

# ONE

The panic filled him. It was fluid and heavy, choking his lungs and pooling in the pit of his stomach, weighing him down. As Lex walked, the hazy, midday air turned into a tidal drag and his knees weakened. He had to stop to catch his breath, so he lurched toward a pharmacy closed for the siesta, ducking out of the high sun and into cooler shadows.

He hid there for a few moments, trying to moderate the fear and failing. He ran a hand through the hair framing his corn-fed features. His haunted, terrified eyes blinked behind his glasses as he fiddled with them, smearing the lenses.

Lex looked down at himself, and for the first time he saw the tiny dots of rust red that speckled the white T-shirt beneath his baggy black hoodie. The vice clamped around his heart tightened a little more. He touched his cheek and it came away smeared with flecks of crimson. Quickly, Lex rubbed his face clean with the hoodie's sleeve and fumbled at the zipper, pulling all the way up to hide the rest of the spatter.

It was the Greek guy's blood. Lex didn't even realise that it had got on him. His mind was so focused on running away.

*It all happened so fast.* They had set the meet for a wide piazza on the outskirts of the old township of Rabat, toward the southern end of Malta. Lex had been on the Mediterranean island for days and it seemed to be getting smaller with each passing hour. He wanted to be gone. When the message came, he was falling over himself to get to the rendezvous.

The information arrived in chain of digital text, filtered through the encrypted Tor server Lex had set up on the day he started running. Decoded, it was a promise from the Greek smuggler to get him out of Europe and on a plane to Canada. *Kyrkos, that was the man's name.* The deal had been agreed. It was going to happen.

It was supposed to play out with them connecting in Rabat and then driving down to Valetta, where Kyrkos had a boat moored. Lex had planned to end this day on the waves, watching the sun set over the ocean. He was going to have a little ritual, where he would have burned the identity documents he was carrying and toss the ashes into the water. Start anew.

Lex Wetherby would be buried at sea and gone forever. That was how it should have happened, because no one knew where he was. *He was safe.*

But after he had sat down across a café table from the Greek, the burly bodyguard positioned nearby did a weird double take. He moved like he'd seen something wrong, something dangerous. In the next second, the big man jerked backward as if he'd been kicked by a horse.

Lex had seen people get shot before, but there had always been noise, the thunderous crack of a gun. This time he'd heard nothing, and it made everything strange and unreal.

Kyrkos had bolted from his chair, knocking over a glass of wine. He had enough time to swear at Lex before a second silent round hit him in the face. The Greek tumbled over in a heap and some tourist on a nearby table saw the blood. A child screamed.

Lex fled, an innate sense of self-preservation making him flip the table aside as he dashed away. A third shot had splintered a corner of the wooden tabletop. Unable to help himself, he'd thrown a look over his shoulder as he sprinted toward the mouth of the nearest alleyway, toward the faint promise of safety.

Tourists and locals stood frozen with horror, hands to mouths, faces lined with shock. The only ones who'd looked his way were a man and a woman of average height, their identities hidden beneath identical light-coloured baseball caps and big black sunglasses that covered half of their faces. He'd glimpsed the dark, angular shapes of compact pistols hidden in their hands and all reason in him dissolved. Up came the oily panic, like a boiling flood head.

He'd raced through a narrow, airless passage full of stale odours which spat him out on to Kbirra Street a few blocks north of the piazza. He'd followed the old road, moving without thinking, skirting around the dusty flanks of the church of St Augustine. Rabat stood atop a hill, and there was a steady breeze through the medieval streets that plucked at his hair and pushed bits of litter along the gutters. On all sides, terraces of sun-bleached buildings crowded in on one another, most of them closed up for afternoon.

Running on autopilot, Lex almost doubled back before he realised he was on the verge of making a fatal mistake. He staggered to a halt in the pharmacy doorway, trying to catch up with himself, concentrating on what he could remember about the town. He knew there was a coach terminus not far from here, where Rabat met the walls of Mdina, Malta's ancient fortress capital. All he had to do was slip aboard a local bus and get away, lose himself among the other passengers. The rest he could figure out en route. For now, he was trying to concentrate on *not dying*.

The red ruin of the Greek's face flashed up in his mind's eye, and Lex gagged as he tried to blot out the image. Nestor Kyrkos was connected and the man had enemies, he knew that. He wondered if maybe the man and the woman in the baseball caps had come to end the Greek's life for some infraction that he wasn't even aware of. Maybe they weren't interested in him at all.

But then, reflected in the pharmacy's window, Lex saw an olive-toned face half-concealed by dead black lenses on the other side of the street, and he knew that he was the real target. Kyrkos and the bodyguard were just collateral. Their deaths had been the shooters clearing the field of anyone who could be a threat, before turning on their true quarry.

Lex slipped out of the shaded alcove and pushed through a group of aging English tourists coming the other way. Over their muttered complaints about his rudeness, he heard the low drone of a subsonic bullet a split second before a sand-coloured block in the wall near

his head grew an impact crater. The tourists reacted with mild surprise at the sound of splintering rock as Lex left them behind, hugging the yellow stone of the surrounding buildings, putting them between himself and the killers until he turned the corner.

*No sound.* Whatever weapons the two assassins were using, they were practically silent. No one else seemed to be aware of what was going on.

Lex moved as fast as he could without actually breaking into a run, afraid that giving into the panic would result in his death. In his haste to escape, he had left his messenger bag behind at the café, but there was little in there that he couldn't replace. The most important thing, *the invaluable thing*, he had on him. The prize for which he had betrayed his comrades had not been out of his reach since he'd left Berlin.

His hand twitched and tightened as this thought ran through his mind, and nervously Lex ran his other fingers over the scars on his palm, picking at the old, healed wound. His right leg was starting to hurt, like it always did when he was stressed, but he pushed the phantom ache aside by patting himself down, taking inventory of what he still had on him in the pockets of his cargo trousers and hoodie.

*Not much.* Adrenaline soured in his mouth, leaving a metallic taste. This wasn't like the kind of fear he was used to, the rush of speed that washed over his body when he base jumped or rode a curl on a surfboard. *That* he could manage, because in those situations Lex was always in control. *This* was raw and hard and overpowering, and he was struggling to keep his head straight.

*These people want to murder me.* The reality of it finally hit him full-on, punching the air out of his chest.

The fateful choice Lex had made weeks ago, while in Germany, had come back to bite him. The people he lived with, partied with, the people he thought he had known . . . Now he wondered if he had never really understood them. He'd been wilfully ignorant of

what was actually going on, of the plans being made. He had deliberately looked the other way and ignored the hard questions that threatened to spoil the fun of it all. Until the day had come when he couldn't gloss over it any more.

Lex hated himself for that. When it got too much, when he couldn't sleep at night for all the fear in him, he ran. He ran to here, into *this*. And now the killers his former friends had sent to deal with him would do their jobs, and Lex's too-late attack of conscience would be rendered worthless. He cursed under his breath and tried to shake off the sick dread that threatened to choke him.

He started to jog, deliberately going around the ornamental gardens at the north end of Rabat and through the parkland. He slipped behind the trunk of a large carob tree to catch his breath, and dared to take another look back in the direction he had come.

The man in the cap and glasses was close, a few hundred metres away in the shade of a road sign. He was looking in the opposite direction, scanning the street for any sign of his target. Lex saw his mouth moving, but couldn't hear any of the words. The man had two fingers pressed to his neck, as if checking his own pulse. When his fingers dropped away, Lex saw what looked like a nicotine patch on the assassin's throat.

