as the reopening of a butcher's shop in the village, twenty years after the old one had gone bankrupt.

Madame had negotiated for them sales-rep positions with Paul, whose estate and staff were much larger than Clos Rémi. She had also called Téo and Patrice to congratulate them in person for their brilliant work during the mission, and assured them that they would soon be called upon again. Until then, they were to keep a low profile, even though they were more eager than ever to get back into action. What made me feel best, though, was the fact that they seemed to have regained the candid gaiety and exaltation of youth.

They would also give me updates from Aurélien, who had asked me not to visit him in jail, arguing that it might affect my respect for him when we would work together again. He had been sentenced to three years of detention but he was jailed nearby in Pau and, according to his lawyer, between the automatic sentence reductions due to prison overcrowding and those for good behavior, he should be out after a year at most. According to Fabrice and Téo, Aurélien was very restless in jail but the prospect of being soon reunited with Anya kept him from getting in trouble with other inmates, even if that meant walking away from a fight.

As for Anya, Madame had found her a job as an assistant in a daycare center in Cordoba, away from Buenos Aires' hazards and close enough so they could frequently visit one another. Although the job was not exactly in line with the young woman's college education—and even less with her personal history—Madame had banked that interactions with children might help fill for Anya some of the void created by Aurélien's absence. It seemed to be working and Anya had regained a moderate level of "joie de vivre." Anya herself never contacted me; I knew that she was upset with me for encouraging Aurélien to give himself up. She would much have

preferred that he follow her back to Argentina where he could have lived under an assumed name. I just hoped that once he got out of jail and they could truly be free together, Anya would realize that my advice had actually been beneficial.

Also missing in action was the fourth member of “Ceux du Doyenné,” who had quit the group to pursue the original plan of sniping down the bad guys. He would never be heard from again. Since he did not even contact his older brother, who was both his idol and mentor, we eventually assumed that he had met an obscure end on his road to vigilante justice.

As weeks went by, I gradually took the reins of Clos Rémi, with the approval of the personnel who appreciated my willingness to listen to them—little aware that I desperately needed to learn from them the trade of wine making. In accordance with the guidelines I had received in Argentina regarding good management practices, I always maintained a certain distance from the employees, including Victor, though he had started treating me with minimal respect after Anya had explained to him what I had done for Aurélien. Yet, Victor was in fact the only shadow on my pastoral new world; always somber, often immobile in the vineyard alleys in his oversized rubber boots. He reminded me of a scarecrow whose rags covered an unspeakable secret of the land into which it was planted.

I immersed myself quite easily in the local way of life and community. Paul and his wife, Lucie, had adopted me as a neighbor and friend. They had introduced me to the local *notables* and I was now being invited more and more often to the parties and events of the area bourgeoisie, a progress well in line with my original assignment.

I had yet to reconnect with my teachers; I thought it best to fly solo for a year or so first to gather some additional confidence. I did, however, send each of them a case of Clos Rémi rosé with a note assuring them that I continued to grow from their teachings. Indeed, I studied new materials and reviewed old ones in each of my disciplines every evening with the same discipline as I jogged around the vineyards first thing every morning and attended mass at the village church every Sunday. I cultivated the mental architecture that Madame had helped me craft, night after night, during my year on her estancia, as I would have a new, fragile hybrid tea rose that held my life’s true essence.

Madame remained more than a friend to me and my hour with her on Sunday evening over the satellite phone was the high point of my week, in more ways than one, actually. I had noticed that call quality was better the higher up the hill I stood with the phone, so I had made it a habit, at sunset on Sunday evenings, to climb to the top of the hill behind the house, above the last row of vines, and call Madame. I would take with me a bottle of rosé and a beautiful wine glass with my—true—initials on the base that I had ordered from the village’s souvenir store. After setting them down next to me on a large flat stone, I would imagine Madame far behind the sunset as her voice flowed into the receiver. We had recreated the spirit of

the “Evenings with Madame” and since time was short, every word was weighted and every thought made to matter. I loved the rigor and intensity of our communications.

Since she had rapidly realized that I was on track to take over Clos Rémi, our discussions were split between artistic considerations, analyses of political and societal events, and news from the group’s affairs, to which she made me increasingly privy. The positive aftermath from the Human Meat Scandal in Europe had bolstered the group’s confidence as well as recruitment of new, high-quality members. I sensed from some of her statements that Madame had climbed another level in the group’s ladder after the success of the mission, but she never discussed the matter.

A few months after the start of the scandal, during one of the Sunday evening calls and as a thunderstorm moved up the valley in my direction, Madame launched into an impassionate discourse.

“Now kids and their parents eat less crap in my country. Local farmers and small business owners are providing for them directly again, with the accountability that comes along with proximity and direct human interactions. Part of the money they earn is itself feeding back into the community. We made it possible for the natural cogs of the local economy to spin freely again; we freed them up from the corroding grime of multinational interests. We reached that goal while bypassing all political channels, all lobbies, all legal avenues, all media or social organizations; we did not even use violence. We simply shifted the power handle back into the strongest hands, the Middle People’s hands. Our dash of evil has brought about a powerful change at a minimal cost. Our approach has been vindicated, Mister Keiffer, and this is just the first of many potent strikes to come!”

“I do love to listen to you when you get all fired up like that; you burst of life at the seams even more than usual!” I teased before switching to a serious mode. “After hearing you, I am grateful to be a part of that change, very grateful indeed.”

“I am for my part glad I had the chance to bring you by my side; I’m sure that you already understand that.”

“When will you visit me here at Clos Rémi so we can celebrate our success together?”

“I’m not ready to come back to Cazaubielle,” Madame replied with a sudden chilliness.

“I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to—”

“I know you didn’t,” she said with a contrite tone of voice. “I’m the one who should apologize. We have this in common that our heart is now in a good place despite the fact that there’s a water lily—a little like in “L’Ecume des Jours”—that inhabits one of its chambers and prevents it from functioning wholly.”

“I understand; I have yet to find a way to pray for my wife and children and make some sort of peace with what I did to them.”

"I have my own water lily as well. Sooner or later, we will both have to extract these water lilies from our hearts and plant them in a safe place where they will no longer hurt us."

"If there is anything I can do here in Cazaubielle to help you with that process, you know you just have to ask."

Huge drops of rain started smashing down one after the other onto the rocks around me.

"Madame, I'm afraid I'll have to hang up," I shouted over the rumbling of thunder. "I'm on top of the hill and the storm is going to hit any second now."

A complete silence ensued. I thought that the static in the air might have cut us off but a faint sizzling indicated that the line was still open.

"Madame? Is there anything else...?"

The receiver remained mute. Just as I was about to hang up and run downhill, Madame's voice held me back.

"There is..."

Her sentence remained suspended in the storm for a long moment before landing.

"Thank you, Richard, for protecting Aurélien—*my son*."

Thank you for reading this far!

If the story resonated with you, I would be grateful if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform.

The Amazon page for this novel is at:

https://www.amazon.com/Upward-Draft-Book-Fugue-Trilogy/dp/1491019557/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0