

Windows

Looking out the window of the train, I thought about how I'd gotten here. There was such a promising career in the archeology department back at the University of Montana. Free travel to just about anywhere in the world. They got to pick where, though. And for how long I got to be there. And why I needed to be there. They needed, with every project, to know where I was at all times; how I was spending the University's funds. Everything had to be accounted for and documented several times. I don't know how they ever got anything done in the field with all the paperwork. And when it wasn't done, you'd better have a damned good reason why not. "The puma ate it." or "There're some scorpions nesting on it. You wanna put your hand in the bag?" I found were not good excuses. However, that did not stop me from using them from time to time. I get blasted at for digging someplace I shouldn't, but the university says I have to and I'm not permitted to return fire. Why would I go through all that work for someone else's showpiece?

AJ would never, could never understand why I left. I do miss him at times, but those times leave as fast as I did the morning I woke up early and packed all the gear I could carry. Which, I discovered was an awful lot. I woke him gently just as the sun was gleaming over the city and said I was going.

"Going where?" he asked, his body still fighting to stay in a dream ridden state.

"I'm going away... to do some bad things."

His eyes shot open, his brain trying to function. Sitting straight up in bed, his dreaming world obliterated, "You're what? You're going to WHAT? I thought you were done with this? Listen, whatever the University wants you to find and dig up in sandland or wherever their holy grail is this time, just tell them you can't go. Tell them I don't want you to go. I don't want you to go."

"AJ, you don't understand."

"WHAT? Tell me what I don't understand."

"AJ, I'm leaving the University... and you." Then I picked up my gear and walked out the door. AJ sat there staring as if I had just plugged a toaster into a leaky faucet and it worked. He cried out something about love but I was already down the apartment hallway and it was nothing more than a muffled whisper when I got to the car.

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The train pulled out from the Poitiers Station in France with a struggle. These slow rides are cheap but take the better part of the day. Still, no badges yet. I guessed the guy who dozed off next to me on the way to Angoulome hadn't missed his coin purse yet. I should be uneasy about this. I'm not. As the old saying goes, *"If you are not living on the edge, you are taking up too much room."* The view is nice here. Maybe this is the edge of it all. Maybe, when this is done, I'll cash in my chips and move here. Maybe there won't be any more jobs for me. Maybe I should get a job working security for the Tower of London. I'd be happy to keep an eye on the "Star of Africa" for them.

I had to laugh at that. There'll always be other jobs like this one. One seller, one buyer. Don't really care how or why. Pick up the package in Orleans, deliver it to its new home in the States. Simple. This time it's a painting. Last time it was a sack full of jade pieces. That one, however, never made it home. The new owner, I found, had more holes than one body should have when sprawled on the floor in that manner. Glad I missed the party. That was a wasted 3 weeks. All that planning for nothing. Can't get paid if you don't deliver. Can't deliver if the guy's dead. So, I kept `em.

I stretched out in the seat and started to drift off. This was nice, not being in the jungles of Nicaragua or some unknown plot of sand in the middle of only Hades-knows-where.

Gotta stay focused, I'll be dead too one day. But, with some planning, it won't be face down in a bloody pile of plant dirt. The last thought before it went dark was a quote from Desiderius Erasmus, *"Concealed talent brings no reputation."*

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Before my eyes snapped open, one of my hands had already found the throat that was connected to the strong hand grasping my shoulder. My other hand was already reeling back, elbow butting against the window, ready to make contact with the back of the owner's skull, using the front as an access point. Eyes open and intently staring at the man, in a low growl I urged, "Who are you? Where am I?"

The man struggled, gasping for air. "S'il vous plaît, Madame. Excusez-moi s'il vous plaît. Je n'ai pas eu l'intention de vous surprendre. S'il vous plaît, nous sommes sur approach de la Station D'Orléans."

I lowered my fist a bit but kept the other attached to his throat, looking at the man while trying to determine where I was. Trying to find some speck of memory, I repeated, "Orléans ?"

"Oui, Station D'Orléans." Still struggling against my grip.

Somewhere in the dark recesses of my mind a light went on. "Orléans ? Orléans, la France?"

"OUI, OUI. Laissez s'il vous plaît vont, je peux à peine l'haleine." His face now turning a pleasant shade of red, nearby passengers began looking about to see if anyone was going to come to the aide of the gentleman. No one did.

It all came flooding back now. Why I was here, where I was, where I was going. "Damn, I hate sleeping. You lose so much time." I let go of the gentleman. "Je suis désolé, j'avais un rêve pénible."

He nodded, rubbing his neck, and hurried off to another car.

With passengers still looking on but trying not to make eye contact, I grabbed my luggage and strolled off the platform towards Ibis Orleans Centre Gare to meet, or for the most part, have a drink with, Roussel Frobisher and maybe do a little shopping near the Place D'Arc before heading on home.

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The hotel bar was dim and sparsely populated. Four tourists by the far window of the bar were chatting about what other cities they had been to. A couple sat in the darker corner connected at the lips. I let out a faint laugh. The guy in the face lock was the only one wearing a wedding band, and a cheap one at that. At the end of the bar there was a poorly put-together man wearing a toupee that was clearly not meant for his crown, sucking down imported whiskey like it was the last minutes of Earth. I stopped and glanced up. "Didn't I read this in a book once?" Waited a moment, but there was no booming voice from above about to destroy the planet. Shrugging at the mild disappointment, I grabbed a stool at the bar.

The bartender was kind enough to pull his face away from the television long enough to notice the new body in the room. The tender walked past the whiskey lush and greeted me with a broad smile. I made a mental note to punch this guy's front teeth in if we ever met again. It could only be an improvement and a great parting gift.

