



*Brussels, Day 2*

His career could rest on not blowing this assignment. Jacob set his mug and laptop on the rectangular table. Outside the wall of windows flanking the conference room, architecture spanning centuries of styles spread to the horizon. The coffee soured in his stomach. Many of the neighborhoods were now home to terrorists.

*Dear God, help us uncover these financiers.*

Although he knew his team only by email correspondence, von Bingen hadn't blocked his choices. All top-drawer experts, each could light bonfires around his experience. Pushing aside his mug, Jacob opened his laptop. Hopefully he hadn't chosen any prima donnas.

Soft murmurs of conversation filtered down the hall. He straightened his tie, adjusted his cuffs as he moved to the doorway. His team filed in, laptops in shoulder bags and mugs in hand. Ian Harper, from the UK Interpol Headquarters in Manchester. Jean-Pierre Aubert from the Lyons office. Gunter Kraus from Munich. Margot Müller from Vienna. If any leads pointed to America, he'd liaise with national security

organizations in Washington. One benefit of being an American posted in Belgium.

“*Guten Tag*, good day.” Model-slender, Margot wore her black suit with panache, her dark hair in a bun that heightened her resemblance to the Duchess of Cambridge.

Of the teams’ emailed lists of possible financiers, only she named a viable suspect.

Jacob took his seat, Margot across from him. “We’re all fluent in French, English, and German. Any preference?”

“How about English. My German’s a bit rusty.” Redheaded Ian Harper, the first to accept the team appointment, plopped into the chair beside Jacob, then nudged his elbow. “How can we lure you to the UK office?”

“It’s tempting. However, my fiancée works here.”

“A pity. We could use a good man like you on our side of the Channel.”

Navy sweater and rumpled cords suggesting a French college professor on sabbatical, Jean-Pierre slouched in the chair on Jacob’s right.

Pulling a pair of half-lens readers from his coat pocket, Gunter sat next to Margot.

When he’d reviewed their creds, Jacob had taken a chance on Gunter Kraus. A gray-haired sixty to his own thirty. But Kraus brought decades of experience and wisdom to the group, whereas the other team members had only a handful more years than Jacob.

The team had divided into native linguistic groups. Next time he’d find a round table for their meeting. “While you’re on site today, let’s compile lists of bank transfers that might indicate money laundering, bitcoin transactions—”

“*Ja*, their new preferred method of laundering.” Gunter chuckled.

“Any known cash couriers, narcotics smugglers, sex traffickers. Even charities. And individuals sympathetic to terrorists.” Jacob waited while they tapped in notes.

“We’re looking for half-inch needles in haystacks.” Ian cracked his knuckles. “By the time we find one, Interpol will be too late.”

“Not much prep time, but let’s share what we have. We’ll start with you, Margot.”

“*Ja*.” She brought up a document on her laptop. “We’ve received numerous reports of a man called the Priest, whom rumors say, is a chief financier of terrorist cells and activities throughout Europe.”

“*Oui?*” Jean-Pierre’s bushy brows arched. “An actual priest?”

“Or it’s a moniker.” Gunter cleared his gravelly bass voice.

“Has anyone seen this priest?” Ian drummed a finger on the table. “Do we have any descriptions of him?”

“Our tip came from a street informant.” Margot sighed. “But when we show up, there’s no one dressed like a priest or anyone connected to terrorists or financiers.”

“Perhaps there’s an infiltrator inside your ranks.” Jacob bounced his pencil’s eraser-end on the table. Uneasy glances darted between his team. “Since we occasionally manage to penetrate a terrorist cell, we should assume they can do the same to Interpol.” Swallowing, he tried to squelch the images of Noel dying in his arms, murdered by terrorists from the cell he’d infiltrated.

Phlegm rumbled in Gunter’s throat. “So how do we flush out this Priest?”

“We try to track him down through his lieutenants.” Jacob laid his pencil on the table. “The henchmen who do his dirty work for him, the fixers and facilitators.”

“Are we assuming he’s based in Austria?” Ian said.

“Possibly.” Jean-Pierre shifted in his chair.

“I propose we focus on London.” Ian’s cheeks flushed. “Sadly, we’re the European capital of money laundering ops, offshore unnumbered bank accounts, foreign oligarchs. Factors appealing to terrorist financiers.”

“The Priest might not be someone on our radar,” Jacob said.

“He may have fingers in multiple worldwide ops. In this age of jetsetters, he might not even live in Europe.”

Groans rose around the table.

“Don’t you Yanks have a jigsaw puzzle called, Where’s Waldo?” Ian said.

Snickers rounded the table, but worried eyes locked with Jacob’s.

“Yes. Based on the British book series, *Where’s Willie*.” Jacob tugged at his necktie. The last thing they needed was a Where’s-Waldo search across the continent. “Let’s focus on money laundering ops in Europe. See if we can build on Margot’s thread.”

“Why not set up a sting operation and see if we can flush him out?” Ian continued his finger-drum.

Jacob turned to him. “What did you have in mind?”

“Do we have time to do this?” Margot, the practical one. “Mounting a sting requires finesse.”

“Or should we concentrate on uncovering the terrorist cells they’re funding?” Gunter rotated his mug in half circles. “Track a lead through them to the financiers.”

