

ASSASSIN IN MY BED



GABRIOLA, BC CANADA V0R 1X4

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ASSASSIN IN MY BED

ISBN 978-1-990335-05-1 (PAPERBACK)

ISBN 978-1-990335-06-8 (CASEBOUND)

ISBN 978-1-990335-07-5 (EBOOK)

PRINTED ON ACID-FREE PAPER THAT includes no fibre from endangered forests. Agio Publishing House is a socially and environmentally responsible company, measuring success on a triple-bottom-line basis.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Noir Intelligence Series

The Black Hat

Spine of the Antiquarian

Kiss of the Death Adder

Assassin in My Bed

ASSASSIN IN MY BED

A Noir Intelligence Novel

H.B. Dumont

CHAPTER 1

Alicia Dupuis looked out of the kitchen window of her Victoria home as she pressed the remote control to start the SUV parked in her driveway. The defroster would chase away the early morning Pacific Ocean mist that had condensed on the windshield overnight. The radiating heat from the seat would replace the ambient chill.

An explosion rocked the house. Alicia dove to the floor in disciplined reaction. Shards of glass from shattered panes and arrowed splinters of wood from the window frames shot through the kitchen piercing everything along their trajectory. The explosion hurled her back into the perilous life she had cast off if only fleetingly and to a mirage of not so distant recollections. Memories and emotions could not be easily dismissed with the nonchalant flick of a wrist.

Alicia was acutely aware that in the duplicitous currency of security and intelligence, nothing exists without context. More importantly, intelligence and context were askew on the periphery of espionage where there were truths, partial truths and make-believe truths. Such were the defining characteristics of the arcane game with its intoxicating charm and deceptive addiction.

“Marc, Sophia, Camilla,” she yelled. There was no answer. She dashed to her bedroom. Marc was not there. She pushed open the bedroom doors looking for Camilla and Sophia. They were also absent. Rightly or wrongly, she assumed that her stepdaughters were with their father, somewhere. She had been away all of yesterday and came home late last night. Not wanting to disturb anyone, she had slept in the spare room.

Wary of any possible view from outside, she cautiously returned to the kitchen where she located her cellphone amidst the choking

debris. She gingerly crouch-crawled through the minefield of jagged rubble to the staircase and hurried down to the basement. She tore cardboard boxes full of family memorabilia away from a wall and opened a miniature door that exposed an underground passage to the garden shed hidden in a hedgerow at the back of the old Pemberton Estate. Her father had had the clandestine tunnel built “in case of a rainy day,” he had explained with a cautioning nod that Alicia had affirmed. A career with MI6, British Secret Intelligence Service, had taught him to always anticipate what your opponent would be thinking tomorrow and not what they had been contemplating yesterday. A Berlin Wall-esque tunnel would provide an escape route from the ghosts of yesterday’s missions to tomorrow’s strategic contingencies, which had become today’s stark reality for Alicia.

She had maneuvered the length of the passageway before, but never with such determination and haste to reach the hatch which opened beneath the work bench in the garden shed cluttered with its camouflage of rusty tools. She left through the back door of the shed and crept along the edge of the English Laurel hedgerow until she reached the adjacent street. A second explosion broke the neighbourhood silence but in the opposite direction from which she was now sprinting.

Once on the sidewalk, she strode at a quick yet disciplined pace so as not to attract undue attention. She stopped and gaped at what had been her friend’s house, now consumed in a cloud of dust and rubble still settling from the second explosion. All the while, the wail of sirens of emergency vehicles became louder as they converged on the scenes of utter mayhem and destruction.

“What happened?” Alicia shouted at a man crouched behind a tree sheltering his whimpering dog.

“A gas explosion I suspect,” he yelled back.

It can’t be, she reflected in an ever-heightening state of

vigilance. *There was no gas hooked up to her friend's house. Not only that but the main gas line ran parallel to the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street.*

Alicia retraced her steps to the garden shed in her back yard. A second group of emergency vehicles could be heard approaching as flames mixed with acrid black smoke from her burning SUV shot above the roofline of what had been the kitchen in her house but was now just a structure in shambles. She retrieved a metal box hidden behind a false wall in the shed. She emptied the contents into a satchel with methodical haste: credit cards, Canadian, American and European Union currency, a Canadian and European Union passport, the latter with French diplomatic designation, other essential identification papers, and a cellphone with a European Union SIM card and continental charging cable. All were linked to that life she had temporarily left behind barely two years earlier. As the emergency vehicles arrived, she stealthily departed as she had entered through the back door of the garden shed, then fled into the shadow of the dishevelled hedgerow in the direction of a safehouse.