The man glanced in the direction of the bus terminal and nodded, listening to a voice that only he could hear.

Lex followed the line of his gaze. His gut twisted as he saw the second shooter, the woman, emerging from between two white-roofed single-decker buses. She had her hands clasped together, holding her gun out of sight under the folds of a light-coloured jacket.

Her head turned, dazzling sunlight flashing off those big glasses, and she looked right at Lex. Her body language changed in an instant, as if a switch had tripped inside her. She started walking his way, slow and unhurried. She had the same kind of patch on her neck as the other guy, and her mouth shaped more words that Lex could not make out.

The matter of his survival collapsed down to one single option. Lex couldn't head for the bus terminal, he couldn't go back the way he came or down the road that descended the hill. Those routes would take him right across the paths of the assassins.

But there were clumps of people going in and out of the old walled city, more groups of tourists crossing the stone bridge that led to the historic gate into Mdina, enough of them for Lex to use as cover. He moved as quickly as he could, the old pain in his leg biting anew, and screened himself behind a clutch of laughing sightseers busily taking selfies.

He felt a strange moment of dislocation as he threaded his way toward the baroque portal rising up in front of him. He knew little about Mdina's real past, but he remembered that this place had doubled for mythic castles in television fantasy sagas, shows that Lex had binge-watched on long and lonely nights as he waited for his code to compile. He half-expected the people on the bridge to draw swords and come at him; it felt like the whole world wanted him dead.

He tensed with every step he took, waiting for another silent shot to strike him between the shoulder blades, but it didn't come. As he passed into the shadowed streets of the medieval fortress, he shivered involuntarily.

On the far side of the gate, the road split into three, and the milling tourist crowd went straight ahead, following Villegaignon Street past the entrance to St Agatha's Chapel, the first of half a dozen churches crammed inside Mdina's millennia-old ramparts. Lex broke off from the group, slipping away into the side street that followed the line of the fortress's southern wall. There was another entrance into the old city that he had seen from the taxi which brought him here, to the west. If he could reach it and double back, he still had a chance to get away unseen.

He started sprinting, but the pace didn't come easily. With each slap of his trainers on the cobbled street his bad leg jolted him.

Soon the walls began to close in, near enough that he could have reached out his arms and touched both sides at once. The narrowing passage captured some of the daylight, reflecting off the sandstone walls and casting precious few shadows where he might have halted to get his bearings. Off the main thoroughfare, Mdina seemed deserted, reinforcing the strange movie-set aura of the place, but Lex couldn't afford to stop, not when the assassins were so close on his heels.

He skidded around a shallow corner and spotted the arch concealing the western gate. The locals called Mdina the 'Silent City' because of a preservation edict that forbade the use of cars inside the walls for all but a few residents, but there was more to it than that. The old battlements seemed to channel sound into odd, ghostly echoes or soak it up entirely. Lex couldn't be sure if the rapid steps he heard behind him were his own footfalls reverberating back at him or those of a killer, and he didn't dare to slow his pace to find out.

He made it to the gate and dashed through, emerging once more into the full brightness of the day at the top of a ramp leading down to the highway.

The woman in the cap and glasses had anticipated him. She was coming up the ramp to the western gate in quick runner's strides, her face flushed with effort. She held her gun close to her waist. They both stopped short in surprise as they saw one another.

She recovered first. Her weapon came up, the blocky black shape of the revolver seeming too large for her long and delicate fingers. Lex was briefly dazzled by something – then saw that the pistol had an integral laser sight beneath the barrel, sending a crimson dot dancing down his face, across his throat and chest.

He threw himself back toward the gateway as she fired twice. The pistol let out a low metallic clatter, more like the sound of jangling keys than the thunder of a gunshot. Divots of yellow stone splintered out of the arch, hot fragments nicking Lex's cheek as a bullet almost struck him.

He veered back the way he had come and ran deeper into the city, jackknifing into the first side street he found to get out of the woman's line of sight. A third bullet cracked into the flagstones at his feet as he lurched around the turn. The narrow thoroughfares of Mdina had been designed to be no longer than the length of an arrow's shot, so that invaders couldn't get the drop on local soldiers, but against modern firearms that conceit counted for little. Lex's headlong flight took him up a shallow rise, beneath lines of coloured glass lanterns hanging out over the street, past windows barred by iron grates and locked doors. He saw the red splash of the laser off the wall ahead of him and dodged aside again before the assassin could draw a bead.

Lex skidded into a piazza, the wide-open space dominated on the far side by the bright frontage and bell towers of the Cathedral of St Paul. More clumps of tourists were dithering here, groups of elderly folk up from the cruise liners moored in Valetta or parents with their animated children in tow, snapping pictures or listening to fast-talking guides leading them about on walking tours. Lex looked past the travellers, trying to find another escape route.

The few cars that were permitted inside the city walls were parked here, and he scanned them, desperately looking for one he could steal.

His gaze caught on the other assassin. The man halted across the way from him, pretending to be interested in the complex iron-work of an ornate second-floor balcony. One hand curled across his belly, hidden under his jacket. The man rocked off his heels and turned in Lex's direction, the motion calculated to look casual and non-threatening.

A fresh surge of panic came over Lex and he searched the faces of the oblivious holidaymakers. He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs, scream for help. But if he did that, what would happen? In his mind's eye he could see the two killers firing wildly into the crowd, slaughtering people in a mad rush to end him.

Lex started walking, quickly and purposefully, pulling his hoodie tighter around him. He did have one last card to play, one final risky gambit that might get him out of this. But he needed height and distance to make it work.

He passed a boutique selling expensive ornamental glassware, on the ground floor of what had once been a medieval hostel. He looked up, briefly wondering if he could access the building's roof from within. Outside the boutique stood a life-size mock-up of a Maltese Hospitaller Knight. Without warning it was thrown back, slamming against the wall, falling into pieces at Lex's feet. He saw the bright silver edges of a bullet hole through the knight's chest plate and staggered back, catching sight of the woman standing at the mouth of the side street. She had her gun concealed in the same way as her partner, and the shot she fired had passed through the gaps in the crowd and nearly struck its intended target. All the tourists were looking in Lex's direction now, surprised by the commotion but still utterly unaware of the assassins in their midst.

At last, Lex's reserve snapped and he gave up all pretence of trying to blend in. He started running again, weaving through the people ambling along the main street, ignoring the curses and shouts left in his wake. He gambled that his hunters would follow him at a more careful pace, knowing that the narrow road he followed only ended in one place. Lex was deliberately boxing himself in, cutting off other avenues of escape.

The street emptied into the Piazza Tas-Sur, an open space more commonly known as Bastion Square. Around the edges, restored palazzos with red-fronted doors had been turned into museums or terraced restaurants, making the most of the superlative view out across the northern ramparts of the city. Visitors stood on the broad steps that led to the top of the battlements, taking in the sheer drop down the side of the hill to Mdina, the outlook over the village of Ta' Qali and the vineyards beyond. On a clear day like today, it was

possible to see out to St Paul's Bay and the resort town of Buggiba on the northern coast.

