

STEVEN GASKIN
MAKE A MOVE



EPISODE ONE

Attack of the 50Ft. Man

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Freddy Mossman had been exiled to Paris, and with his career in ruins, no real friends, and a taste for introspection, he wasn't taking it well. He knew the mistakes leading to his downfall were his to regret, but he still felt that he'd been treated unfairly. With his options evaporating, he'd seized on a last-chance offer without having all the information.

That had been his last mistake.

Sitting in a café just south of the Boulevard de Clichy, occupying a stool at the window through a lack of other choices, Freddy switched his attention between the people passing in the street and the folded copy of *Le Monde* on the narrow bar in front of him. Upon arriving in the city, the opportunity to sit and read a newspaper had been a novelty, but now the lack of stimulation, both in his surroundings and in *les actualités*, was taking a toll.

The café owner arrived with his espresso and orange juice.

'Et un café pour Monsieur.'

'Cheers, Prison-tits.'

Freddy needed a distraction.

Having successfully wasted an hour of his morning, Freddy wandered back toward his apartment. It was February-cold, but he didn't take the most direct route; he was in no rush to get back. Monsieur Vasseur's boulangerie was an available distraction en route, and Freddy headed in to pick up some lunch supplies.

'Hey, Britpop!' the baker welcomed him, leaving the task of sweeping the tan, tiled floor and taking his place behind the chilled, glass-fronted cabinets of the counter.

'Monsieur Vasseur,' Freddy said. 'I assume you're in good health?'

'Thriving, Monsieur Freddy. But you' – he gestured at the newspaper, rolled up cudgel-like in Freddy's hand – 'why do you waste your time so? Feigning an interest in a language you haven't the intellect to appreciate?'

'I have a thorough understanding of your peasant tongue, Monsieur Vasseur. If our conversations ever extend to a subject more taxing than bread, I might get a chance to impress you. Can I get a demi-baguette and a tarte aux pommes, please?'

The baker laughed. 'I hope you never fit in around here, Freddy,' he said. 'That would be unfortunate. How is business?'

'Terrible. I'm empty most nights.'

'A shame for you, but not for Paris. I don't care for your films. Nor for your neighbours.'

'Nobody sees my films, so you can disregard my detrimental impact on the moral health of your countrymen. As for my neighbours, at least they're selective.' Freddy took the offered paper bag and paid. 'Bonne journée, Monsieur Vasseur. See you again.'

'Good luck to you, Monsieur Freddy. Have a good day.' Freddy left the shop momentarily buoyed and pondering ever having seen a thin baker.

Freddy's new neighbourhood was a large part of the problem. Between the cramped, under-laundered hotels, the strip clubs and the brothels, he knew that Monsieur Vasseur was right: he'd never fit in. That realisation was, perhaps, the root of his apathy.

The apartment was cold when he returned, so he switched on the three-bar electric fire in the living room and went to hide in the kitchen, placing his apple tart in the fridge and pulling a chair up next to the water heater. Still with his jacket on, he took his collected mail from the table and flipped through the envelopes: two letters for Mr. Sinclair – now dead: bin – and a home-printed newsletter from one of the less-powerful trade unions, which joined the letters. Freddy leaned across to the kitchen counter and flicked the kettle on, taking a look at the

clock, which hung off-centre, revealing a crescent of cleaner, if still dated, wallpaper. It was almost time to open up downstairs.

1-3

Jay McFarlane had his phone set to silent, but the sound of the handset vibrating against the wooden tabletop was still distracting him. He picked up the phone, read the number, and dumped the call for the fifth time. Knocking back the dregs of his coffee, he checked that his laptop had finished importing the pictures from the digital camera on the table next to it – the two devices linked by a thin, black cable – before connecting to the coffee shop’s wireless network and transferring the image files across the internet to a secure server. Leaving the file transfer running, Jay downloaded and read some new emails: two job offers and a pornographic video clip a friend had sent. He watched the video through a couple of times before sending the file to the trash, along with the two offers.

After packing the camera into its case, and the case into the messenger bag stowed beneath his table, Jay headed over to the counter for a refill. Before he’d even spoken to the barista, he heard his phone rattling across the table again.

‘You got a stalker?’ the young man serving the coffee asked, taking a fresh mug for Jay’s triple-shot latte without asking for his order.

‘The office,’ Jay replied, pushing up his thick-framed glasses to rub at his eyes. ‘They’re a regular salary, but a regular headache.’

‘That’s how it is when you take their money’ – the barista raised his voice over the jet of steam foaming the milk – ‘they own you.’

‘Man, you work for Starbucks. You can’t think that way.’

‘It’s not against the rules. Besides, they own everyone: you owe two-seventy on this coffee.’

‘And everybody’s happy,’ Jay said, handing across the money. He took the finished coffee and dropped the change into the tip jar. ‘Cheers.’

Returning to his table with the coffee and three packets of sugar, Jay saw that the file transfer was complete and shut down the laptop, packing it away into his bag. The phone buzzed again: same number. He tore the tops from the sugars and poured them into his mug, stirring them in, then took a sip before picking up the phone and pressing the connect key.

‘Hello?’ he asked, as if surprised someone would want to speak with him.

‘You know it’s me, Jason,’ a woman replied. ‘Why haven’t you answered your phone?’

‘Melinda, it’s Saturday.’ He offered no further explanation.

‘Colin wants you in the office. Now.’

‘It’s Saturday.’

‘There’s a guy here with him. Looks like government. If you’re not here in ten minutes, I think they’re going to go looking for you.’

Jay looked at his fresh, full coffee. ‘I’ll be there in thirty,’ he said.

1-4

St Barnabas House, Bedfordshire. Three months ago.

Freddy had been incarcerated at Barney’s for over two weeks by the night Thomas Veil came to visit for the first and last time. His period of house arrest had been a holiday compared to his two nights in a military prison, but he’d still needed to resort to some childish distractions to keep his spirits buoyant; as the night’s security shift finished checking-in Thomas at the front entrance, Freddy was wrapping up the last round of a Twister championship he’d ar-

ranged with three of the domestic staff.

‘Making time to consider your plight, Freddy?’ Thomas asked, taking a seat in the corner of the grand room, away from the play area.

‘It’s a coping mechanism, Thomas.’ Freddy unfolded himself from a crab position and walked across to join him, leaving the others to complete the game. ‘How are you?’

‘Good, but not great. Let’s take a walk.’ They left the building, the guards happy to let Freddy wander freely under Thomas’ supervision, trusting to the twelve-foot fence hidden beyond the expertly manicured horizon should Freddy try to run. ‘You’re out, Freddy. That’s it.’ Thomas spoke plainly, but Freddy could hear the regret in the older man’s voice. Looking back toward the house – lit from beneath by a footing of halogen lamps – Freddy smiled. Now that the decision was official, he could relax.

‘I didn’t leave them much choice,’ he said.

‘No. You didn’t. I spoke to C, but he wasn’t going to give me any details. Can you? Can you tell me why you did it?’

‘I can try, but the facts don’t feel the same as they did back then. Now it just feels like a justification, like an explanation for why I did it instead of a reason why I’d do it again. I can’t see the point in trying to justify it now.’

‘No,’ Thomas said. ‘It’s over.’

Freddy pushed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He was cold. ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do,’ he said.

‘You couldn’t have considered that in Mexico?’

Freddy smiled. ‘Things happened quickly.’

‘Yes. I have an idea though, more of a proposal. A safe house. Paris. The caretaker died a couple of months back, and they need a replacement.’

‘Caretaker? It’s a sleeper assignment?’

‘No. No wake up call. You sit, you wait, the end.’

‘Well, I’m sold.’ Freddy tried to hide his disappointment.

‘Don’t dismiss it, Freddy. Think about the alternative. You have a bag full of skills, and you can’t use any of them in the private sector. You’ve been working since university, but you can’t tell anyone about it. Another couple of months for the agency to finish deactivating you, then into the real world with zero prospects. That doesn’t sound fun to me.’

‘What’s the catch?’

‘Catch? I just told you. It’s a shitty job.’

‘I meant with the agency. Why are they keeping me?’

‘I asked them to. Freddy, I don’t know all the details from Mexico, but knowing won’t change things. I want to see you’re all right.’

‘I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but why do you want to help me?’

‘I figure I should start putting some karma out there. I’m getting old, and I’ll need to call in more and more favours. You will pay me back someday.’

‘Thanks, Thomas.’

‘You’ll take the job?’

Freddy paused, thinking. ‘Yes,’ he finally answered. ‘When do I leave?’

‘If you’re packed – now, with me. If you’re not packed, you’ve got ten minutes.’

Three hours later and a BA City-hopper out of Heathrow, Freddy and Thomas were driving south on the A1 toward Paris. Their near-midnight arrival had left them the dregs of the rental company’s fleet from which to choose, but the Peugeot 106 super-mini they’d taken had enough room for both of them and Freddy’s luggage. All of Freddy’s clothes and possessions – the raw materials for his new life in France – had fitted comfortably into his carry-on flight bag.

As Thomas drove them past miles of indistinguishable business parks, Freddy’s unease

grew. The permanence of this move concerned him.

‘You okay?’ Thomas asked, looking across.

‘I feel as though things are out of my control,’ Freddy replied. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘My advice’ – Thomas rubbed at the tiredness in his eyes with the back of his hand – ‘is to cling to that. A few months into this, you’re going to miss that feeling.’

‘It’s a prison sentence, isn’t it?’

‘It’s what you make it. You? I think you’ll be okay. You’ve got a good spirit. Some of the other guys – totally focussed and wound tight all the time – I don’t think they’d handle it.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I mean it. Paris is a great city. You could have a lot of fun here, but if you let it get to you ...’

‘You’re not helping.’

‘I’m trying, and it’s late. All I mean is . . . build yourself a life. Find some friends. Maybe find a girl. You’ll have to keep your head down, but that doesn’t mean you have to be a hermit.’

‘I guess.’ Freddy looked out at the changing architecture – the towers rising to either side of the périphérique as they sped along, name-brand concrete-and-glass giants bringing user-friendly electronics from the Pacific Rim. They soon left the motorway, peeling off right then turning underneath, heading south then east around the foot of Montmartre and onto the Boulevard de Clichy. Thomas pulled the Peugeot over to the side of the street and turned off the engine.

Freddy climbed out of the car.