So much can be suppressed in the silence of a safehouse, a sanctuary, an echo of peace and quiet, camouflaged in the anonymity of suburbia. It had become a footnote to her previous life, forever linked by the vow of silence taken among colleagues.

She sat quietly for a moment staring out of the window at a solitary autumn leaf as it surrendered its grasp on a barren branch and drifted silently to the ground to join others blanketing the lawn. *Was my life becoming a recollection of forgotten photographs from seasons past like those black and white pictures my mother had tucked away in old shoe boxes carefully packed in the storage bins of memorabilia in her now abandoned basement?* she wondered. A scar of doubt lingered but her momentary reminiscence vanished

in the stark reality of the current circumstances in which she found herself.

From the secure wired phone in the safehouse that could not be electronically traced to her, she called her travel agent. Together they reserved a flight from Victoria to Vancouver to depart in less than four hours. That would barely give her enough time to minimally recharge the cellphone with the European Union SIM card that she had hurriedly stashed in her satchel. She reassessed her strategy. She adjusted her makeup to better reflect the photo on her Canadian passport. Using her Canadian cellphone, she attempted to text and email her husband and the children, but the network was not responding. She called her service provider from the secure wired phone.

“Neither my email nor text messaging seem to be working on my cellphone,” she explained.

“What is your account number?”

“I’m not sure. I’m mobile at the moment using another phone. Can I just give you my name and cell number?”

Alicia provided the additional security information requested.

“You are on a family plan that was cancelled effective midnight yesterday.”

“Cancelled? By whom?” she retorted, astonished by the promptness of the exacting reply of the service provider.

“Marc Bolibar. He is the other name on the account.”

“Can you reactivate just my cellphone?”

“Yes. It will take a while. If you have backed up your data to the Cloud, you will be able to download it but that will take longer.”

Using the same wired phone, she then tried to call the friend whose house had been damaged by the second explosion. It rang but there was no answer.

CHAPTER 2

Her brief connecting flight from Victoria to Vancouver was uneventful, not that she expected otherwise. But she had also not expected a blast that destroyed her SUV to demolish her kitchen. Her cellphone boogied across the side table in the Air Canada Maple Leaf Lounge at the Vancouver International Airport from the vibration of an incoming email. The data download from the Cloud had completed. Her domestic cellphone was once again operational. She did not recognize the email address but she did recognize the subject line text which read 2CV. Her heart jumped. Her chest tightened. Her breathing quickened. The only person to use 2CV was Sophia, her youngest stepdaughter with whom she had bonded more closely than her older sister. It was their innocuous secret code solely for use in times of imminent threat.

“Do I know you?” Alicia replied to the email.

“No. But you may know a young girl who asked to use my cell to send a brief email to her mother from the Vancouver International Airport. Are you her mother?”

“Yes, I am her mother. When was this?” Alicia asked, relieved by the contact but increasingly worried by the brevity of the e-communication. The girls would not have the wherewithal to travel alone. Someone would be with them, more than likely their biological father, her husband, Marc Bolibar.

“About four hours ago. She followed me into the ladies’ washroom. She explained that her cellphone had crashed. She seemed anxious but I figured that was normal with young girls when they became inexplicably separated from their social networks. She said she was with her older sister. It didn’t seem too strange so I lent her mine. She calmed down a bit after that.”

“Thank you for being so kind,” Alicia replied. She ended the email and again tried to call the friend whose house had also been blown up. As before, there was no answer. Not knowing was worrying. There could only be two good reasons for being incommunicado. First, she was dead. Second, she was alive but unable to communicate because she was disabled as a result of injury. Or perhaps a third explanation. She had been taken hostage. In order of probability, first, she was dead; second, disabled; third, held against her will. Given her status as a retired MI6 employee, like Alicia’s father and herself, the latter was a distinct possibility – remote but feasible.

Alicia reflected on her own circumstances. Why had she been a target for assassination? Where was Marc? He wasn’t in the house. There was a strong probability his status would mirror the girls’. It just didn’t add up. She didn’t want to consider the alternative, that Marc was solely responsible for the attempt on her life. Could he have been a co-conspirator?

