

CHRIS JENNERT

# CONVERGE

IS THERE A LOCK FOR THIS KEY TO FIT?



A TALE OF MYSTERY, BETRAYAL AND LOVE  
SET IN THE UNIVERSE OF WAREHOUSE 13

Chris Jennert

# C o n v e r g e

Is there a lock for this key to fit?

## Author's notes

This is a fiction set in the world of the television series  
Warehouse 13  
as seen on Syfy Channel/NBC Universal.

Referring to the events of Seasons One and Two,  
this tale employs the show's setting and main characters.  
However, an alternate story line is introduced,  
meant to respectfully carry on the spirit  
and charm of the original.

Because I miss it...

Because this wonder is endless...

Rated 16+  
Not suitable for children and teenagers  
under the age of sixteen.

## Prologue

I only touched you by accident, I swear.

Pete suddenly jerked awake, in his semiconscious state realizing there was nobody else with him; he just had been dreaming. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he blearily glanced in the direction of the alarm clock and in a flash of awareness all but jumped out of bed.

Damn, I missed breakfast again!

Peter Lattimer was a rugged yet handsome ex-Marine, reaching his mid-thirties. Most women would refer to him as charming, though, in an over the top kind of way. After leaving the Corps, Pete had been with the Secret Service for some time before he was reassigned to his current task; for the past two years he had been performing duties as a Warehouse 13 field agent, however, he remained under the cover of a Secret Service employee. For Pete the most appealing aspect of this job was the mythical wonderment that usually joined in on the everyday routine.

The well-built, dark haired agent did not bother with a shower, quickly throwing on a pair of casual jeans and his blue North Canton Wrestling T-shirt, along with his Adidas Sambas. His mind was occupied with the thought of food, and hopefully, he could get his hands on some bagels and a big mug of hot coffee from the kitchen before it was lunch time.

As he was about to leave from his room, his gaze fell upon the comic book he had started to read last night, a rare issue of the critically acclaimed 'Iron Shadow' series. Pete picked it up and let his hand glide over the colorful designed cover, a whimsical smile on his face. Opening the book, he entered the hallway and, without looking up, descended the staircase of Leena's Bed & Breakfast.

The rather small countryside inn, located just outside of Univille, South Dakota, provided Pete and his fellow agents with shelter; over the last two years it had evolved into an actual home for him. The inside of the edifice showed a cozy, almost picturesque look, through and through Victorian, which corresponded formidably with its elegant outside. White wooden walls and a pitched blue roof gave the building an antique and thoroughly pleasing appearance.

Strolling past the den, Pete was flipping through the comic book, glancing up briefly from his reading as he heard movement emanating from within. He paused to investigate, instantly freezing at the sight that greeted him. Myka was back!

Prior to becoming the other fifty percent of the Warehouse's field department, Myka Bering also had been working for the Secret Service. The tall, attractive brunette was in her early thirties, well-read, quick-witted and in possession of a photographic memory. Overall she was a more serious, self-controlled person than her partner. She seemed to be always focused on the job which, in their case, was hunting down mysterious and potentially dangerous artifacts all around the world, following the task of locking them away in a secret storing facility, named Warehouse 13.

Given the fact that the week after Christmas had been unusually slow, at least for supernatural standards, Myka had decided to pay a short visit to her sister in Colorado Springs. Her boss, Artie, had been in agreement for a change. He'd thought, his agents could use a few days for themselves before he eventually would have to send them back out into the madness that naturally came hand in hand with the artifact retrieving business.

## Chapter One

Leena's Bed & Breakfast  
Univille, South Dakota

Pete, well surprised that his partner already had returned, wanted to just sweep her off her feet, embracing her in the hug of a lifetime; but something held him back. He stood outside the den, rooted to the spot, wondering what it could be that made him hesitate. As the agent shot a closer look inside the room his attention was caught by a quite appealing sight, and immediately he forgot about breakfast and everything else.

Myka had her back turned to him, her form clad in black, tight fitting slacks and a white tank top, leaving her arms uncovered. Her dark, curly hair had been pulled back into a ponytail, exposing her neck. She was in the warm up phase of her workout, stretching her muscles. With her legs spread wide, she bent down, her hands slowly moving along her sides down toward the floor until her palms came to rest on the carpet. She bent a knee, leaning to one side for a few seconds, then likewise to the other.

At that point the comic book slipped from Pete's hands and twirled toward the floor. He did not even notice, his facial expression carved in stone.

After Myka had gotten up, straightening her stance, she took a few moments to concentrate. Her bare feet moved fluidly along the floor as she started into her Kata, practicing a certain style of Kempo, the martial arts technique she had learned from H.G. Wells.

Close to being paralyzed, Pete could not help but watch in silent admiration as she moved with the grace of a ballet dancer. He sighed softly; Myka Bering could have made a raggedy pair of sweats look adorable. Following her form with his eyes, he thought she looked stunningly beautiful.

"Hey, what's up, dude? Did you wet your pants or something?" a voice called from further down the hall.

Claudia Donovan, a punk rock looking redhead, was also living at the B&B. Being the Warehouse apprentice, her occupation involved a lot of geeky IT wisdom such as 'hacking the grid', as she used so call it, along with many other superior tech skills. Although she still was in her teens, she had become an appreciated member of the Warehouse staff, at any point providing the team with the latest information.

Claudia, who had just entered through the B&B's front door, smiled confusedly as she locked gazes with Pete, noticing the dreamy look in his eyes. "Pete, what's going on?" The teenager's remarks startled him out of his trance, and the agent reddened visibly, unable to hide his embarrassment.

"Uh...nothing. I was just looking at Myka." No, you didn't say that...Idiot! "I mean, I was looking for Myka!" He recovered quickly, hastily stepping inside the den before Claudia was given a chance to reply. As soon as he entered, Pete slowed his pace, walking up to Myka with halting steps. "M-Mykes, uh...Hey!"

As she turned toward him, Pete instantly froze in his tracks, noticing a reserved, almost cold expression on her face.

Folding her arms over her chest, she greeted him, "Hello, Pete."

Already being confused because Claudia had caught him spying on his partner, Pete became even more baffled by Myka's strangely cool attitude. He swallowed nervously. "I see you're

back and...I just wanted to...um..."

A few strands of hair had fallen into Myka's eyes, which she casually brushed away with her fingers, waiting for him to finish his gibberish talk. "Yes, Pete? You wanted what?"

Meanwhile Claudia had entered the room. Standing off to the side, she watched the facial expressions of her housemates with baffled amusement.

Think Lattimer, think! "Well...Artie was looking for you. He wanted to ask you, you know, about that thing," he said lamely.

Myka frowned. "What thing?"

"You know... that thing..." Pete stuttered.

Myka furrowed her brow even more. Her Partner's statement only served to confuse her, both in terms of conversation and behavior. "Okay?" she replied, eyeing him in bewilderment.

On the sideline Claudia remained completely poker-faced, not sure what to make of the scene playing out before her.

"So... I'll catch you later." Hurriedly Pete made his exit from the den, accidentally stepping on the comic book, he completely had forgotten about. "Dammit! Oh, you son of a..." Pete's voice could be heard from outside the room, soon being out of earshot.

Claudia and Myka exchanged confused glances.

"Dude, seriously, what's up with him? He's acting weird, even for Pete." The redhead came a step closer. Holding a hand to her mouth, she made a whisper out of her statement. "If you ask me, he has been since Christmas eve..."

Myka picked up a towel to wipe off her face and neck with. Shrugging her shoulders, she managed a smile, only trying to hide her own concerns. "Beats me," she replied casually, throwing her towel over one shoulder and exiting the room.

The junior agent trailed behind her. "Myka, if I didn't know any better, I could've sworn he was checking you out earlier!"

The brunette laughed out nervously. "Oh come on, Claud. It's Pete we're talking about here."

Claudia froze as she cast a glance in the older agent's direction, suddenly noticing that Myka was blushing. "Did anything happen between you guys? I mean, during the holidays?" She couldn't believe this. Was she mad, or...did Pete and Myka fall for each other?

The tall brunette remained silent, unintentionally inviting Claudia to state her next question without warning, "Do you have a crush on Pete?"

Myka's cheeks flamed, but she remained expressionless. Instead she just softly cleared her throat before she walked in the direction of the kitchen, increasingly quickening her steps.

"So you do have a crush on him!" The teenager shouted, her voice cracking.

Myka only walked faster, not willing to comment on that statement, and Claudia scurried behind her, trying to keep up. "Myka, Myka wait!" She managed to get a hold on the older agent's arm.

Huffing in exasperation, Myka suddenly turned on her heel and pulled the teenager off to the

side. "Let it go already, will you! Nothing happened between me and Pete!" She yelled, her tone almost harsh. "And I don't want to talk about it!"

Maybe for the first time ever Claudia was speechless. She stood there in shock, and it took her a few moments to catch up on Myka's unexpected reaction. What in Yoda's name has gotten into her? The young agent shook her head in puzzlement.

As Myka realized that she might have overreacted, she immediately let go of the younger woman, bowing her head and biting nervously on her lips. It took the brunette a few seconds to re-group, and as she finally looked up, she had a highly guilty expression on her face.

"Claud, I'm sorry. Look, I didn't mean to yell at you. It's just, you know...it's just that..." Biting on her lips again, she turned her head.

Obviously, the apprentice had taken no offense, producing a knowing smile before she finished the sentence in Myka's stead. "It's just that you don't wanna talk about that nothing happened. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense." Gently she placed her hand on her friend's shoulder, being almost parental in her tone. "It's not only that you have a crush on Pete, there's something else bothering you. Am I right?"

Clearly, Myka had not seen this one coming. Quite impressed by the teen's performance, she took a small step back, and she could not help but smile. "Now, who's the adult here?" The question was directed more at herself than Claudia.

"Guess who!" The redhead's features flashed a victorious grin as she pointed her thumbs at herself. "C'mon, girlfriend, what's wrong? You can talk to me."

Myka hesitated for a lengthened moment. "Promise not to say anything," she eventually asked.

Claudia saluted her before she drew an X over her heart and pointed to her eye. "Boy Scout's honor, cross my heart, hope to die...or not. Stick a needle in my...or not that either. But...oh come on already, spill!" She was near to shouting, wildly gesturing at the same time.

Myka fidgeted, wondering if she could tell Claudia about the trip to the frozen pond; that one time she and Pete had come closer than partners usually do...let alone the things she had come to reflect on, while she had been staying at her sister's place.

Hesitating even longer than before, she finally made up her mind. "Well you're right. Something did happen. You remember the other day when Pete and I went ice-skating?"

Claudia nodded vehemently, clearly on the edge of her seat.

Myka swallowed a lump in her throat. "You see, I was all filled up with Christmas cheer and everything, and you know, one thing led to another, and...we kissed."

"You kissed?" Claudia all but leaped into the air, triumphantly shouting, "I knew it! Baby, I knew it! C'mon, details!"

"Shush!" Myka hissed. "Keep it down! You promised to shut up, remember?"

"OK, OK. But it's sooo romantic!" The young redhead crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself. "I've always thought of you as Han Solo and Princess Leia, in a way. Dude, if that's not destiny?!"

"I guess it is...somehow." Myka's voice trembled. Glancing to the side, she held a hand to her lips.

The odd reply instantly brought Claudia's celebrating to a halt. Taking a step toward Myka, she could see tears welling up behind her eyes. "Hey, why are you crying? That kiss probably wasn't so bad, was it?"

Sniffing back a sob, the brunette turned toward Claudia, and suddenly it came pouring out of her. "You see, that kiss...that stupid...fucking...kiss...it ruined everything!"

Most surprised by her own choice of words, Myka showed a confounded facial expression, and she was not the only one. However, the brunette decided to just ignore it. "I don't...I—I don't even know why I let it happen. I'm such a dumb ass. What is wrong with me?" With the back of her hand she wiped away some of the tears. "I've sworn to myself I would never fall for another partner, ever again. And...and now that!" The agent could not hold it back any longer; by now she was flat out sobbing.

Claudia placed her arm around Myka's shoulders, giving her a gentle squeeze. Sensing there was more to come, she waited silently until her friend could pull herself together, at least a little.

"You know, the reason...the actual reason why I took off to my sister's, was to get away from Pete. Get away from this whole goddamn mess, as far as possible."

The well-experienced agent, famous for her self-composure, was weeping, her face buried in her palms. "Why does it have to be Pete? Oh, hell..."

A few moments of tearful silence passed, then Myka looked up at her friend. "He's so immature, you know. And childish, and...and most of the time...just annoying. He never...he never ever takes things seriously. It's hopeless." Harshly, she concluded, "I don't even think he could commit to a relationship in any way."

Claudia, for the second time today, did not know what to say. As she was struggling to phrase a reply Myka regained her countenance. C'mon Bering, get it together! She reproved herself mentally, feeling as if she had embarrassed herself. Gently, she removed the younger woman's arm from her shoulders, wiping away the tears from her face. "You know, Claud, it's fine. Just forget I said something." She shot a stern glance in Claudia's eyes. "And remember, this stays between you and me."

Turning quickly on her heel, the tall brunette rushed off. With her eyes cast downward, Myka wanted nothing but to vanish into her room. However, she did not notice Pete standing at the bottom of the staircase, and she collided with him, heavily, the impact sending them both to the ground.

Pete sat on the floor, motionless. The expression on his face was caught somewhere between anger and overwhelming agony, his eyes staring at Myka.

As it dawned on her that he probably had heard every single word of her confession, the female agent was terrified, at first. But instantly something else came to her attention. He did it again!

"Pete, what the hell! Stop eavesdropping on my private conversations!" Shouting at him furiously, she slapped him on the shoulder, hard. "You hear me? That's not funny anymore!"

Pete just sat there without saying a word, maintaining the same expression on his face. Myka simply was not able to deal with him at this point, nor with the entire situation for that matter. She hastily got up from the ground. Her knees shaking, she stumbled up the stairs, fleeing for her room.

Being a witness to what had happened just now, Claudia was struck with sheer consternation.



Taking a seat on the chair nearby, the junior agent slowly shook her head. "I think I'll skip lunch today," she murmured quietly. "That's already too much to digest..."

## Chapter Two

"We have a new case?"

"Yes, Myka." Artie nodded. "We have another artifact disturbing the peace. Sit down and I'll explain. Where is Pete by the way?"

"I'm here!" exclaimed the ex-soldier, just now returning from his extended jog, entering the B&B's dining room. He had been out for quite a while, taking a few extra turns, trying to blow off some steam, since his mood was not the best after bumping into Myka this morning.

Avoiding to glance at his partner, he turned toward Artie. "What is it? Do we have a ping?"

"Yes, we have a ping. Now sit down already," the grizzled man replied in his typically grumpy tone.

As the Warehouse's highest ranking agent, Arthur Nielsen was not only in charge of the facility itself, he also supervised the field missions and pretty much everything concerning the world of artifacts. His stocky, slightly odd-looking appearance, dominated by his nappy, graying eyebrows, indicated he did not have much of a social life. Having spent almost forty years as an archaeologist of the supernatural, his behavior, alongside his communication skills, sometimes were a little off-key.

Myka and Pete pulled out two chairs, taking a seat at the table. Artie reached into his bag, extracting two envelope folders, one for each agent, inviting them to get acquainted with the case material.

Myka's eyes grew wide as she read over the file. "The Universal Key?"

"What? No way!" Pete cast a confused glance in her direction. "Like the one in World of Warcraft?"

"I don't know what that even means," replied Myka, and she decided not to answer Pete's question, instead reciting from the file. "It's presumed to be made of brass and...it can provide the carrier with the ability to open every lock. Invented in 1778 by an English locksmith named Robert Barron."

"Oh, now that's an artifact that really could open doors in your life!" Pete grinned impishly. "Get it?"

Myka was already immersing into the case, not even listening to her partner's remark. "Aha, Barron didn't actually invent an universal key, he was trying to build the perfect lock. And he obviously succeeded, since he was issued a patent for a mechanism called Lever Tumbler Lock, a closing device, which can be found still today in a safe or vault. And our object in question is the fitting key to the very lock that he had built."

Meanwhile Pete had opened his folder as well, trying to make any sense of what his partner was talking about.

Suddenly Myka frowned; there was no information in the file on how the key evolved into such a powerful artifact. The knowledge about the circumstances, under which everyday objects became equipped with supernatural powers, very often provided the agents with the solution how to safely neutralize the item's abilities.

The brunette looked up. "I wonder if Barron himself was involved in the transmutation of the key...or maybe someone else had a finger in the pie?"

"Well, naturally there has to be something left for our super nerd here to puzzle together herself." Pete teased her, utilizing a high-pitched, girly voice. "Oh, this medieval stuff is so amazing! I'm so excited, I just peed a little."

"You know, sometimes you're the greatest ignoramus!" Myka was bracing herself to stay calm. "Even you should know that the eighteenth century was not in medieval times! If you weren't such a..."

"What? If I wasn't such a what?" Apparently, Pete was getting upset. "C'mon tell me! Or do you want to chicken out again?"

"Agents!" Artie interrupted, with measured patience. "Please! Is a little professionalism too much to ask? I feel like becoming a kindergarten teacher more and more everyday."

The two agents paused, their eyes falling back on their boss, and they quickly apologized.

"Now...where were we?" Slightly muddled, Artie browsed through the sheets laid out on the table in front of him. "Right." He finally came across what he had been searching for.

"This is a photo, taken two days ago in the vault of a financial institution called PAREF, located in the center of Paris." He pointed at the open vault door, then at the empty shelves in the background of the picture. Producing another photograph that looked almost identical to the first one, he added, "And this is the main vault of BNP Paribas, taken this morning. As one can see, in both cases, there seems to be absolutely no damage to the locking mechanisms or the doors themselves. And, of course, all the goods are gone."

"So, you think the key of this old English dude was involved in these heists. Magically opening big ass, French vault doors, giving the thief access to the money?" Pete assumed.

"Yes, and that dude's name was Robert Barron. Remember?" The senior agent glanced over his glasses toward Pete, stroking his Van Dyke beard. "There aren't many things that could have done this, at least not without leaving a serious amount of damage, and my best guess is Barron's key."

"Makes sense." Myka re-joined the conversation. "But what about the goods? I assume, it wasn't cash that disappeared. These banks actually are investment companies, aren't they?"

"Ah, a light shines," stated Artie, expressing his appreciation. "Two of France's biggest investment trusts. And what was stolen, actually, are loads of unlisted shares and obligations."

Myka noticed Pete furrowing his brow, and before he could even state his confusion, she started to explain. "It's a bunch of fancy looking paper, each worth thousands of Dollars. For people with insight in the investment market, this is so much better than cash."

Artie watched his agents with bafflement. The relationship that Pete and Myka shared would never entirely reveal itself to him. The fact that they knew their partner from the inside out

gave them plenty of opportunities to tease and pick on each other, but despite that, there was something else. Lately, things could get rougher than usual; they constantly seemed to be at each other's throats. Artie wondered what it was that caused his subordinates to be so agitated. But as long as they were getting the job done, he would not complain too much about their attitude.

His thoughts returned to the case. In order to draw the attention back to him, Artie audibly cleared his throat. "However, you might imagine how upsetting this whole thing is, and not only for the banks and Paris police...the world of finance is also quite concerned." He paused for a few seconds. Not far from giggling, he annexed, "Don't ask me if that's a good or a bad thing."

Myka glanced in her partner's direction. Seeing him trying hard to maintain a serious face at Artie's joke, she felt the urge to pursue with the case. "So, you want us to go to Paris and investigate the banks. Anything else?"