The buildings on both sides of the road were clad in neon and Perspex and embossed steel sheeting. Primary colours bled together in the glow from the white bulbs studded around doorways; the reflected light from the damp asphalt of the road blurred details and undermined the sense of perspective, rendering the street as an image on a screen. Couples and groups and resolute singles filled the pavements, some browsing the windows of the more mainstream toy shops, some talking with the greeters from the live one-on-one shows – nodding and touching chins, listening to the sales pitch while building the confidence to enter. A lively gang of men and women – all young – piled out of a bar, forcing an arguing couple to suspend their quarrel and dodge through the crowd. And everywhere: sex. Sex shops, sex clubs, sex therapists, sex shows, sex detectives, sex museums. Six-foot signs shouting sex! Sex! Sex!

Freddy leaned back into the car. ‘You’re stopping off for a lap-dance and a Frappuccino before we head on, right?’

‘That’s you,’ Thomas said, hiding all but the edges of a smile and pointing to a building about fifty yards down the street, on the right. ‘See the one with the steel shutters rolled down?’

‘The cinema?’

‘That’s it.’

‘The safe house is a cinema? A porn cinema?’

‘It’s a good cover. Anyone can walk in and out of that place, any time of the day or night, and people won’t look twice. Not right now though; the place is waiting for the new owner to open up.’ Thomas took a set of keys from the glove box and passed them across. ‘You know anything about projectors?’

‘Not a thing.’

‘It’ll be a steep learning curve. You’ll be fine though. You’re adaptable.’ Thomas reached into the back seat and handed Freddy’s bag out to him. ‘I have to go,’ he said.

Freddy took the bag and placed the strap over his head. ‘You going to be dropping by?’ he asked.

'Can't say. Got some things to do outside of the agency, so my schedule is on hold. Any last things you need to know?'

'Just about the last guy. How did he die?'

Thomas looked away, along the street. 'He got old. I'm sorry, Freddy. Nothing more to it than that.' He turned back to the open door, raising an eyebrow. 'How are you handling this?'

'About fifty-fifty.'

'Good enough. Take care, Freddy.'

'You too – and Merry Christmas.' Freddy pushed the door closed and stood back onto the pavement as Thomas pulled the car into the traffic, then turned and, ignoring the attentions of a couple of prostitutes, headed off to his new home.

1-5

Freddy leaned against the metal track of the rolled-up security screen, looking out into the street. It was quiet, but no more so than usual. The bells from the church of Saint-Jean chimed noon, and Freddy wandered back into the cinema, climbing the short staircase into the projection room. The theatre was empty, as usual, but he always stuck to the schedule; starting the pre-loaded projector, he moved a lever across and checked – looking alongside the yellow-white beam, through the small window into the auditorium – that the curtains protecting the twenty-feet-wide screen had opened.

Returning to take his place behind the counter in the small foyer, Freddy picked up a half-finished novel and kicked back in his chair, resting his feet on the edge of the counter. Through the gap in the heavy, maroon curtains hiding the projected images from the casual glances of passers-by, Freddy saw, and heard, the eclectic cast of "Dick Spannerman: Sex Mechanic" going through their motions for maybe the twentieth time. Belgians pretending to be Germans, dubbed into English and subtitled in French.

#

INT. GARAGE – DAY

DICK SPANNERMAN leans against a workbench, smoking a cigar, his overalls oil-stained and open, revealing his bare chest. A well-dressed lady enters the garage.

WELL-DRESSED LADY

Hello. I have a problem with my car. I think it's the engine.

DICK SPANNERMAN

You're in luck. I'm a mechanic. I can take a look under your hood.

DICK lifts the car bonnet for a second before dropping it back down after scarcely a glance.

DICK (CONT'D)

You're right. It is the engine. You must know something about cars.

LADY

A little. My husband usually looks after the car, but he's out of town right now. Can you help me?

DICK

Yes I can. But I'm on my own here today, and this looks like

heavy work.

LADY
Is there anything I can do to help? I doubt I'll be much use to someone like you, but I'll try my best.

DICK
Don't worry. We'll start off simple. Hold this.

#

Freddy picked up the telephone from behind the counter and dialled.

1-6

Jay always stood out whenever he was forced to show his face at the London newsroom. His tattered, leather biker jacket was the exception, a creased shirt and cheap, loosened tie was the rule. He arrived at Melinda's desk, and – her annoyance tempered with amusement at Jay's complete lack of respect for both her boss and the newspaper as a whole, corporate entity – she handed him the few items of mail he'd received. He took the letters and flipped through, using the activity to hide his assessment of the contents of Colin's office, separated from the editorial floor by a sheet of glass and a couple of well-placed flip-charts.

'Any more to tell me?' Jay asked, unable to see much of the man with Colin.

'Definitely government, probably high up and, apparently, very annoyed with you,' Melinda replied, idly typing into an email window as she spoke. 'He's had Colin asking after you every five minutes since I first tried calling you. That reminds me: why do you have a mobile if you never answer it?'

'I did answer it. But generally I just use it for calling people I *want* to talk to.'

'Nice. So, do you know what this guy wants?'

Jay nodded. 'Think so.'

'You'd best head in then, eh? Let me get back to it?'

Jay dropped the unopened mail into the wastebasket beside her desk. 'See you later,' he said before walking away and into Colin's office. He didn't knock.

There were two seats in front of Colin's large, glass-topped desk, one of which was occupied by a middle-aged, crop-haired fat man in a suit with a scowl on his face. Jay slid the other chair a few feet to the left, away from the man, before sitting down and dropping his bag onto the floor beside him. Colin – an editor with a renowned disdain for stress, both in its causes and symptoms – looked uneasy. His waistcoat, tie and shirt were all crisply detailed and presented, but he still looked ruffled.

Jay liked Colin, despite the lack of deference he afforded him. He was a good guy and gave him the freedom he demanded from any long-term association with an employer, but he couldn't let that weaken his position; he had to open strong.

'I have to be somewhere at half-eleven, Colin,' he said, 'so can we kick things off?'

'You cheeky bastard,' the man to his right snapped. 'You keep me waiting for nearly an hour—'

'Please,' Colin interrupted, gesturing to the man. 'I have no idea how this will be resolved, but I know that it won't be like this. Jason, this is Kevin Quinlan from the Home Office. He tells me there was a disturbance at a nightclub in the West End last night, that you got into an argument with two of his security operatives, and that you took some photographs you shouldn't have. He's here to sweep the event under the carpet, but that will require some compliance on your part.'

'There was no argument,' Jay said. 'They attacked me.'

‘They did not,’ Quinlan sneered. ‘That’s a damned lie.’

Jay turned in his chair. ‘Unless you can put on fifty pounds of muscle at will, I suggest you watch how you speak to me.’

‘You . . . Did you just threaten me?’

‘I have more sense than to admit threatening a government agent in front of a witness, so I definitely have more sense than to threaten one in the first place.’

‘Good.’ Quinlan looked satisfied.

‘But, you speak to me like that again,’ Jay continued, ‘and I’d say there’s a better than even chance I’m going to hurt you.’

‘He just threatened me again! Did you hear him?’

‘Look,’ Colin said, raising his voice, ‘this could go on all day. Jason, you tell me what happened.’

Jay settled back into his chair. ‘I get to the club about eleven,’ he said, ‘and there’re two guys hanging around the foyer. They spot my kit, collar me, ID themselves, and tell me “no press inside the club”. I tell them what I think of that, but they get all uptight so I agree to check my bag in with the cloakroom.’

‘Which you then, somehow, got back the second you left reception,’ Quinlan said.

‘I know the guy who runs the place.’

‘My men told you no press,’ Quinlan snapped. ‘That means no cameras.’

‘I was there to photograph the opening night. The hell else was I supposed to do?’

‘You should have done what you were told.’

‘Yeah. Okay.’ Jay turned back to Colin. ‘I spent an hour or so taking pictures, had a few drinks, then I saw someone I thought I recognised. I asked around, turned out to be Jessica, the Prime Minister’s eldest. I figured it was her security outside, so I kept an eye out for her. See what happened.’

‘So you admit you had an agenda beyond photographing the club,’ Quinlan said. ‘You were told that no press were allowed to operate inside the building.’

‘On whose authority?’ Jay asked. ‘How does baby-sitting the PM’s daughter constitute official business?’

‘That’s my decision to make. I decided the situation was sufficiently hazardous to warrant assigning a team.’

‘Cultural slumming does carry an inherent risk.’

‘Jason,’ Colin said, ‘get back on topic.’

‘Okay. From there it happened like he said,’ Jay nodded to his right. ‘I took some photos of Jessica, and she got all wired about it. Her security came over and tried to take my camera. I told them I wasn’t going to let them take it, and they attacked me. I defended myself.’

‘He broke one of their arms,’ Quinlan snapped.

‘That bit’s not actually true,’ Jay replied. ‘He tried to stick me with a Taser, and I used the bathroom door for cover. Not my fault he didn’t pull his arm back out of the way.’

‘What was Jessica doing when you photographed her?’ Colin asked. ‘Why was her reaction so extreme?’

‘Do not answer that,’ Quinlan said. ‘I’m here to enforce her right to privacy, not to stand by while you leak the details of the event to your editor.’

Jay raised an eyebrow at Colin but said nothing.

‘I want the pictures,’ Quinlan continued, ‘and if that’s a digital camera, I want the memory chip, all of your computers and the login details for all of your internet and email accounts.’

Jay laughed – not a provocative snigger, but a full-body guffaw. ‘I know you don’t have a warrant to back that request up,’ he said, ‘or we wouldn’t even be talking, but even with one, you’d have a hard time taking my gear. Without one? You can go to hell.’

Quinlan pushed himself up out of his chair, but Jay – feeling his phone vibrating in the

pocket of his jeans – held up a finger to stop him. ‘Excuse me a minute,’ he said, answering the call. ‘Hello?’

‘Jay, it’s Freddy.’

‘Hey, stranger. How are you?’

‘Been better. You busy, or are you okay to talk?’

‘Nothing that won’t keep.’ Jay ignored Quinlan, who was glowering at him as he slumped back into his seat. ‘What’s up?’

‘I’m bored. I’m in Paris and I’ve got myself a bit stuck. Thought you might want to come and hang out for a while. Keep me entertained.’

‘Sounds good. You got a schedule?’

‘Today? Get a flight out to Charles de Gaulle after lunch?’

‘Okay. I’ll let you know the details when I do.’

‘Great. I’ll see you later.’

‘Take it easy.’ Jay ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket. ‘Are we done?’ he asked, standing up to look down at the fat man.

‘Two hours,’ Quinlan snarled. ‘I get a warrant, then we pick you up.’

Jay was ready with a comeback, but decided against it. Instead, he picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder, giving Colin a half-wave farewell.

Quinlan stopped him as he reached the door. ‘You know we can find you,’ he said, ‘so don’t do anything stupid.’