He asked, still grinning, "Je ne vous ai pas entendus entrer. Que voudriez-vous boire ?"

"Un, je ne suis pas qu'insidieux, demandez autour de. Deux, j'aurai un double de que ce gars descend," pointing over to the toupeed briefcase and speaking loud enough to catch his ear.

He nearly choked to death.

"What did you say?" he asked, trying to wipe himself off and eyeing the roughneck of a gal sitting two seats down from him.

"J'ai dit, j'aurai un double." Wow, those language classes at MontaU really were worth the headache. I guessed by his near death experience, the man who was spilling good booze all over the bar was Roussel Frobisher. By the looks of him, this little trip wasn't going to go as smoothly as I had hoped. I took a stool next to him.

"I believe you have something for me."

"You speak English?"

"It's the American way."

"Shhhh. Lower your voice. Someone may hear you. Are you sure you weren't followed? I thought someone was following me last night. Paranoia isn't always a bad thing..."

"Yes it is."

He just looked at me, still wiping off his face.

"Well, where is it? I'm on a schedule you know."

He shifted nervously. "No. I didn't want to bring it out in public. You know, in case I got picked up. It's okay though. It's in my room safe."

"Let me understand this. You left it in your room. Period. It's in a safe. If, say, someone was following you, and you left for the bar, all they would need is to acquire the hotel's master safe key to get to it?"

I let that sink in for just a moment. A small dim light bulb went off behind his eyes.

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"The deal was I pick it up from you. Here. NOW."

Realizing his rather large error in judgment and seeing me getting upset to the point of cracking the glass I was holding, he suggested we go to his room. I agreed.

Motioning to the tender, I pulled all of the bills from the purse I had picked up on the train and laid them on the bar. "Cela devrait couvrir les deux nos factures. Ayez un jour grand." I smiled. I winked. I walked away following Roussel.

The alcohol was starting to set into Roussel's brain. It took him three tries to get into his room. The first try wasn't even his room. I thought about kicking in the door and throwing him off the balcony just to speed things up.

Inside, on the way to the safe, Roussel tripped over the leg of a chair. I really should have just left at that moment. This was not what I had agreed to. This was not what I was getting paid for.

The room hadn't been tossed, I noticed. The safe hadn't been touched. The headache Roussel was going to have in the morning would be priceless. I grinned at that thought. He looked back at me from the safe like he had heard what I was thinking. I just smiled. And waited. I don't like waiting. Or smiling.

The safe was opened with a little effort. Roussel was becoming more and more paranoid every minute. Even the little sounds he made made him jump. This guy should either stop smuggling or stop drinking. My vote was for both.

He pulled out the painting and, as I stood at the foot, unrolled in onto the bed. I took a step back and refused to blink. "Merde sainte." The colors, the aged canvas, the old pigments, even the size of it. I knew what it was right away. It was *"The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."* It was a Rembrandt. I wondered if Roussel knew what he had. Things had just gotten interesting.

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"Well, this should be easy." I tried not to sound so doubtful in the successful overseas transport of such a work of art. I knew the owner would send people out looking for who took it. These people would not be local police for sure. "Right?"

"Yeah, easy."

There is one fake out there for sure, I thought. But that one was sitting happily under soft lights at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston since early 1990. Now some bastard is possibly trying to unload a \$300 million fake. I only know this because I, let's just say, came across the grandson, last year, of the man who made the forgery. Nice fellow. Can't hold his rum. Seems his grandfather, on his deathbed, admitted to painting the forgery and the original was safe with Alarico Durand in his private collection. No one believed him when he told the police. I did. He had too much to drink and too many details to be lying. But how could this painting get out of Alarico's house? Fortress is more like it. That place has more security and cameras than Area 51. I know this because I tried to get a look myself, in both places.

Roussel had slumped into the chair in the corner. Eyes sort of glazed over like polished marbles. I wonder how much of this he'll remember tomorrow. A closer examination proved there was no way in Hades that this was a fake. I pulled out the telescoping art tube and slid the second layer of tubing that ran along the inside of it out. With the second tube, I rolled the painting gently around it. The colors were near mesmerizing. Rembrandt's only marine painting is in my hands right now. That gave me a chill.

The art rolled snugly; I slid the cylinder back into the carrier. The ends snapped into place concealing the art and leaving it open in the center to hold more posters. This was originally designed to keep artwork separated, but with this slender design, you'd never know it could hold more. Now all I have to do is pick up some work up from a street vendor, something that looks like it could weigh as much as this does right now, stuff the shoot, and head for home. This should be easy, right? Right.

Leaving the room, a thousand thoughts flooded my mind as I headed down the hallway and out into the sun. I should just bring this home and get paid. Right? Right. But what if for some reason, the shipment was delayed a few days. That's a lot of money. Alarico has got to be looking for this. What's a few days going to do? I really want to get another look at it. Roussel may not even remember what he did with the painting. Let him take the heat for the delay... or the disappearance.

I stopped on the sidewalk. What was I thinking? I flipped open my phone and punched a few numbers. The line rang a few times. This was normal. At least 6 months ago it was normal. A lot of things can change in 6 months. Alex had an extensive tracking and screening system for incoming calls on this number. Normally, after 6 rings, an unfamiliar phone number would hear a disconnected recording. I hoped I was still on his passing list. After the 7th ring, he answered.

"Samantha. How nice to get a call from you. It has been awhile. How have you been? Keeping yourself out of trouble?"

"Good afternoon, Alexandar. I'm happy to see you haven't deleted my number yet. I've been busy. We should get together very soon."

"After all this time. What is the urgency?"