Even after a long career with MI6, her father had not been able to fully retire and walk away from the long-reaching tentacles of the arcane world. She was her father’s daughter with far less time in the shadow of the trenches. She wasn’t naïve. She knew she could not fully retire either. John Le Carré’s fictional character, George Smiley, had been threatened with the loss of pension and benefits if he did not testify about errant details of a prior incident in which he had been involved. These circumstances seemed different, though. She was not being asked to account for dangling details associated with a previous case. Yet, she was once again in the crosshairs. Someone wanted her dead for whatever reason she did not know or for another contrived reason also unknown to her at this time.

Her mind drifted back to the image of her SUV exploding and her instantaneous reaction. Nowhere in her response was calling

9-1-1 an option. She had more confidence in the Keystone Cops than in the local constabulary. Spending time providing a statement and attempting to explain why she had become a target for assassination was not a survival technique. Ironically, her comfort zone was back in the fray among experienced colleagues. There she would be provided with the tools of the tradecraft to help level the playing field.

Out of habit, Alicia found herself assessing the haunted looks of others in the departure lounge lost in their own worlds, giving nothing away. Some were hiding behind newspapers and raised laptop monitors, their heads popping up, eyes calculating, then clandestinely emerging in possible parallel surveillance as either friend or foe. Still other expressions were like empty fireplaces yawning and veiling the thoughts they wished to keep hidden.

A man in his forties, yet seemingly much older because he had no one to impress, stared at other women but not at his wife who sat passively opposite him. A female in her mid-twenties had spent considerable time in front of her mirror applying mascara and foundation to complement her self-administered hair colour in a futile effort to look natural. This female appeared like an orphan. A younger girl sat beside her, head down, timidly attempting to cover up self-administered faint parallel lines on her teenage wrists. Bruising on her upper arms cried out for protection from those who did not see or did not wish to look. Both females were masking defiance and the scars of too many failed relationships. Were others experiencing a similar sense of hollowness that allowed them to cast doubt, at this moment?

The business class pre-boarding announcement diverted her attention. As she rose to proceed to the check-in counter, she glanced back at the teenager who failed to return her gaze. She too needed tutored confidence and access to tools in order to help level her own playing field. At another time and place, Alicia would have

reached out and wrapped her in a protective cloak, defended her until such time as she could stand in confidence against all that had brought her to the perilous precipice of sharp-edged instruments. There, the young girl could look down at her scars of despair with endurance and determination, never to return. Instead, she would be a beacon of hope to others who had experienced the unrelenting onslaught of demeaning abuse as had some of Alicia's childhood friends. *I can't save them all*, she ruminated regrettably.

The short stroll along the boarding walkway from the check-in counter to the front door of the aircraft allowed her the brief yet sufficient time to transition back to the reality of her uncertain circumstances. She showed the flight attendant her e-ticket on her cellphone whereupon she was directed to the private business section, first on her left. Although there was ample space in the large overhead storage bin for her satchel, for security purposes, she chose to keep it close at hand in the cavern of the extended foot rest of her private singular sleeper pod. There, it would be virtually impossible for anyone to stealthily access it should she extend the bed to join Wynken, Blynken and Nod sailing on a river of crystal light in search of much anticipated sleep.

CHAPTER 3

As the aircraft gained altitude enroute to Toronto with a connecting flight to her final destination – Paris Charles de Gaulle International Airport, Alicia found herself reflecting on her vows of silence which were in conflict with her wedding vows. She was aware but did not want to admit that when you decide on a lover to share your bed, you accept anecdotes presented with candour, merged with fabrication. The demarcation is rarely obvious.

Often the naïve partner will be recruited for a role in a play for which they had not knowingly auditioned. More problematic, if the deceitful partner tweaks the script after the curtain rises in order to sway the storyline in their favour, the narrative doesn't flow as smoothly as the initial playwrights had intended. Not yet aware the script had been clandestinely modified, the second partner is foiled by the improvised lines and unrehearsed scenes. After too many deviations from the intended script, the duped partner simply becomes accustomed to the folly, or leaves the stage altogether. If they are still interested in the theatre as a life-time pursuit, as opposed to the façade of the theatrics, separation and divorce becomes the inevitable solution.

In retrospect, Alicia had not been wholly honest with Marc before or after their marriage. She was good at keeping secrets about secrets. It was in her espionage DNA, fine-tuned by her tutored upbringing.