Jay looked him in the eye, his expression relaxed, bland:

‘Moi?’

1-7

Holly Henderson finished drying her hands under the hot air blower and returned to the bank of sinks, flicking the odd loose strand of hair into place and ignoring the bags under her eyes. The bathrooms at EncreTec were tastefully decorated and comfortably equipped, but the mirrors were too fiercely lit. Collecting her purse from the counter and filling it with some extra tissues from the dispenser, she left the bathroom and walked back to her office.

This floor provided office space for the senior management and their personal assistants, but they were afforded no greater privacy than the operators on the lower levels of the building. Each office was separated from the corridors criss-crossing the floor by floor-to-ceiling glass, with a thick band of opaque frosting at waist height. The layout allowed people throughout the building to appreciate the views of Paris – even if their office didn’t include a view as part of the package – whilst promoting a more open and inclusive working dynamic.

As Holly passed office after office, the rising count of empty desks and expensively upholstered chairs became more apparent. Entering her own office – passing Veronique, her personal assistant, without acknowledgement – she cleared the screensaver from her computer and checked her electronic calendar; her next meeting was entered for the following Monday morning, with nothing scheduled until then. She lifted the phone receiver and dialled Veronique’s extension, hearing the phone ring several times, both in the handset and through the open door, before it was answered.

‘Oui?’

‘Veronique, is there a meeting scheduled for this afternoon that I should know about?’

‘Non, Mademoiselle. Si vous aviez été conviée à un rendez-vous, je vous aurais certainement tenue au courant—’

‘May I stop you for a second, Veronique?’

‘Oui, Mademoiselle?’

‘I understand from your résumé that you rate your level of English as fluent. Correct?’

‘Oui?’

‘Great. Do you think you could speak it on the odd occasion? Maybe justify the premium we pay you for having that ability?’

‘But you understand French.’

‘I do. But if I have to translate and pick up on all the implications and thinly veiled insults . . . it gets tiring. So if you could speak English when I’m around?’

‘Of course.’ Veronique was smart enough to know to keep her voice neutral.

‘Thank you. Now, could you tell me if there are any meetings to which I haven’t been invited today?’

‘There’s a meeting in the boardroom until five. Monsieur Hulet arranged it.’

‘Do you know why he called the meeting, or why I wasn’t invited?’

‘I think they’re finalising the figures for the half-year distribution budgets, but I don’t know why . . .’

‘. . . why they didn’t invite the operations manager.’

‘No. I did think it was strange.’

Holly looked out of the window, thinking. Thinking it was about time she didn’t care as much as she did. ‘Thank you,’ she said, before putting the phone down. Turning off her computer, she picked up her purse and took her overcoat from the coat-stand, pulling it on as she walked out of the office. ‘I’m taking the rest of the day off,’ she said as she passed her assistant, not looking at her.

‘What should I tell Monsieur Hulet?’ Veronique called after her. ‘He will ask where you are.’

Holly didn’t answer.

Not wanting to meet anyone on her way down to the street, she walked straight past the bank of lifts and pushed open the door to the stairs. Descending through the well of smoke three technicians on break from the test lab were producing, Holly ignored the door that would take her out through reception, shouldered open an emergency exit and walked out of the building.

1-8

Walking – alone, as so often – Holly headed north-east, further into the heart of the city, wanting to put her colleagues’ latest snub from her mind, determined to find the version of Paris that had lured her there.

#

Though late for the lunch crowd, the cafés of Boulevard Saint-Germain were saturated with Parisians. Had Holly been accompanied, she would have wanted to push into the halls of wine and cigarette smoke, joining in the fun of people-watching – and of being watched – over a leisurely meal. But she passed by, collecting a panini from a stall in the winding heart of the Latin Quarter before heading across the river onto the Île de la Cité, perching on a step opposite the Notre-Dame cathedral to eat her sandwich. Even in the tail end of winter the tourists found the need to chase around the city, and a large group had just arrived. As they filed into the square and collected around their tour guide, an old Italian couple could clearly be heard above the chatter of the group, bickering fiercely on the edge of the crowd, oblivious to the feast of gothic grandeur available, and forcing the guide to wait for them to finish. Holly dropped the wrapper from her lunch into a waste bin and moved on.

#

Browsing in a small boutique, which hid in a fashionably forbidding back street on the far-western edge of the Marais, Holly felt more at home, more relaxed. Finding a pair of jeans she thought might look good on her – admittedly skinny – frame, she took them over to the assistant behind the counter and asked to try them on. Leaving her chatting friends for a moment and showing Holly to the changing room in the rear of the store, the young girl was friendly and helpful, smiling as she pulled the heavy curtain across the opening of the cubicle. Holly didn't miss the mean giggle from back at the counter, though – the humour either at the expense of her accent, her choice of trousers, or whatever else they found objectionable. Holly sat on the chair in the changing room for as long as it would have taken to change into and out of the jeans, which lay, still folded, in her lap. She didn't buy them.

#

In the eighth floor café of the Printemps department store – the mid-priced commercial heart of the Opera district – Holly looked out from her seat at the bar, the pearlescent stained glass of the domed ceiling distorting the dimensions of the enormous open space into an oppressive aquarium. The waiter at the counter only took her order after she'd lost patience and called across to him, interrupting his conversation with a pair of old, overdressed women who had snared his attention with the apparent promise of generous tips. The women glared openly at Holly as the waiter prepared her coffee. She drank it quickly and left payment – with a modest tip – on the counter as she hurried out of the café and back to the customer lifts, pulling her coat on as she went.

#

Holly hadn't seen the Gare du Nord station since the Eurostar had dropped her into the middle of the city five months earlier. On that occasion, the station had seemed majestic in its complexity; today it just seemed functional.

She knew she was testing herself, viewing the prices available for the return ticket to London she had never thought to buy, but it didn't feel childish or desperate to her. It made sense to assess her available options in the cold light of practicality; if she was going to leave her job and return to England, this was how she would do it.

It was a shame that the two were so interdependent – her hateful job and her presence in the city – but Holly couldn't picture herself attending job interviews, the only English speaker in a room filled with native French. EncreTec had made the cross-channel relocation simple for her: they'd bought out the company that had employed her to that point, cherry-picked the best staff, made the rest redundant, and shipped her to the head office in Paris with all of her papers approved and a company apartment, hers for the use of. It had been easier to accept the offer than not.

But the occupational transition hadn't played out as smoothly as the geographical move. The indifference with which she'd been greeted by her new colleagues had kicked holes in her confidence, leaving her defensive and off-balance, tainting her introduction to Parisian life, and despite numerous efforts to gain their acceptance, she remained an outsider.

Putting aside her aversion to failure, Holly was left with an unavoidable fact: if she left her job, she'd have no choice but to leave the country, but continuing at EncreTec was no longer an option.

Heading for the métro and home, Holly stepped onto the escalator that would take her to the underground platforms, her thoughts no more able to stray from their track than the moving stairway. She had almost reached the lower level of the station when she realised that

the man in front of her, four steps down, was travelling backwards, staring up with no pretence at hiding his interest. Another three metal steps had been swallowed by the escalator exitway before she realised that she knew him.

‘Freddy?’ She knew him, but she couldn’t believe she was seeing him.

‘Holly,’ he replied, smiling.

They dismounted the escalator, stepping off onto the tiled causeway. Holly stopped in front of him, only to be pulled forward into a hug. ‘You’re not dead,’ she said, into his ear.

‘Disappointed?’

‘No. Not really.’

Freddy laughed, letting her go. She sniffed back some threatened tears, recovering from the shock.

‘You’ve changed,’ she said.

‘So have you. It took me a second to realise who I’d seen. It was the scowl that clicked first.’

‘It wasn’t a scowl. I was thinking.’

‘Over-thinking?’ Holly didn’t reply. ‘How have you been?’

‘Good. Okay. You?’ She gave Freddy’s clothes a subtle, appraising once-over, but the quality black suit and cheap grey sweater revealed nothing of his status.

‘I’m good,’ Freddy replied. ‘Are you living here?’

‘Maybe. For now.’ Holly tried to sound positive. ‘I’m working here, but I don’t know if it’s going to be a long-term thing. I have a great place down in Montparnasse, but I’m not sure if the company I’m with is a good prospect. Not long-term.’

‘We should meet up while we can, then. Catch up.’

‘We should. Are you free tonight?’

‘No, not tonight. Not really. I’m on my way out to meet a friend off a flight. I was going to take him into the city.’

‘Anyone I know?’

‘I don’t think so. No, I don’t think you met.’

‘We could do something though?’ Holly didn’t want to seem pushy or, worse, desperate, but the chance to not spend another night alone in her apartment was something to be chased. ‘Maybe meet up for some dinner before you go out?’

‘I . . . Look, I don’t want to put you off. I mean it, we should meet up.’

Holly raised an eyebrow. ‘Six years, Freddy. You’ve been gone longer than I knew you. It’s a couple of hours.’

Freddy narrowed his eyes, apparently considering his plans. ‘It is,’ he said. ‘You’re right. I’m sorry. Do you have somewhere in mind?’ Holly took out a business card and wrote the name and street address of a restaurant on the back.

‘Is seven okay?’ she asked. ‘We shouldn’t need to book then.’

‘Great. We’ll see you there. This place dressy?’

‘Not too much. See you later, Freddy.’

Freddy leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. ‘Bye.’ He turned and walked away. Holly replaced her pen in her purse, watching him leave, her mind bobbing in the wash of memories the meeting had released.

That, she thought, was unexpected.

1-9

Freddy rode backwards on the B-line train north out of Paris, the winter sun warming the side of his face through the window. It was a curious sensation – experiencing the intensity of a suppressed emotion; although the capacity for surprise had been conditioned from him, he

could still gauge his response to a situation in a calm, disconnected state. Maybe it was his growing sense of isolation pushing his memories to the fore. Maybe it wasn't. Either way, images of he and Holly together – at a party, in bed, eating breakfast with friends in the college refectory – all seemed clearer than he'd seen them for some time.

He enjoyed the memories as the train worked through its thirty-minute itinerary of suburban stops, picking out the highlights of their time together like a movie trailer. By the time he was climbing the concrete steps from the platform up to the concourse of the station, looking for the exit through to the airport terminal, he'd dragged himself back down into a melancholic funk.

Two men surveying the arrivals hall stood out like police horses at a football match. The atrium was clear and quiet, offering Freddy a clear view but little cover. He made no attempt to disguise his actions as he watched the men though; instead he used a blatant disregard for stealth and subtlety as camouflage, taking a seat towards the rear of the hall and spreading his arms out along the bench back. The men noted his interest, and then disregarded him as a bored piece of the background, returning to their surveillance of the corridor through to the airside areas of the terminal. They didn't look French, and there was nothing about their appearance to place them more accurately within the European intelligence community, but they were definitely government operatives.