"I'll pay you well."

"Well, in that case." You could tell a warm smile had appeared across his face spreading ear to ear. He knew when I talked money it was a worthwhile trip. "Where are you?"

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"In the neighborhood. Haven't you tracked my call by now?"

"To be honest, I was happy to hear from you again and didn't bother. Please, humor an old man, where would you like to meet?"

"I'll be leaving here shortly, maybe 45 minutes to an hour at most, just a little shopping to do. Then, do you remember when we went to the Saveurs du Soleil at the Futuroscope theme park about 12 minutes outside Poitiers?"

"How can I forget? Your bar tab was at least a hundre..." His tone changed from a warm welcome to business. "You're in France? I can be there in 3 hours."

"Good. I'll see you there. And Alex,"

"Yes?"

"Bring my favorite gear."

"You have been busy, haven't you?" He hung up. A million things must have been running through his mind at that exact moment. The only thing on my mind was the painting strapped to my back in a seemingly empty travel case. I headed down the street to go shopping.

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It didn't take long to find a vendor with paintings of the tower and street side cafes. I picked up three just for the weight. With my purchases rolled up and slid into the art tube, I moved off down the street back in the direction of the train. Best not keep Alexandar waiting.

During the long trip, the entire afternoon's episode was playing over and over in my mind. All the unanswered questions came flooding back. One stood out above all. How could someone, anyone, get this out of Alarico's possession? Maybe Alex would have an idea. Then again, maybe he shouldn't know. Gah. What's a girl to do?

2 hours later, the train rolled into the Poitiers station. This ride was less eventful than the last. Everyone had passed on taking one of the seats next to me. Even the children walked quietly past, looking everywhere but in my direction. I'd be scared of me too.

For an American female tourist traveling alone, acquiring a taxi here is amazingly easy. For an American female tourist traveling alone and looking like she could lift a car, not so easy. Eventually their desire for money overcame my outward appearance and one stopped.

The entrance to the Futuroscope Park was filled with every body shape, size and color. And as distracting as all the loose swinging purses and bags left on curbs for loading into waiting cars were, I left well enough alone and made my way through the sea of beings to Saveurs du Soleil. Alexandar already had a table, 2 drinks, and half a plate of pasta. He saw me walk in and motioned me over. He was laughing to himself as I moved the host out of my way without a second thought.

Being the gentleman that he was, he also, without a thought, pulled out a chair for me and waited for me to be seated before ordering me an 18 year old Sazerac Rye whiskey. "I thought that would make you feel more at home. Can I get you anything to eat? Oh, it's so good to see you again, Samantha. Here." He opened the menu in front of me. "Get something to eat before we talk business. What have you been up to?"

I was hungry, I'll admit. The pasta dishes looked very appetizing and getting something in my stomach with the whiskey wouldn't be such a bad idea either. I gave in on one condition. "Tell me what you know about The Storm on the Sea of Galilee."

Alexandar's eyes jumped from mine to the luggage and back again. He dropped his fork.

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Through my meal and several drinks, we talked about Rembrandt: his life, his works, his influences, and the theft of that particular piece from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 1990. To my surprise, Alexandar asked if I knew about a switch made of the same work a year prior to the theft. To his surprise, I did.

He asked "Do you know who has it now?" already knowing the answer.

With a wink, "I know who has it now, I know who had it yesterday, and I know who had it last week."

I finished my glass, he paid the bill and we left to talk business.

Thinking ahead when it comes to business, Alexandar had already called from his plane and reserved a room at the Ibis Poitiers Futuroscope and had his bags delivered there. With the sun there was a light breeze as we walked the 5 minutes to the hotel, passing shops and vendors. All the while Alexandar, knowing what I was carrying, kept asking like a worried parent, "Have you been keeping yourself busy? Is there anything I can get for you? Will you be staying here long?" Which was his way of saying, "How serious is this?" without sounding worried.

At the hotel, we checked in without any questions. This is France; if you have money, they don't care. The desk clerk noted to Alexandar that his car had been delivered to the private lot. He thanked the man kindly and we left for the room.

I walked in. One duffel bag and two suitcases were near the window. The mini bar and desk were in the same place as the last hotel, but thankfully Alexandar had requested a room with two beds. I sat down on one, he on the other facing me.

"So when do I get to see it?"

"See what?" I said with a grin as I pulled out the three pictures. "Oh, these? Aren't these wonderful? I picked them up in Orleans. I don't know if I should have them framed or just use them as wallpaper."

"Come now, I'm an old man, do you want me to have a heart attack? Why would you do that to an old man?" he said, jesting and pointing at the carrier. "Show me."

I pulled out the inner sleeve and unrolled the old canvas onto the bed. "So do you think I should have this framed?" I was looking at him but he couldn't take his eyes off the painting. "If you're going to have a heart attack, please do it near the pool."

He looked at me for a moment, finally realizing I was joking. "You want me to do this?"

"Can it be done?"

"Well, yes."

"Did you bring your art forgery supplies?"

He pointed over to the suitcases.

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"Can it be done quickly?"

He asked concerned, "How quickly?"

"Less than a week. I'm sure there are people looking for this."

"Well I know one person that's looking for this."

"Can it be done?"

He replied as if I had just insulted him, "I'm the best there is. Of course it can be done."

"Then while you unpack, tell me about how you knew about the art switch in 1989."



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A rainbow of colors lay out on the desk next to pallet knives and brushes. An easel went up in the corner, as did rolls of chemically aged canvas. Alexandar was better than good. He was the best. He was the one that private owners and large companies sought out to prove their masterpieces were the real thing. He was the one I sought out to provide owners with the next best thing. Funny how worlds apart can cross paths such as they do. He spoke as he unpacked.