“If we can eliminate much of their income ...” Jean-Pierre leaned forward in his chair. “These cells can’t buy weapons, fund training camps, and live the high life.”

A computer bell dinged. Margot clicked her touchpad, scanned the screen. “We’re in luck. One of our more reliable snitches says the Priest will be in Vienna for a lunch meeting with a client at the Sacher Hotel.”

“When?” Jacob’s pulse quickened.

“Tomorrow.”

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FIGHTING the urge to loosen his tie, Jacob stood in front of von Bingen’s desk. A schoolboy waiting for the principal to cane his knuckles. Apart from her white reveal-nothing coffee mug, there

were no family photos, not even a potted plant. Only a broad desk, a chair for her victim's inquisition, and a credenza whose secrets remained hidden. And an impressive view of Brussels rooftops from the broad plate-glass windows. The décor of a transient, not expecting to stay long.

"Bring me up to date, Coulter." Von Bingen tossed a manila folder in her outbox.

In a few terse sentences, he filled her in on the team meeting. "We'll be doing daily Zoom meetings." Given the Machiavellian curve of her lips, she'd probably bugged the conference room. "The team is working from cubicles now, gathering intel. Researching shell corporations and creating lists of possible suspects for money laundering in core countries. And collating lists of known sympathizers to jihad."

"Think outside the box, Coulter. Look at wealthy hotshots not suspected of being jihadist sympathizers."

"Yes ma'am, we're already on that track."

Gaze zeroed on him, she leaned back in her gray leather chair, fingers working the padded armrests. "Well done." Her tone sounded as if the compliment pained her.

"Thank you." The woman made grown men feel like ten-year-olds earning gold stars for household chores. No wonder her husband ended things.

"I want you on a flight to Vienna tonight."

"But—" Tonight was Riley's debut in Antwerp. No way could he miss that.

"Get on it, Coulter." Von Bingen whipped open her laptop. "Now."

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AT HIS DESK, Jacob scrolled through available flights from Brussels to Vienna. The latest one left Zaventem at eight. He flexed the knots in his fingers. Riley's performance wouldn't end

before nine-thirty or ten. Then it would be nearly an hour back from Antwerp.

The train ride to Brussels was only forty minutes, but she'd be exhausted, and he didn't want her taking a night train without him. After dark, Brussels train stations were dangerous. She wouldn't reach her apartment before one in the morning. He opened a second tab and searched for hotels near the Antwerp opera house.

The opening bars of the Queen of the Night aria "*Der Hölle Rache*," "Hell's Wrath," tinkled from his phone. Riley. "Hey, thought you might be napping."

"Nope. I slept in until noon. I'm good to go."

"That's great." Images of her rented room in Claudette DeBeer's spacious apartment filled his mind as he pulled up a website for florists in Antwerp. The eighty-year-old opera lover had been ecstatic to have Riles move in. He chose a floral shop near the opera house. "Wish I could drive you to Antwerp, but I have team meetings all day."

"No problem. The train's fine. I reserved you a comp ticket on the second row. You can pick it up at the box office." The singsong lilt in her voice sounded like a kid about to blow out her birthday candles.

"Thanks, hon." He selected three baskets of roses, a dozen in each, and entered his credit card information. Tried not to flinch at the bill. Riles was worth every euro of it.

"You seem glum. What's up?"

"Hon, I can't make it tonight."

The silence on her end knifed his heart in two. Would their marriage be like this—choosing the life-and-death call of his job, missing milestone moments with Riles and their children?

"Oh. I see."

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry, but I have to catch a flight to Vienna."

"Couldn't you fly out tomorrow morning?" The wistfulness in her tone made him want to hop in his car and dash to her apartment.

“Tried that. I’d miss the meeting.”

More silence on her end.

“Look, it’s not the kind of meeting one can schedule.”

“Oh.” He could almost hear her sit up straight. “One of those.” Her voice wobbled. “Can you text me and let me know you’re safe?”

“Sure. No problem.” He sagged in his chair. This was her debut in a leading role. He ought to be there tonight, cheering her on. That’s what good fiancés did. But if he compromised the success of his assignment, people could die.

Von Bingen’s office door swung open. Phone in hand, she headed for his cubicle.

“Gotta go.” He smooched into the phone and closed the florist and Antwerp hotel websites on his screen. Checking them on his office computer had been risky. A computer probably under surveillance.

Reaching his desk in three strides, von Bingen held her phone in front of his face. The list of Austrian Airlines flights from Brussels to Vienna filled the screen. “I want you on the eight o’clock flight. And from now on, keep an overnight bag in the office.”

“Yes, ma’am.” At least she didn’t tell him what to pack. Chest spread, he leaned back in his chair, lips clamped. One stroke of her pen and she could have him fired. But no way would he be her patsy. *Man, get a grip. You’re a Christian. She’s your boss.*

“Well—what are you waiting for? Book it now.”

Heat surged up his neck. If only he could’ve been there for Riles. He turned to his desk and pulled up Austrian Airlines. Typed in his information and credit card number. Hovered his finger on the mouse. *Oh Riles. Forgive me.*