"No, unfortunately that's all I have got at this point." The senior agent started to collect the sheets from the table. "Just go to Paris, in the meantime I will dig deeper and see what I can come up with."

After Pete realized his new assignment would lead him back to the French capital, his face showed a cynic grin. "Figures. See, normal people vacation in exotic locations. We get sent there to chase possessed, flying toasters and other crazy stuff...Paris, for the second time. Dammit!"

"C'est la vie, mon ami," Artie said pointedly.

He handed them an envelope. Pete took the offered object and peered inside, finding a credit card and a number of European currencies.

"Your expenses. Do not go crazy!" the senior agent remarked, punctuating each word for added emphasis.

Pete pointed at himself, as if to say, who me? Artie just gave him a glance, and the former Marine stated, "So, when do we leave?"

"Your flight is in ninety minutes."

Without wasting any time, the pair rose up from the table, taking their folders with them, as well as the envelope.

"Agents..." started Artie. "Remember. Pragmatism. Let's just keep it simple. Snag and bag the artifact, try to avoid contact with French authorities...and don't get yourselves killed."

"You got it!" the field agents replied in unison.

Turning to leave, Pete crabbily muttered to himself, "Snag and bag? More like snoop and poop."

The pair swiftly made their way upstairs, both detouring to their respective rooms. Less than fifteen minutes later, they met again in the hallway, travel bags in hand, and Pete even had taken a brief shower. Out of habit and preparedness, the agents kept prepacked bags, containing not only clothing, but also their artifact protection gear, such as purple rubber gloves, static bags and goo spray cans. Actually, they had not really unpacked for two years now.

They trotted downstairs, finding themselves alone in the house, and Pete remarked, "No

goodbyes today."

He turned and headed outside to their SUV which would take them to Sioux Gateway Airport, Myka following a few steps behind. She glanced sideways at her partner as they tossed their bags in the back of the vehicle. In a poor attempt to break the ice between them, she decided to tease him. "Do yourself a favor this time, try and sleep on the flight. I don't want you dragging ass, like you were back in England."

"Dragging ass? Seriously?" Pete turned toward her, slowly folding his arms.

Myka immediately knew this had been a mistake. However, before she could explain herself, the ex-Marine started, "So, basically, what you're saying is that I'm slow and stupid, huh? Obviously, I can't take care of myself. Right?" He paused for a second, something else coming to his mind. "Hey, wait, I have a solution. Why don't you just go ahead and make all the decisions for both of us from now on? Should be no problem, you've already decided that I can't commit to anything...in any way!" Pete's tone turned from ironic to enraged, his face resembling a crumpled grimace. "And in case you think I didn't get it, let me tell you something. Now, I know how low you really think of me, and I thank you for that! 'Least we know where we stand."

Myka removed her shades. Swallowing down the rage rising inside her, she gazed directly in Pete's dark-brown eyes. "OK. Let's forget for a second that you've been eavesdropping on me, earlier. I can see why you're so pissed, and it's not the dragging ass thing, apparently. It's what I said to Claudia." Her tone was a blend of anger and worry. "So let's talk about it right now. You know, we can't act like that throughout the whole mission. Sooner or later we'll have to talk anyway."

"There's absolutely nothing I have to say to you right now," the male agent remarked as he turned away from her, opening the driver's door of the SUV. "I think we know everything we need to know about each other at this point. So I suggest, you get your panties unbunched and focus on the mission ahead." After entering the car, as if to emphasize his statement, Pete slammed the door shut.

Myka rolled her eyes at her partner's behavior. Holding a hand to her forehead, she tried to steel her nerves, knowing the trip to France was going to be beyond aggravating. Slipping back on her sunglasses, she entered the car on the opposite side, exchanging not a single glance with the other agent.

\* \* \*

Paris, France

Twelve hours later, the pair had arrived at the French capital, and even this late into the evening, the city was still buzzing with life. However, after a long flight which both of them had spent reading through their case folders over and over again, mainly to avoid conversation, the agents were exceedingly tired.

They left Charles-de-Gaulle Airport behind, seated in a taxi, heading south toward the city, straight to 'Hotel Left Bank Saint Germain', where Artie had booked two rooms in advance, at least so they had been told.

Arriving at their destination, they exited the taxi and entered the hotel, walking up directly to the main desk, inquiring about accommodations.

"Je suis désolée! I'm terribly sorry, but we have only one room available," said the concierge in an Arabic accent, bashfully smiling.

"Excuse me, but there should be two reservations, one for Bering, the other one for Lattimer." Pete did not like the idea of sharing the same room with Myka, not in the least.

"I'm afraid not, Monsieur. We had to handle a lot of inquiries over the last few days. There is an international medical convention starting tomorrow, you must know. Maybe there was a mix-up of some sort. I'm very sorry." The clerk obviously was mortified, and he tried all he could to resolve the situation. "But I hope it will not be a problem for the young couple, non?"

"Oh, sure. No Problem at all! That's totally terrific!" Myka exclaimed, her features flashing the most ironic of all smiles. Inwardly, she cursed her bad luck as she stated, "OK, fine. We'll take it."

"It is 'The Grand Apartment Suite' number six-zero-one," the man said, as he handed them the key. "Oh, it offers room service around the clock, by the way."

Pete and Myka glanced at each other. Artie was most likely going to have a psychotic break, as soon as he heard about the costs, but he would have to deal with it, somehow, if he wanted the job done.

Pete paid for the room with the credit card, and the agents followed their porter to an elevator that led to the top floor. They were taken to their room and shown around.

The suite certainly was grand. It included a balcony, from where Notre Dame Cathedral could be spotted, a exaggeratedly spacious bedroom, as well as a living room area with a large TV and surround sound system. The kitchen was also well-equipped, offering an enormous refrigerator and a truly professional looking stove. The sprawling bathroom included a large, round tub along with a luxurious shower. All combined, they found an avowedly glamorous yet comforting atmosphere.

"Mademoiselle, Monsieur," said the porter as he bowed to leave. Pete gave him a twenty and the two agents were left alone.

"Hey, I'm pretty exhausted." Pete sighed. "Gonna take a shower before I hit the sack. And don't let it trouble you, I'll sleep on the couch. There's definitely plenty of space in here, so we won't collide with each other again."

As he disappeared into the bathroom Myka watched behind him, wondering how long he was willing to go through with this charade. Hopefully, this case will be over quickly, she spoke without a sound.

As she took a glance around the large room, her attention was drawn to something she spied in Pete's open traveling bag, which rested on the floor near the couch. Walking in the direction of the bag, she took a closer look, confirming her eyes had not failed her the first time. It was the black 'Iron Shadow' T-shirt, an ultimately rare collector's edition, she had bought him as a birthday present. Suddenly, the memories of that party came back to her. What a wonderful night that was, she thought. Everybody had been so happy, joyfully celebrating together. Pete had seemed entirely overwhelmed by the gift, and she remembered him hugging her many times, not wanting to let go of her. That, actually, had felt as if she had found a place to be, a home and people she belonged to.

Now, she had made that stupid, terrible mistake. By kissing her partner, she had put their professional relationship on the line, not to mention their friendship. Things between her and Pete were getting worse by the hour, and she questioned herself if they even were able to solve the case together, considering how much they were ensnared in their own personal

issues right now.

Absentmindedly, purely out of instinct, she picked up the shirt as she turned to head for the bedroom, her thoughts revolving around the mess that resembled her life at this point.

Still not fully aware that she had taken Pete's shirt, Myka sat down on the large bed. Actually, she found it to be too large. Way too much space for one single person. Without paying attention, Myka let her hands drift to the shirt's collar, and very carefully she held it closer to her form. The brunette took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the soft material, cookies and aftershave, the smell drawing a smile to her face. It felt strangely satisfying to her senses, and she could not explain why exactly, but in the next minute she was cradling the shirt in her arms, the way a child would have cherished a toy, silent tears streaming down her face.

Pete could be immature and foolish, but there was no way to deny that he was an exceptional partner and her best friend. For the number of times he teased and taunted her, he would always attempt to coax a smile out of her later. It was all the more reason she feared their relationship could come to an end. She was not going to lose another partner...not again. Myka knew, if she lost Pete, she could never recover.

Wiping away her tears, she dressed for bed and quickly curled up under the blankets, with the T-shirt clutched tightly in her arms. As she thought of how she had been crying herself to sleep over the past couple of nights, her heart being filled with sorrow and despair, she suddenly felt Pete's shirt offering her a strange sense of comfort, and sleep quickly overtook her.

## Chapter Three

All of a sudden, the quiet air of the hotel room was shattered by a tinny buzzing sound. Pete jerked awake and hastily reached for his jacket, hanging on a nearby chair. He extracted the source of that unnerving noise from one of the pockets.

The Farnsworth, resembling an old-fashioned cigar box, was a telecommunication device, encased in a polished bronze container. The cell phone-like gadget had originally been developed by Philo Farnsworth, the inventor of television, back in 1929. It provided two way audio and video communication via a special frequency that could not be intercepted, thus being the only secure way to transmit delicate Warehouse matters.

Flipping open the lid, Pete found Artie staring at him from a black-and-white, convex glass screen.

"A suite?" started the senior agent.

"Um, hey Artie," said Pete dozily. "Good morning."

"A suite?" the grizzled man asked again. "Whatever happened to a little something called, I don't know, common sense?" Obviously, he was upset.

"Whoa, chillax!" Pete replied.

"Chillax?" Artie repeated. "Have you seen the bill?"

Just now the bedroom door opened, and Myka toddled inside, yawning, one of the blankets wrapped around her body. The noisy sound of the Farnsworth had interrupted her sleep as well.

"Look Artie, it was the only thing available," said Pete, briefly glancing up at his tired looking partner. Then he explained the trouble at the booking counter to his boss, finally stating, "We can't change it anyway."

While Artie mumbled something about work ethic and downgrade, Myka stepped behind Pete, leaning over his shoulder, shooting a glance at the video screen. "Morning, Artie." Her tone indicated she had been awake for a few minutes at most. "Do you have an update on the case?" She repeatedly yawned.

"I hope you had pleasant dreams, resting in that expensive bed," the senior agent stated pointedly. Giving Myka no chance to respond, he said, "Though, I do have news for you." He paused for a moment, making sure he had the agents' full attention before he started detailing on his findings. "I had Claudia searching the Warehouse database for information on Barron's key, and she actually found something. An old form from the patent office in London gives some leads on how the key could have developed its powers, however, I'm afraid the facts are rather vague, and none of it could be confirmed yet. But don't worry, we'll figure it out." He sighed, making it obvious how little pleasing the upcoming task appeared to him. "Anyway, it's a wild guess, but I think we could be dealing with a bifurcated artifact."

"There's another object involved?" Myka's curiosity grew by the second. "What is it?"

"As I said, nothing has been confirmed. Maybe it's another key, maybe something else. We don't know yet. But we are on it, and we will keep you posted." Artie had started searching his desk, pushing around stacks of paper and flipping through notes. "Hold on, there's another thing...dammit, where is it?"

Myka and Pete gazed at each other, both their features showing a knowing smile as they watched their boss scrabbling about his collection of loose leaves. The disarray on his desk resembled the general state of his office. A number of old-fashioned filing cabinets were lined alongside the brick walls, together with wooden shelves containing books, maps, collector's items and some more enigmatic objects. The rest of the space was occupied by Claudia's and Artie's desks, as well as a few pin boards and display panels, showing all kinds of research notes and drawings. Altogether, the room had a chaotic yet cozy flair to it, revealing a great deal about the personality of the agent who had been working here for over three decades.

"Ah! Found it." Triumphant, Artie held up a yellow post-it. "I came across a police report about an incident at the Musée des Arts et Métiers. This particular museum has a section devoted to rather obscure exhibits, hailing from the same period as our artifact. And as luck would have it, last week, they reported a burglary from that exact section. In the case file it says, the only thing that was stolen...was an antique key!"

"Dude, that's too much of a coincidence!" Pete turned his head toward his partner. "Do you think this could be our artifact?"

"There's no such thing as coincidence." Myka seemed fully awake now, all on top of the situation. "I bet all three incidents are connected. It all happened in the same city, in the span of only a few days. And I bet this is The Ultimate Key." Then she frowned. Looking at her face, one could practically see how she was processing the new information.

"Man, I can almost hear you think," Pete joked.

Myka was too ensnared in her thoughts to pay attention to his statement. Silently musing, she

strode up and down the room. After some moments she came to a conclusion. "Hey guys, there's something bothering me."

"Yes, Myka?" queried the voice emerging from the Farnsworth, delivering a slightly impatient undertone.

"Let's assume the bank robber and the art burglar are the same person..." Unconsciously, she was playing with a strand from her hair and biting on her lips between sentences. "...then this means that our thief, or thieves maybe, didn't just stumble over an artifact by accident. They probably knew exactly what they were looking for and also what to do with it. After all, this appears to be the work of professionals. Don't you think that's concerning?"

Clearly, Artie's and Pete's features showed great admiration. Although, they were anything but happy with their fellow agent's theory, it did not stop her from having a point. As their experience in this business proved, there usually were no coincidences when it came to artifacts and the people who were abusing them.

"So, basically, what you're saying is we might be dealing with folks who have known about artifacts and their powers before, and probably the Warehouse, too. And they supposedly were looking for The Ultimate Key because they had a pretty good idea of how to use that thing." Pete was giving a résumé of Myka's speech, mostly for himself, trying to keep up with his friend's thoughts.

Artie also was talking mainly to himself. "She could be right. Of course, this could mean that... Is it possible? Could these people be the..." Absorbed in his thoughts, he was mumbling, swallowing the last part of his sentence.

"Sorry, Artie. What was that?" Myka asked, frowning.

"Oh, uh...nothing. Just thinking." The grizzled man did not even look at the Farnsworth anymore. The sound of fingers running over a keyboard could be heard, and before one of the field agents could ask, he stated, "What are you waiting for? You know what to do. Go to the museum, go have a look at the banks, you know, investigate! And report as soon as you find something. Good luck."

Artie abruptly turned off his communication device, and the field agents did the same with theirs. They briefly exchanged glances, being used to their boss' behavior.

"Regarding we spend more than two-fifty a night for the suite, I believe, this went pretty smoothly," Pete pointed out.

"You say that now, wait until we get our next paycheck."

Pete cringed at her remark. "Ouch."

She nodded. "Exactly."

"Oh man, you're right. Remember the last time we were in Paris? It was pretty much..."

Suddenly Pete paused. He took a gaze around the suite, as if he had to remind himself of where he was. Why did he have to think of their first trip to the French capital right now? He forced himself to push the memories that were flooding his mind to the side. His features turned into stone as he cynically replied, "Anyways, we're both up, so we can as well start with our investigation. Since I'm dragging ass, obviously, there's no time to waste."

And here we go again. Myka shrugged her shoulders and shook her head as she turned toward the bathroom. "I'll go have a shower..."



\* \* \*

Four and a half hours later found the agents outside of BNP Paribas, just exiting from the building, both their expressions a blend of disappointment and frustration.

"Good lord, this was beyond futile," Pete said tiredly. "I was surprised, though, they even let us in."

"I'm sure Artie pulled a few strings," his partner replied.

"Probably. Still it was frigging pointless!"

"OK, I have to admit that we didn't find much, but I wouldn't call it pointless." Myka turned toward him. "Come on, what's with all the negativity? At least we know for sure that the banks were robbed by professionals. No fingerprints, no marks, no damage of any kind. Hell, not even a single scratch on the vault doors! It's pretty obvious that a person needs an artifact-y device of some sort to pull off these stunts."

Slipping on his shades, Pete stated, "Sounds plausible. But I hope we'll have more luck at the museum. And I think we should concentrate more on the artifact itself."

"My thoughts exactly. We should be able to find more information on the history and origin of our mysterious door-opener there." Myka could barely hide her enthusiasm. Surrounded by classical literature or art, she truly was in her element.

Pete had to choke down a laugh. Quickly he turned around to look for a cab. "OK, then let's investigate the museum," he replied in an all businesslike manner.

As the pair headed for a taxi stand across the street, the former soldier queried, "Hey, shouldn't we grab the Tesla from the hotel?"

"The Tesla? Seriously?" Myka could not hide a grin completely. "We're going to a museum, not a raid. Do you really think it's necessary?"

The Tesla, every Warehouse Agent's weapon of choice, was a powerful stun gun, resembling a pistol with a glass electron tube attached to it. Invented and built by Nicola Tesla in the eighteen-nineties, it was designed to deliver a bolt of electric energy to one or more targets, rendering them unconscious right on the spot.

"OK. Maybe a bit over the top," Pete stated casually.

After a fifteen-minute drive, the pair arrived in front of the Museum of Arts and Crafts. The edifice appeared to be more of a fortress than a place for exhibitions, not to mention the fact that they would probably need a map alone just to navigate once they were inside.

"Wow!" exclaimed Pete. "Almost beats The Carnegie."

He paid for their fare prior to exiting the cab. Myka waited for him to help her out of the car, as he usually did, soon realizing it was not going to happen today. At least he didn't slam the door into my face, she thought.

"We best get started," Pete remarked. "What are you waiting for? C'mon!"

After entering the museum, the agents noticed that they were presented with a relatively low number of accompanying visitors. In addition the place was labeled with a comforting amount of guideposts, so they should have little trouble conducting their research. The pair repaired to the exhibition from which the presumed artifact had been stolen, eager to gather more

information about its origin and how it exactly functioned.

Myka was not in the least surprised when Pete suggested that they should separate. Although, he pointed out it would only be for the reason of saving time, she knew what her partner's real agenda was. The thought had crossed her mind as well, and the prospect of having some time for herself felt quite appealing. She concurred with Pete's suggestion, and the pair agreed on meeting in the main hall of the museum in three hours from now, hopefully comparing many useful findings.

The agents split up, each one taking a different approach on the investigation. While Myka resolved to read through the documents detailing on the exhibits, she hoped to confirm it actually was Barron's Key that had been stolen. Pete, on the other hand, went straight for the information counter, wondering if it was possible to speak to the curator of the exhibition.

After a few minutes Myka glanced up from her reading. From the corner of her eye she could peer her partner leaning over a desk, extensively flirting with the young woman occupying the counter. Without any doubt, Pete was playing his best hand, and the blonde, attractive clerk obviously was smitten with his charms. Bashfully, she was smiling at him, even laughing out loud at some of his comments.

Seriously? What a jerk! Myka reddened visibly, clenching her fists. Oppressing her first impulse, she decided not to confront him, which probably would have ended in a loud, unpleasant argument in the middle of the museum. Instead, the female agent turned around and headed toward the next room, becoming increasingly disgruntled with herself, mostly by the fact that Pete could arouse her jealousy, apparently, without much of an effort.

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Nearly three hours had elapsed before the agents assembled in the main hall; Myka was carrying a folder, filled with photocopies of some of the documents she had delved into, while Pete held nothing more than a single note in his hand.

"So, that's all you dug up? One lousy note!" Myka started, her tone brusque.

"Whoa, what has bitten you?" It took Pete a second, but then it dawned on him what was bothering her. "Ah, you've seen me talking to the clerk."

"Do you have to hit on every woman you meet?" Folding her arms, the curly-haired agent turned to the side, stating, "You know what, maybe I don't need an answer on that."

"You see, that's so typical. I just tried to talk her into helping us, and you automatically assume I was hitting on her. And just FYI, that clearly wasn't the case." He took a deep breath, visibly struggling to stay calm. "Yes, I like using my charm, especially when it comes to beautiful women. You should know that by now. And all of a sudden, it seems to bother you so much...I don't get it."