He began, "Just under two years before the publicized Gardner theft, which would make it about a year before the switch, a man came to me asking about this exact painting. Asking if I could make one for him, identical in every detail." Looking back at me, "Just as you are doing right now."

With an eyebrow raised. "Yeah, but you like me."

Shaking his head, he continued. "He offered more and more money, yet I refused." He glanced up again. "Out of principle, you know. Then he threatened me. Threatened to ruin my company. Was going to get what he wanted. No one says no to..." He rolled his hands in the air trying to remember the name to put with the face. "Anyways, blah blah. I'll get what I want. You'll regret this. And so on."

He sat down on the bed and looked at me. "You know, I never saw that man again. But I did go to the museum. Oh yes, curiosity got to me. I had a brief trip to the States. Two appointments. Three days apart, plenty of time to go sightseeing. So I made it a point to go see the painting. And do you know what I saw?"

"A fake that wasn't yours?"

"YES! And to this day, I don't know who made it. Only a well-trained eye could have picked out the mistakes. And why would anyone re-examine an existing masterpiece that has already been verified? You know, I do have my suspicions as to why a year later, the fake was stolen."

"Really? Share."

"See, I think the person who had the original, wanted credit for it." He rolled his hands in the air again. "You know how those art collector circles work. But how can it be proven while the so-called original masterpiece is still hanging in the museum? Steal the fake. The fake is gone, the one he has must be the original. This original. This really is it. Someone must be a might upset that this is gone. Maybe the museum fake is in its place." He chuckled. "Ce ne serait pas bizarre."

"I'll leave you alone to work. You have my phone number. Are you all right with this?"

"Of course I am, Samantha. Anything for you, dear. If I wasn't, I would have asked for payment up front." He winked. I went to lounge by the pool by way of the bar.

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I was more relaxed than I should have been. There was no one else on the planet I would have trusted to be alone with the painting than Alexandar. We've done this dance before with a Renoir.

The sun was dropping beneath the skyline now but the warmth had stayed. My phone rang. It was Alexandar.

"Just checking in to see what you're up to. I need a break and was wondering if you would like to accompany me to dinner."

"You mean you're not done yet?"

He could hear the jest in my voice and joined in suit. "Yes, done already. Even folded it neatly, crated it and mailed it to the proper authorities. Post paid. Hungry?"

"Wow, you are good. So what's for dinner?"

"Anywhere you'd like, but please, no pizza and beer."

"So what does that leave me with?"

"Fish `n Chips."

"What kind of girl do you take me for? Find me Steak `n Potatoes and you have a deal."

"Samantha, you're in France, not Chicago."

"Alexandar, you're in France, not Grimsby."

"Why must you be so difficult?"

"Because I'm good at it."

"Parfait. Comment d'un filet en tranches fines coupé de poulet avec la sauce de Roquefort et les pommes de terre Sautéed?"

"I have no idea what you just said except chicken, potatoes and something about a sauce. You have yourself a deal. I'll be upstairs in 2 minutes.

"Is everything put away?"

"What needs to be."

"Can I drive?"

"No."

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The sun had gone down and thin clouds had rolled in by the time we arrived for dinner. To avoid the expected stares from the other patrons, Alexandar requested a table in the back, away from the other dinner guests. After a once-over of how I was dressed, they happily agreed.

We made small talk about countries we had visited recently until dinner arrived. He had just gotten back from a week's stay in Germany. Myself, a month in Canada.

"So, any men in your life now Samantha?"

After a stare down that seemed like an eternity, I gave in. "Yes, there are a few."

His eyes lit up and he leaned in closer to hear.

I set my glass down and rolled my eyes back as if trying to remember all their names. "There's this one, Erte. He's big with foxes. And a Will Turner. He's got a real night and day personality..."

Alexandar leaned back in his chair, shaking his head, not breaking eye contact. "What am I going to do with you Samantha? You should come back with me and work in my Bristol office. I can keep a better eye on you there."

".... And then there's Stuart Davis from Philly. He's really way out there." I stopped to take a mouthful of chicken fillet and washed it back with the rest of the wine. "Do they make you jealous?"

"I'm happy I don't have a daughter like you. I'd never get any sleep."

The mood changed. "Yeah. Well no one has one like me."

"I'm so very sorry Samantha. That was wrong of me to say." He paused to look at his watch for a distraction. "Finish up, we have work to do."

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Camped out on the second bed, I watched Alexandar work magic on the canvas, as if he had done the original himself. The room smelled of cobalt and linseed, like the art history classes at MontaU. That is where I first saw this painting, or at least an oversized print of it. We had done a study on light refraction and pigment origins. This had been one of the examples in the lecture. I just couldn't believe I was looking at it right now. Like dying of thirst and finding a river running through the earth. Absolutely amazing and utterly distracting. I had to tear myself away.

Quietly I whispered over his shoulder, "Alexandar, I'm going to the lobby. I'll be back in a bit."

He nodded and I left, making sure the door locked behind me.

In the lobby, the desk clerk kept looking over his glasses at me, pretending he was reading the paper. Perturbed, I suppose, because my boots were propped up on the table in the seating area while I was watching the TV. It was late and I didn't care. Nothing of interest to watch, flipping channel after channel.

A news blip caught my ear as the channels were blinking by. It went so fast I had only made out five words. Orleans. Homicide. Robbery. And the name Roussel Frubisher. I waited to hear more. Nothing.

Taking the stairs two and three at a time, I felt my heart racing. I stopped just before I barreled through the door, nearly snapping the card in half swiping it through the scanner. Taking a breath, I walked in on velvet paws.