Ten minutes later the first passengers from Jay's flight emerged. Freddy stayed in his seat, watching the agents split up as they moved through the growing crowd. The clot of passengers broke up quickly, some heading for the taxi ranks, some for the rail station, and the two men rejoined, frowning. Freddy watched as they retreated to the doors on the other side of the atrium.

It was a further five minutes before Jay appeared at the far end of the corridor, stuffing loose clothing into his backpack as he walked, obviously annoyed. Freddy stood and crossed the hall, placing himself between Jay and the two men.

'Got stopped again,' Jay said, slinging his pack onto this shoulder and extending a hand to shake Freddy's, pulling him into a brief hug and backslap. 'I swear they have me on a list somewhere.'

Freddy stood back, admiring Jay's appearance: the leather biker jacket, the short, spiked, brown hair, the thick-rimmed glasses. 'Jay, you look like a drug dealer,' he said. 'I'd be worried if they didn't stop you.'

'Thanks. Like I wasn't paranoid enough, the day I've had.'

'I'm not sure it's paranoia this time. Take a look at the two guys over by the street exit.' They both turned to the glass doors leading from the building; the two operatives fidgeted, caught-out but with no cover available to which to fall back.

'Damn it,' Jay said. 'They here for me?'

'Think so. It's not me. You been messing with anyone important?'

'Yep. Is this a problem for you? You on assignment?'

'Yes and no. We can ditch them later. There's no need to make a scene now.' Freddy reached out and took Jay's backpack from him, leaving Jay with his messenger bag. 'Come on,' he said. 'We'll get the train, and you can give me the details.'

1-10

'It was something and nothing,' Jay said, taking pictures of the busking accordion player who had boarded the train two stops from the airport, pressing a five-euro note into the musician's hand for the privilege as he finished his tune. The player was talented, the music a cliché, but Jay wasn't going to insult the guy by not paying for his time. 'Just some rich-kid wannabe getting all strung out because she got the attention she'd been looking for. Timing could have

been better for her but, hey, our paths crossed.'

'You finally joined the dark side then?' Freddy asked, amused.

'No chance,' Jay replied, snapping more pictures out of the window. 'I'm still elite, not paparazzi. I was on a contract. Was her security wound me up and got me interested.'

'That them?' Freddy nodded back down the train at their two new friends toward the other end of the carriage, making no effort to hide their continued surveillance now that they'd been spotted.

'No. Messed one up a bit, and I reckon the other's still getting bawled out about it somewhere. Not my problem.'

'Self defence?'

'Totally. Pulled a stun gun on me. You believe that?'

'Seems a bit extreme. Still, you dealt with it.'

'Had to. So what's happening in your world? You said you were bored, which sounds like a change of pace. Can you talk about it?'

'The agency and I have parted ways. It was a clash of politics. Now I'm on standby, babysitting a bolt-hole in the city.'

'That's not good. How'd it happen?'

'Can't say. I'm off the service, but I'm still under the thumb.'

'Fair enough. What are you going to do?'

'Sit tight and see. And have a few drinks.'

Jay twisted his camera around and pointed the lens back into his own face, raising a dramatic eyebrow. 'Sounds like a plan.' Click.

1-11

The two agents followed them from Gare du Nord, onto the métro and south towards the centre of the city. The daylight was gone by the time they emerged from the underground; the soft lighting of the Hôtel de Ville offered Freddy countless opportunities to sidestep their assailants, but he kept them along. Apart from wanting to know more about the interest Jay had incurred, he had firsthand experience of his friend's taste for spectacle. If nothing else, the situation would be entertaining.

The two friends settled into a bar in the south of the Marais, courting freebie tortillas from their waitress with easy banter as the rounds of drinks began to stack up on the bill. It was a welcoming place, with original hardwood underfoot, floor-to-ceiling windows and a Mexican theme vindicating the intimidating range of tequila on offer. The agents didn't seem as keen on the location, choosing to hover in the street across from the bar. Freddy watched as, later, they phoned in a colleague, who arrived within fifteen minutes, pulling up in a year-old, silver Audi A6, the modern car standing out as a novelty amongst the scooters, pushbikes and battered Citroëns on the street.

Jay took a sip of his margarita. 'So what if you're stuck here long-term?' he asked. 'You going to handle it?'

'Not sure,' Freddy said, returning his attention from the street. 'I never had a problem settling into a place, but this is permanent. It feels different.'

'I like Paris,' Jay said. 'It's honest.'

'Explain?'

'I've only been here a couple of times, in truth, but the people are honest: they work, they play, they don't take any crap and they tell you if you're being a dick.'

'I guess. Some people would call that being rude.'

'Parisians wouldn't.'

'True.'

'I reckon you'll do okay, though,' Jay said, picking up the menu to select the next drinks. 'You'll make friends, meet people. You are allowed to meet people, aren't you?'

'Yeah, I can meet people. I met someone— Damn.' Freddy checked his watch, then caught the attention of the waitress and called over for the bill.

'We done?' Jay asked.

'I met an old friend today. We made dinner plans for tonight. I forgot.'

'What time?'

'About an hour ago.' Freddy read the total from the bill and handed over a few notes to the waitress. 'Keep the change,' he said, pulling on his jacket. The girl smiled, standing aside as they moved from the table, waiting to clear their empty glasses.

'What do we do?' Jay asked, as they pushed through the door into the street.

Freddy heard the Audi's engine start, but ignored it as they jogged to the end of the street and the main road. 'Taxi!'

A white Peugeot 406 swerved across the street to pull up in front of Freddy's outstretched arm. They both piled into the back, Freddy taking a look back up the street to see the Audi pulling away from the kerb. He found Holly's business card in his pocket and showed the handwritten address on the back to the driver.

'How fast can you get us there?' he asked the driver, an old guy with a formidable set of scowl lines adorning his brow.

'You English are always in a rush,' the man said, handing back the card. 'You are not that important, you know.'

'There goes your tip,' Jay said, searching for the seatbelt.

'I thought you wanted to get there quickly?' the driver asked.

'We do,' Freddy replied, noting with some concern that the driver was bothering to fasten his own seatbelt.

'Then have your money ready.'

They reached the restaurant in seven minutes; Freddy did the maths and came to the conclusion that their speed couldn't have dropped below fifty at any point during the trip. He was impressed, and he tipped accordingly. The driver accepted the fare with only a grunt, pulling away from the kerb and into the night.

A few streets back from the tourist-savvy bistros of the Place du Trocadéro, Holly had chosen a small, discreet restaurant, new-Parisian in menu and décor. Freddy and Jay headed inside.

'This could be tricky,' Freddy said, noting the lack of an empty table as they waited for the host. 'Holly can be . . .'

'Uptight?' Jay suggested.

' . . . yeah. I always found the best way to deal with her was to plough on through. Pretend you don't realise she's mad at you. She'll get bored and calm down after while.'

'This was just a sex thing, right?'

'No. We went out for the best part of a year. She is fun – just hard work.'

'She sounds nice,' Jay said, a facetious smile spread across his face.

'Be friendly.'

The host arrived and took them through into the back of the restaurant. Freddy expected to find Holly pushed aside onto a smaller table, nursing a mineral water in a dark corner, but instead found her table loaded with plates as she worked her way into the deep end of her main course.

'I gave up,' she said, before taking a sip of her drink. She placed the glass down beside a bottle of red wine and tucked her dark hair back behind her ear as she returned to her food.

'I messed up,' Freddy said, noting the level in the bottle as he sat down. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's okay,' Holly said, sawing at a large piece of steak. 'I didn't expect you to make it, but

I wasn't going to miss the opportunity for some good food – alone or not.'

'I said I'd come, and I meant to be on time. This is Jay, by the way.' Freddy pointed Jay to the empty chair on the other side of Holly, who gave him a smile and waved her fork in welcome. Freddy caught the attention of their waiter and asked for another bottle of Holly's wine and two menus. The drink arrived quickly, and Freddy sampled the offered wine as he flipped through the menu. 'It's good,' he said, leaving the waiter to fill their glasses.

'It's my fault we're late,' Jay said. 'Sorry.'

'Don't apologise,' Holly said. 'At least you had the good manners to get drunk. I wouldn't want to feel self-conscious.'

'We haven't been hammering it,' Jay replied, finding her tone antagonistic. He turned to the waiter and pointed out three starters and a side salad on his menu. 'That, that, that and one of those,' he said. 'Just whenever they're ready.'

'Don't take it personally, Holly,' Freddy said after he'd ordered a steak of his own. 'I've not seen Jay for a while either, and it has been a strange evening so far.'

'Strange how?' Holly asked.

'Strange tedious. So how have you been, besides work? How are you liking Paris?'

'It's not what I expected,' she said. 'Everything happens so slowly here, but I never seem to have any free time. It's weird.' Her eyes defocused as she raised her glass to drink.

'What's the story with you two?' Jay asked her, ignoring Freddy as his friend's eyes widened in warning. 'What's the history? Freddy said you were together a while.'

'We dated in the second year at college, and then he left me and disappeared. And six years after that is today. So plenty of history, just not much detail.'

'I never disappeared,' Freddy said. 'I told you why I left.'

Holly shook her head for a second too long. Freddy recognising the vague signal from a long time ago: she didn't understand, didn't believe him or didn't care. 'And you two?' she asked.

'Lots of history,' Jay said. 'We were at school together.'

'Why didn't I meet you when we were at university?'

'I was off doing my own thing. I figured a pile of red bricks wasn't going to teach me anything I wanted to know, so I did a year of media school, bought a couple of cameras and took off.'

'You're a photographer?'

'Mostly. I'm into lots of things, but that's what pays my way.'

'How creative,' Holly said, returning to the last of her meal. Jay made a note of her ambiguous comment, but decided to ignore it as their food had arrived and he was hungry.

They spent an hour eating, talking, drinking. Holly's mood improved as Freddy prompted her with memories, and Jay enjoyed both the banter and the rich, Gallic background of the restaurant. Holly ordered dessert; Freddy ordered another bottle of wine.

By ten-thirty they were all done, and the table was clear except for their empty coffee cups and the bill, which they split. They walked through the restaurant – Holly collecting her coat from the host – and moved out onto the street, swaying through the exit. Freddy spotted the silver Audi parked two hundred yards away on the opposite kerb.

'You on the métro?' he asked.

'Yes,' Holly said, adjusting her scarf. 'It's an easy hop for me. One line. Where are you living? I forgot to ask.'