"But Pete..."

"No, Myka, let me finish." In his state of arousal, Pete was not willing to let it go. "This is growing into a serious problem, because, obviously, you don't think I'm doing a good job. Telling me, I was dragging ass and questioning my every move. Myka, do you really think so little of me?" He did not give her a chance to reply. His voice oozing with wrath and sarcasm, he stated, "It must be really fucking hard on you, having a half-assed partner like me!"

Pete was close to yelling, and hastily Myka gestured at him to lower his voice, noticing that some of the other visitors already were observing them with concern.

The ex-Marine paused for a few seconds, swallowing a lump in his throat before he continued in a more moderate tone. "It's like everything I do is wrong. Everything I say pisses you off. And the best part of it...you wouldn't even tell me. If I hadn't overheard your conversation with Claudia, I would've never known." He sighed loudly. "And now, Agent Bering, tell me I'm wrong!"

Myka saw him running his hands over his face, and she could imagine how hard he was battling with his emotions. However, in this moment, she simply could not speak, overwhelmed by the sincerity of her partner's statement.

In the meantime, Pete had come to a conclusion, and his voice trembled as he said, "You know what, this is all a truckload of horseshit! I don't think I can go through with this any longer. And I'm not only talking about what happened during the holidays, the kiss and everything, I'm talking about us, being partners." With a dead serious expression on his face, he directly glanced into Myka's gleaming eyes. "Can't you see, everything that's left of our so called partnership is nothing more than an unholy mess! Myka, for real...do you even trust me anymore?"

Myka held a hand to her lips, and her eyes widened as she was processing Pete's words. Was she really treating him in such an awful manner? Had she possibly ruined the most congenial partnership she had ever been part of? The thoughts sending a frightening chill down her spine, she felt slightly giddy. Entirely forgetting about her surroundings, her eyes filled with tears, and she wondered if Pete could be right. What if I really don't trust him anymore?

"Did you even hear what I said?" Pete's voice jolted the brunette out of her thoughts, and she had to take a look around to remind her of where she was.

All of a sudden, Myka froze in her movement, but only for a fraction of a second. Sniffing back her tears, she leaned in closer to her fellow agent, muttering, "Pete, I think we're under surveillance. There's someone watching us."

"Are you kidding me?" Pete eyed her with bafflement. "You really think I'm buying this?" He thought, clearly she was trying to duck out of the situation, his facial expression showing disgust.

"Shut up! This is for real!" Myka hissed at him. "Look over my shoulder. The big guy in the other room..."

The former soldier was far from believing her. He shook his head yet did as he was told, shooting a casual glance in the suggested direction. In the same second his look fell upon a tall man, standing in the room nearby, the figure turned on its heel and hastily walked in the direction of the nearest exit.

"Holy crap! You're right." Pete was very much surprised, if not shocked, but instinctively he started to pursue the man. Grabbing Myka by the arm, he dragged her with him, shouting, "Let's go! What're you waiting for?"

The other visitors stared with indignation as the mysterious man was running along the halls of the Museum of Arts and Crafts, the two agents hot on his trail, sprinting to keep up with him.

As the pair came around the next corner, they could see the stranger leaving the room through a door on the opposite side. A sign next to the exit said 'Employees Only' in French, but that did not stop the agents from continuing the pursuit. On the other side of the door they found themselves staring down a long hallway, stretching for at least fifty yards. There was nobody

else in sight. Only the noise of a shutting door could be heard from the other end of the corridor.

"Damn, that guy...is fast!" exclaimed Myka, a little out of breath.

Pete nodded. "C'mon, we can't let him get away!"

Scurrying along the hallway, the agents readied their SIG P-228 handguns, and Pete exclaimed, "See, we should've brought the Tesla!"

Myka just rolled her eyes at her colleague's remark, and as they reached the door, she was about to enter first, but Pete held her back, a concerned look on his face. "Mykes, wait. My vibe detector is freaking out." His goose bumps had goose bumps. "Let me go first."

Over the years the experienced agent had learned to trust Pete's premonitions, or vibes as he called them. So Myka instantly concurred with him, however, she had not expected that amount of provision at this point.

"Be careful!" she reminded him.

Pete slightly winked at her prior to opening the door. Glancing inside revealed a large storage room, filled with a number of shelves, big wooden boxes and a huge amount of paperboard containers.

"Man, you could hide an army in here," Pete muttered to himself as he entered the spacious repository, his weapon at the ready. The female agent followed a few steps behind, providing cover for him.

They just had begun searching the room as Myka felt a slight sting to the side of her neck.

"Uh, Pete, I think something bit me..." she started, touching the spot where the pain was emanating from. She could feel a small object stuck in her skin, and she pulled it out. Holding it in front of her eyes, she turned toward her partner. "What in the hell is that?"

"Looks like a small arrow," Pete conjectured, taking a step closer to investigate. "Could be one of those darts used in blowguns."

Suddenly, Myka felt a trace of dizziness. The dart slipping from her hand, she had to take a step to the side to keep her balance. "I don't think...I feel so good." The words slowly left Myka's mouth, and she reached out with her hand, trying to find something to hold on to.

In an instant, Pete was at her side, grasping hold of her arm. "Mykes, what is it?" His voice cracked, his tone clouded by concern. He could sense how Myka lost her balance completely, and he pulled her into his arms. Rolling her eyes, she mumbled some incomprehensible words before she fully lost consciousness, her head falling against Pete's chest.

The ex-Marine did not feel the impact of the projectile hitting him, penetrating the skin behind his ear; he was too concerned with his partner's well-being. By running his fingers along the side of her neck, he was trying to locate a pulse. As he was not able to detect one right away, Pete fell into a state of panic, his knees weakening, his vision blurred. He could not tell if Myka was alive or dead; the fear, arising from that uncertainty, immediately took his breath away.

Pete did not realize that he had been attacked with a dart from the same weapon as Myka. The substance which had been injected into both their blood streams took its toll, and the pair collapsed on the floor. Pete, with the last ounce of his strength, hold tight to Myka's head and kept it from hitting the ground.

## Chapter Four

A parking lot outside the Museum of Arts and Crafts  
Paris, France

Blinking at first, Myka slowly opened her eyes. Her face resembled a grotesque grimace, flashes of pain running through her head. Dazed and confused, she was trying to focus her gaze and identify her surroundings.

"Myka! You alright?" The voice sounded familiar to her ears, and she instinctively felt safe.

"Pete?" the brunette muttered.

"Yes, it's me. Are you OK?"

As she came back to her senses, she recognized her partner's features. "I think so. Only...only that headache is killing me."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

As she sat up, rubbing her neck, Myka took a glance around, realizing she was residing on a gurney in the back of an ambulance, Pete sitting on a medic's bag next to her.

"Hey, partner, what happened?" she queried, a baffled expression on her face. "I only remember chasing a guy through the museum...then it's all a blur."

"Well, the medics said, they found us lying on the floor of a storage room. And they can't explain why we were unconscious," replied Pete, his tone unusually serious. "But I think we were attacked."

"Attacked?" the brunette asked, frowning. "You think? By whom?"

"No idea, but I had this in my hand when I woke up." He showed her a small, metallic dart, not longer than two inches, a tiny needle on the tip of it. "Must have pulled it out before I passed out. And I think, I remember you also being shot with one of these things."

The female agent held a hand to her forehead, musing for a second before she queried, "How long have we been out?"

"For about three hours or so."

"We need to find out what happened. And we need to call Artie." Myka stood up from the gurney, still a little shaky. She rubbed the dust off her pants, stating, "Maybe he can dig into what these tiny, evil arrows exactly are, and who's using them."

As she turned to exit the ambulance, Pete held her back, softly placing his hand on her shoulder.

"Myka wait. There's something I need to tell you," he stated, a rather bashful expression on his features.

"Pete, we really have to..."

"Please, it's important," replied the agent, not allowing her to finish the sentence. "Sit down for a second. Will you?"

Shaking her head, she sat back down, and Pete grasped hold of her hand as he moved closer to her.

"You're not going to propose, are you?" Myka chuckled nervously, being caught fairly off guard by Pete's actions, however, she instantly felt his concern was nothing to joke about. She noticed Pete giving her a bemused look, and without missing a beat she added, "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"Uh...look, I've been sitting here for a while before you woke up, you know, just hoping you were alright. And it came back to me what I felt when you got hit by that evil little thingy." He hesitated for a second, trenching through his hair with his fingers. "I—I—I didn't know if you were gonna make it...and I..."

"You thought I was going to die?" She stared at him, her eyes wide.

"Well, you know...yeah, I did." Pete bowed his head, burying his face in his hands.

As he glanced up at his friend, a single tear ran down his face. "I never felt like this, ever before...and I never want to feel like this again. The thought of you...the thought of you being gone...I couldn't stand it."

"Pete..."

"Myka, let me finish. Please." Quickly, he wiped away the tear.

She nodded slightly, although, she was not sure what to think. Pete cleared his throat more than once, trying to pull himself together before he finally was able to gaze into the brunette's deep green eyes.

"Listen Myka, what I said earlier, you know, that I don't know if I want to be your partner anymore, and that I wonder if you still trust me..." He looked away for a second prior to stating, "It doesn't matter. I don't give a damn! I realized once more that you're the most important person in my life, and from now on I...I..." He paused, exhaling loudly, as he intensely tried to steel his nerves. "Even if you despise me, or think I'm an immature idiot, and that I can't commit to anything...I really...really couldn't care less. And no matter how low you think of me, I'll always have your back. I will always be there for you. That's a promise!"

"Oh Pete..." Myka was stunned. As she was trying to fully comprehend what her colleague just had told her, she instinctively clasped his hands in hers, softly petting them. A great many different thoughts raced through her mind, and she could feel opposing emotions rising inside of her. This was all too much right now. She had to process Pete's confession before she would be able to respond to it. But despite that, there was one thing she was absolutely sure about.

Myka let go of his hand, but only to loop her arms around him, pulling him close to her. Pete was caught pretty much off guard and didn't know how to react at first, but since he felt equally overwhelmed, drowned by his emotions, he decided to return Myka's hug.

Leaning her head against his, she whispered, "I don't really know what to say right now, but there's something I want you to know." She turned her face more toward him, so that her lips were only a fraction of an inch away from his ear. "I do trust you. I trust you with my life, and there's only one person in this world whom I want to have as my partner...and that is you, Pete Lattimer."

Hearing these words from Myka's mouth thoroughly paralyzed him, and Pete was close to tears, to say the least. Holding her in his arms, like this, instantly gave him a sense of well-being, in a way that he had not experienced in a long time. Although the agent was quite

bewildered, he could not help but pull her closer. Feeling her body against his own, he wanted this embrace to last forever, and the urge to kiss her rose inside of him, like hungry flames from a new fire.

However, she had said it herself, she wasn't sure what to think of all this, and neither was Pete. As a matter of fact, he knew that this was no happily ever after. Clearly, they had a truckload of issues to be worked out, if this was even possible, but somehow his guts were telling him that at least their partnership was built to last.

Barely audible to her ears, Pete aspirated, "And I trust you. You'll always be my partner."

She was not sure if he had intended that whisper to be heard, but Myka was glad that she did, and she only hugged him tighter. Sharing a lengthened moment, the pair sat like this, silently cherishing each other's presence.

"Mykes, maybe it's about time we got out of here before somebody starts asking questions." Softly, Pete slipped out of her embrace. "I don't think two Americans are going to get a lot of co-operation from French authorities, stories of wicked artifacts aside."

Myka slightly cringed. "Good point." She reached for her jacket lying beside her on the gurney. Putting it on, she ran through the pockets, checking if something was missing.

"Pete, where's my notepad?" She glanced around the ambulance's interior. "And where's the folder? You know, the copies of the documents from the museum."

"No idea." Her colleague was busy checking for his own belongings. Then he froze on the spot. "Myka, my note is gone, too."

"You sure?" A short moment passed, then Myka started chuckling. "It was just one note, though."

"Ha, ha! That's hilarious!" Obviously, Pete was a little miffed about that comment.

The curly haired woman gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Oh come on, I'm sure it was important."

"It was." All of a sudden, the grumpy expression disappeared from Pete's face, and he grinned triumphantly, stating, "That's why I memorized it!"

Myka laughed out loud at her friend's statement and it took her a while to regain her seriousness. She leaned closer toward him, gazing deeply in his eyes.

"Pete..."

"Yeah?"

"Please don't ever change."

\* \* \*

"You were attacked? And your research was stolen?" Artie could not believe what he just had been told. "Who attacked you, for god's sake?"

"We're OK by the way. Thanks for asking." The screen of the Farnsworth showed a cynically

grinning Pete, Myka leaning over his shoulder. They had managed to disappear from the scenery at the Museum of Arts and Crafts without having to answer any aggravating questions, now walking along an empty alley a few blocks away.

"Yes, I can see that you're fine. Now, would you be so kind and tell me exactly what happened?" Artie's tone indicated considerable worry.

The field agents glanced at each other before they started to brief their boss on the visit to the locations of the robberies. When they came to detailing on the events at the museum, Artie suddenly interrupted. "So neither of you can identify the attacker?"

"Well, definitely male. A tall, impressive figure, muscular and in strikingly good shape," Myka replied.

Pete gave his partner a questioning look. "Impressive figure? Muscular..."

"Oh, come on, you two!" The grizzled man appeared to be even grumpier than usual. He held the Farnsworth closer to his face. "Deal with your repressed...whatever it is...later. We have a serious situation on our hands!"

Both agents' features darkened visibly, but before they could speak, Artie stated, "Due to your description, Myka, our mystery man could be ex-military of some sort, on any account a professional." Taking off his glasses, he reasoned for a moment. Then he ordered, "Show me the dart!"

Pete fetched the tiny arrow that he had pulled out of his neck earlier and held it in front of the Farnsworth. Artie slipped his glasses back on to take a closer look at the metallic object appearing on his screen. It only took him a second to put the pieces together, and suddenly his facial expression froze.

Myka noticed the change on his face immediately. "What is it, Artie?"

"It's a special tranquilizer dart. I've seen this before." The older man's tone was a blend of excitement and concern. "Oh Lord, it's what I thought. And of course this means trouble."

"Why trouble?" Myka asked confusedly. "Artie, what do you know about this weapon?"

"I imagine you both have terrible headaches, haven't you?" Artie assumed.

"Terrible?" Pete grimaced. "Dude, it's killing me! And we can't remember anything after being shot with these little sons of bitches."

The grizzled agent grinned knowingly. "Ha, ha. Yes, I can tell, believe me. I've had my experience with these things in the past. They deliver a rather nasty neurotoxin that affects the human nervous system within seconds, basically knocking you out in an instant."

"So you have an idea who possibly could have assaulted us?" Myka asked, furrowing her brow.

"Well, yes and no," Artie replied. "These evil little boys are fired from a high precision air pistol. Among other advanced weaponry, they were used by a group of very well organized European criminals, back in the eighties. Their leader was a master thief, called Claude Richard, and he somehow had acquired knowledge about artifacts and their powers. He wanted to collect as many as possible in order to pull off heists, no matter how impossible they would seem." He paused to take a sip from his coffee mug. "But we were able to stop him, for good. So, it's not even possible that Richard or any of his companions could be behind this."

"Why? What did you do with them? Bronze 'em?" Pete asked, his tone worried. He'd had his



share of Artie's past haunting them, and he wanted to be sure that this would not be happening, again.

"Oh, don't worry about that," the senior agent gave back. "It was taken care of."

Myka could not hide her nosiness. "So, what did you do then?"

"Well, let's just say that...some time was taken off their clocks. But don't let it bother you, they're out of the picture." Artie took another sip prior to placing the mug back on his desk. "However, somebody came across one of those airguns."

"Right, and that somebody apparently knows about artifacts as well. And he knows about us, too." Myka did not like the thought of an obviously well-trained opponent, sharing their knowledge of the Warehouse, in addition being equipped with high tech weaponry.

Each of the three agents had to take their time to cope with this perception, and for a while they all mused in silence. Again it was on Myka to restart the conversation. "Hey guys, clearly, there has to be a connection between the incidents thirty years ago and our case. There is no such thing as coincidence, we've got way too many links here. This is more of a pattern."

"I'm sure you're right, Myka." Artie was having the same thought. "The man in the museum has to be in some way related to Richard or one of his former gang members. When Claudia is back for her shift I'll have her researching every possible connection. In the meantime, tell me more about your findings at the Arts and Crafts Museum. Any news on the origin or the nature of our artifact?"

"Yes...right." Due to her photographic memory, Myka had little trouble recalling what she had learned from studying the documents back at the museum. "I dug up a brochure that described our key in question as the counterpart of a locking device, invented in the eighteenth century. Also it was listed on a delivery slip together with a number of other antique objects. They were purchased by the Musée des Arts et Métiers about four months ago, especially for this exhibition. And..." The female agent pointed her finger as if to emphasize the following statement, "They were shipped from the patent office in London."

"Ha!" shouted Artie. "Good catch! So I guess it's safe to assume that our mysterious door-opener is indeed Barron's Key."

"Possibly." Although Myka knew it was a good catch, she could not fully share Artie's enthusiasm. "Unfortunately, though, I couldn't find anything on how the key became an artifact or on how it actually works."

Pete sighed vociferously and leaned back, folding his hands behind his head as his features flashed a triumphant smile.

"Pete?" Myka and Artie queried in unison.

The ex-Marine was enjoying himself copiously. Now that he felt it was his time to shine, Pete wanted to bask in this moment. "Let me spill some light on this clouded matter, my unknowing friends." The impish grin would not vanish from his face, and he asked, "Ready to be blown away?"

"Oh, spit it out already!" Artie was close to losing his temper.

"OK, OK...I will. Jeez la weez!" Pete sat up, and his voice sounded at least a bit more serious now. "While you, Agent Bering, were doing your bookworm thing, I talked to that museum clerk, as you might remember..."

Myka rolled her eyes at her colleague's remark but she did not say a word.

"...and she was kind enough to fix me an appointment with the curator in charge of the exhibition, which usually is quite difficult to manage, as I may say."

"Yes, we get it. You were sweet-talking her." Artie tried to put a hold to Pete's self-adulation. "Go on. What did the curator say?"

The former soldier gathered his thoughts. "Right. The guy felt kind of flattered, I guess. Didn't expect him to be so helpful. Anyway, he told me something really interesting. Although the key's made of brass and shouldn't be shiny or anything at all, it had a mysteriously golden glow to it. His exact words."

"A golden glow?" Artie's eyes widened.

"Yup. But that's not all." Pete lowered his voice, as if he was about to share a secret. "The curator said, sometimes the strange shimmer would change color. When the key was pointed in a certain direction, it would start to glow purple. And one could smell..."

"Fudge!" Myka interjected.

"Damn, I knew it! I should've followed that hunch from before!" Artie traced through his hair with his hands. "Anyway, I would assume, Barron's key points to something, like a compass. If that is true, it doesn't only open doors, it also functions as a locating device. And...can anybody guess what it might be, that can be located with that key?"

"The other part of the artifact!" Myka exclaimed, clapping her hands. "So, you were right in the beginning, Artie! We are dealing with two objects."

"Exactly. Bravo!" The grizzled man nodded in admiration. "Now, we need to find our key's counterpart and figure out how they're related, what their real powers are and how we can neutralize them. Well, at least we've got something we can actually work with." The senior agent got up from his desk. "I'll wake up Claudia right away. Since our suspected artifact abuser has no problem attacking Warehouse personnel, we definitely need to speed things up. And as for you two, right now, you have one job, and one job only. Find that man! Find him A.S.A.P.! He obviously isn't fooling around, and it's time you got ahead of him before further damage is done."