"Alexandar. There may be a problem."

He waved a hand at me over his shoulder, his face inches away from the canvas. I sat on the bed and waited. In the back of my mind the words kept playing like a broken record, "... I should just bring this home and get paid. Alarico has got to be looking for this..." The seed of panic had been planted. Rational thought was trying to stomp it out. Roussel could have just been killed because he walked down the wrong alley. Or the sorry drunk got in a fight with the wrong guy. I bet he couldn't remember what he did with the painting. Or what the person looked like that he gave it to. The bartender would remember me. This was too easy. I was too relaxed. I should be on a flight home now. Not here. NOT HERE.

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Alex finished his area of focus and turned around. With sadness in his eyes, he asked, "What is wrong, Dear?"

I explained everything. He needed to know. He needed to know what I had led him into. About Roussel at the other hotel, how I knew Alarico Durand had had the real painting, and the recent news flash. Everything.

He sat in the recliner looking at the floor for a long time.

Finally he looked up. A new well of energy glinted in his eyes. "Samantha, you have to go. You have to go now. Stay in France, see the sights, go wherever there are people."

"But what about the painting?"

"Every time you call, I almost expect to be breaking the law. That's what I love. You keep me young. Keep me on my toes. You keep me pushing forward and I'm not about to give that up now. You need to go. I'll finish the painting and call you when it's completed."

"Alexandar, but what if..."

"If nothing. Go. Find another hotel. I will be fine. And for goodness sakes, Samantha, try acting a little more ladylike. If anyone is looking for you, that will throw them off your trail for sure." He laughed. I didn't. "Go now and promise me you'll try to stay out of trouble."

A quick hug and Alex was pushing me out the door.

Minutes later, I was in a taxi on my way to Bordeaux. The panic had worn off and sleep was taking over. I don't even remember leaving the city lights.

A voice pounded in my head. "Madame. Nous sommes arrivés. Réveillez-vous s'il vous plaît . Nous sommes à Bordeaux." It was better than the train ride. Everything came to me when I opened my eyes. My bag was still under my feet and I had a killer neck cramp.

The voice came again. "Nous sommes arrivés à Bordeaux."

Looking up, the driver had an arm hanging over the back of the seat, hand extended.

Through the grogginess "Right, right. Cool. We're here?" I looked out the window. Another Ibis Hotel.

"Excusez-moi ?"

"Oh, right, sorry, here." Reaching into my pocket, I know I handed him more than the trip was worth but I wasn't going to be picky about it. I got out. He turned back around in his seat counting the wad of money. Looked at me once and then took off. Yeah, it was probably a lot more than the trip was worth.

I stood in the entrance to the private lot looking up. "Another Ibis. Huh. These things are everywhere. At least I know where the bar is." I smiled at that thought. "I need breakfast."

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After a healthy serving of garlic sausage, ham, orange juice, bread and something called a French Puff in the hotel restaurant, I was good to go. I asked at the desk what sites one would go to see in Bordeaux if they didn't come here for the wine. After a brief argument, I corrected myself and asked what sites one would go see here in Bordeaux after they've taken several of the wine tours. She was happy to point me in several directions. I was happy to go.

Croiseur Colbert was an old warship on the banks of the Garonne. It was a very popular site by the look of the crowds. A brochure read *The Croiseur Colbert was one of the largest ever to have sailed in the French navy...* was decommissioned and put into service as an attraction. Yeah. It was a big metal boat. I can see these back home. As careful as Alex wanted me to be, I couldn't subject myself to how dull this place was any longer.

The next suggested location was in a rather industrial looking building. Not what I expected at all. The Contemporary Art Museum also sits close to the banks of the River Garonne and would be a fascinating place to visit if you were interested in modern art. After watching the guards watching me, I was reminded that this was not a sight-seeing trip. I was supposed to be there, not be seen there. I don't like modern art anyways.

A short ride later, because I had no idea where I was going, I got out in The Place Gambetta. This was nice.... *an attractive public square in the very heart of Bordeaux. It's popular with tourists and local people because of its fine cafes and bars that surround it.* That was what the nice gal at the desk said. I'm good with bars.

There was a beautiful fountain near the first bar. People sitting and talking all about. Others in suits rushing through in their daily lives. Not one of them knew who I was or what I had done. This place was wonderful. This place I could kill some time in.

With a drink in hand, I sat near another American couple and struck up a conversation. Happy to be speaking English for a short time, we talked about the wines, the architecture, the language, what they did for work, where they were from. I diverted the returning questions by buying them a locally bottled wine to celebrate their second honeymoon. They were much too open and friendly. I could make a call in two minutes to someone in the States, pinpoint their home and have it sacked. I needed to get away from these people.

I corrected myself. You're too relaxed. Someone may be looking for you right now. Stay focused. Remember, more holes in your body than needed.

I excused myself from them and found another seat.

Focus.

I jumped when the phone rang. It was Alexandar.

"Good morning, Dear. I have some news for you. Albeit not the best. By the way, where are you?"

"Bordeaux. Hit me."

"Oh, good. I'm going to keep this short. I had someone look into that murder in Orleans you mentioned. Seems the gentleman was shot in his hotel room. They're still unsure as to who's done it or why. Only lead is that he was seen with a broad-shouldered woman earlier in the day. No identity has been made on the female. Keep safe, my Dear. I'll call you later." He hung up.

Windows

Panic spread its seed again. Looking around, every face was unfamiliar. A sea of gray moving past my eyes. All the voices and sounds blurring into one another. Then it stopped. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder and there was a steady pressure pushed into my lower back. I froze, the world nearly stopped. I watched the people shift slowly around me when a voice came near my ear.

