

## CHAPTER ONE

Cesaire Girard jumped at the sharp sound of splintering wood and rattling metal. He had just enough time to realize the racket came from his south loading dock before the men in black invaded.

"On the floor!" the lead man shouted. He stormed in from the back in a slight crouch, a terror in combat boots, fatigues, and body armor, all black, and wielding an assault rifle. He had blanked out his face beneath a black ski mask and tinted goggles. Half a dozen men followed, fanning out over the warehouse floor, each a copy of their leader. One drew up to a stack of pallets and steadied his rifle along the top flat of wood, looking for someone to shoot. Another halted alongside the van, crouching and searching the room with his weapon. Several others searched the van, the stacks of pallets and crates, and the administration office, all in a matter of seconds. They herded Girard's men into the open center of the floor and shoved them to their knees.

Not a man of Girard's contingent thought to draw a weapon, thank God. The invaders were too good for that, and quick.

"Stay down!" the intruders ordered in local French, their weapons scanning for heroes. "Hands behind your heads! Don't move and you'll get through this!"

Girard realized that, like his men, he kneeled on the dirty concrete floor. When had that happened? He glanced at the digital tablet in his left hand, the one on which he had reviewed the current manifests as his uninvited guests invaded. He had to get that spreadsheet off the screen; the information there would incriminate him.

The thought was not his wisest, nor was it smart to reach for the tablet's button, but the raid had rattled Girard, so mistakes were inevitable.

So were the consequences. Four rifles pivoted to cover his movement, and multiple screaming voices warned him to freeze or die. Lead Man took two bounding steps toward Girard and kicked him square in the chest.

The attack hurt like hell, a crushing impact that knocked the breath out of Girard and made his ribcage scream. The tablet flipped end over end for a moment, then clattered onto cement.

"Freeze, shithead! What the hell's the matter with you!"

"I'm good! I'm good! Don't shoot!" Girard shouted, on his back on the floor.

"I ought to perforate your ass, dipshit! Don't you move! Nobody move!"

Nobody did. The dim warehouse became an echo chamber of heavy breathing and the occasional keening whine of fear. Girard's fifteen people huddled on the concrete floor, surrounded by dark, cobwebbed walls, poor lighting from the dirty, high up, tilt-in warehouse windows, and the van that represented the only going business concern amid the props of pallets and mostly empty crates. Nobody moved, neither predators nor quarry, except the constantly scanning sentries at the pallet pile and the van.

"Beta team, clear," came a faint electronic voice bracketed by clipped radio squelches. "Perimeter secure."

The men in black didn't so much relax as reorient. They shouldered their rifles and moved in among Girard's people, stripping them of weapons, bullying them face down onto the floor, and trussing them up with zip cord. Lead Man grabbed Girard by the front of his shirt and wrestled him to his feet. He forced his prisoner backwards across the open space until they crashed into a wooden crate. The impact raised a cloud of stale, mold-laced dust. Girard hacked and sneezed.

Lead Man trained his ski goggles on Girard. It was impossible to tell if he studied his prisoner or daydreamed of lunch. Girard saw only his own reflection in the lenses.

"Alpha team, clear," the man said, then shoved Girard once more against the crate before releasing him.

Girard collapsed against his dusty wooden support, barely maintaining his footing on wobbly legs. He had just pulled himself erect when another clutch of armed men entered the room from the loading dock, where they had undoubtedly defeated the security there. A black man marched at the head of this new contingent, standing out due to his lack of a mask, no rifle, and the single-minded trajectory that brought him to Girard's crate.

"I guess you must be the top man," Girard said, then reeled from a punch to his gut. The man snatched him up by the shirt and punched him again, this time in the ribs.

"Where is she, you son of a bitch?" he yelled in English. "Tell me or you're dog food!"

"My God! I don't know who--" The black man punched Girard again, but his shots were wild. Rage made him imprecise.

"I don't need that bullshit! Tell me where she is!"

"I'm an innocent businessman!" Girard returned in his assailant's language. "I have rights!" The argument made no sense, but what was Girard to do but deny, deny, deny?

The man, an American by his English, twisted his face into even more of a mask of fury. Sweat touched his cheeks and his polished bald pate. He grabbed Girard by the neck and drew his fist back to deliver a massive punch to the face.

But it didn't come. A hand reached to squeeze the angry black's shoulder, a small, pale hand with manicured, lacquered nails. Girard's attacker hesitated at that touch. He looked unsure, but refocused on his quarry and drew his fist back farther.

"Gary. Stand down." A British accent, upper crust and in English.

"This bastard knows where Sally is! He's gonna tell me with teeth or without!" He shook Girard like a rattle.

"No, Gary. He's going to tell *me*."

That settled it. The black man's face twisted even more, a contour of anguish rather than hate, and he flung Girard away like a temptation he could not afford. He turned his back then, stalking a few meters away among his shadow compatriots. Girard steadied himself against the crate, which creaked in protest. He no longer feared the man with no mask; there was someone worse in the room.

That someone stepped a few strides away from him. She sized up Girard even as he did the same to her. She showed him angular, strong features marked by piercing, wolfish gray eyes, her short, brown hair framing a serious, uncompromising face. As she stood there cradling her sub-machine gun, combat boots set wide apart, she left Girard with the terrifying notion that she hadn't smiled in years, if ever.

Lead Man lifted the tablet from the floor and handed it to her.

There goes the baffled innocence play.

She looked at the screen. She stared at it far longer than necessary, probably for effect.

"So," she said, "a trafficker in human cargo."

Girard took one last shot. "It's not what it seems."

The black man stared at him, but stood as still as a post.

"Beta team's already located the holding cells," Lead Man said to the lady. "They'll release the people on your say."