"But Artie, we don't have any leads at all," replied Myka.

"Well, last time I checked, finding leads was part of an agent's job. So I suggest you do exactly that. Goodbye." The older man shut the lid on his Farnsworth.

"Hello, Artie?" Pete was talking to a black screen before he realized the conversation had ended.

"At least he said 'goodbye'," stated Myka with an ironic undertow.

"Yeah, shockingly polite." Musing about the senior agent's words, Pete shut his Farnsworth as well and put it in his pocket. Then he turned to his partner. "Any thoughts on this?"

"Actually, yes." Myka gazed directly in Pete's eyes. "So, you weren't hitting on that clerk after all."

"Told you. Just using my god-given talents." He flashed an impish smirk.

"I must admit, I misjudged you." Myka looked away for a moment, admitting, "Pete, I'm really,

really sorry."

"It's fine, Mykes."

For a few seconds neither of them spoke, and to avoid an awkward moment, Pete quickly changed the subject. "So, what next? Oh, did I mention I'm starving."

"Tell me about it. I could also use a bite," Myka gave back.

"Hey, I have an idea." The expression on Pete's face suddenly lightened. "Since we don't have any clue on how to proceed with the case, I'm thinking maybe we should take a creative break. You know, a little distraction to recharge the batteries."

"Mr. Lattimer, that sounds intriguing," she chuckled. "What d'you have in mind?"

"Well, Artie was pissed about the expenses, so I thought we could cut costs by buying food and taking it back to the hotel. You remember what an awesome kitchen we have?" Pete smiled at her impishly. "Might be fun to do some cooking together."

"What has gotten into you?" The female agent eyed him curiously.

Pete slightly blushed and briefly turned his head. "Nothing. I was just thinking we could..."

"You know what, you're right. That actually is a great idea!" Myka nodded in agreement.

"Well then, Mademoiselle, let us proceed." Pete imitated a French accent, inviting Myka to link arms with him.

She embraced his offer by looping her arm around his. "Allons-y, Monsieur!"

Leaning into each other, the pair strolled down the alley in the direction of their hotel. Hopefully, they would encounter a grocery store or supermarket along the way.

## Chapter Five

Hotel Left Bank Saint Germain  
Paris, France

"Pete, stop it! Let me get dressed first," Myka giggled as her partner was trailing behind her across the living room, waving a big wooden spoon and shouting, "C'mon Mykes, hurry up! I'm hungry!"

The brunette had taken a brief shower to freshen up after all the excitement earlier today. She had her tresses wrapped in a towel, her body clad in a large bathrobe provided by the hotel. Pete, on the other hand, felt like starving and just had thrown on a clean shirt and pants; refreshment did not concern him right now.

"Give me two minutes. I'll be right back!" Myka tittered as she disappeared into the bedroom.

"Alright. But I can't promise to wait for you." Pete walked back to the kitchen and began to empty the shopping bags that rested on the counter-top.

He was well-surprised when Myka reappeared even before he had finished unpacking the groceries. She was dressed in flip-flops, jeans and a tight-fitting, white tank top, revealing that she wore no brassiere. Her auburn hair was still quite wet, so she let it fall loose over her bare shoulders to dry off.

"Gosh, I'm pretty hungry myself!" she exclaimed.

Pete glanced in her direction, slightly ginning. "Appears so. Can't believe how fast you've dressed. How d'you do that?" He let his gaze rest on her for a while.

Stepping closer to him, she made a whisper out of her answer. "A woman's secret." With a playful smile she annexed, "And don't think I didn't notice you staring at my boobs."

"Mykes, I...didn't..." Pete stumbled over his own words, his cheeks flaming visibly, and he felt grateful when his friend saved him from drowning in embarrassment.

"Man, what's up? Not the first time you were checking out the tee-tons. Nothing to worry about." Friendly, she slapped him on the shoulder.

Pete managed a lame laugh. But why was he so freaked out about the situation? Myka was right, this happened quite occasionally. So, why all the concerns? Swiftly, he pushed the thought to the side, flashing his one-million-dollar-smile.

Without further hesitation the agents began to work. They had decided on something relatively simple, after a short discussion agreeing on a pasta dish. Luckily, they had found a market hall on their way back to the hotel, where they had been provided with a large variety of fresh, delicious products to choose from.

The pair started by slicing up tomatoes, mushrooms and onions for the creation of the sauce, to which they would add garlic, oregano and basil later. Myka already had finished her work while Pete still was occupied with the tomatoes, more squashing than cutting them.

She gave him an amused smile, giggling, "Are we having problems, Agent?"

Instead of a response, Pete just grunted.

"Hey, why don't you let me handle the cutting?" Myka softly placed her hand on Pete's shoulder. "You could take care of the pasta. Water's already boiling."

"OK, you're right." He handed her the kitchen utensil, looking at it with obvious disregard. "Knives never been my thing."

As Myka took over slicing duties, Pete opened the pasta bag. Pouring the handmade noodles into the big pot filled with bubbling water, he joked, "Ha! Drown, you little suckers!" Then he made a frightened face, changing to a high-pitched voice. "Oh no! Please don't drown us, Pete! We're just innocent pasta, trying to get noodled." Pete could not stay in character, bursting out into a loud laugh at his own performance.

Myka struggled to maintain her seriousness. Finally giving in, she joined Pete's guffaw. Grasping hold of his arm, she leaned into him, close to tears with laughter. Pete, equally overwhelmed by mirth, wound his arms around her. Instinctively. Accidentally. Joyfully.

It took the pair a while to come back to their senses, and after the laughter had ceased, Myka lifted her head, locking gazes with the handsome man who held her in his arms. Pete's

features showed an impish grin, and the female agent eyed him curiously.

"What?" she asked.

"Do you realize this is the first time we're cooking together?" he replied.

She smiled at him, stating, "I was just thinking the exact same thing. And who knew, this actually is fun!"

Pete nodded in consent. He took a curl of Myka's hair that had fallen in her face and gently brushed it behind her ear. His palm came to rest upon the side of her face. Immediately, he saw her blushing, slightly bowing her head.

Damn! He quarreled with himself; how could he be so thoughtless? He did not even know why he had touched her in the first place. What was he thinking? Irritated by his own actions, Pete was about to pull back, but surprisingly, Myka stopped him in his movement, grasping hold of his hand and pressing it against her cheek.

A slight odor of sweat was emerging from Pete's skin, and she leaned in closer to inhale the scent, finding it strangely appealing. As the tall brunette looked back up at him, she noticed the bemused expression on his features, and she gave him the sweetest of all smiles. Lightly, she started brushing against his palm, first with the flank of her face, then with her nose and lips. Then she planted a soft kiss on it.

Pete, instantly, was well aware of her intentions, and all of a sudden, his head was flooded by dozens of thoughts—confused, opposing thoughts. Naturally, he remembered their first kiss a few days ago, and there was no doubt that he wanted this, too. He wanted her, badly, and the urge to hold and caress her was overwhelming.

Nevertheless, a part of his mind was highly alerted, telling him to make a quick exit, as smoothly as possible. He knew this situation could only mean further intricacies. However, it took him just a few short seconds to push these warnings to the side. With Myka's slim form huddled against his own, all his doubts vanished into thin air. Feeling the touch of her lips on his palm, Pete realized resistance was futile.

Gently, he freed his hand from his partner's hold and let it glide on her back, softly grasping her neck, pulling her closer to him. In the instant their noses met, the pair froze. For a lengthened moment they deeply gazed in each other's gleaming eyes before they closed the gap between them.

At first, their lips moved slowly, almost cautiously. However, the longer this embrace lasted the more passionate and fiery it became. Myka could see the desire rising, burning in Pete's eyes, and all the more she could feel it by the way his caresses intensified. She fervently moaned, feeling brawny arms running down her sides, hooking under her thighs. Covetously, his palms squeezed the muscles of her well-toned legs, lifting her up on the counter-top, sending pieces of onions and tomatoes to the floor. All four of her limbs looping around him, the brunette pressed her body against his, her heavy breathing revealing her arousal. As strong yet gentle hands moved under her tank top, patting every square inch of her skin, she fully lost herself in this moment.

Naturally, Pete sensed the change in her temper, and the flame of his passion was increasingly fanned by the salacious manner in which she was embracing him. As he began to trace her giraffe-like neck with avid kisses, he felt her fingers scurrying over his shirt, hastily opening the buttons. A lewd sigh spilled from Myka's lips as she ripped the piece of cloth from his body. With her fingertips biting into his skin, she ran her hands down his back, her bosom brushing against his unclothed, muscular chest.

Driven by an overpowering urge, Pete held her tighter, enclosing the beautiful creature that rested in his arms. Slowly, he let his right hand move to the front of her appealing form, while his left petted her back. As he sensed her mouth eagerly sucking on the skin of his neck, he gave in to his longing and valiantly pulled up her top, tearing it over her head.

Highly aroused by his actions, Myka practically purred as he ran his lips down her chest. She could feel his tongue tiptoeing around the peaks of her femininity, while lustful hands crawled over her backside. Winding her arms around his head, she buried his face between her breasts. Vanquished by her desire, she was willing to give herself up to him, and she knew there was nothing in this world that could stop her right now.

Then, out of the blue, the Farnsworth went off with a noisy buzz. Myka yelped loudly, and the alarm nearly made her jump out of her skin. Abruptly, in an almost cold-hearted manner, the antique cell phone interrupted this intimate togetherness.

"Come on, seriously?" Pete was not as much in shock as his partner, but he definitely shared her disapproval. "Oh man...this sucks big time!" he stated, face-palming himself.

"Actually, it looks like there won't be any suction at all," Myka replied insinuatingly, quickly adapting to the situation.

Gently pulling herself out of Pete's embrace, she slid down from the counter. Briskly, she picked up her tank top and slipped it over. As she went to retrieve the Farnsworth from a table nearby, looking over her shoulder, she coyly smiled at her partner.

Pete returned her smile, however, he was rather surprised by her statement. While he reached for his shirt, he watched her opening the retro-style phone, being saluted by Claudia who suddenly appeared on the video screen.

"What's up, bitches?" the junior agent's voice sounded, emerging from the communication device. "All good in the French hood?"

"Hey Claud, you're in a surprisingly good mood!" Myka indicated.

"Yeah, of course I am. I'm farting rainbows!" the redhead started. "Just FYI, I might had a little too much caffeine. Way too much, actually. You see, Artie kicked me out of bed at 4:00 AM. Can you believe it? That's the time I usually go to bed." Claudia's voice was not far from cracking, and she went on babbling, "Oh, right, I had band practice last night, and it went till midnight. So, you can imagine I'm beyond exhausted. Thought it might be good to start the day with making a pot of coffee and...well...drink it. And I..."

"Hey, calm down!" Myka interrupted, squinching up her face. "You drank a whole pot of coffee?"

"Yup, you know, it seemed like a good idea. Mostly because I couldn't find a single Red Bull in the whole B&B," the copper haired teen stated.

"Well, that explains a lot." Myka smiled knowingly.

In the meantime, Pete had put his shirt back on, moving to his partner's side in order to join the conversation. "See Claud, I told you you were addicted to that stuff. So, how does a Red Bull withdrawal feel like, anyways?" Pete's tone appeared to be rather serious. He suddenly felt reminded of his own addiction, and unpleasant flashbacks occupied his mind.

"Dude, chill!" Claudia put a stop to Pete's parental advice. "It's just caffeine, taurine and some melted gummy bears. No cause for alarm, Papa Pete!"

Myka chuckled at the teenager's remark. From the corner of her eye she could spy Pete giving her a look of reproach, which she decided to ignore. Instead she focused on the reason of the junior agent's call. "Anyway, Claud, what's going on?"

"Right-y-right. I got news for you. Some good, some quite concerning." The redhead piercingly eyed her fellow agents. "What are your preferences?"

Pete did not have to think twice. "Good news first. What ya got?"

"I suppose, you remember Doctor V?" Claudia started.

"How could we forget Artie's girly girlfriend, Doctor Vanessa Calder," replied Pete. "What's her role in this?"

The junior agent went on explaining, "Artie had the idea that Vanessa might be just the right person to come up with some kind of antidote or counter-agent, in order to neutralize the poison delivered by those air gun darts. And what can I say, she really is that good. It took her only about an hour to throw something together, once she had analyzed the substance. A pretty nasty neurotoxin, by the way."

"That is good news!" Myka exclaimed. "How long will it take to get the antidote to Paris?"

"Ha! These are no longer medieval times. It already is in Paris!" The teen's face showed a wide grin.

Myka frowned. "But how's that even possible?"

"Ah, let me guess..." Pete seemed to know the answer, "Artie did something artifact-y? Maybe a transatlantic beam of some kind?"

"Yesss...something very artifact-y!" The tech geek could barely hold back her laughter. "It's called an email!"

The field agents eyed each other in bafflement, and before they could ask, Claudia already presented them with the answer. "I sent the formula for the antidote to an old friend of Artie's. He lives in another part of Paris and he knows his chemistry, at least that's what grumpy face said. The guy is re-producing the counter-agent as we speak, and Artie wants you to meet with that dude in about an hour."

"Wow, color me impressed." Pete nodded in appreciation. "Good work you guys! Next time we run into the notorious air gun shooter, this should give us the ability to even the odds."

Having exchanged high fives with her partner, Myka addressed the younger agent. "So, who's that chemist, and where do we meet with him?"

"Gilbert Gardin. I just sent his location to your phone, Myka. Should be a forty-minute's drive," the redhead replied.

"Nice. We'll be there." Pete said, slightly excited. "You also said something about bad news, though. What is it this time?"

"It's not really bad news, just a word of advice." Claudia's features showed a mischievous grin. "Maybe next time, you two should clean up a little before answering the Farnsworth. You realize it has video, right?"

"Why? What d'you mean?" the ex-Marine queried, his confusion evident.

"Let's just say, I'm sorry to have interrupted your little make-out session."

Pete and Myka both blushed visibly, glancing at each other with a deeply baffled expression on their faces.

"H-H-How did...How did you know?" spluttered Myka.

"Well, despite your raggedy looks, it mostly is the big-ass hickey on Pete's neck." Claudia paused, noticing how he covered his neck by turning up his shirt's collar, while Myka nervously tried to straighten her top. The redhead flashed a suggestive smile before she continued, "One doesn't have to be omniscient to know how much you guys are enjoying the capital of love...and each other, as far as I can tell. But don't worry, my lips are sealed. Promise."

"Well, thanks for that, I guess," replied Myka as casual as it was possible for her at that point. Obviously, she was mortified and wanted nothing but to end the awkward conversation. "We have to go now. You know, meet with that chemist and...other stuff. So, talk to you later. Bye."

Before Claudia could give a reply, the small screen in front of her turned black.

"I guess, working for the Warehouse has negative effects on everybody's manners, not only Artie's. Will have to keep an eye on that," the junior agent mumbled to herself, returning to her research about The Ultimate Key.

After a prolonged, silent moment, Pete spoke first. "Pew, she caught us pretty red-handed. Thank god, it wasn't Artie!"

"Yeah, whatever. It doesn't matter, because this will never happen again. Ever." Myka's tone indicated embarrassment mixed with anger.

"What?" Pete took a step back. "What exactly do you mean? Making out or getting caught making out?"

"Both, apparently."

Pete could clearly hear the roaring noise of the freight train that just had hit him. He opened his mouth, but his thoughts would not transform into words. The agent just stood there, struck with consternation, staring at his colleague in disbelief.

At first, Myka did not realize the impact of her words on Pete; she was too angry. Actually, not with him, but very much with herself, foremost for the lack of professionalism that she just had portrayed. And there still was the fact she had offered herself to Pete, and now, she did not even remember why exactly. It happened again! Once more she had lost control of the situation and furthermore of herself. The brunette inwardly queried, what is going on, what is happening to me?

As she suddenly came to notice the sheer bafflement on Pete's face, the female agent was reasonably shocked, and she did not feel able to cope with the situation, not in the least. Usually, Myka was not afraid of any confrontation, but right now she simply did not have the strength to face him. Quickly she said, "What are you looking at? We've got to meet with Artie's contact, and I don't want to be late. No time to waste, let's go!"

As she turned to leave the room, Pete took grasp of her arm, holding her back. "Myka, wait! Please explain what the heck is going on."

"I have no idea what you mean!" she replied, her voice trembling.

"Oh yes, you do! Don't be ridiculous! Please, don't act like nothing happened. Don't act like



you were just playing!" Confused by his own thought, Pete had to take a deep breath before he could continue. "Or are you just playing with me, Myka?"

"No, Pete. I'm not...I don't know. Dammit!" She vehemently pulled her arm out of Pete's hold, and she shouted, "I don't know what to think right now. I don't know how to feel and...and what the hell I should do. I just don't. So...back off!"

The bedroom door slammed shut, and for a while Pete could not take his eyes off that piece of wood dividing him from his partner. Although, she tried hard to avoid any noise, he clearly could hear her crying, which soon turned into weeping. He took some halting steps toward the bedroom, but suddenly he froze in his tracks. What was he doing? The woman obviously had some serious issues, and he was most likely to become one of them, if he got involved any deeper. No doubt, she was toying with him! But how could she do that? A profane curse escaped his mouth, and he turned to walk back to the kitchen, his hasty movements revealing the fury that was dwelling inside of him.

His look fell upon the half-finished sauce which had started to scorch, and the pasta, being completely soaked with water by now.

"Not exactly my perception of a romantic dinner," Pete said to himself, his tone a mixture of sarcasm and frustration. He stared at the mess, supposed to become their meal, the sight only enraging him further. In a vigorous move he grabbed the cooking pot and poured the sauce in the sink; the pasta disappeared into the trashcan. What a freaking waste!

## Chapter Six

Municipality Hôtel de Ville  
Paris, France

The sun had set already, and the city was wrapped in black when the Warehouse Agents made their way to meet with Artie's contact. During the cab ride from the hotel to Place des Vosges not a single word was exchanged; the tension filling the air was nearly unbearable. The taxi driver nervously squirmed in his seat and Pete noticed him breaking the speed limit more than once. He was not the only one feeling a strong sense of relief, when they finally arrived at their destination.

Pete paid for the fare and gave the chauffeur a hasty nod. "Merci. We'll walk from here."

Exiting the vehicle, he once again neglected to help his partner out of the car. Instead he immediately started walking, turning on his cell phone's navigation app in order to orientate himself. After climbing out of the cab, Myka took a few quick steps to catch up with him. Putting her hand on his shoulder, she resolutely pulled him back, forcing him to turn around and face her.

"Myka, what the hell!" Pete hissed at her.

"Oh Pete, sorry. I didn't mean to pull so hard...I—I—It's just..." she paused. "It's just that, you know, somehow I have a bad feeling about this."

"Huh? What d'you mean?" He gave her a confused glance. "About Artie's pal?"

"Yeah." The female agent seemed worried. "I know he's Artie's friend and we're supposed to trust him, but something tells me we should be careful tonight."

Reasoning, Pete gazed at her for a lengthened moment prior to saying, "Usually, I'm the one with the vibes, but OK, we'll handle it your way. Eyes and ears open."

Myka was rather surprised by her colleague's statement. She definitely had expected him to argue, though, she did not complain. Instead she nodded, an appreciative smile on her face.

After checking Pete's GPS, confirming they were headed in the right direction, the pair crossed the street and walked toward Rue du Pas de la Mule. As they passed a crowded coffee shop on the right, Myka noticed her partner grinning at the sign outside, saying 'Café Hugo'.