“Hola, Samantha. ¿Qué piensa usted que usted hace aquí?”

“Who are you? What do you want?” I struggled against the pressure in my back but it didn't ease up.

“Usted tiene algo mío.”

“I don't speak Spanish. What do you want from me?”

“No juegue a juegos conmigo Samantha. Usted sólo puede perder. Usted sabe para qué estoy aquí. ¿Dónde está ello?”

Focus Sam.

Gritting my teeth, I had one chance. His stance was close enough to have one hand on my shoulder and the other concealing the gun from the view of others near my backpack, which left his legs open for an attack.

One foot slightly raised, I leaned back into him to offset him. My heel, swung from the hip, shot back into his right leg. His tibia splintered just below the kneecap, ripping apart ligaments. Unable to keep a hold on my shoulder, he hit the ground screaming in pain. I twisted and swerved into the crowd.

Gun drawn, no longer hidden from the crowd, everyone panicked and scattered. He fired twice before the police closed on him.

The sound reverberated off the buildings. In moments, the park was cleared.

Sitting on the floor of the hotel room, I watched the news. Looking and waiting. Then it came over BBC. A report on shots fired. *An unnamed Spaniard armed with an American-made .44 Magnum was arrested with injury this afternoon after firing into the crowd in The Place Gambetta in the heart of Bordeaux, France. Nothing more has been released on the incident.*

I didn't sleep that night. But I swore no one would ever get that close to me again.

Continued on next page...

Windows

The morning came none too soon with the phone ringing. "Good morning, Alexandar."

"Good morning Samantha. I just saw the morning news. Were you there?"

"Yeah. And I think a part of his knee is still stuck in my boot heel. But I'm all right. Just give me the good news."

He sighed in relief. "You should come back to the hotel."

"You think it's safe?"

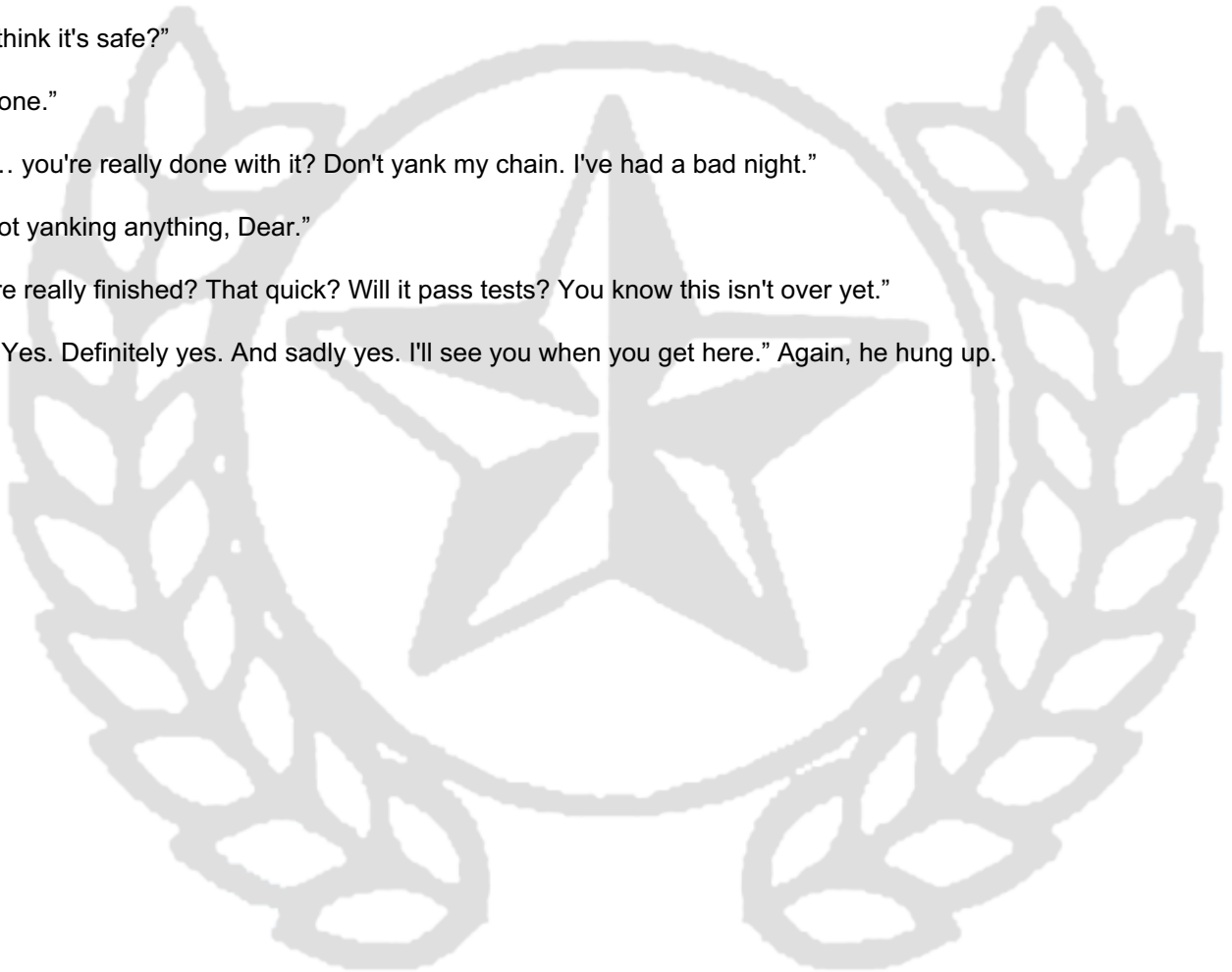
"I'm done."