The woman stepped close to Girard and held up the cracked screen of the tablet. "Not what it seems? It 'seems' you're a middleman in the white slavery trade, shipping Eastern European girls through Morocco to the United States and Brazil. That's what it seems like to me."

"I'm just a businessman. I don't--"

She slammed the tablet against the side of his face. He found himself on his side on the floor, shaking his head to clear spots from his eyes. His temple and ear felt wet, and stung.

"I haven't a care about your business, Cesaire Girard." The woman straddled him, fingering the handgrip of her sub-machine gun as if from sexual pleasure. "I care about one thing and one thing only. Are you listening, Girard? Are you paying close attention?"

"Y-yes." Girard ran a shaking hand along his cheek. It came away red.

"I care about one manifest item. One girl. Where is Sally Reiser?"

"I-I don't know--"

"Way wrong answer." She charged her weapon and took one step away. Her gun muzzle flashed and released a baritone cough.

Girard heard screaming. Then he realized two things: his left knee poured blood over his pant leg, and the screaming came from him.

His men mewled on their stomachs. The invaders flinched as one when the gun went off, but did not intervene.

"Where is Sally Reiser?" the woman asked again.

Girard tried to control himself, tried to tamp down screams and wide-eyed stares at his knee. He wondered from some armored place in his soul, the place that made him such a fine criminal, when his mind would realize that his body had been shot. He felt no pain; he felt only panic.

"You still have one good leg, Girard. Where is Sally Reiser?"

The black man stared, and did not move.

"They'll kill me! They'll kill me!"

"And I won't?" The woman pressed her weapon's muzzle hard against Girard's remaining knee.

"No! Germany! She's in Germany!"

The woman pulled the trigger. At that moment, as her weapon belched, Girard's body caught up with itself. His other knee, the one wounded first, sent terrible, howling agony to his brain. Slow-assed response, he noted in his armored place. He no longer had any legs.

"Jesus, you shot me! Again?"

"Germany's a big place, Girard."

"I'm going to die!"

She still held the muzzle of her gun on him. She hunched over him with a face as cold as the floor beneath his back. She cocked her head. "And why shouldn't you die, you burk? You run a rape parade. You help your friends in Bosnia or perhaps Romania snatch girls off the street and sell them to perverts. Maybe they think they're going to England, or to Hollywood in America to become a cinema star. Thanks to you and so many like you, all they ever achieve is getting bum-fucked by degenerates. So, there it is, Girard. I'm highly motivated to gut-shoot you right now, to empty a magazine into your--"

"You'll get nothing if you kill me! I never did anything to you!"

"Don't interrupt! Now, where was I?"

Lead Man glanced at his wrist. "Umm, empty a mag, and so on..."

She nodded to him. "Thank you. Anyway, Girard, you get the point. I very much wish to murder you and all your little minions, but there's this matter of Sally Reiser. I'm motivated in her regard, too. Despite your low station in humanity, I'm willing to grant you life for information leading to her."

"But I don't know anything! Just that they took her to Germany!"

"He lies!"

The voice came from an unexpected quarter, from among the trussed-up prisoners. The murderous woman curved her lips up at Girard. She didn't grin; no humor escaped her eyes. She rose to her full height.

Lead Man and his cronies glanced around for who had spoken.

"I know where they took her," one of the bound men said. "I know and so does he. Let me go, and I tell you." He held his head off the floor to speak, looking like a trained seal there on his stomach with his hands and feet tied at his back.

"Tell me now," the woman said, her tone flat.

Girard glared at his man, but what could he do, legless, bleeding to death? If he spoke, the woman would kill him.

The talkative one seemed ready to bargain, but an invader stepped over and put a boot in his back. He did so with slow insistence, suggestion rather than demand. He brought the muzzle of his rifle to the squealer's cheek, just within sight.

"All right. They took her to Germany, to an old army base, a place called Wildflecken."

"How long ago?" the woman asked.

"Ten, maybe twelve hours. They went by van."

"Why Wildflecken?"

The man faltered. He looked unsure. Girard hoped their interrogators took that as a sign of unreliability.

As if punishing him for the thought, his other knee suddenly flooded his brain with knifing, urgent pain.

"I-- I don't know," the pigeon continued, his eyes darting to Girard writhing beneath the woman. "There was an airfield. They were flying her out."

"When and to where?"

"I don't know!"

Except for Girard grunting and thrashing, the warehouse fell silent for a moment. Then the woman stooped close to Girard. She grabbed his chin and turned his face to catch her eyes. "See? You were right. I'd get nothing by killing you. Torture is much more effective. It's your lucky day, you monster. You live."

Live? For how many minutes? Bleeding to death, his legs blown apart? Girard couldn't help it; he burst into hysterical giggling.



Wendy dropped the bastard's chin and stood. She took in the assembly of tac troops and slavers and wondered at her next step. She also wondered how pissed Girard would be to find his legs were perfectly fine but for lacerations from a few shards of concrete where she'd blasted the floor beside him. She looked at Gary, poor Gary, wound tight enough to burst from worry over his girl. Wendy hoped he'd see her alive soon, but knew how such things turned out.

Her alpha team leader stepped up to her, holding a smartphone out for her inspection. "It's eleven and a half hours to Wildflecken by van. They just got there. What are your orders?"

They had just gotten there. They could be loading her onto a plane. They could be shipping her out for murder, torture, dissection, who knew? The one sure thing was that Sally Reiser would not be afforded the suspect pleasures of getting gang-banged by Arab sheiks or western millionaires. She was too old. Whoever had taken her wanted her special.

"Order beta team to release the hostages. Throw this garbage out onto the street. Torch the place."