She was the only child of a well-established British family and had spent her formative years in Weymouth on the south coast of England. Her father had worked for British Secret Intelligence Service's foreign intelligence agency, MI6. The family had moved to Canada upon his retirement, a transition which left Alicia filled

with guarded anticipation, and pessimistic optimism, like an initial offer of full-time employment. She had returned to England to complete her graduate degree in mathematics and computer science at Oxford University before briefly following in her father's footsteps. She spoke neither about this initial foray into the enigmatic world of espionage and intelligence nor the esoteric vocation which she had subsequently pursued on the continent.

Marc, on the other hand, had been more elusive about his family roots near Donostia-San Sebastián in northern Spain on the Bay of Biscay – Basque Country, only alluding to faint assertions of Spanish sovereignty. His parents had separated. Although he maintained a distant relationship with both, he spoke little about his childhood. He had two daughters from a previous relationship, Sophia now aged 13 and Camilla 15. He explained that his wife had been killed in a boating accident on the Spanish Riviera. Sometime later, he departed with his daughters to begin a new life half a world away on the Pacific West Coast of Canada.

Both Alicia and Marc were in their early- to mid-thirties when they met and exchanged wedding vows in a civil ceremony in Victoria. She was happy to adopt what would appear to be a maturing family without the anguish of morning sickness and stretch marks. It was not so much a marriage of convenience as a fitting façade within an established suburban setting.

Recently, however, Marc had become withdrawn. He had begun to turn away from her more often in bed as if a veil had been progressively woven, preventing her touch. Of greater concern, he had become increasingly aggressive toward her and the girls. Alicia could not pinpoint the source of the stress. Their relationship had deteriorated rapidly in the past several weeks. Today, it could best be described as turbulent. They had talked about the possibility of a trial separation at a date yet to be determined. With their

disappearance, she presumed, rightly or wrongly, he had arbitrarily made this decision to depart with the girls without forewarning.

Like the vacant business class seats, her life felt eerily empty, one previously scripted by others. She had inherited the house from her father and legally adopted Camilla and Sophia. Now, the house was in shambles and both Marc and the girls were gone. Re-establishing contact with them would be her second priority at this juncture. The first would be identifying and neutralizing the threat to herself which she surmised was linked to her former arcane exploits beyond the hedgerows of her secluded Victorian Pemberton Estate home.

The intricacies of returning to the intelligence fold after a hiatus, however brief, were never taught as part of tradecraft curricula. Both parties assumed the employment would be full-term or until death do one of them part, invariably the employee. An attempted assassination negated these unwritten rules of engagement. The terms of the initial contract would be renegotiated. If linked to a previous case file, discussions would be premised on mutual benefits. Alicia would first need to establish that link. Second, she would need to demonstrate that the threat to herself was not just a risk to the employer, but that the employer was in imminent peril. Third, eliminating one threat would ideally eradicate the threat to both for the foreseeable future. If not exactly happily ever after, life would at least be less precarious and stressful.

For now, the flight from Toronto to Paris would provide her with the uninterrupted luxury of listening to a medley of her favourite Joan Baez folk tunes composed at the time of the American involvement in the Vietnam War and the subsequent peace protests. Alicia's current circumstances seemed to pale in comparison with the perceived threat to global peace of the sixties and early seventies. It had been fabricated by politicians and generals who put their careers ahead of the lives of thousands of soldiers

and civilians, and countless others maimed physically, mentally and emotionally. It echoed the brutality and carnage orchestrated for the entertainment of plebeians and patricians in the Roman Colosseum. The lyrics and the unmistakable voice of Joan Baez, the iconic folk singer made her reflect – *We both know what memories can bring; they bring diamonds and rust.*

Like a couple of light years ago, Alicia recalled lessons her father had taught her. There was more truth in stories than detail in facts he had reminded her repeatedly as if once was not enough. Stories had to be interpreted, facts just had to be memorized for the simplicity of what they were. She was very good at remembering, gifted as had been her mother. Stories interpreted, in contrast, were a matter of deduction, having first considered all the facts. But drawing inference from what? She did not have all the facts, instead just suppositions.

Had she been away from the fray too long, her ability to think critically lessened, eroded unlike diamonds which do not rust? She had escaped the explosion more by providence than skill. The consequences of challenging premonition devoid of critical analysis could be deadly, not only for herself but for others in her sphere. She needed answers. Why had she become a target for assassination again?

CHAPTER 4

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing shortly at Paris Charles de Gaulle International Airport. In preparation for landing, please ensure your luggage is securely stowed, your table trays and your seat backs are in the upright position and seatbelts are securely fastened. The local time in Paris is 9:55 a.m.”

