



*Brussels, Belgium, Day 1*

Urgent need to expose European terrorist financing and channels of distribution. Priority No. 1 assessment. Internet chatter suggests looming coordinated terrorist attacks.

Seated at his desk inside Brussels' Interpol Headquarters, Jacob Coulter reread the page. No mention of where they might attack. Or when. Or how. *Face it, Coulter. This isn't just about catching terrorists.* Ever since his best friend had died in Jacob's arms, trying to warn him and Riles had helped Interpol uncover terrorist cells on the riverboat cruise in June, Jacob had taken these assignments personally.

Sighing, he topped the towering memos in his inbox with this latest warning. Most were top-priority assessments. He yanked at the knot in his necktie. Intel analysts weren't magicians.

Two jiggles of his computer mouse, and his monitor screen sprang to life. These days, too many leads morphed into red herrings. Wasted time and manpower searching to the left, while the enemy took the castle on the right.

“Coulter.” His new boss, Helga von Bingen, stood behind his chair. On the carpeted floor, her stilettos were as stealthy as an F-35.

Good thing he still wore his suit jacket. He rose to face her. Usually when she roamed the area, his colleagues tongue-clicked a warning then ducked their heads beneath cubicle walls.

“You’ve read the latest communique?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Up this close, the mid-fiftyish bags beneath her eyes were hard to miss.

“Good.” Her cool gray eyes raked him from his head to his well-polished shoes. “I’m changing your assignment.” With the practiced touch of a wife, she adjusted the knot in his red silk tie, her breaths warming his lips.

Dealing with her was like crossing Niagara Falls blindfolded on a tightrope. Fist unclenched, he reached for his tie and tweaked the knot loose. Newly divorced von Bingen just didn’t get it. He was engaged to Riles. “So—I’m to stop tracking terrorist cells?”

“For the time being.” She fingered the strand of pearls circling the neckline of her gray sharkskin suit. “Your success uncovering the riverboat cruise plots was impressive. I’m assigning you to head an international team to find these financiers.”

Inadvertently, his shoulders squared. Riles, with all her derring-do antics, had been equally responsible for the terrorists’ apprehension. “Do we have any leads?”

“Precious little. Other than references to someone connected to sources in Vienna, Austria.”

Why this leap in authority?

Von Bingen’s eyes hooded like spring-trapped security doors. “We need to hit the terrorists at their source. Arrest these financiers, shut down their money-making operations. And that, my friend.” She poked a well-polished nail in his pec. “Is your job.”

“Yes ma’am.” Perspiration pooled in his armpits. Maybe she’d

set him up to fail. After all, he'd already spurned her squeezes on his shoulder, her fingernail trailing his temple.

Riles' ringtone broke the silence. He reached inside his pants' pocket, stilling the raging aria she'd chosen.

"A personal phone call?" Von Bingen's lips thinned to a gash.

"My fiancée."

"Tell her you're going to be working around the clock. We need a breakthrough on this case. Fast."

"Yes, ma'am." Riles wasn't going to like this. More nights apart. No weekends together. How much more separation could their relationship withstand, with him living in the office and her traveling around Europe, singing?

"I want the names of your team members before lunch today, and your first team meeting onsite tomorrow."

"Will do." And three solid leads on the identity of the financiers, no doubt. Problem was, American and European Union agreements prevented data storage on a person for more than five years. If they were hunting terrorists not in the current database, he'd have no names to give her. With terrorist attacks in the works, massive funding could be fueling their recruitment and training camps, logistics, purchase of weapons.

Von Bingen headed for the conference room where department chiefs were filing inside, coffee mugs in hand.

Back at his desk, the photo of Noel, Christine, and their infant son, pinned to his cubicle wall mocked him. Another self-promise he was failing to keep. Looking after Noel's widow and the baby. He'd envisioned helping her two or three times a week, to take care of little Noel. But Jacob's job kept him deskbound more hours than he was off each week.

*God, help me find a way.*

Tracy's snapshot was also pinned in the corner, dressed in her boarding-school uniform. Seventeen years between them—his parents' "surprise" baby. They'd been so eager to return to the foreign mission field, they'd plopped her in a British boarding

school at the age of six. The poor kid had never known family life. But then, neither had he.

Shaking his head, he pulled out a legal pad, jotted the names of key financier-traffic analysts for France, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and the UK. Not that terrorist activities were limited to those nations, but their cities were known targets. While he waited for their response to his emailed invites to the group, he dialed Riles, twirling the pencil in his hand.

On the third ring, she answered. "Did I catch you in a meeting?" Her question mumbled around a mouthful.

"Yes." Keeping his voice low, he filled her in on von Bingen's kibosh on his free time.

"Bummer. I was hoping you'd come to Antwerp tomorrow night." More garbling he could barely interpret. "For my premiere."

"Are you eating lunch?"

"No. Burie's chocolates."

Ever since he laid eyes on Riles' press picture on the riverboat, he'd been smitten. How could he have believed she was working with the terrorists? The past three months had been like opening tiny windows on an Advent calendar and finding a sweet surprise inside.