"*Oui, mademoiselle.*" He turned away and signaled to his men. "Okay, you heard the lady. Quickly now, we've been exposed too long as it is."

Wendy stepped over Girard and headed for the front exit. She grabbed Gary on the way.

She slammed open the thin metal door and stepped into bright morning sunlight and an expansive parking lot. It was crowded with tractor-trailers and a few cars, probably owned by the bad guys. Cranes peeked above the trailers, made toylike from distance. The sounds of the harbor were muffled.

"You scared the shit out of me when you shot him," Gary said. "Part of me wished it was real."

"You're a good Christian boy. You'd be wracked with guilt for years."

"And you wouldn't."

"No." She fumbled in a vest over her Kevlar and extracted a cigarette from a bulging pouch. "I won't kid you, Gary. They've maintained their head start. If they're really running for an airfield, they may have disappeared Sally already. She may be lost to us."

"That's not a factor. We can't allow it to be."

Wendy lit her cigarette. "It's a tactical probability. Your emotional involvement--"

"Fuck that, Carlisle. My 'emotional involvement' aside, you know good and well we can't give up Sally. She's more important than you, more important than me. Your boss made that clear."

"The network is exposed. It gets more and more exposed every time we pull a stunt like this."

As if on cue, a muffled whoomp! sounded from the warehouse, and the windows high on the wall rattled. Men began pouring from the doorway, many of them hobbled by zip cords at their ankles.

Gary didn't seem to notice the commotion. He was focused. "You know that doesn't matter. The network ain't shit compared to Sally. Besides, they haven't shipped her off. There must be twenty airfields

between here and Germany. If they were so keen on transport, they would have used one of them. Your orders are to get Sally back, even if that means driving the network into the ground."

Wendy Carlisle took a long drag on her cigarette. "Yes," she said, "and we are doing that, aren't we? Team leader!"

The tac officer drew to her side immediately. "*Mademoiselle.*"

"Pull in your contingency. We need air support soonest, to Wildflecken."

"Of course. I'll set up refueling in Lyon."

"No time. I want a straight insertion."

"You'll refuel in Lyon. That trip into Germany is over a thousand kilometers. Without refueling, you'll insert yourself on dry tanks. Gravity's a bitch."

"Whatever. Make it happen. And get me the cell in central Germany. I need them combat outfitted and pulling reconnaissance before I'm on station."

She read his concern through his hesitation; his mask and goggles revealed nothing of his face.

"That's more exposure," he said. "England, Portugal, here. At this rate, the Euro network will be entirely compromised."

"The win is strategic. We can take the tactical hit."

"Yes, of course," and he stepped away.

Carlisle flicked her cigarette into the parking lot. "Okay, Mister LaMonte," and she turned her eyes on Gary. "We're in play again. I hope your girl's in this Wildflecken place, because we can't keep this up forever."

Gary stared into the lot, his face sullen. Once, Wendy might have sneered at him, a boy though only a year or so younger than she. A boy due to inexperience and wide-eyed optimism. She might have snorted derision at him in battle dress. She might not have trusted him with a weapon. That was over a year past. It was then, not now.

"Car!" she called to no one in particular. "And give me an LZ for air support!"

The tac officer jumped to her commands, his men to his. They were French. They didn't know her, except by reputation. They owed her nothing. They were not her cell. But their boss -- *her* boss -- demanded they cooperate, so they ruined secrecy and destroyed their sleeper status for her sake. No, that wasn't true. As the Renault Koleos SUV came around to halt in front of her, Wendy corrected the focus of her assault team's loyalties. If she had been shot dead by Girard, none of her men would have cared a whit. They did nothing for her.

They did everything -- *everything* -- for that woman named Sally Reiser.

## CHAPTER TWO

As Wendy Carlisle and Gary LaMonte piled into the Koleos and took instruction from their anonymous masked tac officer, Sally Reiser lay cramped and bruised on the cargo floor of yet another vehicle, a van whose make or model she could not have identified for money or life. She struggled against the zip cords binding her wrists and ankles, against the nylon strap joining the two so that she could not extend her legs or reach above her waist. She breathed hard against the duct tape wound about her head at the mouth, feeling its gummy adhesive against her lips and its vicious pulls at the hair it pressed to her skull. Sally knew she was dead. The two men in the front seats fully intended to end her life. They avoided speaking to her, avoided looking at her. They hadn't offered her water, food, or rest. She was a package they were charged to deliver, or, more likely, to dispose of.

Why was she bound like an animal? What had precipitated this horror? That meeting on the bridge in London, brought on by a call from John Bennington, her benefactor and partner over the last several months. It hadn't been from him after all. She had been unwise to dismiss the cautions of her security

team. They had tried to warn and protect her, and now every one of them lay dead in some London morgue.

What would her kidnappers do with her? Where did they take her? Her only thread of hope was that they hadn't killed her on the spot, but what kind of thread was that?

She could think of all manner of ghastly reasons they might keep her alive.

What about Gary, who undoubtedly fretted to get her back? Gary hadn't been there, had worked a mission she herself had given him. Now she wondered if that mission, too, had been a ruse, a fiction to get him away from her side.

Sally squeezed her eyes shut until they watered. She opened them again and tried to think straight. Every thought, every decision she had made that day, came back to her under a light of suspicion. She knew nothing of her captors except that they spoke French. They had shown themselves devious enough to ensnare her in a complicated trap. But maybe they had been lucky. She clung to that idea. If they were dumber than she allowed, she might stand a chance. If they weren't...