The pain in Lex's bad leg collected around the knee joint and he winced as he slowed to a walk. He started checking the zips and fasteners on his clothing, making sure they were secure. Under different circumstances, what he planned to do now would have excited him. He would have a GoPro clipped to his shoulder, and the action camera set to record everything. But here and now he was more afraid than he had ever been in his life, driven by abject terror instead of a thrill-seeking impulse.

Lex closed up the hoodie and tugged a canister from the thigh pocket of his cargo trousers. The size of a large beer can, it attached to a web of expanding bungee cords that he spooled out and looped over his shoulders, snapping them together with a spring-loaded D-ring. He pulled it tight and the canister sat high on his back, between his shoulder blades.

Lex took a deep breath and climbed the stairs up to the battlements two at a time. As he reached the top, he felt the distant twitch of his stomach swooping before the sight of the drop.

*If I do this wrong it will end me*, he told himself. But if he didn't, the shooters would put him down right here in front of everyone. He turned his head and closed his eyes, feeling the breath of the wind on his face, sensing the direction of the gusts.

Then Lex reached up his back for a red plastic toggle on the bottom of the canister, and stepped over the cautionary signs warning not to approach the unguarded edge.

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Behind him, Lex's pursuers held their guns sideways on and low. They kept them down by their hips, hidden in the folds of their jackets. Both of them fired, but even with their specialised training, their shots were off-target by too great a margin. One round blasted

a discarded water bottle sitting on a step, the other blew up a puff of rock dust a few inches from the target's feet. Again, the faces of bystanders started to turn in his direction.

'*He is going to kill himself,*' said the male assassin through the wireless communication node adhered to his throat. This was unexpected.

'*No,*' said the woman, her reply tickling him through his skin. '*I don't think so . . .*'

The target's arm came down in a sharp motion, and the object he had strapped to his back snapped open into a blossom of bright orange fabric and fine white cords. The thin material immediately caught the steady breeze and inflated into a narrow rectangle with a kite-like cross-section.

'*A parachute?*' The man disregarded protocol and launched forward, hoping to get to the target before he could step off the ledge.

The compact canopy filled with wind, drawing shouts of surprise from the assembled tourists in the square, and the target pushed off the side of Mdina's battlements and into the air.

The woman grabbed her partner by the shoulder and pulled him back. '*Wait.*' She was already putting her weapon away.

He resisted, irritated at the idea of missing the kill. The chute was little better than a gimmick, a toy that would barely slow the target's descent. If he got to the edge, if the woman covered him, he might still be able to hit the mark. It was galling to think that this *civilian* would escape them.

'*Both of you stand away,*' said a third voice. '*I have this.*'

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Lex had half-expected the micro-chute to flop out and tangle, leaving him with nowhere to go, but the device performed better than he dared to expect. A nasty shock went through his chest and shoulders as the canopy took his weight and the cords cut into his

flesh, but that was a small price to pay for getting away from the silent shooters. An unexpected thermal from the base of the tall hill threw him up and to the side, slipping him away from the edge of the fortress city, carrying him toward the farms ranged out below. Elation shocked through his body.

It would be a hard landing, he could tell from the rapid rate of descent and the fluttering of the canopy, but it would be one he could stagger away from and that was all that mattered. Lex was already thinking about what to do next – find a vehicle, get down to the coast and get off this rock – when the wind boosted him up once again in a brief rise. He caught sight of the church spires and tiled rooftops across Mdina and Rabat.

In the tallest of the towers, the light of the sun glittered in reflection. A flare off the glassy eye of a telescopic sight.

A moment later, a single steel-cored 7.62mm bullet penetrated Lex's body a few degrees off his sternum and tumbled violently as it passed through him. In the brief instant it took to enter through his chest and burst out through his back, the round spun and ripped through the tissues of his lungs, and tore open the bottom of his heart. Blood gushed into the ragged void created by the passage of the sniper shot and his body twitched as it went into brutal, fatal shutdown.

Lex died as he sank toward the ground, his life ended in an instant. When his corpse finally crashed into a row of vines down in the valley, his clothes and the orange chute were soaked with a wet mess of dark, arterial red.

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A tourist pointed over the edge of the battlements and shrieked. Others were holding up cell phones to record what was going on, and neither Cat nor Dog wanted to remain in the square a moment longer, for fear their faces might get captured on some idiot's video footage.

*'Back to the rendezvous point,'* Dog said, stepping back from the ramparts. He gave Cat the slightest of sideways looks as he walked away, acting as if they had no connection to one another. *'Leave through the main entrance. I will go through the west gate.'*

*'Understood,'* said Cat, speaking without speaking, the device on her neck sensing the half-constructed words as they formed in her throat and turning them into a droning signal. The sub-voc unit made her skin crawl and she resisted the urge to scratch her face, directing the motion into adjusting the sunglasses perched on her small nose.

*'I am making my way to the car,'* Fox said. Cat unconsciously looked up, although from where she was there was no way to see the high roost the sniper had used. *'Local law enforcement officers are at the site of the first engagement. Recommend we shift to secondary exit protocol.'*

Dog was team leader, so the decision was his, but both he and Cat respected the elder Fox's field experience and the answer was as she expected it to be. *'Agreed.'*

She passed by the cathedral and quickened her pace. Her fellow assassin had already vanished into a side street. *'What about the target?'*

*'I saw where he went down,'* Dog replied. *'We must act quickly if we are to get there before anyone else.'*

*'I had to leave the rifle behind,'* Fox admitted.

*'You sanitised it?'* said Dog.

*'Of course.'*

*'Then it won't be an issue,'* Dog added. *'Proceed.'*

Cat slowed her pace as she passed through the Mdina gate and stopped at a vendor to buy a bottle of chilled water, aping the tourists congregating nearby. As she paid for the drink, the green Fiat the team had been provided came around the corner and slowed to a halt. Cat walked over and climbed into the back.

From the driving seat, Fox gave her a nod and then drove on, halting a second time at the next intersection to pick up Dog. As

they rolled away from the traffic lights, a silver police car lined with a blue checkerboard livery raced past in the other direction. As soon as it was out of sight over the crest of the hill, Fox accelerated away, aiming the car toward Ta' Qali.

'Why was he not killed with the first shot?' Fox's voice sounded gruff when he spoke aloud. He didn't direct the accusation at either of them, but Dog stared out of the window and at first gave no indication he was listening.

'The Greek and his bodyguard were more dangerous,' said Cat, after a moment, as she peeled the comm unit's self-adhesive pad from her neck. 'They were armed. They needed to be neutralised first.' She always felt odd talking immediately after removing the sub-voc – she had to consciously remember not to whisper each word she said.

Fox was going to add more, but Dog turned to him. 'Just drive,' he said. 'If we don't get what we came here for, then we will have to consider our alternate options. That will extend the duration of the mission.' He gave Cat a look. 'None of us want to be here any longer than we must be, no?'

Cat shook her head, and began reloading her weapon, swinging out the revolver's angled chambers to insert fresh rounds. There might be witnesses at the landing site, she reasoned, and if that were the case it would be necessary to silence them as well.

## TWO

There had been a good fall overnight, so the morning's arrivals at Pont de la Flégère had come up the mountain eager to race the runs and make the most of the fresh powder. Across the valley from the majestic peak of Mont Blanc, the skiers and snowboarders were already carving paths back and forth before the sun was high in the clear blue sky. There were no clouds, and the thin air was crisp and dry. It was going to be another perfect day on the slopes at Chamonix.