"Is chocolate good for the voice?"

"Not exactly. But it's great for the soul. And dastardly for my hips. You don't mind if I sprout big hips, do you?" Licking sounds bled into the phone. "I really need your support." Shrilling up to one of her high Cs, she told him about the death-defying staging.

He jerked forward in his seat. Snatched a pencil from his desk. "That's insane." He needed to be there for her. Three months ago, he'd nearly lost her to the terrorists. "What are they doing to keep you safe on that lift?"

"They're going to oil it before tomorrow night. But the stagehand, Frans, must think he's playing with a joystick."

Chomping and lips smacking drifted through the mic. “Maybe I should buy a parachute.”

“That’d work about as well as a pair of wings.” He tossed the pencil on his desk. “Play the prima donna. Demand some sort of safety harness. A net.” Heads peeked at him over the cubicle wall. Huddled over his phone, he lowered his voice. “Anything to keep you safe from harm.”

“Right. Better get on that.” Phone kisses smooched into his ear. “Love you.”

Before he could respond, she’d disconnected the call. Would she take his advice or decide she could ace this gig on her own? Shoving aside his now-cold coffee, he sent up quick prayers. Thanks to all the press coverage after the river-boat cruise, Riles’ face was now known to terrorists everywhere.

Terrorists focused on revenge.

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*Antwerp, Day 1*

NO NEED FEAR THE TERRORISTS—FRÉNIÉ would kill Riley if she didn’t mail her a box of chocolates. After all, what were best friends for? Who’d have thought their two years as graduate-level voice students at the National University of Music in Bucharest would stand the test of time and separation?

Riley stepped inside Burie’s Chocolatier, famous for elaborate shop window scenes concocted of the confection for every holiday. Soccer matches, even a white chocolate replica of the White House. Whatever appealed to Mr. Burie.

Shelves of gifts and navy-blue boxes, hundreds of chocolates inside the glass counter, waiting to be devoured. She drew a breath and let the scent invade every molecule in her lungs. A dark chocolate on her tongue and she could cope with anything.

“Ah, you’re back. And so soon.” Wiping her hands on a towel, the clerk smiled at her.

“Half-empty, already.” Riley jiggled her blue Burie’s bag.

“I see.” The clerk tapped the corner of her lip, the universal signal for food on your face.

“Oh, *Dank U*.” Riley licked the corners of her lips, and the rich chocolate truffle melted on her tongue. “I want to buy a box for my friend.” Then she’d take the next train back to Brussels and chill out in her apartment the rest of the afternoon. Cell in hand, she dialed Frénie.

“Only for your friend?” The woman’s eyes twinkled.

“Uh, no. I need more emotional support.”

“What size box?”

“A kilo. For each of us.”

“A kilo. That is serious emotional support.” Smiling, the woman poised her tongs over the trays of pralines and truffles.

Riley pointed to three of Frénie’s favorites, then raised four fingers for the amount.

“*Allo, ma chérie*.” Frénie’s French accent lilted into the phone, conjuring images of her friend’s gamin face, her pixie haircut. So perfect for her career as a musical theater chanteuse. “Where are you?”

“In Antwerp, at Burie’s. Buying us kilos of chocolate.”

“A kilo? What’s happened? Did you break up with Jacob?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” At least, not yet. Bringing Frénie up to date on the rehearsal, Riley pointed to three more chocolates and held up five fingers.

“*Chérie*, my advice is—finish these performances, come to London and we’ll see the sights. And you absolutely must meet Armand.” Giggles erupted on the phone. “He is so—*oo-là-là*.”

“He must be wonderful if you’d give up your job on the cruise boat after we worked so hard to keep it.” Subbing for Frénie and dancing with terrorists had been more than Riley had bargained for. “I thought you loved being an entertainer.”

“I’m taking a sabbatical.” Scuffling sounded in the background. Frénie whispered, “He’s fabulously wealthy. Has his

own private jet. Last month he bought me a red Lamborghini. Oh *chérie*, he treats me like Queen Cleopatra.”

“Yeah, well. Things didn’t turn out so well for her.” Riley snarfed a truffle from her bag. If she’d learned one thing from her own dating disasters, wealth and looks could be deceiving.

“I tell you, *chérie*, Armand dotes on me. He’s even promised to buy me a diamond necklace.”

With a plethora of stones and twice Frénie’s weight in carats, no doubt. “How did you meet him?”

“He was a passenger on the riverboat cruise six weeks ago. Oh, *chérie*, we danced together all night. Spent every spare moment together. When he invited me to come to London, how could I refuse?”

“Uh-huh.” Riley restrained an eye roll. Simple, really. Just. Say. No. “What’s he like?”

“He’s so gentle, so kind. And very respectful of me.”

“Well ... that’s good.” She wasn’t so sure love was actually blind, but infatuation certainly was. The last thing she wanted for Frénie was a disastrous marriage. Stuffing another praline in her mouth, Riley stifled a shudder. They’d endured too much together. Arrests. Romanian Police interrogation. No-good boyfriends.