Eulie, she tried to cry, and it came out as a mumble through the tape. So sorry, so sorry. Her little boy was lost to her, and she to him. Gary would have to tell him. Please let Gary be the one. Gary loved Eulie and would guard him. He would be a father to her poor, broken son. Eulie endured too much. He endured life with a scrambled brain and uncooperative muscles. He endured the knowledge that he was not whole. He should not be forced to endure his mother's death unless Gary could hold him and help him through it.

God, protect Eulie. Keep him safe. Make him forget.

*God is a little busy right now.*

Sally darted her eyes about. She craned her neck to see the men in the van, but neither of them looked at her. Neither laughed at his clever joke. They carried on the same sporadic French small talk they'd maintained all along.

So ... who had spoken?

*It isn't so important who says what, but what they say. Mind yourself. Keep your wits. He moves events into your favor.*

She breathed hard. Her nostrils flared. She knew what this was. It was not her first time.

Daddy? she thought.

*You're going to hyperventilate.*

She struggled against her bonds.

*Don't. You'll cut yourself on the cords.*

She ceased her fighting immediately. She closed her eyes and tried to calm down, tried to slow her breathing to normal.

Why are you here? she wondered.

*Because you need me,* whispered through her head.

## CHAPTER THREE

Jeffrey Odom sat ankles crossed on deck, cursing his existence and the low-assed pay that made it such a chore. The mid-morning sun blazed into his eyes. No matter which way he slumped, the sun came around, forcing him to squint. God damned boat must be rotating, he guessed. God damned turn in the current, Goddammit. He shielded his eyes with one hand and glanced about, finding nothing but the same dirty gunwales, the same worn paint on the old cabin, and the same skinny bastard at the flying bridge.

"Can you keep the damned boat decently parked?" he called to the other man, not caring about the peevishness of his tone.

The man glanced at him, then turned away. Bastard didn't like Odom much, though they'd never met before this job. Feeling was mutual.

"He asked that I keep this position, and the lines over the port rail," the skinny guy called.

So, *he* was rotating the boat? Jesus! "So fine. But keep the sun in one fucking place, why don't you."  
"There's a current down deep. Keeps moving the tanks. They're getting under the boat."

Odom didn't understand any of that. Odom was no sailor. Everything he knew about sailing came from watching *Jaws* about fifteen times. He had answered an ad in the *Tribune*, for pity's sake, an ad for monkey work. The thin bastard at the flying bridge lorded it over him with his sailor shit. They had been at it for two fucking weeks. The SCUBA dude, the one with the payroll, was nice enough, but hardly ever aboard. He showed up at the boat every day, rode out with them cracking jokes and commenting on the weather, then spent all but a few hours around midday deep in Lake Michigan, like a freaking mermaid or something. Odom worked topside to feed the lines and answer his majesty the skin diver's infrequent calls, and to deal with the uppity skinny dude who thought he was Captain Queeg. Now the guy moved the boat just to keep the sun in Odom's eyes. This wasn't worth the pay.

Odom raised a finger to protest but the call signal cut him off. Two loud buzzes issued from the black box with the communications line snaking over the rails and into the great green deep.

Captain Queeg turned to look at him. "Well?"

"How's about you come down here and hump this shit for a change."

"My job's to steer the boat. Yours is to feed the lines."

Well, okay, much as he wanted to, Odom couldn't argue with that. He threw the dude a sneer and climbed stiffly to his feet.

Odom wasn't made for the lake, mentally anyway. Day after day he arrived for work dressed in cargo shorts, flip-flops and some dark t-shirt or other. Each day he shivered in the early morning and roasted late in the day. He burned until he looked like a stubble-chinned lobster, and sweated into his shirt until the dark material at the armpits showed rings of perspiration salt. The diver always kidded him about it, but Odom returned every day dressed in the same impractical get-up. Captain Queeg had schooled him, had told him to wear jeans and long sleeves to protect against the sun. He had told Odom to get a hat. And because Queeg said so, Odom didn't do it.

Every day he regretted his decision, but anything was better than giving in to that dipshit. Now Odom shambled to the left rail -- the port rail, they called it. He couldn't walk on the rolling deck very well. He reached for the line draped over the rail, the one next to the communications cable, and put on his leather work gloves. His hands protected, he proceeded to haul the rope aboard.

Bringing in the line was arduous work. It hung three hundred feet into the lake and was anchored by two heavy oxygen tanks. Actually, they were rebreathers, Odom recalled the diver saying. They released no bubbles and the air lasted longer, or something. Odom's job was to haul the tanks aboard, switch the emptied tanks for fresh ones, and lower those back into the water. The diver would use up the air he carried, then exchange those tanks for the ones Odom sent him. This way, the diver hardly returned to the surface. He swallowed his air on a bait line.

Odom took half an hour to haul up the heavy air tanks. He took a minute or two to switch them out, then thirty seconds to pitch them over the gunwales. The SCUBA dude's air lasted an hour, so Odom got thirty minutes to rest. All that time, Captain Queeg played lousy, pop star country music over the radio.

"What's he doing down there, anyway?" Odom asked once after the sun started baking him from right overhead.

"I dunno. Maybe diving for wrecks."

Odom peered over the rails toward shore, where he picked out the marina, Shedd Aquarium, and the fountain at Grant Park. "What the hell kind of wreck sits half a mile off Chicago?"

"The lake has a long history. But just last year, around Christmastime..."

"I read about that. Some dumbshits set off fireworks on a ferry. Went down in, like, twenty minutes. What's he want with a ferry? Shopping for a used Toyota?"

Odom thought that funny, and laughed. Captain Queeg did not.

"There were a bunch of boats out here then," the captain said. "Some bigwig radio star on the ferry, and hundreds of smaller craft. Skiffs and sailboats, tour boats and yachts. Stupid time to be out on the lake, what with rough water in December, and ice. They were out there because they thought the world

was ending and they were gonna get raptured. More than one boat went down, and I don't think it was fireworks."