“Welcome back to Paris, Madame.” The security officer stationed in the priority booth spoke with a brusque nod having reviewed Alicia’s French diplomatic passport with a cursory glance.

“Thank you,” Alicia replied, her voice an unassuming whisper. Her accent was cultured and continental, acquired after academic terms as an exchange student at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. She had spent hours immersed in the ambience of the cafés, fashions and gastronomy in the City of Lights, and summers vacationing in Monaco, Cannes and Marseilles on the French Riviera.

She had returned to France several times since moving to Victoria, describing the trips to Marc and the girls as business related to her father’s estate and his previous home in Weymouth on the south coast of England. Some flights were direct from Toronto Pearson International Airport to Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. Others were through London Heathrow Airport with a Eurostar connection from London St. Pancras Station to Paris Gare du Nord. Varying her itinerary provided additional secretive facets to her business consulting cover story. The trips had been financed through her private Banque Nationale de Paris debit account to keep Marc from finding out, another deception in their marital relationship.

She hailed a taxi to drive her directly from Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport to the Gare du Nord rather than taking the Metro

because it avoided prying eyes scrutinizing passengers arriving on international flights. She boarded the TGV high speed train from the Gare du Nord to Gare de Metz-Ville in the province of Alsace-Lorraine, while starlings and sparrows pecked at crumbs left around the bench-style seats abandoned by the parade of passengers who had joined the scrimmage for regular seats on the train. Alicia, in contrast, boarded the first-class car and settled into her reserved, more spacious seat on the upper deck. This vantage point allowed her to look above the berms at the passing countryside. Initially, she had considered purchasing a small farm like some she saw but came to the realization that any location in France was too close to her haunting past. When the earthen sound barriers obscured the view, she withdrew into pensive interludes marked by less tangible thoughts.

Once at the Gare de Metz-Ville, Alicia took a taxi to an out-of-the-way refuge, another safe house in Place Saint Louis. Through lead-lined stained-glass windows and Alsatian lace curtains in the turreted garret suite, she had 270-degree unrestricted surveillance of the comings and goings in the square. Those who frequented the plaza in the cool of the summer evenings to sip Perrier or Pinot Noir were thankful the pigeons and doves no longer followed the flight path of their winged ancestors to the pigeonier that adorned the turret under the shale roof tiles.

One of her favourite brasseries serving the best boeuf bourguignon and an exquisite selection of Côtes du Rhône wines was located directly across the square. She had spent many hours sipping cappuccinos while reading novels by Jean-Paul Sartre, Virginia Woolf, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. Conveniently, this exquisite brasserie had an equally unfettered view of the square. Of operational importance, it provided direct getaway access, as needed, to a delivery lane via a back door, more frequently used

by harried employees capturing a quick nicotine fix or enjoying a fleeting amorous rendezvous.

She adjusted her appearance once again to match the regular French passport which she exchanged for her French diplomatic documents.

ALICIA STROLLED ACROSS PLACE SAINT-JACQUES IN THE old district of Metz, stopping briefly in front of an antique shop as if window shopping. She smiled, her scrutiny surveillance alert. The backgammon board had been turned, indicating he had arrived. She entered the adjacent shopping arcade from the Hôtel des Fleurs entrance and descended the escalator. Out of habit, she tapped in the code and pressed her thumb on the recessed reader. It seemed as if no time had passed since she had spent hours here analyzing intelligence data for patterns and anomalies, in addition to patterns of anomalies.

“Good morning, Daan,” Alicia said as she extended her hand to Daan Segers, the director of the European Union Intelligence Unit. He exuded cultivated elegance. As always, his dress and deportment were flawless, complementing his athletic physique. His azure blue eyes were as magnetic as they were disarming. She noted the hair on his temples had adopted half a dozen shades of grey since they had last talked face-to-face. Recalling the French fashion designer, Coco Chanel whose mantra was ‘dress chubbily, they remember the dress; dress exquisitely, they remember the woman.’ Accordingly, she dressed to be remembered.

“Well, you are a pleasant sight for weary eyes.” Daan rose from his ornate boule mahogany desk with a welcoming smile followed by a gentle hug and a kiss on both of her cheeks. The advantage of sharing space with an antique boutique was first choice of items

dropped off as consignment for sale. “What brings you back to my doorstep? Do you want your old job back?”

“Be careful what you ask for because you just might get it,” Alicia replied, trying to maintain a light disposition.