'North. North-ish. The Pigalle. Think we'll get a taxi.'

'Nice.' She didn't mean that. 'Mind walking me to the station?'

'Not at all.' Freddy cast his attention across the street as they walked away from the restaurant, signalling to Jay, who saw the car waiting for them and ignored it, lighting a cigarette and falling into step behind the others.

It was a short walk to the station, and they were soon waiting at the entrance turnstiles, Holly searching for an unused ticket in her handbag. Jay said goodbye and gave Holly a quick kiss on the cheek – which seemed acceptable, given how much they'd drunk over the evening – before heading back out front to wait.

'I had a fun night,' Holly said as she gave Freddy a brief hug. 'In the end.'

'So did I,' Freddy said, letting her go, 'and I'm sorry we were late.'

'That's okay. You can make it up to me. Just make sure you set out earlier next time.'

'I will. We'll meet up soon.'

'What about after the weekend? Are you around?'

'I'm not sure,' Freddy said, not knowing, but not wanting to make plans he couldn't keep. 'Maybe. I'll call you. I have your card still.'

'I'd like to see where you live,' Holly said, hugging herself to stay warm. 'We could meet up for lunch?'

'We could do that.'

'How about Monday?'

'I'm really not sure,' Freddy said, feeling uncomfortable but trying not to show it. 'I didn't want to plan anything while Jay's here, you know? Just see how we feel on the day. I will call you though.' He turned to leave.

'I'm lonely, Freddy,' Holly said. Freddy stopped, turned back. 'I don't know many people here, and the ones I do know don't like me very much. They're mean to me. I'm . . . I'm not doing too well, and I need some help to . . . I could use a friend.'

Freddy stepped back to her and pulled her into a hug – longer this time. 'I will call you tomorrow,' he said. 'I promise.'

'Thank you,' she said, her cheeks flushed. 'Thanks, Freddy.'

1-12

The engine of the silver Audi turned over as Freddy emerged from the station, but he ignored it and crossed the street to join Jay, who was perched on the edge of a bench, looking through the buildings opposite at the gold-lit spire of the Eiffel Tower.

'Everything okay?' Jay asked.

'Yeah,' Freddy replied, fastening his jacket and pushing his hands into his pockets. 'She's not settling in too well. I think she'll sort herself out. Just needs to work through it.'

'Dinner was fun. If you weren't listening properly, you'd swear she was all sugar and spice.'

'I know. Thanks for not letting her wind you up. Like I said, it's best to just ignore her. I'm sure she forgets she's said anything herself.'

'She's a friendly enough girl, I guess,' Jay said. 'Just has her quirks like we all do. So where's the best place to catch a cab around here?'

Freddy looked left and right along the street. 'No idea.'

'So how come we didn't take the train too?'

'I figured your friends would follow us, and I didn't want to get Holly involved.'

'Pain in my ass,' Jay cursed. 'I can't believe we're sitting out in the street in the middle of winter because of this.'

'I can't let them follow us back to my place,' Freddy said, 'but I've an idea of how to deal with that when we get there. Apart from that, you'd better get used to them being behind us, because they're not going to give up.'

'Okay,' Jay said, standing up. 'If they're not going to give us a break, they're sure as hell going to work for it.'

'You got something creative in mind?'

‘Yes, I do. Come on.’

Jay sprinted away down the street, his trainers slipping on the frosted pavement, and Freddy ran after him, ignoring the burn of the cold air in his lungs, enjoying the feeling that, finally, something unpredictable was happening.

1-13

The Audi pulled up hard to the junction, the driver relying on the anti-lock brakes to avoid making a dick of himself on the iced road.

‘We’ve lost them,’ the driver said, turning to his companion in the passenger seat. ‘Get on the satellite.’

‘We haven’t lost them,’ the second man replied.

‘We bloody have,’ said the first.

‘Would you at least try to find them? They’re on foot. Try that street on the right.’

‘I reckon they went left, back into the park.’

‘You reckon they went left, go left. Don’t over-think it.’

‘Abbott,’ the driver asked over his shoulder. ‘What do you think?’

Two red-rimmed eyes stared out over a sodden handkerchief, the gluey square of fabric balled up and pressed over a streaming nose. ‘I don’t care, Dunnes. Really, I don’t. Now will you please turn the heating up?’

‘No chance’ – Dunnes clicked the driver’s window down a couple of inches – ‘it’s too hot in here as it is. It’s bad enough you made me take over the driving, but I’m not sitting here sweating my nuts off on your account.’

‘Close the window,’ Abbott yelled.

‘Close the window,’ the second man said, folding a notebook computer open on his lap. ‘I’ll get on the satellite now we’ve wasted any chance of catching up with them.’

‘Thank you,’ Dunnes said. ‘Have the hardware, use the hardware.’

‘Why drive around the block a couple of times when we can use a multi-billion-pound satellite network to find a couple of drunken losers twenty yards away?’

‘Exactly, Hector. Good to see we’re on the same page.’

‘You truly are a child of your generation, Dunnes. Now close the damned window.’

Hector logged into the notebook and launched the viewer application, waiting while the satellite images of their coordinates were buffered into the computer’s memory. ‘Okay,’ he said as the image resolved, dragging his finger across the notebook’s trackpad to scroll the image around on the screen. ‘Can’t see them. Not got any thermals from the park. Nothing from those trees over there,’ he nodded through the windscreen. ‘They must have made cover – be in a doorway or something.’

‘Roll it back and see where they were heading,’ Abbott said, leaning forward between the seats to get a look at the screen.

Both men in the front of the car instinctively turned their faces away from their infected colleague. ‘Will you sit back?’ Dunnes asked. ‘I can smell the disease on you.’

‘My back hurts,’ Abbott said, rubbing at his kidneys. ‘I need to stretch out.’

Hector tried to ignore the gurgling breath at his ear and returned to the computer, selecting a timecode from two minutes earlier. The images reloaded and began to cycle through – one picture every five seconds. ‘Got them,’ he said. ‘I’ve got McFarlane on the bench back over there’ – he pointed out of the rear window – ‘then his friend joins him and they head off this way, past where we are now.’ He clicked through the sequence of images, trying not to lose the heat signatures as the timecode jumped forwards each time. ‘Right,’ he said, tapping the screen, ‘they split up. I’ve got one heading into the park, and the other went right, down onto the street running parallel to this one. Okay. Okay. Damn it. Lost them. No, they’re back. The

sneaky bastards are doubling back to the métro. They're moving quickly. Hang on, lost them again.' Hector looked left and right, trying to see into the shadows to either side of the car. 'They were around here when they disappeared.'

'Go back to the live feed,' Abbott said, his voice wet and fruity with mucus.

'If they've got accommodation in one of these hotels, we're going to have to sit out here all night,' Hector said, refreshing the display. 'Pick them up in the morning.' The first image from the live satellite feed resolved on the screen, showing two strong thermal signatures immediately behind the car.

'Ah shite.'

1-14

The car rocked first left, then right, as the rear doors opened and Jay and Freddy piled into the back, pushing Jay's bags onto the rear parcel shelf.

'Pigalle, please,' Jay said, pulling the door closed behind him.

'Are you thick?' Dunnes asked from the front. 'This isn't a taxi.'

'They know that,' Hector said.

'Yeah, we know that,' Jay said, twisting around to ferret in his bag.

'We're not giving you a ride,' Dunnes said, turning off the ignition. 'Get out of the damned car.'

Freddy was still trying to close the door on his side, but Jay's fidgeting was leaving Abbott with no room to move across. 'You've been following us all evening,' Freddy said, 'and we figured you'd try to follow us home.'

'And?' Dunnes asked into the rear-view mirror.

'So let's car pool,' Jay said, as a high-pitched whine started to emanate from under one of his arms.

'I'm not driving you anywhere,' Dunnes snarled, twisting around in his seat. His expression of menace morphed to pure anger as Jay whipped out his camera and snapped a picture of the man's face. The *fumpf* of the flash firing disoriented everyone in the car. Dunnes closed his eyes – trying to clear the white window in the centre of his vision – and lunged for the camera. 'Give me that!'

'Hey!' Abbott yelled as he was pushed aside, Dunnes attempting to climb into the back seat after Jay. 'Get the hell off me,' he snapped, 'and will you please close the bloody door?'

'You're going to have to give me some room,' Freddy said. 'I almost had it shut before, but if your friend's coming back here too, I can't see it happening.'

'Then get out,' Hector said. 'I don't know who you are, and I don't care. If we have to follow you across the city all night, we'll do that, but we're not going to give you a ride. Hell, you're walking on principle alone.'

'You mean you didn't check him out?' Jay asked, still wrestling with Dunnes to stop him from taking his camera.

'No, we looked into it,' Hector said, turning around to look at Freddy, 'but you're agency, aren't you? Your file's locked.'

Jay had one hand on Dunnes' face, the other holding the camera as far into the rear of the car as he could reach. 'Which means,' he said, 'that any success you've had in keeping up with us has been due to a complete lack of concern on our part. So do yourselves a favour.'

Hector was still staring at Freddy, perhaps trying to conjure a connection – some kind of empathy – from their common background.

Freddy just grinned.

'Dunnes!' Hector snapped, pushing his companion back into the driver's seat. 'Let's go.'

'We're not giving them a ride,' Dunnes insisted.

‘Yes, we are.’ Hector closed his computer and placed it onto the carpet behind his feet.

As the pressure eased across the back seat, Freddy could finally slam his door shut. ‘Boulevard de Clichy,’ he said. ‘The western end would be favourite.’

Dunnes started the engine and pulled the Audi into the junction and left, his anger still visible as each streetlight flickered amber across his clamped jaw line.

‘And if you see anywhere open for cheesecake’ – Jay snapped a picture of himself with one arm around Abbott’s shoulders – ‘you wouldn’t be losing any friends if you wanted to stop.’

1-15

The streets of the Pigalle were strangely mild. Hot, moist air spilling from the open doorways of the live sex shows warmed and flavoured the streets like an automatic hand drier in a nightclub toilet.

‘Thanks for the ride,’ Freddy said as he opened the car door. ‘You can wait if you like, but I sense a long night ahead. Right, Jay?’

‘I think so,’ Jay replied, collecting his bags.

Hector didn’t turn around. ‘We’ll wait,’ he said. ‘You take your time.’

‘Your choice.’ Freddy slammed the door closed behind him.

‘Hope you’re feeling better soon,’ Jay said to Abbott as he climbed out of the car. ‘You should get home to bed.’

‘First chance I get,’ Abbott replied.