Well, so what? It was just boats, after all. It wasn't like a Spanish galleon filled to the brim with doubloons.

Odom heard splashing alongside. He stood and went to the rail, watching as a figure in a shiny, black, rubberized skin clambered against the ladder hung down to the water. He struggled with the tanks on his back, working his way out of them.

"I'm here," Odom called, and cast about for the pole, the one with the hook at the end. He found it where it was stowed above the scuppers, and lowered the hook end down to the man. The diver draped the tanks on the hook by their harness, then gave Odom the signal to take them aboard.

Even depleted of oxygen, the rebreather seemed as heavy as a car. Odom struggled with it as he had every day, Captain Queeg helping after coming down from the bridge. The weight of the tanks made for slow, tedious going. The diver climbed aboard before his tanks did.

He said nothing, just sat on the winch at the back -- stern -- of the boat, arms hanging limp off his knees. He tore off his headgear and gloves but left the close-fitting body suit alone. His breath came in heaves.

"Steady there," Captain Queeg directed as they lowered the tanks to the deck and strapped them to the gunwales. He shook water from his hands as Odom finished the niceties.

"Need a drink, boss?" Queeg asked the man in the back.

The diver shook his head once.

Both crewmen knew better than to press. Something about the pressure down below, Odom thought he recalled. A man could take it for only so long.

Odom finished stowing the tanks, then took up his seated position on the deck.

The boat rocked in the broiling sun, the lake reflecting blinding shards of light. Somewhere down the shore, probably Navy Pier, the deep horn of a ship sounded.

"Will you be going down again?" Queeg asked after a while. He sat on the steps leading to the flying bridge.

The diver didn't answer for long seconds. Then he turned his eyes to take in the deck and seemed to notice his crew for the first time. The sun had baked his short, sandy hair dry, and his stubbly chin reflected white-blond in the sunlight. "Yeah, sure," he said, his voice raspy. "In a while. Take the boat two points starboard and maybe a hundred yards."

Queeg offered a casual salute, then rose to ascend the stairs. "Odom!" the bastard called, and Odom clenched his fists. "Drag up the lines!"

"Why? I'll just have to toss them over again when he goes back down."

"I have to move the boat. I don't want those lines tangling in the propellers."

"Shit, it takes half an hour--"

"Odom." That was the diver, the one holding the pay. "Haul up the lines."

Odom frowned. Odom grumbled. Odom hauled up the lines. Thirty minutes later, the engine kicked in and they trundled off to a new speck of water.

From his usual position on the deck, nursing the complaining muscles of his arms, Odom addressed his boss. "You know, they make this shit called sonar, so you can find what you're looking for without ever going into the water. Then, when you dive, you're right on target."

"What we're looking for won't show up on sonar."

"Oh? And is it too nosey to ask what exactly we're looking for?"

"A body."

That stopped him. A wreck, an old car, the lost treasure of French fur traders, okay. A body?

"What the fuck..."

"December before last, a lot of people were lost. Some of them need finding." The diver started putting on his gear, a clear sign the discussion was over.

Odom decided not to take the hint. "That's it? You're looking for a dead person? I don't know, man. That's kind of ... off-putting."



"You go along for two weeks and you want to get out now? We can drop you off -- and pay you off -- when we get back to shore tonight."

"No, no, no. I'm cool. But this, well, isn't."

The man had his headgear on and shrugged on his tanks. He stopped and grinned. "Come on, Odom. If you were lost at sea, wouldn't you want to be found?"

Well, yeah, Odom imagined, except, being dead, he wouldn't want anything.

"Get the other tanks over the side. It's time to go back to work."

The diver worked his way over the gunwales while Odom wrestled the tanks to the rail and made sure the line still held. The diver dropped, splashed, and was gone. The extra tanks followed, then the communications line.

The operation slid by at half-speed from there. Before, Odom had just done a job, a mindless task that paid him in cash money every evening at the dock. Now he knew the gruesome purpose behind that job, and it was ... strange. A body. Holy God. And what would the boss do when he found that body? Surely he wouldn't bring it aboard. The implications overwhelmed a simple day laborer's senses. The boat, the water, and the now more mysterious boss congealed into a surreal morass. This would take some processing.

Odom looked up from the gunwales where he had stood for he knew not how many minutes, thinking. He thought he might turn it all over with Queeg until he saw the captain up on the bridge, hand on the wheel and eyes on the help. Odom watched Queeg while Queeg watched him, and knew not to open his mouth any more than he already had.

Queeg wasn't shocked by the purpose of the dive. Queeg had known all along. He showed it in his relaxed manner, the laid-back attitude of a lion stuffed with wildebeest, considering a gazelle as a snack for later.

Three men on a boat, one of them odd man out.

Odom wondered if he might need a new job. Maybe when they got back to dock, he'd pick a direction and just start walking.

Maybe he wouldn't even insist on getting paid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Sally knew she approached the end. The continual whine of tires on asphalt changed pitch and deceleration rolled her against the back of the two front seats. The floor of the van tilted one way then the other, and she heard the machine grunts of switching gears.

Pay attention. Look and listen, she thought. It would give her something to do besides panic.

She strained to see something other than cheap carpet and metal walls. Treetops flashed past through the windows, evergreens. The sky beyond them looked like dirty cotton balls. Where was she? How long had she lain on the floor of that van, smelling the carpet's embedded stink of rotted geraniums? Wilted brown petals hid in the recesses of the wall panels, sometimes breaking loose to flutter at her nose. She couldn't stretch out her arms or legs. Her wrists and ankles burned from wear against the thin, plastic cords that bound her. She wondered if she had any skin at all on her wrists; she couldn't look far enough back to check.