“What can I do for you?” Daan enquired.

Alicia showed him a photo on her cellphone.

Daan squinted through wary eyes. “There’s an ugly ghost from Christmas Past. Where did you get it?”

“You recognize him?” Alicia answered with a faint edge to her voice and a falling tone.

“His name is Marc Bolibar, also known as Santiago López. Since you took your leave of absence, we learned he was and may still be an active Basque separatist.” Daan paused, letting the revelation hang before filling in the final agonizing details.

“We have also learned that he murdered your former fiancé, Jacques Bernard, three years ago. He disappeared sometime afterward and his trail went cold.”

Alicia screamed silently. She stood frozen in stunned shock at the realization that Jacques’ assassin had shared her bed for the better part of the last two years. The glaring mental imagery was horrifying.

Her soul had died the same day as Jacques. Although he was dead, her memory of him was not. At this moment, distant recollections of joy shared with Jacques collided with overwhelming feelings of vengeance that consumed her every fiber. She had reflected on the events leading up to his murder more often than she cared to remember. Despite her gift of clear analysis, she could not identify who had pulled the trigger or why Jacques had been targeted. She repeatedly reviewed all combinations and permeations of the facts known at that time. Nothing seemed to make sense.

“I can confirm that he is married and has two children,” Daan continued. “His estranged wife, Elana, is also a member of the

Basque separatist movement. More revealing and assuredly more problematic, she was a Russian informant. She subsequently joined the FSB as an agent whereupon she was sent by Moscow back to Basque Country in northern Spain to stir up discontent. Elana is still active, recruiting internationally for the Basque cause, although we do not know her exact whereabouts. We surmised that Marc, Elana and the girls had disappeared with the aid of Moscow perhaps to lay low as a sleeper cell. Subsequent intelligence suggested otherwise. They had gone their separate ways. With no trace of the girls, we believed Elana had taken them to Moscow where they would not be recognized. Perhaps Marc had become a freelancer off the grid somewhere.”

I'm married to the murderer of my fiancé and a bigamist. Alicia shuddered in disgust at the reality of that revelation. She felt numb, suspended in time by the realism thrust upon her. That thought was so repulsive it had never entered her mind, let alone been considered as a contributing factor in the recent dissolution of their marriage. She struggled to catch her breath.

Marc had been a maestro of deception and seduction. But did he know about my background? Could I have been that naïve? Does love make us that blind? Her mind buzzed at such dizzying speed she could not perform calculations in elementary school maths let alone forensic calculus.

Her reaction did not escape Daan's scrutiny. He had often observed her withdraw when conducting analyses of case file data and then rejoin the discussion with solutions in rank order of probability. She was elsewhere at this moment, in another space he did not recognize.

Alicia broke the protracted silence. “I may take you up on your invitation to end my leave of absence and actively rejoin the European Union Intelligence Unit. But you may decline my overture and for very good reason.”

Daan held her gaze without speaking. He had been tutored in the richness of patience. His open smile morphed into a non-judgmental expression of collegial encouragement and support.

“Talk to me,” he quietly invited, his voice as appealing as it was disarming.

Shrouded in a shadowed world within worlds like Matryoshka Russian dolls encased in successive replicas that conjured unspoken truths and emotions, she replied in a faltering voice, “It’s complicated.”

She had reluctantly taken a temporary leave of absence to deal with her personal affairs, the circumstances of which had been impairing her ability to make rational decisions. After Jacques’ death, she had become a liability to herself and her colleagues. Daan had agreed and granted her request for a temporary leave of absence. Although no time had been set when she would have to either return to the fray or resign, it was agreed that she would keep in contact. Hence, she had developed the cover story for the business trips from the sanctuary of her Pemberton Estate in Victoria to Daan’s den above the Metz antique shop. The trips also allowed her to update her French diplomatic and regular passports, European Union SIM card and other documents.

CHAPTER 5

“Complicated may be an understatement,” Daan commented after listening to Alicia’s account of her life since taking an extended leave of absence from the European Union Intelligence Unit after Jacques’ murder. “Grief can be messy.” He allowed a moment of silence to linger in respect. “I now have a better understanding of your response and desire to re-join our merry band of brothers and sisters. I need to clarify one point. What is your primary motivation?”

“Why am I a target of assassination after all this time?” Alicia replied without hesitation. “What has happened that the fight has been brought to my front door, literally? Once that unknown has been unveiled, I am confident other truths will be revealed.”