"You... you're really done with it? Don't yank my chain. I've had a bad night."

"I'm not yanking anything, Dear."

"You're really finished? That quick? Will it pass tests? You know this isn't over yet."

"Yes. Yes. Definitely yes. And sadly yes. I'll see you when you get here." Again, he hung up.



Windows

On the long quiet ride back to Ibis Poitier Hotel, the ringing sound of the gunshots still played in my ears. Never had I heard such a sound at close range. And I wouldn't soon forget it either.

Alexandar met me in the lobby with open arms. He was too excited to talk, so he dragged me up to the room. Exhausted, I stumbled in. There it was. There *they* were, side by side. He was right. Only an exceptionally well-trained eye, with close examination could tell the difference between them. "They're beautiful. Which one is which?"

Grinning like a proud papa ready to hand out cigars, "Guess."

"Alexandar Christian Shelby. I'm in no mood for games right now." I glared at him.

"Awe, Samantha. Isn't it wonderful."

"Yes, but which is which? I can't believe it only took you three days." I sat admiring his work.

He gave in. "The one on the left. Can't tell, can you?" Still smiling.

"Can I leave with these?" Grabbing my gear.

"I was thinking. Since you're only to return to the States with one, and I'm expected to return to the office with something, why don't I take the other one with me back to Bristol for 'examination'. Then when all is said and done, you call me and I'll transport it to wherever you'd like. I could then come stay in your home, perhaps visit these other 'men' you told me about." He fiddled his fingers together.

"On the level?"

"On the level, as you put it."

"I'm trusting you with this. I've got to go. I'm already two days behind delivery. I'll call you soon."

"Be safe, my Dear. Call me as soon as you can."

I rolled up the duplicate and slid it back into the sectioned part of the tube, followed by the three prints and left for the airport.

I took the next flight to Casablanca, Morocco. It was the quickest way out of Europe. From there the following flight went from Casablanca to Sydney, Nova Scotia. There was no way I was going directly into the United States from Africa. Too many questions. I slept very little, keeping an eye on my carry-on luggage. This was almost over. The flight got in late to Sydney, so I walked to a local hotel. Sleep overwhelmed me again, and morning came too quickly. There was a flight leaving for Chicago and one for New York. I chose Chicago.

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Windows

I was expecting a problem in customs. There was. After we landed, I was brought to a room and given a choice to open my luggage in front of security or... I didn't wait for the other option.

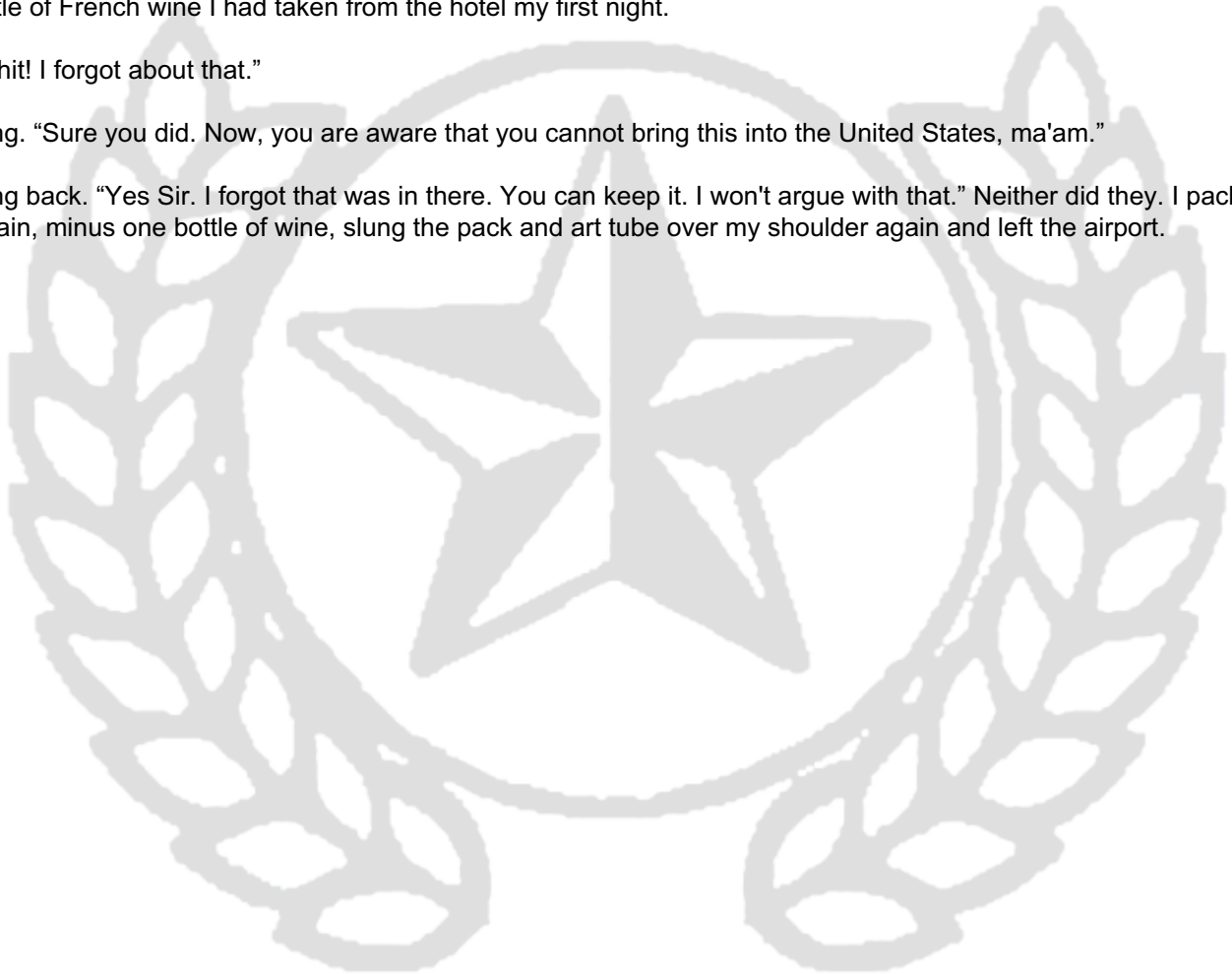
I laid my art tube on the table and my backpack. I opened the Art tube and slid out the three prints. The guards continued to look at me. "Is that all you have?"