Jay caught up with Freddy at the kerb, and they walked a short distance along the pavement to a building on the corner. The ground floor frontage was shaped into a rounded theatrical entrance of neon, metallic walls and bright, glass-encased posters depicting writhing women in spray-on pants.

‘This is us,’ Freddy said, approaching one of the men loitering in the atrium with a handful of four-colour flyers.

‘Hey, Freddy’ – the man shook Freddy’s hand then reached for Jay’s, waiving the formality of an introduction – ‘are you here to play?’

‘Yes, we are. Jay, this is Gaétan. This is his show.’

‘It’s cool to meet you,’ Jay said. ‘I like your place.’

‘Thank you,’ Gaétan said, smiling. ‘I am proud of my business and my girls, but Freddy never comes for my shows. He comes to talk – we are friends – but he doesn’t stay. He never stays to see my girls.’

‘I can assure you that tonight we’ll be staying,’ Jay said, before turning to Freddy with a glare. ‘We are staying, right?’

‘We’re staying. What have you got for us Gaétan?’

Gaétan ran a hand through his thick, black hair before checking his watch. ‘I could offer you the main room,’ he said, ‘but I think you will like an experience more personal. More exclusive?’

‘That sounds like what we’re looking for,’ Freddy said, reaching for his wallet.

‘Freddy!’ Gaétan snapped. ‘You will not be paying tonight. Do you understand?’

‘Okay. Thank you.’

‘Tatienne will dance for you, and it will be her pleasure.’

1-16

Hector was trying to think, ignoring Abbott’s snuffling and snorting, watching Jay and his friend enter the strip club. He spun the evening around in his head, examining the details.

‘Something’s wrong with this,’ he said, inadvertently addressing the others.

‘Damn right,’ Dunnes replied. ‘Bad enough they spotted us at the airport, but taxiing them around, and sitting here like their parents while they get funned-up in that lice palace . . . I’m not happy, Hector.’

‘Me either. This is a diversion.’

Dunnes turned to him, an eyebrow raised in question.

‘Seriously. Neither of them seem the type to finish an evening here. Well, maybe McFarlane, but not his friend.’

‘You can’t tell by looking at someone.’

‘Yes, Dunnes, you can. And, aside of that, they’ve been too bloody smug all night to assume anything but the worst.’

‘So what do we do?’

Hector let a long breath out through his nose. ‘I say we send Abbott inside.’

‘This is a joke,’ Abbott said. ‘First I get pulled off sick leave to come pick you two up, and now you want me to go and look inconspicuous in a strip club. Do I even look horny?’ He blew his nose for effect.

‘You look pathetic,’ Hector said, turning around in his seat, ‘which is why you won’t even have to try to blend in.’

Abbott said nothing. Pressing his radio earpiece into its waxy receptacle, he pushed his way out of the car and headed up the street to the club.

1-17

Freddy and Jay were escorted into the rear of the building, past the bar and the entrance to the main auditorium, to a corridor with thick maroon carpet on the floor, walls and ceiling. The walls to either side were curved, beginning with room to park a bus between them but narrowing to a metre apart in the middle, giving the sense of standing in the upper bulb of a furry hourglass. Each wall held five doors, and Gaétan led them to two on the left.

‘Make yourselves very comfortable,’ he said, opening the first door for Jay to enter. ‘I know you will enjoy the show.’ Jay offered Freddy a half-shrug, thanked Gaétan and wandered into the cubical. The door closed.

The room was again carpeted on the walls and ceiling, but the small area of floor not hidden beneath a large, black, fake-leather armchair was tiled, the dirty grout breaking up the black expanse. The front wall was entirely glass, with a dimly lit and empty space visible beyond. The only other furniture in the dark booth were two black speaker grilles – looking like they’d been stolen from the dashboard of a nineteen-seventy caravanette – a toilet roll dispenser and a waste basket. Jay slumped into the chair and lit a cigarette.

1-18

Abbott had paid his twenty-five euros for the eleven-thirty show in the main room, which gave him a reason to prop himself against the bar, watching McFarlane and his friend entering the private booths off to the right. He checked his watch – eleven-ten – and raised a glass of whisky to his lips, using the drink to hide his mouth.

‘They’re in the back,’ he said, ‘having a private show.’

Hector’s voice twittered in his ear. ‘Can you still see them?’ he asked.

‘No’ – Abbott tried to work the whisky fumes into his blocked passages – ‘I don’t need to.’

‘Yes, you do. Get where you can see them.’

‘I can’t. They’re in single booths. Have you never been to one of these places?’

‘No. Why in hell would I?’

‘Because you need to lighten up,’ Abbott snapped. ‘They’re not going anywhere, and I’m not going anywhere. Now can I please have this drink? I don’t feel very well.’

1-19

A brief hiss preceded the inexpert fade-in of a hip-hop track onto the cubicle speakers, and Jay watched as the lights in the room beyond the glass warmed up to reveal a girl entering through a door in the back wall. The added illumination revealed the design of the setup: a semicircle of cubicles constructed around a central stage.

The girl – Tatienne – stepped up onto the stage.

Jay watched as she began to dance, paying little heed to the rhythm of the music as she flexed and stretched, flicking the skirt of her school uniform as she spun to reveal her white, cotton knickers, the awkward dancing obviously an affectation to reinforce the illusion of her young age. Jay was struck by how beautifully the dilemma was presented; as the girl pulled open her white blouse, letting her striped school tie fall down between her small, pale breasts, Jay reached his mobile phone out of his jacket pocket and speed-dialled Freddy.

‘Would it be rude,’ Jay said as Freddy picked up, ‘to ask to see her driving licence?’

‘Don’t worry,’ Freddy laughed. ‘All the girls here are legal. Gaétan assures me.’

‘I’m not convinced. She’s cute, but . . . Freddy, she looks about twelve.’

‘You sound old. Hang on a minute.’ Jay could hear Freddy struggling on the other end of the phone.

‘Please tell me you’re not into this.’

Jay heard a ripping noise from directly above him and jumped out of the chair, looking up into the shadows of the cubicle.

‘I’m not into this,’ Freddy said as the white glow of his face appeared in the darkness where the dividing wall used to meet the ceiling. ‘Besides, we don’t have time.’ He pulled again and the carpet-and-plywood roof of the cubical lifted off further, allowing him to reach inside. ‘Pass me your bags and climb up.’

Jay did as he was told, treading his illicit cigarette out and jumping up onto the chair. ‘You had me worried there,’ he said, handing Freddy his rucksack. ‘Thought you’d gone funny.’

‘Thanks for the faith and support.’

‘Hey, I wouldn’t blame you. She is cute.’

‘Enough. Time to get serious.’ Freddy helped Jay up to join him on the wiring conduit suspended from the roof – the foot-wide metal structure holding them six inches above the top of the false ceiling of both the peepshow and the corridor outside. ‘She’s dancing behind a two-way mirror, so we’re cool for a second, but once we drop down . . . I doubt she’ll be too happy.’

‘Neither will Gaétan.’

‘I know,’ Freddy said, ‘but I can square things with him later.’

‘So what’s the plan?’

‘Head through to the back of the club and out. Just follow me.’

Jay pulled his rucksack onto his back and yanked the straps down tight. ‘Let’s go.’

Freddy felt for the edges of one of the ceiling panels over the small stage, then lifted it aside and dropped in. The room was a kaleidoscope of semi-naked, semi-legal dancer; the mirrored glass between the stage and the booths offered endlessly repeating reflections of the shocked expression on Tatienne’s face as Freddy landed on the stage. Hoping to minimise any threat the girl might perceive, he kept moving, heading straight for the door at the back of the stage and not making eye contact.

As Jay landed, Tatienne had recovered from the first shock of their appearance and had

made some effort to cover herself with her shirt. He gave her a quick smile but – spotting a series of impacts shaking the mirrored glass fronting one of the cubicles, and not wanting a confrontation with an angry client – he decided to leave the introduction at that.

Through a couple of short, cluttered corridors, Jay caught up with Freddy as he was pushing his way through the crush of the pokey dressing room. Or rather, the undressing room. Clothes rails and wall hooks were supporting the kind of apparel more often found in a saddler's, and a number of attractive and well-shaved men and women were in transition from heavy outerwear to the lighter, though more robust, bridle-wear.

Freddy stepped around and between the performers, moving easily through the crowd despite toting Jay's messenger bag with him. Jay wasn't having as much luck in creating a path, bumping male and female forms aside, drawing reprimands and curses, although oblivious, adrift in a sea of flesh. He left the room assisted with a shoeless kick in the ass.

They regrouped in the corridor outside. 'Where now?' Jay asked, still grinning.

Freddy reached for a thick, purple curtain on the other side of the corridor and pulled it aside, allowing Jay to see their exit: a glowing green "SORTIE" across an expanse of spot-lit stage.

Jay's grin disappeared. 'And I think we've found my limit,' he said.

'Stage fright?' Freddy asked, but didn't wait for a response. Instead, he took a handful of the front of Jay's jacket and pulled him through the curtain behind him.

1-20

Hector was passing the time messing with the satellite imaging on his laptop, seeing what brand of car was parked outside his ex-wife's house tonight, when Dunnes nudged him.

'Something's happening,' Dunnes said, pointing to the door of the club. Hector looked up to see all but one of the men on the door of the club retreating into the building at speed. A second later, Abbott shouted into his radio.

'Something's happening,' he growled, coughing as he ran.

'We know that,' Hector snapped back. 'Details.'

'They haven't left their booths, but there's shouting from the theatre. I'm going to check it out.'

'Be quick, and keep us informed,' Hector said, closing the lid on his computer and tossing it onto the back seat. He looked back at Dunnes as he opened his door to get out. 'Don't move from here,' he said, 'but be ready to.'

1-21

Abbott slurped the rest of his whisky down and threw a five-euro note onto the bar before trotting across to the theatre entrance. Three of the club security guards had just entered, and he tried to follow them in, but a fourth stepped in front of him.

'Monsieur?' The man asked. He wasn't a tall man, or particularly broad in the chest, but he looked mean enough to warrant stopping.

'What's going on?' Abbott asked, trying to peer past him into the theatre.

'Votre ticket, monsieur?' the guard asked again. Abbott reached his ticket out of his coat pocket and showed him, still trying to edge around. The man didn't move. 'Ce ticket n'est valable que pour la prochaine séance.'

'I know, Abbott said, his frustration outstripping his malady in its ability to raise his temperature, 'but I need to get inside right now.'

'Non monsieur, désolé.'

'Great,' Abbott said, stepping back, resigned. 'Guess I'll wait at the bar.'