Among the early risers were a couple who kept to themselves, freestyling on a pair of fast CAPiTA boards, looking for kickers to jump and natural drop-offs at the periphery of the blue runs. The guy was white, in his late thirties, tall and whipcord-thin with a scruffy mop of dirty-blond hair, and he had a ragged excuse for a beard that aged him more than he wanted to admit. Now and then he let out a whoop when he caught some air, and he spent most of the time grinning out from behind a pair of mirrored goggles. He took risky turns that planted him in the snow every few runs, as he rediscovered old skills faded with disuse and worked at finding the limits of his abilities. The woman with him took it more cautiously. She was East Asian, maybe ten years his junior, and slightly built. Her small frame, the blue highlights in her black hair poking out from under a cherry-red helmet and her round face made her look more like a teenager. Her matching crimson jacket was a size too large for her, accentuating the impression. She made languid, geometric lines in the powder and rarely got herself into a spill.

Their path brought them toward a cable car station rising further up the peaks, close to a lounge bar with a wide terrace looking out over the valley.

'Race ya,' she said, with a challenging nod.

‘You think you can keep up with—?’ He didn’t get to finish the question. Out of nowhere, his partner made a rapid push off a low slope and flashed by him, digging in a little to spray snow as she passed. ‘Funny. Ha.’ He called after her, pivoting on to the same line.

‘Loser buys!’ She sang the words over her shoulder, deliberately mimicking his boarding style, cutting back and forth in tight traversals.

He pushed into the headwind rising up from the valley and closed the distance. Up ahead of them, pennants raised over the lounge bar’s frontage flicked and snapped in the breeze, marking their makeshift finish line.

Another group was at the bar’s entrance in the process of removing their skis; an elegant couple in expensive, fur-lined snow gear, along with an assistant and three grey-jacketed men of heavy and intimidating build. One of the heavies detached himself from the group and walked into the path of the snowboarders.

They didn’t appear to notice him, both of them too busy trying to outpace the other on the last few hundred metres of their improvised race.

The guy on the snowboard used his weight to his advantage and cut the line past the woman, tossing off a sarcastic wave as he left her in his wake.

‘You’re a dick!’ she said, without heat.

The man looked back in her direction as the slope levelled out. ‘And you are—’

He was going to say *a sore loser*, but the tip of his board hit a mogul that he hadn’t noticed and before he could correct, his balance shifted the wrong way and he wiped out. Face-planting in the white, he rolled to a stop and came up laughing at himself. ‘Idiot!’

The big man’s shadow fell across him and for a second he thought there might be the offer of a hand to help him up; but the heavyset man just watched, waiting for him to rise.

'It's okay. I can manage,' the boarder said dryly.

The man in the grey jacket moved to block the path to the lounge. 'Bar is closed,' he said, in a thick Eastern European drawl.

'Oh?' The guy made a show of looking over the other man's shoulder, watching the elegant couple as they took the best table on the terrace. The lounge's staff were in the process of ushering out the handful of other customers already there. 'Doesn't look that way to me.' Behind him, he heard his companion slide to a halt a short distance away.

'Bar,' repeated the man in the grey jacket, 'Is *closed*.' He said the words slowly, as one might speak to someone who was hard of thinking. Then to underline the point, he used his thumb to drag down the zipper on his jacket so it fell open. The knurled grip of a handgun was visible protruding from a belt holster beneath the coat.

'Whoa, whatever, pal.' The guy raised his hands. 'Be cool.'

'Go away,' suggested the other man calmly. 'Now.'

He shrugged and picked up his board, deciding not to argue the point. The woman fell in step with him as they carried on down the slope.

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'That's her.' Marc Dane dropped the Canadian twang he was affecting and switched back to his natural London accent as he hefted the snowboard on to his shoulder.

'Oh yeah.' Kara Wei nodded, adjusting her goggles. 'I got a good capture.' The optic rig the Chinese-American woman wore concealed a digital image processor, and she tapped at a control pad on the brow of the frame. 'Looks like she's brought her latest lover up for some of that clean mountain air.'

Marc turned his head so he could steal a glance back toward the bar. The big man watched them walk off, and by now the lounge

had been completely emptied of everyone but their target and her entourage. ‘How much d’you think it costs to buy out a place like that for lunch?’

‘Pocket change for the rich and self-centred,’ Kara said flatly. ‘Meanwhile, we have to work for a living.’

‘Yeah,’ sighed Marc. ‘For a second back there, I actually remembered what it was like to take a holiday.’

Kara made a face at him. ‘*Boo hoo*. Come on, we have crime to do.’ She dropped her board back on to the snow and stepped into the bindings, rocking on the heel side as she snapped them tight.

Behind her goggles, Marc thought he saw a flicker of anticipation. He looked down at the battered Cabot dive watch on his wrist, putting himself into a mission-ready mindset. ‘If she follows her usual pattern, that gives us roughly three hours before the limo meets her party at the cable car station . . .’ He clipped on to his own board, gazing along the line of elevated cables down through the snow-dusted trees to the terminus in the valley below. ‘You ready to try a black run?’

‘Race ya,’ Kara repeated, and launched herself with a burst of speed, hunching low and forward.

Despite himself, Marc grinned again and turned after her, guiding the rocker board into Kara’s wake.

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The descent passed in a blur of white and brilliant sunshine, the mountain depositing them back at Les Praz de Chamonix, toward the northern end of the valley. For Marc, the Evettes Flégère run concluded a hazy race through snow, rock and woodland that seemed to take only moments. Time became elastic on the track, contracting into one single extended instant of concentration as he guided himself down and down, crossing dozens of switchbacks

and descents. Then it was over, and his heart was still pounding in his chest. The denser air felt oddly heavy in his lungs and he panted as his body adjusted back to it.

Kara shared a bottle of water as they walked quickly through the side streets toward the heart of Chamonix. They avoided the main drag, which at this time of the day would be choked with tourists and those late to the party on the mountains. Marc checked the countdown as they found their way to the back of a nondescript two-storey office behind a hotel complex.

The building had been rented from a letting agency weeks earlier, and deliberately left to sit idle. Marc and Kara had arrived in the dead of night a few days ago, and they followed a careful routine to make sure the place appeared unoccupied to the outside world.

'I'll spin us up,' said Kara, as she went upstairs.

Marc stripped out of his snowboarding gear and cleaned off. He changed into a dark-blue boiler suit, rolling it on over a fresh T-shirt, working his arms into the sleeves before pulling the brass zip to his neck. A match for the ones worn by the mechanics working in the garage down the street, Marc had weathered it by dragging the thing around the tarmac behind the office, making sure it had enough oil stains and scuffs to look lived-in.

He moved to the windows and peeled back the corner of a layer of sun-bleached newspapers taped over the glass, peering out at the garage a hundred metres away. Set back off the road, the collection of low hangar-like structures had the same arched roofs as the rest of the town. But where the residential chalets, hotels and shops sported wooden cladding, ornamental balconies and sprays of flowers, the garage workshop was bare corrugated metal and blank grey walls. Petrol pumps and a spare parts store took up the eastern end of the place, while the rest of the area had been given over to grimy workshops and maintenance bays. It was a long way from the clean lines, expensive stores and classy restaurants a few blocks south.

He scanned the open mouths of the workshops, picking out the shape of a green Land Rover and a black Mercedes C-Class inside, but saw no sign of the target vehicle. His leg muscles were stiffening from the run down the mountain, and he walked in a circle to fend the aches off. He wanted to look at his watch again, but Marc knew that counting every second wouldn't make time move any faster.