"Did you know Victor Hugo used to live here, just a few yards away? And I guess that's the place where he drank his coffee and possibly also worked," Myka explained.

She became increasingly excited as she recalled how rich in history Paris actually was. She stopped and slowly turned, letting her gaze wander the dimly lit environment. Thick plumes of fog were crawling along the streets connecting to Place des Vosges, and the brunette watched the mist slowly swallowing the square-cut plaza, painting the imposing, neo-Gothic buildings surrounding the scenery in shades of gray. Thinking about all the historically important events that had taken place in this city, as well as the many influential writers and artists who had lived here, she completely got lost in the moment. Absentmindedly, she embraced herself, a deep sigh escaping her lips.

Pete could see how much she was enjoying herself in the face of all that historical significance, and he gladly gave her the time to do so. He took a couple of steps back, silently observing his partner basking in this eerily romantic moment.

First he tried to fight it, but soon he was drawn in by the beauty of the scene playing out before him. If he liked it or not, Pete had to admit he adored the woman standing there in the streets of Paris, allegorizing the loveliest sight he had ever seen. Even the thought that Myka just might have played with him did not bother him at that point.

His head bowed, the ex-Marine was deeply ensnared in his thoughts and it took him a while to realize that his friend had walked up to him, now placing her hand on his arm. Slowly he looked up at her, his features showing a quite dumbfounded expression, and Myka could not help but laugh out loud.

"Pete, you should see yourself right now! What's up with you?" she giggled.

"Hmm...uh, nothing." Pete's face slightly reddened and he felt a little sting of embarrassment. Turning around, he gently pulled his arm out of Myka's hold, stating, "I think we paid enough attention to this place, so let's go meet this guy. As you said yourself, we wouldn't want to be late, now, would we."

With a bemused smile on her face, Myka followed her fellow agent with her eyes for a while before trailing behind him. As she caught up to him she was gathering herself, bringing her focus back to the case. And suddenly, there it was again, this awkward feeling that something was off. She could not explain what exactly, not even to herself. However, Myka checked on her sidearm, just to be sure, and she told Pete to do the same.

Shortly after the agents had crossed Rue des Tournelles, they stopped in front of a blue painted door, marking the entrance to an old apartment house that obviously had seen better days. The shop on the ground floor looked as if it had been abandoned for years, and

furthermore, the entire face of the building left an impression of decay.

"Here we are," said Pete, turning off his cell phone's GPS. "Rue du Pas de la Mule, number 5."

Myka took a closer look at the name tags next to the doorbell buttons. "Found it. G. Gardin, third floor," she stated, pressing the respective call button.

A crackling voice sounded from the tiny speaker near the door panel, "Come in, Agents. It is three stairs up." A buzzer sounded, and the pair went inside, exchanging meaningful glances.

Myka and Pete were greeted by a tall, grizzled man in his early sixties. Dressed in a custom-made, light-gray suit and lilac shirt, he showed an overall well-groomed appearance. Mr. Gardin was standing on the doorstep of his apartment; gesticulating, he invited them inside.

"Mademoiselle Bering, Monsieur Lattimer, welcome! It is always a pleasure to meet friends of Arthur's," the man stated in a noticeably soft tone, his words coated in that typically charming French accent.

Shaking his hand, Myka said, "Bonsoir, Monsieur Gardin. Thank you for seeing us on such short notice."

"De rien, ma belle!" the man replied with a wink, in an old-fashioned manner planting a kiss on her hand. "And it's Doctor Gardin by the way. But please, call me Gilbert."

The brunette slightly chuckled, presenting him with a welcoming smile. "Nice to meet you, Gilbert. I'm Myka."

Instantly, Pete felt the urge to intervene, and he stepped forward, practically pushing his partner to the side. "Hi Gilbert, I'm Pete. And don't even think about kissing my hand!"

While the two men were exchanging handshakes, both of them ironically grinning, Myka took the opportunity to shoot an ample glance around the condo. Right away, she noticed the tasteful, expensive-looking interior which one had not expected, regarding the bad state of the house's facade.

"May I offer the agents a drink?" Gilbert asked, leading his guests into the living room.

"No thanks, we're on duty," Myka replied with a brief smile.

Pete added, "Actually, we're kind of in a hurry, and we really need that antidote. We hoped that you would've finished it by now."

"Ah oui, of course!" Dr. Gardin turned on his heel and pointed toward a room on the opposite side of his domicile. "Follow me, s'il vous plaît."

A heavily reinforced door led to a fully equipped laboratory, containing a number of desktops and shelves crowded with all kinds of chemicals, test arrangements and research instruments. Among other high-tech devices Myka even recognized an electron microscope. When Gilbert noticed the wondering expressions on both agents' faces, he instantly explained, "Oh, this is just my little hobby room. You must know, I used to be a recognized scientist, and I did a lot of chemical research for the Warehouse back in the day. Although, by now, it's not more than a pastime."

Pete turned his head in his friend's direction, muttering, "Artie was right, this dude does know his chemistry."

"Indeed I do." Gilbert's features flashed an impish grin as he gazed at Pete.

The chemist reached for a small vial, resting on one of the work tables, containing a transparent liquid that very much resembled water.

"The antitoxin?" Myka curiously eyed the tiny bottle in Gilbert's hand. "Is it really going to protect us from the effects of those dirty darts?"

"Yeah, and what about side effects?" Pete annexed.

"Mais oui, it will neutralize the toxin entirely. As far as I can tell, Dr. Calder's formula is flawless," replied the doctor. "I spoke to her earlier on the phone, and she assured me that everything will be fine, as long as we follow her instructions."

As he prepared two infusion sets, one for each agent, he briefed them on the procedure. "In order to avoid vertigo and nausea, you will not be injected with a syringe, instead we will take a less aggressive approach and put you on an IV. That should take about forty-five minutes at most. And don't worry, I have done this before."

"Okey-doke, then let's get started." Pete took off his jacket. "So, we're going to do it here?"

"There is no need to be uncomfortable, I guess you would agree." Gilbert picked up the infusion bags and pointed at the laboratory's exit. "Have a seat in the salon, s'il vous plait."

After the agents had settled on the luxurious couch centered in the living room, the doctor set up the IVs. Afterwards he vanished into the kitchen to fix a pot of tea, leaving the agents to themselves for some minutes.

"Gardin actually seems pretty nice," started Myka. "Maybe I was wrong about him. What do you think?"

"Yeah, he's nice. A little too nice, if you ask me," Pete said, twiddling with the injection hose that was plugged into his left arm.

Myka spontaneously slapped him on the shoulder. "Stop fiddling with that thing! You'll only pull it out."

She cut off a patch from the plaster spool that, among other medical utensil, was spread over the coffee table, using it to cautiously fix the needle stuck in Pete's skin. "That should hold. But don't touch it, OK?"

Pete only answered with a sigh.

"So, what did you mean when you said, Gardin is too nice?" she queried.

The male agent sat up, avoiding to look directly at Myka. Mumbling, he stated, "You know, I just thought he went a little over the top with the flirting. Not that I'm jealous or anything, I just found it to be inappropriate."

"Flirting? Seriously?" The brunette had to choke down a laugh. "That's what you're concerned about? Pete, FYI, French guys are world-famous for being gentlemen, also for their charm. Besides, I'm pretty sure he's gay."

"You think? Oh...oh, good," the former soldier remarked, a brief smile scurrying over his features. "I mean, uh, whatever."

Musing for a moment, Myka teasingly stated, "Don't think you can fool me, Lattimer. You really are jealous, aren't you!"

Pete did not respond right away, bashfully glancing at his feet, and she quickly said, "Oh, come on. No reason to be ashamed. You know, actually...I think it's sweet of you. Very, sweet."

When Pete felt his partner grasping hold of his hand, he turned his head to face her, and the pair locked gazes. For some time neither spoke a word. Sitting like that, holding hands, staring at one another, they suddenly could see the temptation lighting up in each other's eyes.

"Pete..." Myka started, but instantly she was interrupted by a finger, gently placed on her lips.

"Don't. We'll talk later," Pete whispered, moving his fingertip along her features, tenderly tracing her jawline. "Right now, I just want to..."

A loudly whistling noise, produced by the boiling teakettle in the kitchen, jolted the pair out of the moment they were sharing. Myka yelped, and Pete almost jumped off the couch, being absolutely positive that he was experiencing a heart attack.

"Tea will soon be ready, mes amis!" Gilbert's voice sounded from the neighbored room.

The agents, both gasping for breath, showed rather puzzled facial expressions, but after a short lapse of awkward silence, they simultaneously burst out laughing.

Gilbert was entering the living room just now, carrying a plate with a big pot of black tea and three mugs. Noticing the agents' guffaw, he instantly froze in his steps. "Qu'est-ce qui se passe?" he asked, his confusion evident. "Would you mind telling me the reason of your amusement?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she giggled. "Pete is just hilarious sometimes." Holding a hand to her lips, she turned to her friend, whispering, "We'll continue later, OK?"

Pete still was not in control of himself, but he nodded in agreement and gave her a knowing wink.

Obviously, the chemist was not sure what to think of the situation, however, he decided not to ask further questions. He placed the plate on the coffee table and started to pour the delicious smelling tea into the cups, while he eyed his guests closely. "Alors, how are my patients feeling? Are you experiencing nausea or dizziness?"

"No. Everything's fine so far," the brunette replied. "What about you, Pete?"

Holding up one thumb, the ex-soldier answered, "Nothing out of the ordinary."

"That's good news!" Dr. Gardin exclaimed. "Not that I expected otherwise, but as they say, discretion is the better part of valor."

The Shakespeare reference coaxed a smile out of Myka, and suddenly her interest was sparked. "So, Gilbert, as it seems we have some time to kill. Why don't you tell us how you met Artie, and how you got involved with the Warehouse?"

"Oh mon Dieu, that was a long time ago." He handed each agent a mug prior to taking a seat in an antique wing chair, opposite of them. "Let me think, it all started with the burglaries in 1984. Or was it 85? I don't remember exactly, however, I do remember the first time I met Arthur. I will never forget those eyebrows, oh là là!"

Myka and Pete exchanged mischievous glances, both chuckling, and Pete even nearly choked on his tea.

Gilbert, not completely hiding a grin, went on with his story. "At that time I was a consultant for the Gendamerie. Arthur and I met at one of the crime scenes, le Musée Carnavalet, I think. He approached me, saying that he worked for a secret organization and that he knew more than the police. When he asked for my help, I agreed, and we began to work together on developing the very antitoxin that is being injected into your bodies as we speak. But unfortunately, we were not nearly as successful as Dr. Calder has proven to be. If only we had known the things we do today, at least a few lives could have been saved."

Myka noticed a shadow scurrying across his face, and she wondered whose life it was that he wished to have saved, though, she decided not to bother him. After a moment, the Frenchman put his mug down on the table and offered the agents a refill, which they thankfully accepted.

"Merci, Gilbert. The tea's excellent." Myka smiled at him. "So, how did you solve the case then?"

"Actually, we did not," the older man replied. As he saw the agents' gazes narrowing on him, he asked, "Why the surprised looks? I understand, Arthur told you everything, non?"

"He only said the thieves were taken out of the picture or something," Pete stated.

"That is one way to phrase it." The doctor flashed an sarcastically morbid grin. "One of the artifacts used by the thieves was a pocket watch that once belonged to Pierre-Simon Laplace..."

Myka frowned and interjected, "Marquis de Laplace, the mathematician?"

"Mais, bien sûr." Giving her a glance of appreciation, the Frenchman continued, "However, the watch had powers far beyond of what the burglars were able to control. After Arthur and I had found the thieves' hideout, we confronted them. Their leader, Claude Richard, tried to use the watch against us, but something went wrong. Terribly wrong. The watch was creating an enormous energy, up to the point when it exploded. Every single one of them was...well... they were frozen in time, at least Arthur explained it that way. So, one might say, the case solved itself."

"Frozen in time, huh? That's pretty strange," Pete wondered.

"We've seen stranger," his colleague reminded him. Addressing Gilbert, she queried, "And afterwards, you and Artie have stayed in touch?"

"We have. Arthur was grateful I helped him trace the burglar crew, and for a while he would consult me whenever the hunt for an artifact involved a chemical question." He emptied his mug, reasoning for a second, then he concluded, "And even after I had retired, he would call from time to time. Arthur really is a good friend."

For some lengthened moments silence filled the air before Pete came back to the actual case. "Gilbert, you've been living in Paris for a long time and obviously you got a lot of insight in artifacts. Can you imagine who might be behind the thefts we're dealing with?"

"I am afraid I can't help you. Since Arthur called me I have been thinking about it, but nothing comes to mind. I am sorry." The older man shook his head and directed the question back to the agents. "And what about you? Do you already have a lead, maybe on where to find Barron's key?"

"Unfortunately we don't." Myka swallowed a lump in her throat. "Basically we're back at square one. That's why we need to speed things up."

"And now we can!" Pete exclaimed, pointing to the IV bags which were nearly emptied.

After checking on the bags, Gilbert nodded, "Yes, my friends, you should be immune to that neurotoxin from now on. At least one thing less to worry about." He removed the injection sets from both agents' arms and threw them in a trash can nearby. "As far as I am concerned, you are good to go. But please, let me know if you experience side effects."

The pair nodded, and Gilbert concluded, "Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"I don't think so. You already did more than we could expect. Thank you so much!" Myka replied, as she shook Gilbert's hand.

"Yeah, Doc, thanks for everything," the male agent said, even managing a smile.

"You're always welcome, mes amis!" Gilbert returned the smile. "Although, Arthur promised to keep me in the loop, I would be glad if you two stayed in touch as well! Please let me know if I can be of further assistance."

The agents promised to do so and bid farewell, exiting Gilbert's apartment. A minute later found them back on the street, outside the blue door.

"I guess, you actually were wrong about the guy." Pete gave his partner a friendly shove. "He seems pretty solid in the end."

"You're right, of course he's solid. After all, Artie knows him since almost thirty years," Myka admitted.

"So, Mademoiselle Bering, what's up next?"

The brunette produced her cell phone from the inside pocket of her coat. Checking the time, she stated, "Twelve-thirty already. I think we should call it a night."

"Agreed. But not without grabbing something decent to eat first." Pete grinned impishly at her. "And don't tell me you're not hungry, I just heard your stomach growl."

"OK, I'm in. What about the pasta? We could finish cooking," she suggested.

"Uh, yeah...about that. I might have thrown it out before we came here." He avoided to look her in the eyes, knowing that she was not going to be amused. "You know, there was not much left that was edible anymore."

Pete's reply did not sound very convincing to her ears, and her features showed a rather bewildered expression. Under different circumstances, Myka surely would have freaked out, but right now she was not in the mood for an argument.

Casually she stated, "If you say so."

Nevertheless, the incident bothered her.

Taking a step toward her, Pete put on a smile, trying to motivate her. "Maybe we can find a cozy restaurant back on the way to the hotel?"

"I don't know. Actually, I'm kind of exhausted." Shrugging her shoulders, the female agent concluded, "I, on my part, will go back to the hotel and order room service, maybe go over the file once more."

"Seriously?" Pete's eyes narrowed on her. "I would prefer eating out and, you know, maybe talk about things."

Turning away, Myka took her phone and dialed a taxi service. "Suit yourself. I'll be off then."

## Chapter Seven

After the odd conversation outside Gilbert's house, Pete utterly had lost his hungry feeling. Maybe Myka had not expected him to really split up, but considering that cold attitude of hers, he had felt the need to be with himself for some time, telling her he would walk back to the hotel.

Musing about the many awkward and annoying situations he and his partner had undergone together over the past days, the dark-haired agent had made some detours on his way to the hotel. The extended promenade had helped him clear his head, and he actually had come to some conclusions. Bearing a feeling of satisfaction, he could not wait to tell Myka.

Entering the hotel lobby just now, Pete's glance fell upon the long case clock opposite the entrance, and he was quite surprised that it read 3:35 AM. He turned toward the front desk, asking the night porter if there had been any calls. The man just shook his head and passed Pete the key card for the room. Nodding, the agent took it and went straight for the elevators.

It was not till he exited the car on his floor that he realized there should not have been a key at the desk. Myka was supposed to have arrived at least two hours ago, and she would have needed the card to enter the room. Immediately Pete's spider sense started tingling, and he sprinted along the corridor toward the suite. Almost breaking down the door, he rushed in, calling out his friend's name, his tone indicating great worry. But no answer sounded, and a quick search revealed an empty apartment.

Pete's hands were shaking as he took his phone, pressing the dial button that had Myka's counterfeit on it. When he heard a computer generated voice, telling him the number was temporarily unavailable, his features instantly froze. The ex-Marine felt dizzy for a second and had to take a seat on the chair nearby. Burying his face in his palms, he tried to think of every possible scenario, but nothing really made sense. Myka always called or at least left a note when there was an unexpected change of plans, and she never turned off her phone during an investigation. Something must have happened. Where the hell could she be?

A lengthened lapse of musing passed before Pete finally plucked up the courage to call the Warehouse. Immediately, Claudia answered her Farnsworth, being greeted by a nervous, agitated field agent who reluctantly started to brief her on the latest events.

"What d'you mean, you lost her? Dude, what the heck!" The bronze communicator nearly slipped from the apprentice's hand. It took her a moment to process the information. "You two ain't even really together, and you already managed to scare her off? Way to go, Lattimer!"

"Shut up, Claud! You don't understand." Pete had to take a deep breath to stay calm. "It's not like that. You see, after we left Gardin's place, I wanted to grab something to eat, but she was tired and said she'd take a cab directly to the hotel. That was three hours ago, but she never showed; I checked with the concierge. And the real strange thing is that her phone's off."

"Are you getting a vibe?" the junior agent asked.



"A really bad one!" Pete trenched through his hair, his features stone-faced. "Oh man, I should have stayed with her. Dammit!"

Claudia held the scope-like screen closer to her face. "Hey Pete, listen. We'll figure this out. Don't worry, I already have an idea."

Pete's features slightly lightened, and curiosity rose inside of him as he heard fingers running over a keyboard.

"What're you up to?"

"Shush! I'm being awesome..." the redhead replied without even glancing at him.

A minute or two passed before Claudia was willing to respond, but when she finally turned toward Pete, a wide smirk stretched across her face. Triumphant, she exclaimed, "Ha! Found her!"

"Shut the front door!" Pete's eyes grew wide at her statement. "How? Where is she?"

The tech geek pointed the Farnsworth in the direction of her laptop, allowing Pete to take a gaze at the tracking software that was currently running. While he studied the pictures being transmitted to him, Claudia explained, "I remotely turned on Myka's phone and activated the GPS. Et voilà, there she is. Well, at least her mobile is."

"You can do that? Wow!" Pete remarked, his surprise evident. But suddenly something caught his attention. "Hey, wait a sec...isn't that location just next to Place des Vosges! That's damn close to where I left her. And it looks like the thing is moving."

A few clicks later, the tech geek confirmed Pete's conjecture. "You're right, the phone's somewhere near Gardin's place, and it is moving! Man, that's..." Claudia suddenly stopped, realizing the call had already ended.

As soon as the address was verified, Pete had shut the lid on his Farnsworth and had jumped up from his chair. Grabbing his SIG, the Tesla gun and a flashlight from the kitchen counter, he had run out of the suite.

\* \* \*

"Oui, Madame. Un taxi sera chez vous dans dix minutes," the cab company's operator stated.

"Bien, merci beaucoup!"