It was a poor effort at deception, but, in his defence, he wasn't on top form. As Abbott spun back to the doorway and lunged forward, the guard stepped up and collected him in his arms, aiming to lift him off his feet. Abbott was a heavyset man, though, and his momentum took him and the guard backwards into the theatre, Abbott's arms pinned at his side, wriggling like a netted fish.

As he was carried back out through the doorway, he twisted around and spotted the stage. The two-second glance he was allowed revealed the cause of the commotion. The three security guards en route to the disturbance were pushing through the angry crowd blocking the central aisle. Above the protesters, brightly lit in the centre of a stage, a man and woman were kneeling on an elaborate bed, making vague attempts to cover themselves with the gaudy linen and mismatched scatter cushions upon which they were expected to perform. To the right of the bed, a stuffed beagle completed the attempt at saucy, provocative décor; far to the left, Jay and his friend were shouldering open the emergency exit.

The guard found his balance and propelled Abbott back into the foyer, tossing him to the floor, where he rolled like roadkill, coming to a stop sat upright and cross-legged.

'They're out,' he panted into his radio.

'Get the car around the back, Dunnes,' Hector shouted across the connection. 'I'm going in.'

'I'm coming out,' Abbott explained. 'I lost them.'

'No,' Hector snapped. 'Trace their escape route. If someone helped them, we want them. We have to pick them up fast.'

'Okay,' Abbott said, sighing. 'I'll start at the booths.' He dragged himself to his feet and headed into the back of the club, taking only a second to get inside Jay's booth, jiggling the flimsy lock with ease. Tatienne was still pressed against the one wall of the enclosed stage, and it didn't take Abbott long to see how they'd fooled him: the missing panel in the stage ceiling was conspicuous in the sea of mirrored textures dressing the rest of the room, and a quick look up revealed the matching orifice above the booth. He waved at the dancer. 'Don't worry, I'm coming over,' he shouted over the piped music. She didn't answer, didn't respond, but she looked shaken so he climbed onto the chair regardless and started to pull himself up.

1-22

Hector paid the man on the door, thinking it was quicker than arguing, and knowing he could claim it back on expenses if he insisted on a receipt before he left.

He clicked on his radio: 'Abbott, where are you?' No answer.

Two men arguing an inch from each other's faces were blocking the door to the left, so Hector looked elsewhere and spotted a door hanging open half way along a corridor to his right. He took his gun from beneath his coat, carrying it discreetly in front of him, and stepped up to the door, poking it open wider with his foot before stepping through, gun raised in front.

The small room inside was dark, fed with tinny music and fronted by a large panel of glass – thickly spattered with blood and snot and perfectly framing the spectacle of Abbott getting the thrashing of his life from a semi-naked schoolgirl.

'Dunnes. Anything?' he asked into the radio.

'No,' Dunnes replied. 'They're gone. What do you want to do?'

'Give me a minute to think.' Realising that they were done for the evening, Hector holstered his gun, pulled the door closed behind him and took a seat to watch the show.

1-23

'You have your own cinema?' Freddy could hear the disbelief in Jay's tone, but it was only as

the heat lamps in the ceiling of the theatre warmed up through yellow that he saw his friend's mouth hanging open.

They'd entered the building through the fire escape in the back alley; the building's function was hidden until they headed into the auditorium, Freddy flicking on the main lights as they entered. Jay had no idea, and the surprise was pleasant.

'You have your own cinema,' Jay repeated, catching up with the idea. 'This is the fourth coolest thing I've ever heard of. How in hell did you get bored?'

'It's not much,' Freddy said, grimacing in distaste as the rising lights began to pick out the seedier details clinging to the worn upholstery of the seats. 'The projector's a relic—'

'Woah. Lemme see the projector.'

Freddy led them back through the foyer and into the projection booth. It was a dark, dusty room, and cramped with the two of them in there, but Jay didn't seem to notice. After confirming Freddy's assessment of the projector, he worked his way through the cans of film in the rack on the wall, smoothing out the peeling, handwritten labels with his thumbs to read the titles.

'I told you,' Freddy said. 'It's not that great a place.'

'Nah,' Jay said. 'You've just got crap porn is all. There's nothing here to get the punters worked up. You need to get some new material in.'

'There's no point. I don't need the business – the place is bankrolled by the agency. And the lack of customers works for me. I just keep the place open for most of the time, stay low profile. It works.'

They turned off all the theatre lights and headed upstairs to Freddy's apartment.

'Does that mean you have a free hand in what you do here then?' Jay asked.

'More or less,' Freddy said, edging aside the curtains in the living room, taking a look down into the street, 'but I've no plans for the place. Like I said, the low profile is working out fine for me, so I'm not messing with that.' The Audi was still parked at the kerb, about a hundred yards along.

'We could do something though,' Jay said, thinking out loud. 'Be a shame to waste this opportunity.'

'Jay,' Freddy spoke up, making sure Jay was listening. 'This deal with the photos – those guys are still hanging around. First thing is we need to wrap that up.'

'No problem,' Jay said, his eyes flicking left and right, sympathetically with his thoughts. 'I've got an idea. I'll make some calls tomorrow.'

'Just make sure it's tidy,' Freddy said, heading for the kitchen and the bottle of vodka in the freezer as Jay settled onto the seventies-sourced, chocolate-brown sofa. 'You sort it, you finish it, we disappear.'

1-24

The next morning, in daylight, Freddy didn't want to leave the apartment and risk being spotted, so he collected the highlights of his fridge and cupboards together for breakfast. Jay was in the bathroom across the hallway, talking on his mobile, his voice raised over the spluttering rumble of running bath water.

'How much for one?' Jay asked. 'How much for both? Okay. Send both.' The roar of the water increased as Jay's head appeared around the kitchen door. 'What's the building number here?' he asked.

'Fifty-three,' Freddy answered, scrambling eggs.

'Fifty-three,' Jay echoed into the phone, returning to the bathroom. 'Boulevard de Clichy. Uh . . . Paris. No, there's only one. The guy'll know, stop worrying. Cool. Speak to you soon.'

Freddy heard the squeak of the taps, then a gasp as Jay lowered himself into the water.

With the breakfast dishes drying and the smell of overdone bacon escaping through the louvers in the kitchen window, Freddy dialled the number on Holly's business card. Jay was completely focussed on the screen of his laptop, only letting go of the mouse long enough to lift first a cigarette, then a cup of coffee to his mouth.

'M'hello?' Holly's voice sounded moist when she answered, like she hadn't been awake long enough to wash down the stale alcohol and gum-cheese with a coffee.

'Morning. It's Freddy. You feeling okay?'

'No. I'm tired and embarrassed, and I think I might be sick soon.'

'I think the hangover was unavoidable, but you've no more reason to be embarrassed than Jay or me.' Jay raised his eyes from the computer, but Freddy ignored him.

'I didn't mean to be so needy,' Holly said. 'I've been keeping it together, doing okay, but the wine finished me off. I didn't mean to dump that on you. It's not your problem.'

'It's not a problem at all. I get isolated too, you know. It's good to have people around. I'm just sorry I didn't pick up on how you were feeling sooner. I guess sometimes you need to shout.'

'You haven't changed have you?'

'More than you can imagine, but most things are the same.'

There was a pause, as if Holly was deciding whether to ask, which she did: 'Where have you been, Freddy?'

'That's a long story, and I'm not sure if I can remember all of it. Can we leave that for another time?'

'Yes, we can. But don't think I'll forget. So can we make plans for today?'

'This isn't a put-off, it's really not, but today isn't great. I've got some things to sort before we can meet up.'

'Are you in trouble?'

'No, Jay is. But, like I say, we're sorting it.'

'So . . .'

'Hang on one second.' Freddy snapped his fingers at Jay to snare his attention away from the computer screen. 'You got a timescale in mind?'

'Tomorrow night,' Jay replied, still clicking away at the laptop. 'Holly's coming, right?'

'Jay has something planned for tomorrow night and would like you to come along,' Freddy said into the phone, 'but I'm not sure what it is, so I can't tell you what to expect.'

'That sounds . . .' Holly said. 'Yeah, I'm not sure if I'm free tomorrow night.'

'Ask her if they have vans where she works,' Jay said.

'Did you hear that?' Freddy asked.

'What kind of vans?' Holly was thrown by the random question.

'What kind?' Freddy relayed.

'Big ones, with an extra battery under the bonnet.' Jay said, thinking. 'Preferably with flashing ambers on top, like motorway maintenance vans.'

'Tell him,' Holly said, 'that we have some white vans, and that's as much as I know.'

Freddy told him.

'Can she bring one tomorrow?' Jay asked.

'I have a lot of meetings tomorrow,' Holly said, loud enough to not need repeating.

'But can she bring one?' Jay asked again.

Freddy could hear Holly breathing hard through her nose, obviously flustered, if not annoyed.

'Tell him I'll see what I can do,' she said, 'but know that taking dirty vans from work is

something I'd never do if I wasn't so bored.'

'Holly,' Freddy said, 'I feel exactly the same way.' He gave her directions to the apartment – including instructions on how to get around the back of the building and, hopefully, avoid being seen – before saying goodbye and hanging up. Picking up Jay's cup from the table and heading for the kettle, Freddy caught sight of the computer screen. 'Is that who I think it is?' he asked.

'Yep,' Jay replied.'

'And is that what I think it is?'

'Yep.'

'Are you're sure that this is a good idea?'

'I'm expressing myself creatively,' Jay said. 'How can that ever be a bad idea?'

1-26

Hector and Dunnes were holed-up on a rooftop in the west of the city, six storeys up and heavily armed. Across the street, parked in the wash of an amber streetlamp, was the En-creTec van they'd followed from the cinema. Monitoring the mobile phone signals in the Pigalle hadn't given them Jay's location, but they'd heard enough to know what to be looking for. This guy Freddy would have been stealthier arranging for his girlfriend to come pick them up in an ice cream van.

'It's cold,' Dunnes said, squatting on the low, stone wall marking the boundary between the roof and the eighty-foot drop to the pavement below.

'I know,' Hector answered, snapping together a large, black rifle. 'Get back from the edge. We can't mess this up; if you fall into the street, they might notice the stain.'

Dunnes stepped back and squatted next to Hector. 'How mad was Quinlan?' he asked.

'Mad,' Hector said, lifting a telescopic sight from the padded shooting mat spread out beside him and clipping it into place.

'How mad?'

'What do you want me to say, Dunnes? He told me to consider letting McFarlane get away again on a par with having sex with his mum. His mum's dead, Dunnes. Now, do you feel better for knowing that? Is that helping?'

'I just wanted to know where we stood. How much leeway we have.'