“Understandably, I sense a whiff of vendetta. The *raison d’être* of the EUI Unit is to protect the European Union from internal and external threats, not to provide *carte blanche* for personal revenge. My final question is simple. Can you control your urge for reprisal should you confront Marc?”

“I can’t cover up my primal instincts to shoot that son of a bitch in retribution for Jacques’ murder. But that wouldn’t shed light on the answer to my primary question – why have I become a target for assassination after all this time.”

Again, Daan allowed her a moment to consider the magnitude and consequences of the information he had provided, in addition to her motivation to re-engage.

“In response to your question, yes I am confident I can control my primal urge to retaliate.” Like the Siamese cat she had once had as a child which could maintain a trance-like state with its blue eyes wide open, Alicia reflected with an equally impenetrable

gaze. She reflected. *Had I been too much my father's daughter and not enough of my own self? How many times had I felt eclipsed standing in the enigmatic shadow of his espionage silhouette? I had been good at mirroring successful mannerisms. My parent's marriage had been successful, at least to all outward appearances. The British family had perfected that façade of maintaining appearances, the stiff upper lip with a typical English sense of propriety and a generational code of silence when it came to details of family secrets.*

She had mimicked those performances, the husband, the two children, the house in upper-class suburbia despite the fact the marriage had been a private civil process, the children adopted not truly hers, and the house, although lawfully hers, never really a true home. Genuineness had been absent in her marriage.

As a gifted child, more her mother's daughter than her father's in this regard, she found contentment in the solitude of her mind. She never saw herself as a dutiful devoted spinster. After her mother's death from cancer, she and her father merely shared the accommodation, each in their own mental space most of the time. Yet, after his death, Alicia realized she was truly alone for the first time. Escaping into the solitude of her mind was no longer sufficient. She didn't need a soulmate, whatever that was. She didn't need a father either – perhaps just a partner, someone with whom she could engage in conversations that mattered yet unrelated to her chosen vocations and inherited background.

She furrowed her brow. She tightened her lips, admitting for the first time that genuineness had been absent. She paused, abandoning any pretence. Internal change needed a catalyst. Daan's revelation about her husband's true identity, Marc's deceit, his dishonesty was now that catalyst. Now, her own admission, her anger, her horror, her sorrow, her railing against betrayal, was her motivation. It opened the gateway for her to allow the possibility of change and

to relinquish her grasp of the haunted memories – the lyrics of Joan Baez, the diamonds and rust.

“Not sure if you have had a chance to catch up on international news?” Daan’s prompt caused her to refocus.

She leaned forward slightly, looking inquisitive. The initial detail had left her in deficit mode, her confidence faltering but not defeated. How much more shocking could it be?

“Enlighten me,” she replied, her response less a question than a statement.

“Quiet, staid Victoria is now on the front page of the international news. An Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS – cell has supposedly taken responsibility for the bombing of two houses. You are reported to have been killed along with an unidentified occupant of the second house. Marc/Santiago has been identified as the suspected bomber because of his supposed Middle East sympathies. His arrest is the number one priority for Interpol. He is also on the Europol radar.”

She took a deep breath before responding. “He may be tangentially involved somehow. I just don’t know. But he wouldn’t carry out the bombing of his own house. And his mysterious disappearance without notice is completely out of character. Yet, it is connected somehow and is one of those unknowns. He loves his daughters and would go out of his way to protect them physically, mentally and emotionally, not place them in harm’s way, although he has a strange way of showing his affection on occasion.”

“How certain are you?”

“I’m still a good judge of character, less so of male amorous intentions apparently. After two years of living with him, I can state emphatically that he would not affiliate with ISIS. Basque and Islamic philosophies are at opposite ends of both the religious and secular spectrums. Those hard-held Iberian hatreds are innately grounded in Spanish history. No more so than in Basque

resentments that date back to when the Moors invaded Spain in 711 A.D., bringing with them their Islamic religion, caliphate and culture. Marc would become enraged anytime he heard news items about ISIS or Islam in general.”

It was Daan’s turn to reflect. “Yes, the EU Council in Brussels also has its doubts about any ISIS connection. It’s too convenient. Whoever is spreading this rumour has ulterior motives. I’m convinced it is connected to the recent simmering dissidence, still unidentified, which has an inherent anti-EU undercurrent.”

Daan went quiet as he contemplated the options to counter this latest threat to the European Union. Alicia knew enough not to interrupt him. She remembered the many times he would stare upward focusing on nothing in particular while the embryo of an idea was born.