*Don't worry about your wrists. They've seen worse treatment.*

Oh, yes, and thanks for the low blow.

Her wrists held scars from past abuse, from episodes of self-destruction in which Sally found no pride. Or they had. For all she knew, those wounds were scraped clear, erased from her body by newer afflictions.

Her destiny was to suffer, whether at her own hand or those of others.

She keened bewilderment against her duct tape gag, but all that came out was a low hum. Why must she live such a miserable life? Why must her fates conspire to torment her? They had saddled her with an abusive husband, a man who tried to murder her. They had driven her to virtual self-flagellation as she lurched from one dismal relationship to another. They had coaxed her through several attempts to do the world a favor, to assist its efforts to end her bullshit life. Even when fate gave her reason to live, when it provided her a child to love and protect, that gift arrived with a dollop of cynicism in the form of debilitating handicaps.

Eulie, her Eulie, her one good reason, had proven at once her trial and conviction. She had lived from the moment his life budded within her, but all those days she had lived with guilt. She hadn't proven much of a mother; she had given Eulie poverty, had raised him with ineptitude and ignorance. Even the body she gave him was cursed. Maybe he was better off without her, after all.

*When I said focus, I didn't mean on that.*

Shut up! Shut up! Voices in my head.

*Just the one.*

She grunted against her gag as she rolled along the carpet and struck the rear gates. The metal doors sent shocks of pain up from one knee. She barely avoided getting brained by a jack handle sliding about in the same cramped space. The embossed German name on it wanted badly to brand her. What was this? They drove uphill. She heard the engine groan against their ascent. The treetops through the windows seemed tilted. They also seemed to hang over the vehicle, almost a tunnel of trees.

They climbed a mountain. Where were there mountains in France?

Was she still even *in* France?

The van struggled. It drove around a bunch of corners, or up a series of switchbacks; Sally wished she could see better through the windows. The men up front ignored her. They smoked cigarettes and engaged in short, clipped conversations in French. They treated her with as much consideration as trash they took to the dump.

Please, God, don't kill me. I've done what you asked. I've done the work. Please, let me see my son again.

No snappy comment. Maybe he ignored her, too.

Brakes squealed. Sally rolled into the back of the front seats. She felt the duct tape balloon across her mouth as the wind tried to blow out of her. Her eyes watered from agony as one ankle caught at a strange angle refused to roll with the rest of her body.

The cargo door opened. A man reached in. He grabbed her under the armpits and pulled. Carpet burn; they didn't care. He held her suspended above cobblestones, her body half in, half out of the vehicle. Another man took her legs. The two hoisted her like a rolled-up carpet, then she was out of the van.

Leaden skies. Buildings, their walls coated in painted plaster. Casement windows. It all looked old, careworn. Where had she seen that sort of thing, and cobblestones?

The men carrying her were not the ones from the van. Those two stood by their doors, stretching. They were dressed in khakis and button-down shirts and wore identical leather jackets. The men carrying Sally wore cheap, dark suits.

They maneuvered her through the front doors of the neighboring building, the storm-heavy sky giving way to a darkened interior and the faint whiff of mold. The men manhandled Sally into a more-or-less vertical position propped at the edge of a straight-back, wooden chair. One man held her upright while the other drew a nasty switchblade from within his suit jacket and sliced the straps holding her arms and ankles.

Suddenly, painfully, Sally could sit up.

She tried to thank them, but only mumbled into her duct tape.

The man with the knife held her arms flat against the chair arms. His partner looped a strip of Velcro around each chair arm and wrist, and cinched them tight.

Without ever uttering a word, the men left the room and closed the door after them.

Sally heard only the rattle of duct tape as her breath drew in and out, or tried to. She concentrated, calmed her breathing, and directed it through her unobstructed but blood-caked nose. Her eyes teared

from the pressure at her wrists, which she could see were naked of skin beneath the Velcro. She tested her new bonds, but could not move her hands.

So, little was changed. They still held her prisoner, but her back ached from straightening.

She peered around her prison, disappointed to find next to nothing. She sat in a vestibule dominated by cracked and yellowed plaster walls and by a warped, worn wood floor. A hallway behind her went off to right and left. They hadn't even bothered to put her in a room. The place was dark, possibly unused except as a venue for tying down kidnapped women. Her only light came from a painted-shut transom over the door to the outside and from some unknown source far down each end of the hallway.

Okay, now what? If they planned to murder her, they were taking their sweet time.

As if in answer, a scuffling sounded from beyond the door.

*Pay attention now. Look and listen.*

The door opened. Two men entered, not the same ones who had carried her in minutes earlier. One man, in a charcoal suit, carried a chair, a six-pack cooler, and a folding tray table under one arm. The chair was gray metal and padded at the seat and back. It looked like something from a '60s war movie. The chair went down in front of Sally, the cooler beside her left leg, and the tray table next to the cooler. The second man, in a gray suit shiny from wear, carried another tray table, this one open and draped with a white towel. With a butler's fussiness, he arranged his tray table beside the metal chair.

After checking to see they had done their jobs, the two men left the way they had come, leaving the door open.

Outside was cobblestone, another one-story plaster-coated building across the street, and the brooding coolness before heavy rain. The back end of the van intruded into the universe framed by that door.

Sally noticed sweat rolling into her left eye. More sweat greased the rest of her body, the salt of it stinging her wrists.

With the nonchalance of unbounded confidence, someone stepped into the rectangle of the doorway. The man wore a rumpled, off-white suit over his thin frame and a straw fedora atop his age-wrinkled head. He had huge, knobby hands. What thin light the day could muster reflected off his round, wire-rimmed glasses. He had to be at least seventy years old.