After Myka had ended the call, she put the phone back in her pocket, being glad she would not have to wait long for the taxi to arrive. Turning her head, she could see Pete just vanishing around the next corner. Involuntarily, she had to think of dinner preparations earlier, and she felt the anger still dwelling inside of her. The brunette could not believe that he actually had dumped the half-prepared meal. Sometimes her partner very much resembled a twelve-year-old child, and again she began questioning herself why she was drawn to him in such a strong way. In a flash of irony she thought, Maybe it is a medical condition.

All of a sudden a strange feeling befell her, and when the agent turned around, she could spy a couple of blurred shapes on the other side of the street, maybe a hundred yards away, slowly moving in her direction. Intuitively, Myka opened her coat, releasing the cover flap of her

holster, and she took some steps back to keep herself hidden from the flare of the streetlamp nearby.

The fog flooding the road had gotten even thicker by now, and the diffuse figures had nearly come flush with her before she could identify them as a tall, well-built man accompanied by a short-haired redheaded woman of almost the same height. For a second there, the two seemed to have stopped, but Myka obviously was mistaken. Keenly, she observed them as the pair passed by her in silence. Even if she had wanted to, she could not take her eyes off of them. Tracing their every movement, she remained on high alert until the strangers disappeared into the darkness.

It was only now, the agent realized she had been holding her breath during this whole uncanny encounter. Deeply she inhaled the cold night air, inwardly laughing at herself. Come on, Bering! What's the matter? Relax! But out of no apparent reason she still was feeling quite unnerved and tense. Leaning against the wall of the building behind her, she closed her eyes and ran her hands over her face.

Suddenly, an alarming sound entered her ears. Footsteps were quickly catching up to her. Instantly, her head spun in the direction where the sounds originated from. At the same time a small object whizzed over her head, and as she turned around, reaching for her sidearm, a second projectile was shot at the agent, missing her only by an inch. Instinctively, she started running, headed for the next street corner to find cover, however, it was too late already.

Tackled by something that felt like a wrecker's ball, Myka was knocked to the ground; the back of her head hit the sidewalk hard. The only thing she could hear was her weapon skidding over the asphalt, immediately, waves of pain flashing through her skull. The objects in front of her eyes began to swim, and they would fade to black soon...

Yet the well-trained agent was not willing to give in. As she sensed her attacker moving closer, leaning over her, she knew, this was her only chance. Quickly, with all her strength, Myka pulled up her leg, delivering a considerably effective kick to the person's lower body. A suppressed groaning confirmed that she had found her target, however, her efforts were not meant to pay off. Out of nowhere, Myka was hit by a second strike, this time directly to her left temple. She rolled onto her side, and consciousness left her with a sigh.

\* \* \*

Pete already had passed the hotel's front door as he abruptly froze in his tracks. The question of transportation came to his mind, and he turned on his heel, walking back into the lobby, straight toward the night porter's counter.

With no time to waste, he came straight to the point, "Excuse me, don't get this the wrong way, but do you, by any chance, happen to have a car that I could borrow?"

The concierge eyed him skeptically. "Pardon, Monsieur?"

"OK, this won't get us very far." Pete slightly leaned over the counter, offering the clerk a handshake. "What's your name, buddy? Mine's Pete."

Shaking the agent's hand, the man haltingly replied, "Marchand...Je suis Haziem Marchand."

Obviously, he was of Arabic descent. Possibly Morocco or Algerian ancestry, Pete thought, as he sized him up, preparing his game plan.

"Listen Haziem, I have a serious situation on my hands, and I don't have time to wait for a freaking cab. At four in the morning that would take forever." Pete's impatience grew by the second. "So, if you have a car here, please let me borrow it. You'll have it back by tomorrow, and of course I'll pay you."

A brief moment of hesitation passed before Marchand stated, "Oui Monsieur, I have a car here, but it's not mine. It belongs to my girlfriend."

"You do have a car? Awesome!" The agent fished in his back pocket for his wallet. Producing it, he pulled out a one hundred-euro bill. "So, what d'you say?"

The concierge's eyes grew wide at the sight of the green-colored piece of paper, though, he shook his head. "Non, c'est la voiture de ma chérie! Sorry, Monsieur. I can't do it."

"Yeah I get it, it's your girlfriend's car, but you see, I'm desperate. Dude, don't leave me hanging here, I need transportation right now!" Pete's patience was done for, and he looked the guy straight in the eye. "So...how much?"

Instead of giving an answer, Haziem just raised three fingers, a wide grin on his face.

"Seriously, three hundred? What the fhhh..." Pete was close to losing his temper, but as it would seem, he had no other choice. What else could he do? Shoot the man?

"OK, smart-ass. You got yourself a deal." Reluctantly, he produced another bill from his wallet, this time a yellow one. "That's three. Now, gimme the keys!"

The night porter's face showed an all satisfied expression as he took the currencies. Tossing Pete a key ring, he stated, "The orange Renault, right around the corner."

Without wasting another word, Pete took the keys and exited the hotel. Just like the man had promised, he found the vehicle at the aforesaid location. But what he found was not exactly what he had expected. Yes, it was a Renault, and it was orange, but apart from that, the two-door compact car was not even worth to be called a rust bucket. Easily twenty-five years old and in horrible shape, the car looked as if somebody had stolen it from a junkyard. A rusty plate on the rear lid said 'R5'.

"What the hell is that? You gotta be kidding me!" Pete was talking to himself while his face crumpled, but since he was in a hurry, he decided to go along with it. Having entered the cabin, however, it took at least a dozen attempts to get the engine running, accompanied by a number of profanities spilling from Pete's lips. When the small four-cylinder finally started up, the agent hammered the shifter into first gear. The transmission cawed loudly, and the front tires left a huge cloud of smoke behind, as he floored the gas pedal.

Fortunately, there was not much traffic, due to the early morning hours, and Pete made good time approaching his destination. He did not care about speed limits nor the strange noises emerging from the car, relentlessly chivying the overstrained vehicle across the misty streets of Paris. All the former soldier could think about was his partner who presumably was in serious danger.

Blaming himself, Pete wondered how he could have left her on her own; at least he should have waited with her until the cab arrived. Idiot! He berated himself, and in an outburst of anger he pounded his fist on the dashboard. All at once a loud cracking sounded, and the entire glove compartment fell out of its casing, noisily crushing onto the floor. Holy crap! Pete was startled; distracted by this incident, he was just about to crash the Renault in a bus stop on the side of the road. Its tires squeaking, the aged vehicle came close to overturning as the agent sharply turned the steering wheel, managing to avoid a collision only by inches. If he had not been the well-trained driver he was, this without a doubt, would have ended badly.

Only seconds later, Pete felt a vibrating sensation in his pants, caused by the buzzing Farnsworth. Maintaining a relatively high velocity, he reached for the device, opening it with one hand.

"What is it? I'm kind of busy," the agent started.

"So I can imagine; Claudia filled me in," Artie remarked. "Hey, what's that noise? I can barely hear you. Are you in a cab or something?"

"Borrowed a car. It's pretty loud. And pretty shitty." Pete was quite short with him, preoccupied by his worry about Myka. "So, what d'you got?"

Claudia's features showed up on the small, round screen, and she excitedly stated, "Pete, get this...Myka's phone is still being moved, but as it seems somebody in running in circles, more or less. We're tracking it via GPS, and the signal is now headed south on Rue de Birague. It's moving kind of slow, so I guess, whoever carries that mobile is on foot. Could be her, don't you think?"

"I don't think so, Claud. She would've called by now." He paused for a moment, maneuvering the car through a narrow hairpin turn. "Listen, I thought, it'd be helpful if I could track that signal by myself. Any ideas?"

"You're not the only one. I'm already on it, setting up a feed directly to your phone," the teenager replied as she typed the last digits of the code, then hitting 'Enter'. "Check your cell, it should be receiving the data now."

Placing the Farnsworth on the passenger seat, he took out his phone. After a few seconds a map of Paris appeared on the display, and also a red dot, blinking continuously.

"Got it! Nice work guys." Not even looking at the video screen anymore, he concluded, "Gotta go now."

"Alright," Artie nodded. "Keep us posted. Good luck!"

At full throttle, Pete kept speeding along the avenues and boulevards of the French capital. The old Renault groaned and jarred loudly. Vomiting oil and other fluids, it left a trace of blueish smoke behind, but the agent was unflinching in his determination to find his partner, and he was all but easy on the decrepit car.

After circling Place des Vosges, Pete slowed down and steered the vehicle into Rue de Birague. Studying the GPS data, he could see the little, red gizmo moving further to the south, and he continued the pursuit. After crossing a large intersection, he found himself in Rue Beautreillis, only about two hundred yards away from where the signal was emerging. Since the road was slightly sloping down toward the River Seine, the agent decided to kill the engine and let the car silently roll down the street. He checked his pistol and produced the Tesla from the inside pocket of his jacket, powering it up. With the stun gun in his right hand, the phone in his left, Pete used his knees to steer.

Slowly the orange R5 descended Beautreillis Street, and besides a low, squeaking noise emitted by the brakes, it was an entirely stealthy approach.

Then, all of a sudden, the Warehouse Agent spied a tall figure to his left, obviously male, strolling down the sidewalk with his back turned to him. Hey, wait a minute, Pete thought, could that be the guy from the museum? A glance at the tracking feed confirmed that this man, whoever he was, had to have Myka's mobile phone with him.

He waited until the gap on the stranger was almost closed before he slowly stopped and exited the vehicle, anxious to avoid any sound. Pointing the Tesla at the man, he silently sneaked up on him.

"Secret Service! Freeze!" The agent's voice echoed back from the walls of the surrounding buildings. "I got a gun pointed at you. So, don't move and show me your hands!"

The tall figure instantly grew stiff, at least for a moment, however, instead of raising his hands, he made a move to turn around.

"Hey, hold it right there, buddy!" Pete shouted.

The man did as he was told, though, a deep, coarse voice sounded, speaking with a strong French accent. "Ah, Agent Lattimer! You arrived earlier than I expected. Chapeau!"

Apparently, the agent was surprised by that statement, to say the least, but he did not lose his coolness, stating, "I said, show me your hands, wise guy!"

In one quick move, the stranger lifted his hands and turned, holding up a mobile phone.

"Hey, hey, hey...slowly! What's that? Is that my partner's cell?" asked Pete determinedly.

Cautiously, he eyed the man who probably was in his late twenties, heavily built, and spotting a few scares across his face. Naturally, the ex-Marine wondered if he could beat him in a fight.

"Oui, bien sûr!" A wide grin appeared on the Frenchman's face. "And right now it is your only chance to walk out of this situation without your partner getting hurt."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Pete's tone was a mixture of anger, worry and confusion. "I swear, if anything happens to her, I will shoot you right on the spot, only with my other gun!"

"Well, Peter, that is totally up to you," the kidnapper remarked, smiling confidently. "But, you see, if I don't call my associates within a certain lapse of time, they are instructed to do...let's just say, rather unpleasant things to Mademoiselle Bering. So I suggest, you put your ray gun down and listen carefully to what I have to say."

After a lengthened moment of hesitation, the Warehouse Agent lowered his weapon and gestured at him to continue.

"A wise decision. Apparently, you are not the simplistic fool you are said to be." Curiously he observed Pete's reaction to this remark, but his opposite remained expressionless. "Alors, listen up then! We know exactly who you people are and what you do. We know about the Warehouse and your associates, like Arthur Nielsen, or should I say Arthur Weisfelt. And we know about everything else. You want Barron's key. That's why you are after us." He paused to pull a cigarette from a soft packing in his pocket and lit it up. A few deep draws later the man continued, "But you will not stand a chance. And you know why? Because we are way ahead of you. For example, we knew that you would remotely activate your colleague's GPS, so we gave you the opportunity to track me down. In other words, we arranged this very meeting."

With a baffled tone, Pete replied, "Wait a sec...I don't get it. Why would you want to meet with me?"

"Because, Mr. Special Agent, there is something I wanted to tell you." The Frenchman took a drag from his smoke and then another. "Here is the deal. We are going to release Mademoiselle Bering, hale and hearty. You must know, we never had the intention to abduct her in the first place; she was just in our way. But consider this a warning! If you stay in Paris,

if you keep chasing us, you will deeply regret it! You don't know whom you are up against!"

"You want us to back off from the case? Seriously?" Pete choked down a laugh. "You do know we're with the Secret Service, right?"

The smoker's features flashed an arrogant grin as he stated, "Technically, you are not, are you? We both know that the Warehouse is not actually a part of the Secret Service, nor is it an official institution of any kind, for that matter. Do I have to remind you on whose turf you are? As my own organization has proven today, we can easily outplay you, and here in Paris we have by far greater resources available than you. So, I don't think you have much of a choice."

Pete took a few seconds for himself, processing what he just had been told. Piercingly, he eyed the man standing in front of him, handling his smoke like John McClane in 'Die Hard'. A slight smile scurried across the agent's features, and he put back on his poker face, addressing the kidnapper. "OK, you win. I just want to save my partner, that's all."

"What about your investigation?" the stranger queried.

"You can rest assured, we won't investigate any further." To emphasize his statement he put the Tesla back in his pocket. "I swear, as soon as I have Agent Bering back, we will dust off. We'll leave town tomorrow and never come back. I hate this place anyway."

The Frenchman took a last draw from his cigarette and flipped it away, saying, "Bon, but don't think we won't have an eye on you."

"Sure." Pete grinned ironically. "So, how's this going down?"

"Well, you stay right here, don't move and don't call anybody. I will leave you the phone and walk. As soon as I am assured that you are not following me, you will receive a text containing the information where to find your friend. And don't try anything stupid, comprends-tu?"

As the agent nodded the tall man handed him Myka's mobile. Then he took out his own phone, calling his associates to inform them that everything went according to their plan.

After hanging up, the Frenchman flashed Pete a grin of superiority, pointedly stating, "For your own sake, I hope you will remember our agreement. Au revoir, Peter Lattimer."

The agent did not deign to respond. Musing about said agreement, he watched him turn and walk away. As the man disappeared around the next corner, Pete mumbled to himself, "What a douche-bag!"

For the next ten minutes, which felt like hours, he was pacing up and down in front of the vehicle, nervously biting his fingernails. Every few seconds he glanced at the communication device in his hand, checking if it had good reception, impatiently waiting for that message to come in. When the text alarm finally went off, Pete was so scared he nearly dropped the phone. With shaky fingers he operated the touch screen to open the message. It consisted of nothing more than a number and a street name, a location not too far away.

Quickly climbing into the two-door compact, the ex-Marine was in a great hurry, but the engine was not. Despite many tries, it simply would not start. Cursing, Pete exited the car and left the driver's door open. Furiously he kicked at the rear fender, leaving a considerable dent in the steel, which did not seem to bother him too much. He started pushing against the a-pillar with his left, using his right hand to steer; and slowly, he set the vehicle in motion. Due to the slope of the road, an adequate speed was reached soon, and the agent jumped on the seat, shifted into second gear and disengaged the clutch. When he heard the engine sputter to life, he instantly felt great relief. Releasing all his anger, the agent forcefully slammed the door shut, causing the garnish molding to break off and crush on the road's surface. He could not care

less.

\* \* \*

Some ten minutes later, the smoke puffing Renault turned into Rue Pasteur, and Pete parked the car outside a run-down, apparently abandoned storage facility, embedded between two historical apartment buildings. Leaving the engine running, he approached the front door, finding it to be unlocked. The Tesla in one hand, his flashlight in the other, he entered the place.

"Myka! Are you there?" The agents voice resounded in the empty hall. Again he called out, "Hey Mykes, where are you?"

"I'm here!" A dampened voice could be heard from the far side of the facility. "Pete? Is it you?"

"Yeah, it's me! Hold on, I'm coming..."

Pete found his partner in a tiny room that resembled a broom-closet. All four of her limbs were tied to the arm rests and legs of a rusty steel chair.

"Mykes, are you OK?" he queried, hastily untying her.

"Besides a terrible headache I'm fine." She rubbed her neck and slowly tried to stand up. Pete grasped hold of her hands, giving her the support she needed. As their glances met, his eyes grew wide. Embracing her in a dearly hug, he stated, "God! I'm so glad they didn't hurt you."

"Oh Pete, I'm just happy you found me." Gently she leaned her head against his. "But how did you..."

"Easy, easy," he interrupted her. "I'll tell you later."

Silently the pair enjoyed each other's presence, standing like that for a long moment before Myka slightly turned her head to place a kiss on Pete's cheek.

"Thank you for saving the day...and me," she whispered.

Slowly disengaging from the hug, Pete came to lock gazes with her. Staring in these beautiful, deep emerald eyes, he gasped for breath and replied, almost shyly, "Always."

As Myka felt a tear rolling down her cheek, she quickly wiped it off and stated, "I think it's time we got out of here. C'mon, let's go!"

Given that Pete also felt a little uncomfortable, he just nodded. As his partner made her way through the old building toward the exit, he sent a short text message to Claudia, letting the Warehouse staff know that Myka was safe and sound. Then he followed her, quickly catching up.

As the pair stepped outside, the female agent immediately noticed the parked Renault, and she could not believe her ears when Pete told her that this actually were their means of transportation.

"Nice wheels, Lattimer! You really know how to impress a girl," Myka remarked, impishly smiling. "Why's the engine running?"

"Don't ask," Pete's response sounded. Climbing into the cabin, he added, "And yet, you don't know the best of it. I paid three hundred euros for this piece of junk."

"You bought this car? For three hundred bucks?" Myka was baffled.

Entering on the opposite side, she had to wait until her colleague had shoved what was left of the clove compartment under the passenger seat before she could sit down. "Pete, I don't want to be rude or anything, but judging by its looks, this rust bucket's not worth the gas in the tank."

"Yeah, tell me about it." He gave her a look. Accelerating the car, he headed in the direction of their hotel. "I only borrowed it, though. You see, I was kind of in a hurry, saving your sweet, little butt. And so, I got ripped off by our night porter."

Glancing sideways at her, Pete could see a whimsical smile stretching across her face, and he asked, "What?"

Myka raised her brow, stating, "So...you like my ass, huh?"

"Not the only one of your assets that I like." Pete playfully winked at her.

The brunette returned the wink, and one could tell she was making a mental note.

Coming back to the more serious matter of their still unsolved case, Pete began questioning her about the abduction, and Myka told him everything up the point when she had lost her conscience.

"So, the kidnapper has a female accomplice. That's interesting," the former soldier remarked.

"Yeah, though, she isn't the one pulling the strings," Myka explained. "That gal was guarding me after I'd woken up, and I can tell, she only was following orders given to her by phone."

"Well, the good thing is, we have something to start with. What we need now are names to our suspects." Pete furrowed his brow. "But that will have to wait till tomorrow. Right now, I'm flat out exhausted!"

"That makes us two." Pointing at the horizon, she annexed, "Hey, the sun is already coming up."

Myka yawned extensively. After a short moment of reasoning, she chuckled, "Still, you have to tell me about Special Agent Lattimer's heroic quest to save the girl with the sweet butt!"

Pete eyed her curiously, his look a mixture of surprise and amusement, and once again he had no choice but to feel intrigued by the equally witty and attractive woman sitting next to him. Subsequently, without giving away his thoughts, he began detailing on the events that had led to her rescue. He only left out the part where the kidnapper had told him that people were referring to him as a 'simplistic fool'. That was something the agent had to process first before he could talk about it, even to Myka.

As soon as he was finished, the brunette stated a question. "Pete, you don't really expect us to stop investigating the case, do you?"

"Are you kidding?" Pete replied, almost shouting. "We will hunt these bastards down! And when we do, I'll knock the living crap out of them! Nobody messes with the people I lov..." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "...the people that mean something to me."