He wandered up to the bare, unfurnished room on the second floor, where Kara sat in front of a camping table, staring fixedly into the screen of a military-specification laptop computer. Black cables snaked away from the machine, some coiling into a portable power pack, others connected to a collapsible satellite antenna that sat on the floor like a discarded, open umbrella. As with the floor below, the windows were papered over with yellowing pages from *Le Monde*.

Kara's expression was distant. Her eyes had taken on a hacker's robotic intensity, an aspect that Marc himself knew well from his own experiences of being stationed behind a keyboard. There was a strange kind of non-awareness that came on when you were glued to a screen for too long, a narrowing of the world that made everything fall away until the motions of your hands and the blink of the cursor seemed to happen of their own accord.

Getting deep into the code, losing yourself in the wires . . . There had been a time when Marc had found that *restful*. A part of him was envious that Kara was running support for this mission. Once, that would have been his assignment.

But a lot had changed for him since that time. Formerly a field technician for one of British Intelligence's tactical Operations Teams, Marc had left that life behind after fate conspired to first make him a fugitive, and then cut him off from his country and the service that had trained him. In the wake of that, he might have been set adrift and lost all purpose, if it hadn't been for the intervention of others.

A man named Ekko Solomon gave him a chance to recover some of what he had lost, to get back into the world and make a difference in it. The enigmatic African billionaire owned a large corporation called the Rubicon Group, and a small part of it operated as a private military, security and intelligence contractor. Marc was officially listed as a ‘consultant’ on the company’s books, but that vague title covered a multitude of possibilities.

Rubicon’s PMC arm specialised in close-protection details, kidnap and recovery and information security – or at least, that was the face shown to the world. The reality was that the company’s so-called ‘Special Conditions Division’ had a much larger mandate than fielding bodyguards for affluent clients.

Solomon made certain that Rubicon adhered to a staunch moral code. He was a man on a mission, using his wealth to do right, to reach out across the globe and take on threats that nation states were either unwilling or unable to oppose.

*Small actions with large consequences.* Rubicon’s founder described their work in those terms.

It was a just cause, and Marc had willingly signed on to be a part of it. He promised himself that he would remain until the day came when he had cause to doubt Solomon’s sincerity, if he ever did. In the shadow world of intelligence agencies, terror cells and non-state actors, where lines of loyalty and truth were often blurred, the suggestion of doing a thing because it was ethically *right* seemed like a quaint, almost naive notion. But there was a correctness about it, a truth that Marc Dane couldn’t ignore.

‘Five minutes out,’ said Kara, her voice pulling him back from his reverie. She studied video feeds from a series of co-opted traffic cameras. ‘You ready for this?’

‘Yeah.’ He straightened, moving to another table where his mission kit was laid out, waiting for the go.

‘All this build-up and then *poof*, it’ll be over . . .’ Kara said to the air. ‘A girl could be disappointed.’

‘You should be happy this is a low-hazard assignment,’ Marc noted. ‘Easier that way.’

‘Hope so,’ she said. ‘Of course, maybe Solomon doesn’t think the two of us can handle the dangerous ops.’

He eyed her, uncertain if she was joking or not. Kara’s demeanour could switch from cat-eyed and grinning to flat sarcasm in a blink, and that made her hard to read. ‘You don’t want to get shot at.’ Marc told her.

‘You’d never say that to Lucy.’ She looked up, then back to the screen in front of her.

‘Lucy Keyes was a tier-one Special Forces operator before she signed on with Rubicon,’ Marc countered. The ex-Delta Force sniper was another vital member of Solomon’s covert agency, and while they usually worked alongside one another, right now the American was a world away on an assignment of her own. ‘I reckon Lucy’s tolerance for mayhem is different from yours and mine, yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ echoed Kara. ‘A gig like this would be way too boring for your girlfriend.’

Marc stopped dead and glared at her, colouring slightly. ‘That is not, in any way, *correct*.’ He sounded out the retort so there was no equivocation. Marc had respect for Lucy and he trusted her, but he didn’t like the intimation that there was something else going on between them. ‘We have a strictly professional relationship,’ he added, and didn’t dwell on exactly why Kara’s comment bothered him so much.

‘I’m not judging.’ She worked at the keyboard, pulling up different video feeds. ‘I figured . . . you and she had . . .’ Kara gave a lazy shrug, starting to lose interest in the thread of conversation. ‘I mean, after you cut loose from MI6 and abandoned them—’

‘I didn’t *abandon* anything.’ His tone hardened. ‘I didn’t have much of a choice.’

She heard the edge in his voice and became contrite. 'Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it.' Kara shot him a blank look, then turned away again. 'My mistake.'

'Not the time,' he shot back, tamping down his irritation, forcing his attention back to the situation at hand. 'Don't be fooled into thinking this'll be a cakewalk.'

Marc returned to kitting up, completing his disguise with a grubby black watch cap and a plastic nametag that Kara had made up in a portable 3D printer at the back of the room. A folding Wingman multi-tool went into one of the boiler suit's sleeve pouches, an ASP air-weight collapsible baton into another. Marc checked his custom-made Rubicon digital notepad and then zipped it into a thigh pocket, along with a spool of data cable. The last thing to go on were a pair of black 5.11 tactical gloves.

'Comms,' said Kara, and she threw a tiny object to him in an underarm toss. He snatched a flesh-coloured radio bead out of the air. The device resembled a discreet hearing aid, and he put it in place in his left ear.

'Okay.' Marc took a deep breath and tried to shake off some of the adrenaline rising in him. It didn't help.

'Nervous?' she asked him, without looking up from the screen.

'No.'

'Liar.' Kara tapped out a command and peered at the display. 'One minute out. He's turning on to the street now.'

Marc wandered back to the window and found a tear in the paper to look through. Approaching from the end of the road, the midnight-blue limousine was impossible to miss. That kind of car was a rare sight in all but the largest European cities, with most of the older continental avenues too narrow to accommodate the vehicle. Having such transport in one's personal fleet made a statement. The owner didn't care for the shortcomings of the world impacting upon their need for conspicuous luxury.

Here and now, the limo was empty, made clear by the way the driver bumped it over the kerb as it pulled into the forecourt of the garage. Marc watched a roller door rise so the car could nose into one of the workshops. 'We're sure that's the right vehicle?'

A digital camera encased in a non-reflective sheath was clipped to the window ledge and Marc heard its lens motor whine as it zoomed in. Kara captured hi-resolution images of the limo to compare with the surveillance shots they already had on record.

'Same plates. Getting a ninety-eight per cent match on vehicle mass analysis,' she told him, all business now. 'That's Toussaint's ride.'

'Okay.' Marc pulled the watch cap down over his hair and scratched his chin through his beard. 'Green for go. In and out in forty minutes, that's the optimal.'

'Good luck,' Kara said absently, already lost once again in the glow of her screen.

Marc exited the empty office by the rear fire escape and turned up the boiler suit's collar, hunching forward as he walked toward the garage.

'Radio check.' Kara's voice buzzed in his ear and he adjusted the fit of the radio bead.

'Five by five,' he replied.