The sight of him made Sally breathe harder and faster. She lost the rhythm through her nose; the duct tape started fluttering again. She didn't see an old man in a suit. Rather, something crouched atop that impression. She saw iron and blood, and the exhaustion of long marches and strenuous battles. War stood in her doorway, and something akin to sacrifice. She saw these things not with her eyes. For all intents, the figure before her was just the old man. She saw those things, those impressions, those glimmers, with that something that made her different. That something that probably brought her to the vestibule of an abandoned building to die.

She tried to move her arms again. She tried so hard and so desperately that her chair rattled against the warped floor. Her raw wrists burned against her restraints. The bindings seared her, but she didn't care. She just wanted to escape that man.

"Good afternoon, Miss Reiser," the old man said. He spoke in a tremulous tenor, his accent odd beneath the quaver. Eastern European? "I hope your trip was not too ... uncomfortable."

She doubled her effort to escape, adding a keening, nasal whine to the scraping riot of her chair.

He stepped into the building and Sally's intuitive mind heard thunder. "Yes," he said, nodding his head and rubbing his nose in a show of sheepish apology. "I imagined you might react so. It is the sight, is it not?" He took four easy, unhurried strides around the chair placed before Sally until he stood directly in front of her. "Here, let me help you with that." He grasped one corner of the duct tape and snatched it from her face.

A gasp flew from Sally's mouth. Her face slapped sideways with the pull of the tape and her hands tightened to claws. Tears drowned her eyes.

"I apologize for that, too." The old man released the tape and let it hang from Sally's hair. "Personally, I find it easiest when it comes off quickly. The discomfort is great, but does not last. Isn't that the mercy of quickly inflicted pain? It hurts, yes, but is over in a moment. Give me the well-thrust sword over a woman's betrayal any day."

Sally turned back to the man. Her eyes, clearing, rested at his chest, where a red and white pin held his tie in place. "Who are you?"

The man cocked his head at her and clicked his tongue. "Not the best question, under the circumstances. You might have asked 'Why am I here?' or 'What do you plan to do with me?' 'Who are you?' gains you nothing, I would think."

The tiepin was of a red cross on a white field. It seemed somehow pious.

He stepped away from her and sat down in the other chair. Without a word, he made a minor adjustment to his tray table then reached for the cooler. From it he extracted a bottle of Evian water, a clear plastic glass, and a sandwich.

Sally's stomach growled. She began to salivate.

"Sorry again. My snack." He waved the sandwich at her, filling the vestibule with hints of ham and mustard. "I'm a diabetic, I'm afraid. Frequent snacks to control my blood sugar. I assure you, I am not being intentionally rude."

He took several dainty bites of the sandwich, seeming to forget Sally sat in front of him. She wanted to scream at him, bury him in questions, weigh him down with pleas for mercy, but she willed herself to silence. If he had something to say, he'd say it. Sally did not control the conversation.

"A good sandwich," the old man said. "I must ask what restaurant it came from." He looked at her askance. "I would offer you a bite or two, but you are Jewish, no? You cannot eat of the unclean beast."

Sally's stomach protested otherwise.

He set the sandwich on the tray table, took up the water bottle, and poured himself half a glass. Purposefully, as if acting a part, he closed the bottle, set it down behind the sandwich, and took up his glass for one long draught.

Sally licked her lips.

"Good and cold, though I'd prefer a sip of wine. Oh!" He seemed to notice her again. "Now I *am* being rude. You haven't drunk in, what, twenty, thirty hours? How long, Marcus?"

French answered him from beyond the door.

"Thirty-five hours! Intolerable. How can you answer questions if your throat is parched for water? Come, allow me."

He poured a dribble of water into the glass, then rose from his chair. He carried the water to Sally and, cradling her head, brought up the glass for her to take a sip.

Sally tried to pull away.

"Come now," the old man said, wagging a finger at her. "I drank from this myself. There is no poison in it. Drink."

He brought the glass back to her mouth. This time, Sally let the liquid touch her lips. She slurped at it. She couldn't have stopped if she wanted to.

"Good, good, very good." The man returned to his seat and placed the glass on the tray table. He sat with his elbows on his knees, examining Sally as if reading directions. "Interesting thing, quenching one's thirst. A little water, just the right amount, can loosen the lips, allow communication. Of course, a little water does not alleviate the dryness, the parched throat. In fact, a little water is painful. It reminds the body what it is missing. You, Miss Reiser, were given a little water."

He just sat there, letting her think about it.

She tried not to.

The wait drew on.

Something brushed at the edge of hearing, maybe a breeze through trees.

No other sound polluted the stillness.

"So!"

Sally flinched.

"You will now tell me all you know about John Bennington, Jr. and his so-called network."

As if cued, a man in a suit stepped into the building. He must have been waiting just outside the door. He walked around the old man and stood at Sally's side.

"Why would I tell you anything?" Sally asked, and the effort burned her throat. "I don't even know who you are."

"And you will not, Miss Reiser. This is not one of your American action movies. I am not -- what is it? -- a super villain. I will not prognosticate on my vision for an enslaved world or my plans to make it so, assuming I have such a vision. No, I will ask questions and you will answer them. That is our arrangement."

"No."

"Yes. You see, we have a schedule. An aircraft arrives in a few hours to take you on to the next and possibly last phase of your association with us. Before that time, I require answers. You will supply them willingly, or not."

The man beside Sally removed the towel from his tray table. Laid out on its surface were three hypodermic needles, alcohol pads, a blood pressure cuff, and a stethoscope.