Myka silently watched her partner from the side. Had she heard him right? The people he



loved...Was he really about to say that?

But before she could phrase a sentence, Pete remarked, "There is one big problem, though."

"What d'you mean?" Myka frowned confusedly.

Pete turned in his seat, gazing directly at her, and stated, "Mykes, I think we got a mole in the Warehouse!"

## Chapter Eight

The Warehouse  
Univille, South Dakota

Entering from an archival storage room next door, Artie stepped inside his office, carrying a load of documents, loose sheets and file folders. He found Claudia sitting at her desk, sleeping. Her head rested on the laptop's keyboard in front of her. The screen showed several search engines, each one autonomously scouring the internet, police databases and every other resource for information on Barron's key, as well as the French criminals who were causing the trouble in Paris.

Artie glanced at his watch, 0:43 AM. Tilting his head to one side, he smiled at the scene that greeted him. She has worked all day since this morning. Come on, Weisfelt, let her rest, he thought. As he walked over to his desk, out of nowhere a noisy and very shrill ring tone sounded. The senior agent tripped and almost sent the papers in his hands to the ground.

Claudia jerked in the air, shouting, "Don't shoot. I will drop my pants..."

As Artie placed his loading on a desk nearby, he tilted his head to the other side and remarked, "I don't even want to know what you were dreaming."

With a greatly bewildered expression on her features the teen stuttered, "Uh...W-W-What?"

"Would you mind turning off that unnerving noise?" the older agent urged her.

Blurily, the redhead reached for her smart phone, silencing the aggravating sound.

"Why do you even have a ring tone like that? It's horrible, and nerve-racking, and stupid, and..."

"You can stop now, grams. I already turned it off," she interjected. Checking the text message that just had arrived, she pointed out, "By the way...this was the Myka-is-safe alarm!"

"Pete found her?" Joyfully Artie clapped his hands. "Oh, thank god! That's fantastic! Anything else?"

"The bad guys escaped, and our two notorious field agents need a nap. Desperately!" she responded. "They're gonna call us in the morning."

"So, as it would seem, everybody is in need of a nap," Artie stated, furrowing his brow. "Hey Claudia, why don't you clock off and get some rest back at Leena's?"

The redhead eyed him disbelievingly. "Are you serious?"

The grizzled agent nodded, "Sure. The search engines haven't found anything yet, and just sitting on your butt, staring at the screen isn't overwhelmingly productive. Besides, you are much more useful to me after a good night's rest."

Claudia did not need to be told a third time. "Nighty-night. See you in morning, old man." She grabbed her jacket and was off.

As Artie strolled over to the coffee machine, refilling his mug, he mumbled something that could be interpreted as 'goodnight'. His thoughts already returning to the mystery of The Ultimate Key, he knew that it was going to be another long night alone with the love of his life, the Warehouse.

\* \* \*

Hotel Left Bank Saint Germain  
Paris, France

The rising sun squeezed through a small split in the living room's curtain, flooding Pete's features with bright light. Slowly, he came to his senses, and the first thing catching his attention was the plashing sound of the shower; Myka was already up. Clumsily, he reached for his watch lying on a small table near the sofa, which had been his uncomfortable resting place for the night once again. Barely four hours of sleep, he realized. The things I do for The Warehouse...

Slowly rising from the couch, Pete's stomach rumbled loudly, and he remembered that his last meal had been yesterday's breakfast. But first of all he needed refreshment. Shortly afterwards, he could hear the shower's splashing ceasing. Nice.

Suddenly, a big smile came to his features; he took his phone and immediately started typing on the touchscreen. There obviously was something that needed to be taken care of. Then a dampened voice sounded from the bathroom, "Hey, Pete? Are you up?"

"Yup, I am. What's happening?" he replied, still a little sleepy.

"Do you know where the towels are?" Myka's tone indicated embarrassment. "I don't think there are any in here."

Pete shot a glance around the living room, then it hit him. He had taken the bath towels to use them as a pillow for the night, finding the sofa's cushion rather unbearable.

"Yeah, I have 'em here," he stated.

"Why would you have them there?" Evidently, Myka was baffled. "You know what, forget it. Just fetch me one, will you?"

The male agent took a large towel from the sofa and went to the bathroom door. Slowly entering, he forced his gaze toward the floor, at the same time ensuring her, "Don't worry, I won't look."

Hiding behind the semitransparent shower curtain, Myka reached out to grab the towel from Pete's hand, however, by accident he let go too soon, and the piece of cloth twirled toward the floor.

"Oops, sorry! I'll get it," he said and bent down to pick it up. As he straightened up, his glance unintentionally wandered about his partner's slim form gleaming through the curtain. Quickly looking to the side, he handed her the towel, in the next second vanishing from the room.

Myka was well aware of what had happened, but she felt neither upset nor ashamed, and she decided to let it rest, for now. As she toweled herself off, musing about the status of her relationship with Pete, she came to conclude there were issues that had to be worked out. Soon. Otherwise, they surely would drive their friendship into the ground. Regarding yesterday's events, the agent wondered if Pete was expecting her to come forward and start a discussion. However, one way or the other, that had to wait at least until after breakfast; right now she was starving. Wrapping the towel around her from, she exited the bathroom, finding Pete already waiting for his turn in the shower.

"Bathroom's free. Got everything I need to dry my hair in the bedroom," she remarked. "Oh hey, wait! You must be hungry, too. Shall I order something?"

"Already done." Pete put on a smile. "Two large French Breakfasts coming up! With every side order I could think of, the whole shebang!"

Myka returned the smile. "Perfect."

Pete hurried and made his shower a brief one, barely able to wait for room service to arrive. He did not bother to shave, quickly fixing his hair and putting on a black polo shirt, blue jeans and his black Adidas sneakers. When he re-entered the living room about fifteen minutes later, Myka had already taken a seat at the large dining table, fiddling with her hair. She was fully dressed, wearing a rather casual, dark-gray blouse, tight blue jeans and also a pair of sneakers, darkish with blue stripes.

"What is that? Dude, we almost look like twins!" Pete joked as he walked over to her. "Take that off, immediately!"

"You wish," sounded the female agent's response. "Haven't you seen enough of me for one day?"

Pete blushed right away, and his answer was a stutter. "That was not...Uh...I-I-I didn't mean to..."

"Hey, relax!" Noticing his embarrassment, she choked down a chuckle. "I know, it happened accidentally. So, everything's fine. I'm actually cool with it."

Pete bemusedly glanced at her, but since she was not going to make a scene, he was more than happy to go along with it. A smile came to his face, and he thought, If it's like that, I wouldn't mind seeing more of her.

Suddenly, a knock sounded from the apartment door, followed by a call, "Room service!"

Instantly turning on his heel, Pete marched toward the door and let the bellboy in. Entering the suite, the young man positioned a tea-cart next to the table where Myka was sitting.

"Mademoiselle, Monsieur, I hope you find everything to your satisfaction," he stated, smiling at the female agent. "Is there anything else?"

"Non, merci beaucoup." Pete quickly slipped him a tip, and the bellboy left the pair to

themselves.

"Wow! This smells delicious!" Myka inhaled the scent of fresh croissants, omelet and hot coffee. "Looks like you ordered everything that was on the menu."

"You know, the usual." The former Marine, flashing an impish smile, presented the order to her. "We have baguette, brioche, croissants, jam, yogurt, fruit compote, ham, three different kinds of cheese and, of course, brouillade, meaning scrambled eggs. And, as you can see, fresh orange juice, coffee and especially for the lady...café au lait."

Her eyes narrowing on the crowded trolley table, Myka's mouth watered. "Pete, thank you. This looks amazing! Come on, let's get to it, I'm starving!"

The agents took the plates from the cart and placed them on the dining table, immediately digging into the food. For some minutes neither of them spoke, and the only sound filling the air was Pete's occasional smacking.

As he had the first taste of the omelet his gaze widened and, loudly munching, he stated, "You have to try the eggs. They'll blow your socks off!" With a big grin he speared a piece of the scrambled matter and led the fork toward her lips. "C'mon, don't be shy!"

Myka smiled bashfully, musing for a second, before she opened her mouth and took the piece from Pete's fork with her lips. Being surprised by the unexpectedly good taste, she remarked, "From all the hotels around the world we've stayed in, this one has the best room service ever!"

"That's for damn sure!" he exclaimed. Small bits of the egg dish were stuck in the corner of his mouth, and his partner casually wiped them away with her napkin before he continued. "You know, after we've solved the case, we should stay here for a couple more days." Directly looking at her, he raised his brow. "Call it a vacation if you want. I have to admit I'm starting to like it in this city."

"A vacation? You and me?" she queried, her tone indicating great bewilderment. "Are you serious?"

Pete grew stiff at her question. Definitely, this was not what he had hoped for, furthermore he did not know how to respond. And all of a sudden, there it was again, this awkward silence between them. For a number of minutes the pair sat like this, focusing on their meals, avoiding eye contact. An odd, suppressed tension lay in the air, just like so many times before. They finished their breakfasts, and after Myka had taken the last sip from her café au lait, she suddenly glanced directly into her colleague's darkish eyes.

"Listen, Pete, we can't go on like that," she started. "I mean acting like teenagers. You know, we never really talk about things, although, we do need to talk, badly." Nervously, Myka brushed a strain of her curly mane from her face. "You said, you would always be my partner, which I have absolutely no doubt about, by the way. However, we definitely reached a point where our personal issues obstruct our work. Pete, we need to sort things out, or this partnership will be over sooner than you think...as well as our friendship."

Actually, Pete was not in the mood for a conversation of this kind, though, he agreed with his partner that a discussion was more than overdue. "True. If we hadn't argued, you would've never ended up in that street, alone, waiting for a stupid cab. And they would've never gotten to you in the first place. You're absolutely right, we have to work this out."

"Agreed. And I think I need to begin." Myka paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts. Then she stated, "I know there's something that must be bothering you, something I said. Pete, aside from whatever you may think, I assure you I didn't play with you. I never have and

never will...you're much too important to me." Gently, she cleared her throat. "You see, I really, really like you, and in a way I feel attracted to you. But that's exactly my problem...I'm everything else but sure of how deep these feelings run. I honestly don't know."

Regarding the seesaw of the past week, Pete was rather overwhelmed by Myka's outburst of sincerity, and his facial expression revealed his state of irresolution.

The female agent was mildly disturbed by Pete's reaction, or better non-reaction. However, she continued, "I know how difficult this must be for you. Hell, it's not easy for me either. We've been partners for over two years, and we also have become best friends. And now, all of a sudden, there are these weird feelings, and we don't know how to handle them, apparently." Again she cleared her throat.

"Right. We don't know how to handle this," Pete remarked, flashing an ironic smile. "But, please, go on."

Briefly, she returned the smile, saying, "Pete, I noticed how the way you look at me has changed lately. I mean that dreamy look you sometimes get, you know, for instance this morning in the car. And I must admit I like it. Actually, I like this look a lot! But, consider me crazy, this also scares the crap out of me! Right now, I don't think I'm able to return these feelings in the same way. And I have to wonder, what if I never will?"

For some time silence swamped the air, and Myka was eyeing her co-worker curiously, impatiently awaiting his response. She could see Pete struggling to process what she had told him, and after all, she could comprehend his confusion.

Eventually Pete came forward, "Thank you, Myka! Thank you so much for...your honesty. It's true, I couldn't stand the thought of you just playing with me. And for all the world I believe you when you say that this wasn't the case. Mykes, I understand what you're going through, and I would never blame you for that. Nobody can control their feelings, not even you." He had to pause as a wave of emotions suddenly overcame him. He steeled his nerves, running his hands over his face. "And about what you said to Claudia before we left for Paris...of course I can be childish sometimes...and annoying. But you have to understand that when it comes to serious matters, like a sincere relationship for example, I couldn't be more determined. I would never let you down, you know that."

"Yeah, I do. Especially since you saved me from the kidnappers." Speaking these words, Myka naturally recalled the hours of being bound to that chair, as well as the anguish and misgivings she was struggling with then.

"Back at that storage place, I knew, if there had been only one person in the world who possibly could have saved me, it would've been you." She could feel tears welling up behind her eyes, and she reached for a tissue from a box on the shelf nearby. Slightly sobbing, she glanced at her friend. "Pete, I really could use a hug right now."

Without speaking a word, the former soldier stood up from the table, walked over to Myka and held his arms wide open. Instantly, she jerked up from her chair and fell into his embrace. Dearly, lovingly the pair enfolded each other for quite some time. Myka pressed her cheek against his, a few teardrops running down her features, dripping on his neck and shoulder. As Pete felt her tears on his skin he even held her tighter, gently petting her long, dark curls.

"You know what they say, a hug's nothing more than a way to hide your face," he said at once.

The statement very much served to confuse her, and Myka tried to pull out of the hug. However, her partner grasped hold of her arms, keeping her close to him, and he locked gazes with her. Just as the female agent was about to state her bemusement, Pete smilingly stated, "Relax. I only wanted to look in your eyes. Your beautiful, enchanting eyes."

Myka felt perplexed by his words and actions, and before she could react, Pete leaned in to greet her lips with a soft and tender kiss. Noticing that his colleague was not refusing him, he let go of her arms and slowly moved his hands to her back. Pulling her close to him, he began to move his lips more fervidly, and soon the brunette returned his caresses.

After a few moments of uninhibited passion Myka suddenly pulled back, only slightly though, without entirely breaking up the kiss. While he continued to trace her lips with his, she aspirated, "Pete...what are you doing? This is not...what we...talked about."

"You know, actually...this is exactly...what we talked about," Pete whispered, not breaking up either. "You said...you're attracted to me, and I wanted to know...if that's true."

At that point Myka found his response somewhat satisfying, and she sighed. Snuggling against his form, she began to deepen the kiss. Just standing there, lovingly playing with each other's lips, this intimate embrace stretched over several minutes before they both ran out of breath. Gasping for air, Myka tilted her head back, and Pete's temple came to rest on her sternum. Winding her arms around his head, she trenched through his short, dark-brown hair, coming to reflect about this morning's events.

"Hey, Lattimer," she said softly. "About what happened in the bathroom..."

"Yeah?" Pete's voice sounded dreamily.

"Did you like what you saw?" she asked, her tone filled with exuberance.

Myka's question jolted him out of his trance, and Pete mused for a second prior to answering, "You can bet your sweet, little ass on it." Simultaneously his hand glided down her back, stopping just below her waistline, and he squeezed her tight buttocks.

Myka instantly leaped back, giving him a rap on his fingers, resolutely stating, "Pete! Hands off the merchandise!" Shooting an exaggeratedly angry look at her partner, she noticed a wide grin stretching across his face; Pete knew she was only acting as if she was upset, and swiftly Myka added, "Not now, we got work to do. But maybe we can negotiate on that later..."

Pete's eyes grew wide at her remark, but she did not give him a chance to respond. "Come on, partner, get it together! Time to attend to our investigation. Aren't we supposed to call headquarters?"

"Uh, yeah...sure." Pete tried hard to focus. "I'll go get the...uh...the..."

"The Farnsworth?" Myka chuckled.

"Right, the Farnsworth." His gaze wandered about the living room area, trying to locate the device. As he saw it resting on the coffee table, Myka was already there to pick it up. "Way too slow, pal!"

\* \* \*

Myka activated the communication device and Arthur Nielsen's features immediately appeared on the screen. "Good morning!" she greeted him.

"Yes, a very early morning," he replied, his tone even grumpier than usual. "Five-thirty, to be precise."

"Right, almost forgot about the time difference," she stated. Taking a closer look at him, she asked, "Artie, did you sleep at all?"

"Not a wink. Doesn't matter." The senior agent was no stranger to all-nighters, and beyond that, he had more serious issues on his hands. "This case should be our only concern right now."

Myka and Pete exchanged short glances, sharing a slight feeling of guilt before their boss urged them to fill him in on yesterday's incidents. Without lagging, the field agents started to brief him, and Artie was listening very carefully to their report, which was interrupted by him two or three times to express his surprise.

A couple of minutes passed, and Pete finally concluded their joint statement by saying, "Artie, if you ask me, there's only one explanation why these guys know so much about the Warehouse and especially us in person."

"And why is that?", the older agent queried. "Let me guess, you're thinking of a spy?"

"Yeah, actually this was my first thought, but..."

Seamlessly Myka continued Pete's reply, "...we've had this scenario several times before, just think McPherson, and I'm not willing to believe that anyone of us could do such a thing, at least not without being whammied by an artifact. We all have proven our loyalty dozens of times. But, and that's a big 'but', there must a leak somewhere. No question about that."

For a prolonged moment Artie reflected on this presumption, his facial expression revealing a great concern. Then he finally came to a conclusion. "As it would seem you have a point. However, as disturbing as this may be, don't make it your business, at least for now. I will look into this, and I will find our leakage. Don't worry." Briefly glancing away from the screen, he wrote a short note on a post-it. "In the meantime I have something to report myself. While you people were soundly asleep, I acquired information about another heist, quite certainly performed by our burglar-slash-kidnapper during the time you were abducted, Myka."

"Another heist? Damn, those French thugs don't fool around!" A bleary voice sounded from behind Artie's back. Claudia had just entered the office, a large can of Red Bull in her hand, loudly yawning. As she leaned over the senior agent's shoulder, she greeted Myka and Pete, "Morning guys. Oh, look who's still alive and kicking! Good to have you back, girl!"

"Thanks, Claud. That's sweet", the brunette replied, an appreciative smile on her face.

"Agents!" Artie interrupted. "Can we please focus on the case? Thank you."

"And good morning to you, too, chubby!" Claudia chuckled, boldly slapping her boss on the shoulder.

Before Artie could put the teenager in her place, Myka came to her rescue, stating, "So, what about that theft?"

After shooting an admonitory glance at the redhead, the grizzled man addressed the field agents, "OK, you might remember a certain place called Le Musée des Arts et Métiers? Apparently it was hit a second time."

"What?" Pete was astonished. "Why the hell that place again? Tell me, there wasn't a second key or something!"

"Well, it's not a key, however, it has something to do with Robert Barron." Artie leaned

forward, looking over his glasses. "I think it's the lock! The very lock our key in question was specifically designed for."

"You mean the one lock that can't be opened, unless you got a special, artifact-y key?"

"Yes, that one. I'm glad you can keep up, Pete," Artie stated ironically, then pointing his finger in the air. "But, besides the fact that somebody got injured this time, there is something..."

"Wait, Artie! What? Who got injured?" Myka interrupted him, her features showing great bafflement.

"Oh, right." Artie glanced at a note he had written before. "A security guard who was early for his shift ran into the thief on his way out. But he couldn't remember anything, by now being in a coma, due to the serious head injury he sustained."

"Serious head injury? Coma?" Claudia seemed worried. "Shit! That poor guy..."

"Yeah, well, let's just hope the man gets better soon. However..." Again Artie pointed his finger in the air. "...there is something much more interesting about that heist. And I think that actually could be the game changer we've been looking for. You see, I didn't wonder why or how they stole it..."

"...you wondered why they even knew it was there," Myka pitched in.

"Excellent thinking, Agent Bering!" Artie applauded her.

The brunette briefly smiled, then she went on, "Pete and I have been at that museum for hours and we've turned the place upside down. So, why didn't we find that lock, or at least any information regarding it?"

"See, I asked myself the same question. Following a hunch, I found something in the archives of Warehouse 12." The senior agent took off his glasses for further emphasis. "It's a partial copy of a manuscript about British inventors and their inventions. Apparently the Warehouse Agents of that time came across Barron's key and lock. Unfortunately, they failed to retrieve them, however, they came close enough to identify the two objects as a bifurcated artifact."