'*En Francais,*' she admonished. '*You're pretending to be a local boy, remember?*'

Marc gave a thumbs-up that would be seen by the camera in the window. '*D'accord.*'

The timing was good. Half of the garage's staff were still out at lunch, and at a distance Marc's disguise made him resemble any one of them. He could easily have been a guy wandering back early ahead of the other mechanics to get a start on the afternoon's jobs. *Nothing amiss here*, he told himself, willing it to be so.

The cover allowed him to cross the edge of the forecourt without drawing any attention and slip around the side of the workshops,

where he knew a fire exit was situated. Two nights earlier, Marc had slipped carefully over a wall topped with broken bottles and done some in-person recon. The oil drum he had moved was still where he had put it, close to the wall where he could use it as the stepping stone to an escape route if the operation went badly wrong.

Of course, if that happened, then the whole mission would have to be scrubbed. The operation hinged on leaving as near to zero footprint as possible, and getting made by the targets would trigger a whole load of secondary protocols.

Marc had worked out the details before they had arrived in Chamonix. They would have to make it look like a failed attempt to steal a car, hiding one illegal action beneath another, but he hoped it wouldn't come to that.

He kept moving, carefully following a path that kept him out of the eye line of the yard's security cameras. Marc had their positions memorised, but he couldn't afford to take any chances. A stocky, bearded man over by the petrol pumps caught sight of Marc and threw him a languid wave, not really looking at him. Marc returned it and before the greeting could turn into something more, he was out of sight and at the fire door. It opened easily, and Marc slipped into the workshop.

Within, it was as unremarkable as it was outside. The garage's owner didn't draw attention to his place with big neon signs or gaudy advertisements. The business had a reputation for discretion and competence, which was why its customers paid handsomely.

The workshop was gloomy and heavy with the reek of engine oil. The black Mercedes and the Land Rover were up on jacks above the maintenance pits, undersides lit by electric lamps but with no sign of the mechanics working on them.

Parked between the two jacks, the target vehicle's bonnet was open to reveal the engine beneath. Even at a distance, Marc could see the anti-fragmentation baffles around the power-plant. The car had been hardened, fitted with heavy duty shocks, run-flat tyres,

sheets of high-impact armour and bulletproof glass. This kind of protection was usually afforded to vehicles that rode around in war zones rather than the French Alps. Nothing short of a rocket-propelled grenade would be able to pierce the passenger compartment, but right now the rear right door hung open as someone moved around inside.

Marc drew back into cover and waited. He tapped the ear bead twice, a pre-arranged code to let Kara know he had eyes on the limo.

*'Copy that,'* she replied. *'Be advised, I saw the driver go into the main office with one of the other employees.'*

After a while, a ropey young white guy in his twenties with a shaven head and a glum expression clambered out of the back of the car, cradling a portable vacuum and other cleaning kit in his hands. The servicing of the interior done, he moved to the front and set to work on the engine, snapping on another work lamp to flood the compartment with light. That had the effect of dazzling the mechanic, allowing Marc to slip around the Mercedes and go low, out of his line of sight. He moved toward the limo's passenger door and eased it open again.

Marc waited for the right moment, and when the mechanic's attention was elsewhere, he climbed into the rear compartment and pulled the door shut.

*'I'm in,'* he whispered. Moving low and slow to keep his weight evenly spread, Marc slid toward the panel that separated the driver's cab from the rest of the interior. The internal privacy blind was still up, and with the dark tinted glass in the side windows no one outside would be able to see him in here.

Next to a glass-fronted mini-fridge stocked with bottles of expensive Veen mineral water and tins of Beluga caviar, Marc found an access port that flapped open when he pushed at it. Behind the flap, he saw the limousine's electronics bay, a nexus for the circuits that ran the car's entertainment system, air conditioning, internal lighting and more.

It was the *more* that interested Marc. Plugging the data cable into the bay's mini-USB port, he connected the compact tablet from his pocket to the other end and booted it up.

The device quickly mapped the architecture of the limo's systems and auto-launched a piece of intrusion software. Within a few seconds, the program had found the vehicle's on-board satellite navigation system and set to work sifting through its limited memory. As Marc expected, the records of the previous journeys stored in the satnav were gone. He imagined the driver was dutiful about that, erasing each route map after it had served its purpose. But simply hitting the *Delete* key was not enough to destroy computer data. That would only erase the file's header, and the majority of the data would remain in the device's memory until actually overwritten by new information. If you knew where to look, that 'deleted' map could easily be recovered.

A progress bar popped up on the tablet's screen and slowly began to fill as the intrusion program copied the satnav's memory. *Two minutes*, Marc guessed. *Then we'll have Toussaint's complete itinerary for the last month.*

Madame Celeste Sophie Toussaint was proving a difficult quarry for Rubicon's Special Conditions Division. She kept walled estates outside Annecy and down on the south coast, and the corporate headquarters of the media company to which she was sole heir occupied an elegant eighteenth-century building in the historic quarter of Lyon. All three were highly secure locations, protected by advanced security systems and guarded by well-paid forces of armed guards. Toussaint employed a Russian-based military contractor called ALEPH as her sentinels, and Marc knew them well. He had crossed paths with some of their mercenaries on an icy day in the Polish countryside and he had no desire to be in their sights again – hence this operation had been conceived to get the intelligence they needed on the woman by more indirect methods.

Over the course of the last year, Rubicon's digital intelligence sources had tracked payments going into Toussaint's accounts through several shell companies that were suspected fronts for militant groups operating in Central and Western Europe. They didn't have proof yet, but the intel strongly suggested that Toussaint was using her global network for the clandestine brokerage of classified information. While she overtly supported nationalists, manipulated politics and stoked the fires of dissent through divisive news programming and slanted media, nothing outside the bounds of legality could be traced back to the woman. Toussaint was suspected of deep ties to the leaders of far-right organisations and fanatic extremists on all sides of the ideological divide, but to date Rubicon had been unable to put her in the same place as any of those people. When she left her estate, she travelled below the radar, and her vehicles, like her homes and her office, were swept twice a day for listening devices. Tracking her was not a viable option, and the dense firewalls around the computers in Toussaint's offices and estate were formidable.

In the end, Rubicon applied an old but irrefutable truth to the operation: security is only ever as strong as its weakest link. Marc had found that weak link in the garage used to service Toussaint's cars while she visited Chamonix. It was impossible to remotely attack her limousine's on-board electronics, but a physical connection would get the intelligence Rubicon needed. If they could build up a picture of Toussaint's movements and map that on to information already in hand about her clients, things would come into sharper focus. Toussaint had a reputation for wanting to make deals face to face, and if that meant she had been meeting terrorists and criminals somewhere in the French countryside, her itinerary would be proof enough of her dealings. And then . . . steps would be taken.

Marc turned that thought over in his mind, watching the progress bar creep forward, listening to the mechanic working at the engine a few metres away.

The French media heiress was more than an amoral opportunist. She was part of a covert group called the Combine, a gathering of power brokers, industrialists and old money types who worked with the common interest of enriching themselves still further. The group had originally come together in the horrors of the First World War, profiteering off the sale of weapons to both sides in the great conflict. In the present, they sought to manipulate the unending War on Terror, stoking the fires of a fearful world and reaping the rewards.

For a moment, Marc lost focus, remembering. The actions of the Combine had set him on the path he now followed. They were responsible for killing the members of his MI6 team, when the unit had come too close to the edges of a Combine-supported terrorist plot. A woman he had cared deeply for, his friends and his career in the British secret service had all been lost in fire because of that.