Sally jerked away from the table. She strained at her bonds. Her chair rattled against the floor, beginning a slow creep toward the wall. The man beside her stepped behind the chair to steady it.

*Look! Listen!*

"No!"

"Yes, Miss Reiser." The old man's face cracked in a nicotine smile. "You will be very helpful. Now, tell me about this network..."

## CHAPTER FIVE

The helicopter set down just long enough to release its two passengers, then clawed its way back into the overcast German sky. Gary took in his surroundings, a survival habit built over the last year and a half. The chopper had dropped them in the middle of a field, dangerously close to what looked to Gary like a ski lift. Short grass spread in all directions, the closest trees at least fifty yards away. In the snow.

Snow in June, even if just in the shadow of those trees. The rendezvous must be pretty high up, quite a change from sea level just three hours before.

A good distance beyond the trees stood buildings, at least he could make out the red tiles of their rooftops. In the opposite direction from the buildings yawned a great vista of forest, red-roofed towns, and the patchwork quilt of family farms. He wasn't just high up, he stood on the slope of a mountain.

You're a long way from Indy, bro.

Carlisle grabbed Gary by the arm and dragged him toward the three Range Rovers waiting a few feet away. Ten or so men stood about the trucks, all in either wool overcoats covering full battle gear.

"*Guten Tag, Fraulein Carlisle*," one of the men called, and waved. He wasn't the most noticeable guy if you discounted the field gear and slung sub-machine gun. Average of stature, forgettable face, his balding head reflecting dully in the diffused light. But he greeted Carlisle by name, so that made him the local tac officer.

"Tomas!" Carlisle answered, "It's been so long! *Es geht gut, ya?*" She shook the balding man's hand.

"*Ausgezeichnet.*" The man looked at Gary. Everyone else did, too. "*Und er es?*"

"This is Gary LaMonte, an American. You should trust him as you would the boss." Then she looked Gary up and down and shrugged. "*Obwohl, er ist kein Soldat, verstehen?*"

Some of the men laughed.

"Hey," Gary said. "I'm standing right here."

That made them laugh all the harder. The tac officer -- Tomas -- waved everyone over to the lead Range Rover, where a large geodetic survey map lay spread over the hood in a plastic map case.

"Here is Rhon Kaserne," Tomas said in English, probably for Gary's benefit. He pointed to a half circle of buildings, several deep, on what looked like a wooded, low mountaintop. "On a clear day, you can see it from here on Wasserkuppe, eleven kilometers as a bird flies, *ya?* My men watch from the town

below, here, and from the trees part way up the slope. They observed one van, French make, enter the base two hours ago. We think it went here, an airfield near the peak, at the back of the installation."

"Hold it." Gary reached out and tapped the map in no particular place. "I thought we were going someplace called Wildflecken."

Tomas slid into an explanation as if he had expected the question. "Rhon Kaserne is Wildflecken. Until the Americans left the installation in the nineties, the post had no official name except that borrowed from the town at the base of the mountain. When the *Bundeswehr* -- the German army -- moved in, they named it Rhon Kaserne. This place has a long history, *Herr LaMonte*. It began as a training base for the Waffen-SS. After the war, it was used as a refugee camp for the displaced Polish. The American army moved in, then left when the Soviet Union collapsed. It is now the German, ahh, warfighting school, is that clear?"

"Okay, sure."

"*Gut*. The *Gefechtssimulationszentrum* takes up only a small part of the base. The rest stands empty except when NATO units come in to train. I do not know how these people we are after gained unchallenged access to an active military base, but they are there."

"We'll work out the why later," Carlisle said. "Where are they keeping our girl and how do we get in?"

"We are working out the first answer now, but our best guess is this small building just off the helicopter pad. We are sending a team up to an abandoned Army outpost straight across the valley. The view to our expected target should be clear and unobstructed through a one-thousand millimeter camera lens."

"And the second question?" Gary grew impatient with all the paramilitary talk. "How do we get to Sally?"

"Two approaches. One up the road from the village. This has the least probability of success. We could be spotted by lookouts or stopped by the *Bundeswehr*. The second approach is dangerous, but with a greater chance of both success and surprise."

"And that would be?" Carlisle prompted him.

"A forced march up the northwest slope, through the presently inactive tank gunnery range."

That sounded ominous to Gary. "Tank gunnery range?"

"There is a high probability of encountering unexploded ordnance, but the route brings us right up behind our kidnapper friends, and they would certainly never expect us."

Until then, all attention had focused on the map. Now every face turned to Carlisle, who alone continued to study the green and white sprawl of paper. Gary knew the decision was hers, but he also knew where he stood. If he must trudge through exploding bombs and missiles to get to Sally and keep her safe, so be it.

"Well," Carlisle said, straightening her spine in that characteristic stick-up-the-ass British manner. "We'll only live forever standing around the bonnet of this car. Let's set it up and move it out, Tomas. I want to begin the climb within the hour. I want eyes on target in forty-five minutes. Commo all around, English first, then German."

Acknowledgements. Carlisle reached beneath her Kevlar and extracted a crumpled photograph, the one Gary had given her.

"Everyone, take a look. This is our girl, Sally Reiser, American, blonde, speaks English and no other languages. Anyone who isn't her, shoot them."

"This Sally Reiser." Tomas looked from man to man, then back to Carlisle. Clearly, the name disturbed them. "This girl, she is the one we've heard of?"

"The one and only," Gary said, nodding.

Another overall exchange of looks. "Then we won't dawdle," Tomas said, and the men broke to their vehicles. Tomas leaned close to Carlisle. "For you, we fight." He nodded to Gary. "For her, we die."

"Damned straight," Gary agreed.

Two minutes later, the field stood empty.