“You bring to the table first-hand knowledge of Marc’s personality and, more importantly, of his Basque penchant for planning, better than any confidential informant or espionage source could. That is invaluable and may tip the scales in our favour to neutralize this threat. Other sources suggest that it is international in scope so we have not yet envisioned the true magnitude of its devastating potential, like a viral pandemic in its infancy.”

“How can I help?” Alicia offered, her question posed in earnest.

“How would you like your old job back? It may be to our and your advantage to be reported as one of the two cadavers recovered from the bombed houses in Victoria, at least for now.”

“Happy to accept your invitation. When do I start?”

Daan handed her a hotel business card embossed with a reservation number. “Please proceed to this hotel in Vaduz, Liechtenstein as soon as possible. There you will meet up with your new partner who will introduce himself as ‘the professor’. I will join the two of you once I have finalized some details and received formal

authority with budget approval from Brussels. I will bring your identification documents and toys of the profession.”

“I would like to make one stop here in Metz before I leave.”

“Fort de Queuleu?”

Alicia stood quietly, acknowledging her superior’s recollection of history and her family connection.

Daan nodded solemnly. “Depart as soon as possible.” His direction was forthright yet compassionate. He was acutely aware of her motivation for a brief detour.

Before being made aware of her family’s heritage, her life had been simple, surrounded by teddy bears and dolls, and friends who shared common British values and some secrets in her diary. After learning about family secrets, she was more careful about what she shared, what she wrote. She thought long and hard before she spoke. She had fewer friends as a result, because she was seen as being introverted like a librarian, not eager to take on a commanding leadership role in the classroom or on the sports field, or support others with great enthusiasm.

Inwardly, she had not changed. She was still Alicia, the inquisitive highly-intelligent girl who believed in equality, fairness for all and environmental causes. Eventually, she shunned others in response to their rejection of her and what she believed in. It wasn’t right but it just happened naturally. She found solace in individual achievement. As a gifted child, she excelled particularly in maths and sciences. A myriad of trophies and awards adorned her shelves and walls, bolstering her ego and confidence. The secrets were still there, though, and she was very good at keeping secrets about secrets.

She gained solace from the fact that she knew things that others did not, details that she had learned on her own. It was not a matter of arrogance felt from lording knowledge over the heads of others. Instead, it was satisfaction experienced from solving the crossword

puzzles with uncanny speed and accuracy, and the subsequent confidence that she felt. She didn't need constant praise, so to speak. Often, she found such accolades to be demeaning.

But why had she recently become a target of assassination after all this time? Not knowing all the facts was frustrating. She found herself unable to logically deduce the answer, like not being able to decipher the calligraphy of the legend which she had meticulously scripted. Worse, she didn't know the reason for the impasse. Celtic culture taught that our ego was the dragon holding us back. She needed to slay the dragon. There were advantages of being a Star Wars lone Jedi. Now was not one of them. Luke Skywalker had Yoda. Perhaps her new partner, the professor, would fill the role of an Obi-wan.

CHAPTER 6

Alicia presented Daan's business card to the receptionist at the hotel in Vaduz who immediately summoned a gentleman from the hotel manager's office. He was dressed as one would expect of a distinguished representative of a five-star European hotel spa. There was no mistaking his professional bearing, which was that of a seasoned warrior, approachable but unforgiving if crossed.

"I am Alicia Dupuis. You must be Professor Lucas Peeters. I understand we will be working together on a research project."

He extended his hand, his grip confident but not overpowering. "Apparently so," he replied, with a restrained yet relaxed tone. Intuitive students attuned to disciplined processes of communication could learn more from his demeanour and how he spoke framed in the milieu of the knowledge he passed along within the context of formal lectures but more importantly the informal gestures. Marshall McLuhan was correct. The medium is the message. Professor Lucas Peeters was such a medium.

"We will have your luggage taken to your room," the concierge politely whispered.

"The journey from Metz to Vaduz can be a bit circuitous, especially as Vaduz is the only European capital without an airport or railway station. For our purposes, it is advantageous when keeping track of who comes and goes from this fairy-tale principality. A little light refreshment?" he invited.

Alicia followed him into the lounge while scanning the décor that added to the venue of excellence and ambience of intelligence. The message was subtle but self-evident.

"Come into my office," he gestured as they approached a discrete alcove with two high-backed plush leather chairs positioned