These people, with their money and their power and their view of the world as if it were a chessboard for their games, were the ones who had struck the flame. A year later, he had been forced to work alongside Combine operatives during the frantic search for a missing weapon of mass destruction, and being directly exposed to their callous outlook had only hardened Marc's resolve to bring them down.

If Toussaint was just a criminal, then exposing her would restore a small measure of balance to the world. But if they could prove she was Combine, then the deed became a personal one for Marc Dane. He nursed an icy fury for the group and ruining their schemes was a victory he sorely wanted.

But Rubicon had to be *certain*. Ekko Solomon would not act against someone without being absolutely assured of their guilt.

'Hey,' Kara's voice sounded in his ear, drawing him back to the moment once more. As she spoke, the layers of digital encryption in the signal gave her words a flat, machine-like timbre. 'I'm seeing the guy who spoke with the driver. He's walking out to the front of the main gates for a smoke. He's alone.'

‘Eyes on the limo driver?’ Marc whispered the words, letting the bone-induction microphone in the earpiece pick them up.

‘*No joy,*’ Kara told him, and a jolt of cold ran down Marc’s back. As she said the words, he heard a mutter of conversation strike up outside the car, behind the open bonnet. He caught a few words in clipped, fast French. The mechanic complaining about a half-finished job. Then another voice, gruff and pissed-off, insisting that it was time to leave, *right now*.

Marc looked at the tablet. The progress bar was three-quarters full, and without the complete download the mission would be a failure. If he tried to get out of the car now, he would be seen. Possibilities spun through his mind, all of them untenable.

The downward spiral his day was taking continued unabated. The limo’s bonnet came down with a slam and the car jostled on its shocks with the force of it. Marc glimpsed movement in the side windows and he heard the driver’s door clunk open and closed.

‘*What’s going on in there?*’ said Kara. ‘*I don’t have a visual.*’

‘Think I’m going for a ride,’ Marc whispered.

The vehicle’s engine grumbled into life and a chorus of dull metallic thuds sounded around him as the doors automatically locked. The limousine lurched into reverse and crawled out of the workshop, back into the wintry sunshine.

‘*Oh shit.*’ Kara’s reaction mirrored Marc’s own, but he stayed silent for fear of doing anything that might alert the driver to his presence.

It would only require the man to drop the privacy shield and throw a glance into the passenger compartment for him to see Marc down on the floor, clutching at the data tablet. Toussaint’s drivers were provided by ALEPH, and they carried personal firearms in defiance of French gun laws. Marc’s folding baton would be no defence against a pistol.

He felt the vehicle bump the kerb as it eased out on to the road, then lurch again as it moved into forward gear and away.

*'Dane, he's leaving early. Tell me you're not still in there.'* He tapped the earpiece in answer and Kara's reply took a while to come. *'Shit. Okay. I've got your comms. I can track you.'* There was another long pause. *'This is not optimal.'*

Marc didn't respond, moderating his breathing to slow his racing pulse as he lay on the floor of the limo, staring up at the frost-spotted sunroof above him. The tablet in his hand vibrated gently, letting him know that the download had finally completed, but in the current situation that gave small consolation. He decided to risk sending a data signal, using the tablet's wireless functionality to compress the stolen information, then direct it in an encoded burst back to Kara's computer and a remote cloud server operated by Rubicon for exactly these kinds of situations. It only took a few seconds to run the subroutine, and when it was done, he took a deep breath. At least now, if he ended up on the wrong end of a gun, the intelligence they had come to Chamonix to capture was safe.

It only remained for Marc to get the hell out of the limousine without being discovered. He tapped silently at the tablet as the driver switched on the radio, the vehicle accelerating as it veered on to a main road.

The radio spat out a rapid-fire stream of French from a newscaster filling in the high points of the day's global events, concentrating on a terse report about a metro train crash in Taipei that had claimed the lives of a French fencing team visiting Taiwan for the Youth Games. Presently, the news bulletin concluded and a female presenter returned to hosting a chart show rundown. The music gave Marc the cover he needed to move around in the limo's rear compartment.

He shifted so that his legs wouldn't cramp up in the tight confines and ruin his chances of running if an opportunity presented itself. Trees flashed past the windows, but from his low angle Marc could see no landmarks. Instead, he used the tablet to mirror the satnav screen on the limo's dashboard and squinted at the display.

They were moving south, back toward the far side of the valley. That meant that the vehicle was most likely on its way to the cable car station to pick up Toussaint early.

He ran through that scenario in his head, based on the surveillance data Rubicon had gathered on the woman's routine. The limousine would park, covered, at the side of the station and Toussaint would get in with her executive secretary and bodyguards before they set off to her next destination, either the airport or her estate. Given the annoyance in the driver's voice back at the garage, Marc guessed that this summons had not been planned in advance. He wondered if he could use that to his advantage.

Marc considered and rejected a couple of possible action plans; get Kara to drive out and intercept the limo before it reached the station; try to co-opt the vehicle's cell phone and fool the driver into redirecting them to a secluded spot where Marc could make a run for it. He shook his head. Both of those options were messy and they would leave Toussaint aware that her security had been violated. It was imperative she did not know her itinerary had been hacked, otherwise the woman would go dark and the intelligence Rubicon had painstakingly gathered would be rendered useless.

Waiting until the car reached the station was the worst choice of them all. Even with the element of surprise on his side, Marc estimated his chances as slim to nil. ALEPH's mercenaries tended to solve problems with the liberal application of bullets, as he had learned back in Poland.

*'I checked the maintenance logs from Haute-Savoie,'* said Kara, referring to the nearest airport, an hour away in Annecy. *'Toussaint's Gulfstream is being gassed up as we speak. Something has her rattled.'*

Again, he didn't reply. Speculating on the target's reasons for her rapid departure was, for now, of secondary importance. Instead, he opened up another window on the tablet and streamed the live feed of traffic bulletins pushed to the satnav, skimming them for anything he could use. There was information about a stalled coach

out in Argentière causing tailbacks, a notation about ongoing road-works in Le Houches . . . And then he found what he needed. An advisory to motorists warning them to avoid police patrols with radar guns camped out along the N205 motorway. The cops were tracking reckless or inattentive drivers speeding out of the long Tunnel du Mont-Blanc.

Working quickly, Marc inserted a command window between the incoming traffic data and the limo driver's display. His grasp of the French language was good enough to craft a quick message to the effect that an overturned truck had blocked the road they were already on. He hit *Send* and a moment later, Marc heard the satnav ping as the message appeared. The driver gave a grunt of irritation and Marc knew the man was buying it. With a few more commands, Marc made the hacked satnav display show a new route that directed the limo on to the N205 and a roundabout route to its destination. He deleted all mention of the speed patrols and held his breath.

The limo rolled slightly as the driver pulled into a slip road and took the on-ramp. *Step one*, Marc told himself. *Now for my next trick.*

Retreating out of the satnav's programs, Marc went back to the basic maintenance menu and found the main virtual circuit for the vehicle's other electrical systems. Like most cars built in the last few years, the limousine used a device called a 'controller area network' to run the power flow from the battery to the various devices. CAN access could be shielded from external wireless attacks, but from within the car with a hard line plugged in, it was wide open. Marc's eyes narrowed as he swung into the pace of the plan. He cued up a macro to activate the solenoid switches in the door locks and open them on his command, then tabbed to the controls for the limo's front and rear lights, and waited.