I opened the pack and dumped it out. A change of clothes, some maps of Canada, a French to English dictionary and a small bottle of French wine I had taken from the hotel my first night.

"Oh shit! I forgot about that."

Smiling. "Sure you did. Now, you are aware that you cannot bring this into the United States, ma'am."

Smiling back. "Yes Sir. I forgot that was in there. You can keep it. I won't argue with that." Neither did they. I packed up my things again, minus one bottle of wine, slung the pack and art tube over my shoulder again and left the airport.



Windows

Grabbing the first cab, we pulled out into standing traffic. The driver looked back, "So where to?"

"Out of this mess. Get me to Rockford in record time and you get an extra \$100 on top of the fare."

He drove like back streets were his new best friend.

Once we were under way, I pulled out my cell and started punching numbers. This had gone on too long. A voice answered with a gruff "Yeah." I knew he was part Italian. So between Dumb and Stupid, I couldn't figure out which half.

"Hey, I just got back in town. Where can I meet ya?"

"You just got in now? I've got people looking all over fo' you. Was there a problem? Is there going to BE a PROBLEM?"

"I'm so happy you care. Tell your lackeys to back the hell off. I am in no mood to deal with anyone. And since you asked, there WAS a PROBLEM in customs. That's why I'm late. You don't know how hard it is to get a bottle of wine into this country."

The cab driver laughed out loud giving me notice that he had been listening to my conversation. I changed my tone and the driver stopped laughing.

"Funny, I don't remember asking for a bottle of wine. But that's okay as long as the rest of the order was filled. Meet my driver at The Venice Tavern just outside Aurora. Is that do`able for you princess?" His tone had changed too. I didn't like it.

"I'd meet the Pope there as long as the money is in my account."

"The money'll be there. Just make sure you are. If there's a problem, don't hesitate to call me."

I hung up and pounded on the cab's passenger divide. The driver jumped. Change of plans; bring me to The Venice Tavern just outside Aurora." And in my best Italian mobster voice, "Is dat do'able?"

The driver nodded and turned on his blinker. I was more awake now than I was this entire trip. The adrenaline and the focus were back.

A long quiet hour later and one mile out from the tavern, I asked the driver to stop. He did. I called my bank. Odd, the sum that should be in there, wasn't. Next call was to Joey.

"Yeah?"

"Where's my money, Joey?"

"Where're you?"

"That doesn't matter right now, does it? I've had a very bad day and your driver is going to have a worse one if that money isn't in my account in 60 seconds."

Continued on next page...

Windows

Noticing the change in my manners and the more aggressive tone in my voice, and the fact I punched the back of his seat in frustration, the driver was white knuckling the wheel in the 10 and 2 points. Sweat rolled down his cheek, as he avoided looking in the mirror.

"Alright, alright. It's done. I just wanted to make sure you'd show. You do good work for me, but I'm entitled to have my doubts when there's this much money involved. Are we good?"

"We are if it's there."

I called the bank again. An automated voice came across, *"Your account balance is \$116,054.38. Thank You."*

Again I called Joey. "Took you long enough. Call your driver; tell him to drive slowly south on South River Street. He'll see an airport cab driving straight at him with the headlights off, hazards on. Have all the windows rolled down. This package means as much to me as it does to you. I don't want to see it get messed up. Ya got me Joey?"

"Yeah, yeah. I gotcha."

"Talk to you later, Joey."

Turning to the driver. "You heard what I said to him?"

He nodded, still without looking.

"Are YOU going to be a problem?"

He shook his head just as quickly.

"Good. Drive."

He pulled out and we started heading north on South River Street. The blue sedan came over the hill. My driver turned off his headlights, flipped on his hazards and slowed down. The sedan had all the windows open; you could see straight through the car. Good, he got the message.

As we passed, I handed the tube to the driver. We nodded in passing. We drove on for a few blocks.

Still gripping the wheel, he asked, "Can we pull over? I think I'm going to throw up."

"Sure. But when you're done, do you want to go get some dinner? I know this tavern just up the road."

He let loose his grip, "I'll pass, thanks. But can I still get that tip?"

Again with the voice, "That's do'able."

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Windows

He drove to the first hotel he saw and let me out. I paid him well and he was more than happy to get out of there. It started to rain, so I called Alexandar from inside. I wondered if he was going to pick up. This was a lot for him to go through. And now, he had my painting. Waiting through the seven rings seemed like a lifetime.

"Samantha! I'm glad you're home. I trust everything went well then?"

"Yeah, I'm happy to be home too. So when do you want to have dinner?" I know I sounded weary. The rain didn't help.

I could hear papers sorting about. "Well, I could make arrangements for a week from tomorrow. How would that be?"

"That sounds lovely. I'll have your room ready. You can see the sights and meet my men."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful, Dear. I'll see you then." He hung up.