Hector looked down at the rifle. 'This isn't a party popper, Dunnes. I think we can say that things are as serious as they're going to get.'

'Okay. I just asked,' Dunnes said, shivering and petulant.

'Move the mat out for me.' Hector said, ignoring his colleague's tone and crawling his body and the rifle forward onto the dark-green, waterproof mat that Dunnes slid out to the edge of the roof. Resting the back of his gloved left hand on the top of the stone wall, he dropped the forward grip of the rifle into the palm and aimed the gun down into the street, looking through the sight and adjusting the optics until the van came into sharp focus. Happy with the distance and the available light, Hector swung the gun to the right, adjusting the scope again, his right eye compensating for the flood of illumination as the Arc de Triomphe entered his sights at the far end of the street. The one-hundred-and-fifty-feet plus of white stone was lit on all sides, both by the fixed lamps at the base and by the swell of traffic circling its feet. Hector took note of the distance on his scope then panned the rifle back to the van.

'Are we good to go?' Dunnes asked.

'Yep,' Hector replied, not taking his eye from the rifle scope. 'We're good.'

Holly made a conspicuous effort to wipe the flakes of cigarette ash from the van's dashboard; Jay made a conspicuous effort to ignore her.

'I have to get this back in pristine condition,' Holly said. 'Can you please hang that cigarette out of the window?'

'Holly' – Jay closed his eyes as he took a drag on the cigarette – 'this is meant to be fun. I'm passing up the chance of a fat royalty cheque with this outing. I'm at least going to enjoy myself. You should too.'

'This is illegal.'

'Yes, it is.' Jay flicked his cigarette stub out of the window and turned to her. 'We haven't time to subject you to the prolonged debasement that has shaped my own moral framework, so I'll just point out that what we're doing is no more questionable than bribing a fleet manager to lend you a company vehicle for a jolly. And we're double-parked.'

'How are you and Freddy friends?' Holly asked, frustrated. 'He was always so focussed. How can he find anything in common with . . .'

'With . . . ?'

'A troublemaker.'

'Oh, please,' Jay laughed. 'You wouldn't believe the things Freddy has done. He's a professional troublemaker. That nice-boy look of his is all a part of it. How can you not know that? You two not get past first base?'

'That was a long time ago,' Holly said. 'Now you're just being mean.'

'But not too long ago, eh?'

'When someone says you're being mean, you're meant to back off.'

'Okay. I'm sorry,' Jay said. Holly's expression didn't change. 'I mean it, I'm sorry. Just seems that between the Freddy I know and the Freddy you think you know, we've got enough for another person.'

'I don't care, Jay. Really I don't. I have some good memories of our time together, and I won't let you ruin them.'

'That's all you had to say. Consider me told.' Jay looked along the street to the Place de l'Étoile – the rotary vehicular convergence with the Arc de Triomphe as its centrepiece – and spotted a car pulling in to park at the kerb, shortly followed by a second. 'It's time to go.'

'Are they friends of yours?' Holly asked, starting the engine and pulling the van out into the stream of slow-moving traffic.

'Professional contacts. I paid them the courtesy of a tip-off.' Jay plugged a power lead into the van's cigarette lighter socket and fed it back between the seats into the cargo area. He climbed through after it, flicking up the catches on an aluminium storage case and opening the lid, plugging the other end of the cable into the black box inside, which he lifted out and placed on the floor. With a second cable, he connected the black box and his laptop, opening the lid on the notebook and clicking on an icon to launch an application. Finally he pressed the standby button on the back of the black box; within a couple of seconds the interior of the van was lit up like a microwave oven.

Hector tracked the rifle ahead of the van, looking on to the end of the street, trying to construct a shooting scenario from what he could predict of McFarlane's plan. A number of cars were parking up at the end of the street, safely out of the influence of the Place de l'Étoile traffic. That had to be it. He rolled out the adjustment on the rifle's sight, clicking to the previous distance he'd taken from the arch. 'I'll take the shot the second he leaves the van,' he

said. 'Get ready to move, Dunnes.'

By way of an answer, Dunnes slumped onto the floor alongside Hector's shooting mat, unconscious and bleeding from where his head bounced off the tarred roof.

'Your finger clear of that trigger?' The voice came from close behind Hector's head. He hadn't heard anyone join them on the roof, and he considered that while he decided whether to risk a lie.

'Yes,' he said, trying to rotate his head a degree or two, trying to see.

Freddy took a step and kicked out, grazing Hector's cheek with the side of his shoe as he punted the rifle from his hands. The gun discharged – the silenced round still managing to make a show of itself as it punched through the driver's door of a Mercedes parked across the street, the impact triggering the airbags, filling the car with a press of nylon and talcum powder. As the rifle sailed out over the edge of the building, descending into one of the leafless birch trees lining the street – the strap snagging a branch to leave it swinging, ten feet above the pavement – Freddy said: 'I did ask.'

Hector rolled over, clutching at his stinging cheek, but he came to rest against Dunnes' bulk before he could roll clear. Expecting an attack, he was surprised to see Freddy step away and take a seat on the wall at the edge of the roof, swinging his legs out over the side.

They'd been travelling light to get onto the roof with as little noise as possible, and Hector's only weapon had just left the building. He could try pushing the guy off the roof, but it wasn't quiet, and he wasn't sure if he'd let him. For want of a better plan, he got to his feet and wandered across to join Freddy on the wall.

'I could push you off here,' Hector said as he let his legs swing over the edge.

'Yes, you could,' Freddy replied. He was looking along the street, towards the Place de l'Étoile. 'You know you'd be going with me, though, right?'

'Right. So, what are you? A spy?'

'Used to be.'

'And what are you now?'

'Ex-spy.'

Hector followed Freddy's gaze along the street, watching as Jay's van reversed into position, the rear doors facing the Arc de Triomphe, only the front of the vehicle visible. The tail of the van bounced as someone pushed the doors open from the inside then, and white light flashed across the face of the stone arch, overpowering the fixed floodlights around the structure.

'I guess that's me done,' Hector said.

'You sound disappointed,' Freddy replied. 'Would you really kill him to protect a reputation?'

'I was told to kill him. That's it. You understand that.'

'Maybe I did once, but not for a long time.'

'Well, I don't have the luxury of doubt,' Hector said. 'I follow orders. I've got too much to lose.'

'I guess you're right,' Freddy said, and then gave him a slap on the back. As Hector fell forwards, his balance beyond recovery, Freddy grabbed the collar of his coat and tipped him back. Freddy pushed himself up to his feet and stepped back from the edge of the roof as the first camera flashes flickered over the outline of Jay's van. The light projected onto the southeast face of the arch revealed shapes – bold, blazing outlines of colour, resolving into the detail of an eye, a hand.

Hector was gasping, the shock of almost falling having forced a shot of cold air deep into his lungs. He let himself fall backwards from the wall onto the roof, flat on his back, his ass pressed against the stone parapet, looking up at Freddy standing over him.

'There are worse things to lose,' Freddy said.

1-29

Jay tried to keep his cigarette smoke from pooling too thickly in the light from the projector as he sat on the floor of the van, hanging his legs over the rear bumper. He recognised a few of the faces around, each with one cheek pressed to the back of a camera. More people than he'd contacted; friends of colleagues of acquaintances.

'You're a popular guy,' Holly said, looking out at the crowd.

'Seems so.' Jay was enjoying the moment, keeping enough attention at street level to spot any approaching police.

'Are you going to be this popular tomorrow?'

Jay looked back over his shoulder at Holly, smiling, before turning back to the arch without answering.

1-30

Freddy left Hector and walked to the corner of the building, watching the light show. The bright light of the arch dimmed the surrounding area by contrast; the streets and roofs were the auditorium to Jay's urban cinema, Freddy's outline the silhouette of an idiot blocking the projector. The photographers continued filling their cameras' memory cards as Jay's stitched-together images bleached to white, disappearing into the stone of the arch, only to resolve in inverse colour, the blue-green-grey face of a much-publicised young woman – her teeth black, her startled eyes mint-green – snorting a line of black cocaine into her nostril. As the colours inverted again, the image sequence repeated, showing the white powder inhaled into the pale, tired face of an otherwise attractive, young girl.

Freddy turned back to Hector, raising his voice to carry above the background hiss of people in cars. 'I'm not going to tell you how to play this with the agency,' he said, 'but this is over. I don't care what they do to you. You come back – come after Jay again – I'll do worse.'

Hector said nothing, just closed his eyes. Freddy took that as understanding and turned back to the show. As more of the image sequence was revealed – the set of rapid-fire images edited like a music video – the pale surface from which the cocaine was inhaled came into focus, and the camera flashes intensified, the strobing assault of lights catching the traffic in freeze-frame. Then Freddy saw that the cars and coaches really had stopped, that the passengers were leaving their vehicles to gawp at the spectacle, to walk between the stationary cars for a better view, to witness a wealthy, gifted, respectable young woman snort cocaine from her drug dealer's penis, the member in question projected, in distorted perspective, fifty-feet long across the face of one of the city's most treasured monuments.

'That's just not pretty,' Freddy said, before turning his back on the scene. 'Of all the people's pockets to fall into, a drug dealer's not going to treat you with too much respect.' As he passed Dunnes' prostrate form, he gave the man a kick and, satisfied with the grunt he received, headed for the roof exit.

Down at street level, walking away from the Arc de Triomphe and the increasing disorder Jay's show was causing, Freddy fastened his jacket and pulled the collar up tighter around his neck. Behind him, in twenty-feet-high letters, Jay had inter-cut the message of his piece with three images of the act, each with the colours supersaturated, the indecency stylised in red, blue and green.

"Touche pas" – *flash* – "à la" – *flash* – "drogue".

Don't. Do. Drugs.

Sitting in a café just south of the Boulevard de Clichy, occupying stools at the window through a lack of other choices, Freddy, Holly and Jay were engrossed in the morning's copy of Le Monde on the narrow bar in front of them. The story had only made it to the third page, but the coverage and pictures were detailed and explicit. Any doubt over the circles in which the Prime Minister's daughter had been socialising had been removed, and an editorial piece had drawn some parallels between the fall of the class system and the wider decline of moral values in today's United Kingdom. It was a cheap shot, opportunistic, but no editor was going to turn it down.

'Think I might hang out at yours for a while, if that's okay?' Jay asked.

'I think that would be best,' Freddy replied.

Holly couldn't help but hold her breath as Freddy turned each page, hoping not to see a shot of the van, her company's logo displayed on the side in bold, vinyl lettering.

The café owner arrived with her café crème and brioche.

'Votre café, Mademoiselle.'

'Merci, Monsieur Presentis.'

THE END

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