On the satnav screen, the crimson dart representing the car passed into the area where the police patrol lurked and Marc set the next stage in motion. With a couple of keystrokes, he started the exterior

lights blinking on-off, on-off, hoping that the driver wouldn't immediately notice it. With more time, he might have been able to loop into the traction controls for the vehicle's brakes or even affect the steering, but doing so would have run the risk of causing a traffic accident. With the frost-slick road beneath the limo's wheels, it could have easily thrown them into a serious collision.

*If this doesn't work, that's exactly what I'm going to have to do.* Marc tensed, wondering how best to survive that, if it came to it.

But in the next second, the flash of blue strobes behind the car told him he had been successful. A white BMW police motorcycle roared up on the inside lane and Marc glimpsed the helmeted cop in the saddle jabbing a finger in the direction of the motorway's hard shoulder as he paralleled the limo.

The driver swore under his breath and Marc felt the vehicle slow as it slipped across the highway. In a moment, they had halted and the man up front began drumming his hands irritably on the steering wheel.

Marc cued up a last macro on the tablet, set the command running and then disconnected it. As he carefully replaced the flap over the access panel, the driver rolled down the window to talk to the police officer. Marc began counting down from ten.

*'Y at-il quelque chose qui cloche avec votre véhicule?'* Marc could make out the cop looking into the cab of the limo as he slid back over the floor of the rear compartment, toward the door nearest to the hard shoulder. The driver said something Marc didn't catch as his count reached zero. The limo's horn let out a long, loud blare of sound and the doors unlocked in the same instant.

In the time it took the motorcycle cop and the limo driver to react to the unexpected noise, Marc had opened the rear door just enough to slip through and roll out, face down on to the asphalt. Staying low, keeping the body of the car between himself and the police officer, Marc squirmed over a squat concrete barrier and into a weed-choked ditch. He lay flat, willing himself to remain unseen.

He didn't dare raise his head to look over the wall, for fear that he might be spotted. Instead he waited, gripping the handle of the collapsible baton and straining to listen. Minutes seemed to stretch into hours, and at any second he expected the shadow of the cop or the driver to fall over him and a voice to angrily demand *Que faites-vous ici?*

At length, he heard the grumble of the limousine's engine as it pulled away, and after waiting another minute, Marc finally peeked back over the lip of the barrier. The vehicle and the motorcycle patrolman were gone. The tension of the situation drained out of him and a half-gasp, half-chuckle escaped from his mouth.

'Close one,' he said aloud, looking around to re-orient himself. Trudging back down the hard shoulder, he set off in the direction of the staging area. Marc reached up and tapped his radio earpiece. 'You reading me? Extraction is complete, over. It was chaotic as hell, but I reckon we did okay.' Only silence answered him, and after a moment he plucked out the device, checking to make sure it was still working. 'Kara? Are you on?'

The only sound that returned was the faint buzz of an open channel.

He wanted to get back to the rented office as quickly as he could, but Marc resisted the urge and followed the protocol that existed for any irregularity in the mission. He took a circuitous route, making sure he wasn't being followed, until he approached the site from the opposite direction he had left it hours earlier. He was cold and tired by the time he arrived, chilled by the icy mountain air even though the sun shone brightly.

Across the street, nothing seemed amiss at the garage where it had all started, the mechanics at work and no sign of any suspicious vehicles parked nearby.

Keeping out of sight, Marc came up the stairs to the office space with the ASP baton hidden in his hand, ready for anything. He

found Kara alone in the bare, unwelcoming room. She was in the middle of stripping the place down, packing their kit into bags.

‘You’re back,’ she said, ‘good, help me with this.’ Kara thrust the portable satellite antenna into his hand and nodded at an open case on the floor.

Marc pocketed the baton and set to work folding up the antenna for transport. ‘You went silent on comms—’ he began, but she spoke over him.

‘Had to,’ Kara insisted. Her earlier mood, the mix of sly boredom and undirected energy, was gone. In its place she seemed distracted and sullen. ‘There was . . .’ She stopped talking and then started again. ‘There’s been a development.’

As she said the words, Kara moved to her laptop and snapped it closed. Marc saw a flash of a screen filled with text. ‘Toussaint?’ he asked. ‘I mean, are we blown?’ His hand clenched. Had all his on-the-fly improvisation to get the data from the limo been for nothing?

Kara shook her head. ‘Not that.’ She flashed him a quick smile. ‘Smart play, very good.’ Then it was gone, flicked off like a light. ‘This is different. We’re shutting down, Delancort’s going to have a clean-up team come in and sanitise this place.’

Henri Delancort was Ekko Solomon’s executive aide and de facto chief of operations, a man who seemed to have the numerical value for everything stored in his head, and in Marc’s eyes, someone who only saw the world in terms of losses or gains. It was usually his job to parcel out the tasks of the Special Conditions Division. ‘Delancort contacted you?’

Kara gave a nod, stuffing the mil-spec laptop into a backpack before snatching up a red leather jacket hanging on the back of a chair. ‘As of now, the Celeste Toussaint investigation has been pushed to secondary status. We’ve been re-tasked to a more time-sensitive assignment.’ She jerked her head towards the door that led to another room, where their personal gear and sleeping racks had been set up. ‘You ought to change. I got us flights.’

Marc closed up the antenna case. 'We're not going to debrief?'

'No time for that. Give me the tablet, I'll refresh the memory and load the data – you're gonna need on it. I have you on a plane from Geneva. I'll take the train across the border to Turin and get my flight from there, to maintain operational security.'

'Where are we going?'

'Malta. Rubicon received an alert . . . Someone – a *person of interest* – was killed there today.' She eyed him. 'There's a Combine connection.'

Marc felt a rush of cold run through him. 'Probable, like Toussaint, or—?'

'High confidence,' she cut him off again. 'Look, there will be a briefing packet waiting for you on arrival, okay?' Her tone softened. 'You know how it goes with these creeps. If they pop up on the radar, we have to take advantage of it. Solomon wants us to get this done. Low-profile. Minimum communications.'

'There's no one else Rubicon can send?'

'SCD's other assets are tied up,' she explained. 'It has to be you. And me.'

Marc nodded to himself. If there was a confirmed Combine lead in Malta, it would go cold quickly. The group were good at covering their tracks.

And after what happened today, he felt the gnawing rise of a familiar ache in his chest. The need to make the Combine pay for all they had taken from him, for all they had taken from so many innocents, never really went away. If there was a chance to strike back, for certain this time, he wanted to be a part of it. 'The guy who was killed, he was with them?'

'He was their victim,' she corrected. 'We have to find out why.'

'Okay,' Marc said, at length. 'I suppose this is what we get for complaining about low-hazard assignments . . .' Kara looked at him blankly. 'Are you okay?' Studying her, he noticed her cheeks were flushed.

‘Fine,’ She noticed his close attention and turned. ‘I was blind-sided today. Getting complacent. Seeing you nearly get tagged out there brought me up sharp.’ Kara gave a low sigh. ‘It reminded me this isn’t a game.’

‘Can’t argue with that. All right, I’ll get my kit and we’ll head out.’

‘Marc.’ Kara called his name as he walked away. ‘You trust me, don’t you?’ It seemed an odd question and his confusion must have shown on his face. ‘Never mind.’ She brushed her words aside like they were a nagging insect, before he could answer.