"I knew it!" Pete exclaimed. "Man, as if this case wasn't weird enough already?"

"Ha, wait until you hear the end of it," Artie replied. "The lock was stored in a part of the museum where they keep objects that need to be examined and cataloged first prior to becoming exhibits. I just spoke to the director on the phone, and he said the box hadn't even been opened yet. Nobody of the staff knew exactly what was in there."

"Wait. I don't get it," Claudia piped up. "If the museum's staff didn't know, how can you be so sure that is was Barron's lock? Do we even know for a fact that our lovely French pair is responsible for the break-in?"

"That is a good question, Claudia!" sounded Artie's remark. Slightly exited by his own findings, the stocky man, still in his chair, performed some kind of odd dancing step. Then he stated, "Listen and learn! This is me being awesome..."

"What is it grams? Are we having a stroke again?" Placing a hand on his shoulder, the teenager's face showed a whimsical grin.

"Hysterical!" The older agent's response brimmed over with irony. "We will talk about that later. Anyway, here's my theory. Assuming it actually was Barron's lock in that box, the only way the criminals could have known about it was if they had some kind of tracking device."



"Which absolutely makes sense, presuming the two objects really are connected," Myka remarked.

"Precisely." Artie scabbled about the papers on his desk, producing a crumpled note. "And guess what, the agents of Warehouse 12 discovered that, if separated, the key could be used to locate the other part of the bifurcated artifact, because it is, and I quote, somehow pulled toward the lock, changing color if pointed in its direction."

Pete's gaze narrowed on the small screen in front of him. "Artie, that's exactly what the curator back at the museum told me about the glow emanating from the key!"

Abruptly, without warning, a loud beeping sound filled the air in Artie's office, and the senior agent spun around. "What the...? Claudia, not again! Your toys are really starting to get on my nerves! What is it this time, an urgent friend request on Facebook?"

Claudia sighed and gave him a crabby look. Turning off the alarm, she took a seat at her desk and studied the message on the computer screen. Only seconds later the teenager raised a fist in the air and with a triumphant voice she shouted, "Guys! You gotta see this!"

Artie, in his office chair, rolled over to her, bringing the Farnsworth along. "What is it?"

"It took a while, but my search engines unearthed something interesting. Claude Richard, our infamous but dead gang leader and criminal mastermind, has a son! Raphaël, middle name Pierre. He was born a couple months after Richard's death, which is probably the reason why this info isn't in our files."

"And why's that interesting?" Pete queried, his tone slightly bored.

"Because..." Claudia's fingers ran over the keyboard with lightning-speed. "...we're looking for a connection between the thefts that happened in the eighties and the current ones, right? So, what if the son was the connection? According to his birth record he's twenty-nine by now. Pete, what did you say how old that kidnapper dude probably was?"

"Uh, late twenties." Pete's facial expression was carved in stone. "Damn, that fits!"

"Like a glove! I'm already searching for all the Raphaël Pierre Richards in and around Paris, but..." The redheaded teen paused for a moment, frowning her brow. "Bummer! Nobody by that name fits the profile. Either too young, too old or too far away..."

"Try Raphaël Pruvot." Artie's delighted voice resounded in the office. "There shouldn't be too many people by that name."

"Why Pruvot, Artie?" Myka was as baffled as her colleagues.

"His mother's maiden name. Just found it in the file." Artie replied, his face showing an expression that actually could be described as a grin.

"Hey, grumpy face, look at you!" Impishly smiling at him, the tech nerd was still typing as if the devil was after her. "And here it comes...only one Raphaël P. Pruvot in the whole area of Paris! Oh, wait...the given address is absolute bogus. It's in the middle of the River Seine!"

"You got a picture?" Myka and Pete stated in unison, afterwards exchanging telling glances.

"Hold on, it's coming up." The teenager turned the laptop around so the image could be caught by Artie's Farnsworth. The photo showed a young, snooty looking man with short, blonde hair and a stubbly beard, covering some scares on his face.

"Holy smokes! That's him!" Pete all but jerked up in the air.

Artie nervously squirmed in his chair. "Do you also recognize him, Myka?"

"Sorry, I never really saw his face," the brunette stated. "After I woke up, the only one around was the girl. She was getting her orders via phone."

"Did you see her face then?" the senior agent wondered.

"Nope. She was wearing a ski mask the whole time. Sorry again," Myka conceded.

In the meantime, Claudia had modified her efforts, researching a number of social networking sites for further information, and anew she raised her fist. "Folks, check this out, Raphaël's Facebook indicates he's very interested in archaeology, artifacts and the occult. Interesting. And he's engaged to a woman named 'Giselle G.'" She paused for a moment, switching to the fiancée's profile. "Wow! Guys, you gotta see this! Apparently, Giselle used to work as an investment broker for BNP Paribas!"

"You're kidding me!" Myka exclaimed, almost yelling. "That could be the connection to our bank heists!"

"Exactly! And...we even have an address on her!" Claudia stated, smirking at her boss. "Say what you want, but when it comes to personal information, no intelligence agency in the world beats Facebook!"

Artie just gave her a look. Musing about the new findings, he mumbled, "Why didn't Raphaël wear a mask? Only she did. Giselle G., there's something about that name..."

"Sounds like a porn star to me," Pete stated with a big smile.

Myka just rolled her eyes at her friend's remark. Addressing Claudia, she asked, "Can you show me a picture of her, too?"

"Wait a sec, I'm scanning her Instagram...but as it seems, she's careful enough not to post pics showing her entire face. Here, have a look yourself, maybe you can find something."

As the redhead flipped through Giselle's uploads, Myka studied the pictures via Farnsworth, and it did not take long until she recognized something. "Wait Claud, can you go back to the last one? Yeah, that's it. See the tattoo on the side of her neck, the red and yellow dragon? The woman who was guarding me, during the abduction, had a dragon just like that one, tattooed in the exact same spot."

"And you're absolutely sure?" Artie queried, eyeing her piercingly.

"Well, there was nothing else to do, so I've been staring at that thing for hours. Yes, Artie, I am sure," Myka gave back, her arms akimbo.

"Very well. At least, this sheds some light on our mystery. Now, we've got an address on the suspects, as well as their names...kind of." The grizzled agent swiftly stood up from his chair, exclaiming, "Finally, we're making progress. This was about damn time!"

Pete shared his boss' enthusiasm, and he impatiently asked, "Hey, Claud, what about that address? Can you send it asap, please?"

The tech geek frowned, casually stating, "Sent it minutes ago. To both your phones, in case you need to split up again."

"She's right," Artie interjected, "Don't do anything stupid! These guys have portrayed how dangerous they are. Stay together, if possible, and...be careful!"

"Yeah, alright, we will. Don't worry," Pete replied with an irritated undertone. "You know, yesterday they caught us with our pants down; this won't happen again! I had the chance to talk to Raphaël at length, and I watched and analyzed him. I think I know his soft spot...that dude is way too arrogant! I'm pretty sure he underestimates us, thinks we're a bunch of dumbfounded dipshits. But I'll prove him wrong!"

"OK...do whatever you have to do, but please, don't get yourselves killed...or worse," the senior agent said, revealing a considerable worry. Then he annexed, "I would hate to do the paperwork." He ignored the unsettled glances he earned from his fellow agents and continued, "I suggest you two start by setting up a stakeout at Giselle's place, and maybe take a look around inside. Sooner or later she has to show up there. In the meantime, Miss Donovan and I will look deeper into the connection between the two artifacts, as well as our unpleasant loophole. Au revoir."

Being on the job for more than two years, Pete had gotten used to this kind of farewell. Sighing, he shut the lid on the Farnsworth. For a while he stared at the polished, bronze box in his hands, musing about the conversation that just had ended and the challenge he and his partner would be facing soon.

Myka also was ensnared in her thoughts, however, she reflected on something different. A few moments of hesitation passed before she found the courage to address her colleague.

"Uh, Pete, I didn't want to say anything in front of Artie and Claud, but I noticed that you're really pissed off at something, and I think it involves Raphaël." Hesitantly she placed her hand on his shoulder, giving him a gently squeeze. "You're taking this pretty personally, aren't you? Did the guy say or do something that you're not telling me about?"

Pete cringed considerably at Myka's statement. Instantly feeling uneasy, his first impulse was to deny her thesis, to dug out of the situation, somehow. Then he felt the touch of her palm on his shoulder, and swiftly it comforted him. She always had his back; whenever he was at a loss, Myka was the one to get him back on track, giving him strength. Pete knew that he could trust her with his life. Grasping hold of her hand, he turned toward her, and for a lengthened moment he simply gazed in her eyes.

"It's a little frightening how well you know me," the male agent finally remarked, producing a slight smile. "You're right, the guy did say something. I was caught pretty much off guard, and it kind of got to me. You see, he knows all these things about us, our names, how we interact, even the relationships we share, and he obviously knows our weak spots, too. Well, at least mine." Stopping to swallow a lump in his throat, Pete glanced to the side.

Myka took a step toward him. Looping her arm around his shoulders, she quietly asked, "Pete, what did he say?"

He slightly tilted his head in her direction, and in a low, raspy voice he stated, "He...uh...he said people would refer to me as a 'simplistic fool'. At first I thought he was just taunting me, you know, provoking some kind of reaction out of me, but then I realized people actually do refer to me as an idiot."

"Hey, that's not true in the least!" Myka was aghast at her partner's appraisal. "Why would you say that? You know what a great asset you are for the Warehouse, and apparently for me, too."

"I'd really like to think that, but don't you notice how Artie always makes fun of me?" Pete

scrunched his neck. "Like earlier, when he said, he was glad I could keep up. It's pretty obvious what he thinks of me."

Myka took another step toward him, and her body came to huddle against his. Both her arms clasping around his head, she gazed at him insistently. "Oh Pete, you can't seriously mean that. Don't you think, if Artie really did perceive you as an idiot, he would have never approved of you as a Warehouse Agent in the first place?" The female agent's features flashed an almost playful smile. "Besides, why would you care what other people think of you? There's only one person whose opinion should mean something to you...and that's me!"

Myka's last remark pulled him out of his resentment, and Pete could not help but chuckle. "So it's like that, huh?" His arms slowly moved along his partner's sides, coming to rest on the small of her back. "Well, they say one must obey their master. So, I guess I'll just have to trust you on this one."

Gently, she nudged his nose with hers, whispering, "You'll have to trust me with everything else, too." Slowly closing the gap between them, she softly brushed against his lips before the pair engaged in one long, dear kiss.

Reluctantly breaking the embrace, Myka smilingly stated, "I hope that was encouragement enough."

"Actually that wasn't in the least enough, but it will do, for now," Pete impishly replied. "You see, that's the kind of encouragement I could use on a daily basis!"

Myka gave him a wink. "I bet you could!"

After sharing a last, brief kiss, the agents let go of each other, immediately starting to gear up for today's mission. As usual Pete lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors, and for the day the Tesla belonged to Myka. After they had gathered and checked their equipment, Pete took some bottles of water, as well as a few snacks from the fridge and stuffed them in a big, dark-blue back pack, together with some of the gear that appeared to be less handy, such as binoculars, flashlights and a night vision device. Shortly afterwards, the pair grasped their jackets and left the suite, both feeling highly motivated and ready for the stakeout at Giselle's apartment.

## Chapter Nine

"Did you see that guy's face? Pete, I swear, I almost peed my pants!" Myka giggled, wildly gesticulating.

Pete's eyes became watery as he snorted with laughter. "Dude...I can't believe you told Haziem that our President was going to stay at the hotel!"

"Well, he already had bought the Secret Service story. After all, we'd shown him our badges...and I just couldn't help it!" the brunette gave back, a mischievous grin on her features. "And it worked, didn't it. He never would've accepted a normal apology without asking for another few hundred bucks. You saw how much in shock that man was when he saw his beloved, half-wrecked car."

"Yeah, sure it worked. And I won't complain since it saved us a lot of money," Pete replied, still laughing. "But it makes no sense at all! Why would we need his car to check the area for possible threats? That was just humbug! And absolutely brilliant by the way!"

"Thank you, Agent Lattimer!" she said while giving him a friendly shove.

"I knew you were witty and flexible and all, but that was simply outstanding," he complimented her.

"Actually, you have no idea how flexible I can be," Myka replied with a frisky wink. "But maybe I'll show you some time."

Pete froze on the spot, the expression on his face beyond surprised. Watching behind his colleague as she strolled down the crowded Boulevard Saint Germain, he had no other choice than to picture what she just had told him.

"You're coming?" the brunette queried, glancing over her shoulder at him.

Oh, if you only knew, Pete thought, hurrying to catch up with her, replying, "Right here!"

When the pair reached the taxi stand, located a quarter of a mile west from the hotel, they found the place overrun by all sorts of conspicuously well-dressed people. Judging by the little number of cabs available, the agents would have to wait at least some twenty minutes to hitch a ride.

"So that's why we weren't able to call a taxi to the hotel," Pete stated. "Where the hell do all these folks come from?"

"Maybe the doctors' convention?" Myka assumed. Taking out her phone, she opened the web application, downloading a map of Paris' public transportation system. "Hey Pete, there's a train station not far from Giselle's place. If we took the Metro to Gare du Nord, then switching to railroad, we could be there within forty-five minutes. Would be much faster than waiting for a cab."

"Alright, the Metro it is," he concurred.

Myka wound her arm around Pete's, and the pair left the taxi stand behind, headed for the subway station 'Odéon' that was located just around the corner from their hotel.

Halfway there, the male agent suddenly was hit by a menacing vibe. The hairs on his neck were standing up, and a cold, ominous feeling struck his stomach, causing him to shoot a brief glance around while trying not to attract any attention.

"Mykes, vibe alert! Either somebody has also just decided to take the train...or we're being followed," he muttered.

"Who is it? Giselle or Raphaël?" she asked, resisting the urge to take a look.

"No. It's some dude wearing a green jacket and flat cap. Thirty yards away, on our six o'clock," Pete remarked. "I saw him at the taxi stand. He was checking you out, at least that's what I thought. This is why I even noticed him."

"Well, maybe he was just checking me out. I like to think that you're not the only guy who appreciates my looks," she quietly giggled.

"Anyways, we'll find out sooner or later." Pete took the phone out of Myka's hand and studied the Metro map. An impish grin scurried across his face as he stated, "If he really is trailing us,

I may know a way to use this situation to our advantage."

"And how are you going to do that?" She curiously eyed her friend.

"I have thought about this before. After all Raphaël did say he would keep an eye on us. So, assuming he has the means to monitor passenger lists, which I'm sure he does, I made flight reservations." Pete gazed at his partner, raising one brow. Then he continued, "I know this charade won't throw him off our tracks completely, but it will give us at least some time and space to operate. And even more if we can shake off the guy behind us, while convincing him we actually are headed for the airport." Giving her a mild nudge, he added, "By the way, how do you like my big ass back pack? Makes our departure look more believable, doesn't it?"

"OK, now I'm officially impressed!" Myka stated her appreciation. "When did you find the time to come up with all of this?"

"This morning, when you were in the shower. Well, that was when I made the reservations." Pete turned his head slightly to the side. "Actually I've been thinking about it pretty much all night."

She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "Maybe it's a good thing you're taking this case so personally. Looks to me as if you're pretty much kicking ass!" Myka remarked, receiving a smiling glance. Then she queried, "So, how are we going to trick him?"

Showing her the map, Pete pointed at a gray spot in the north of Paris. "Whether we take a train to Saint Denis, where Giselle lives, or to the airport, we have to get to Gare du Nord first. That's one of the largest stations in the world, right? Crowded with thousands of people. Shouldn't be too difficult to get rid of our pursuer there."

Hesitating for not one second, Myka approved of his plan; and as the pair entered Odéon Station, the stranger still was on their tail. Even after they boarded the Metro car which would take them to Paris' main station, the man wearing a green jacket and cap was with them.

"That must be coincidence!" Myka ironically remarked, earning a smirk from her colleague.

Arriving at Gare du Nord, they found themselves in an overcrowded concourse, just as they had expected. Instead of purchasing tickets from one of the machines, Pete went straight for the next booking office, inquiring about the fastest way to get to Charles-de-Gaulles Airport. Naturally, the clerk at the ticket window did not speak anything else but French, leaving Myka with no other choice than to pitch in. The negotiations went on for several minutes, and the amount of people standing in line behind them grew appreciably before Pete finally consented to buy the tickets.

Departing from the office, the agents were given a few angry gazes, and Pete triumphantly said, "That was just perfect!"

"Perfect? You mean absolutely unnecessary," Myka stated bemusedly.

He shot her a brief smile, replying, "Wait until you see the outcome. Regarding the stir we just caused, it should be easy for our mysterious stalker to find out where we supposedly are heading for."

As they passed by a newspaper kiosk, Pete made sure the stranger was not watching. Abruptly, he pulled his partner to the side, and the pair slipped behind the booth. As it turned out, this spot was very well chosen, because it provided them with the chance to observe the crowd in front of the booking office without exposing themselves. Right now their pursuer was conversing with the clerk; Myka and Pete could see him passing a fifty-euro bill over to her. A few seconds later the man turned away from the counter, a ticket in his hand, and he started

scanning the area.

"He didn't get any change back! Though, the ticket to the airport only costs ten bucks," Myka remarked. "That was a bribe!"

"Yup, and now the guy thinks he knows our destination. I love it when a plan comes together!" Pete stated, inwardly celebrating the reference he just had made.

From their hiding place the pair could spy the man in the green jacket wandering about the bustling concourse, obviously searching for them. As the departure of the train for Charles-de-Gaulle was announced, the stranger started fidgeting nervously. A few seconds of hesitation passed prior to marching off, turning directly toward the tracks. Keeping a safe distance, the agents followed him until they saw him stopping right in the train's doorway. He took a final glance around the platform and boarded the car only in the last possible moment.

"Good riddance!" Pete's face showed a satisfied grin. "I'm pretty sure his report to Raphaël will state that he lost us on the way to the airport. Hopefully this will buy us some extra time." He spun around, exclaiming, "Now, let's get us some tickets to Saint Denis!"

Myka, gently placing a hand on his shoulder, held him back. "Pete, wait. I think I have an even better idea. What about a rental? A stakeout in a car is much more comfortable than hiding behind a bush or a garbage can. Don't you think?"

As he mused about his friend's suggestion, the male agent's features lightened visibly. "I guess we could afford to rent a car," he replied with an ironic undertow. "Agent Bering, I like the way you think!"

Myka remembered spotting a car rental agency next to the station's main entrance, and the pair set off in that direction. Although, Pete actually would have preferred a more powerful and fancier vehicle, he was convinced to hire a rather small, ecologically beneficial hybrid. Having handled the technicalities at the rental counter, they were given the keys along with directions that would lead them to their car. The parking lot was situated on the other side of Gare du Nord, and as the agents approached it, they found, among dozens of other rentals, at least twenty hybrids there, all of the same color. Silver.

After locating their car using the remote control key, Pete sarcastically stated, "Looks like an Easter egg to me. Could be worse, though. At least it's not yellow...or pink." Tossing her the keys, he teasingly exclaimed, "You wanted it, now you drive it!"

Without wasting one single word, Myka only grimaced at him as she entered the cabin.

\* \* \*

Nearly half an hour had passed, and the silver compact car left the crowded streets of downtown Paris behind and turned onto Autoroute 1, the urban motorway that usually was the fastest route out of town. Unfortunately, the freeway was also jammed, and the hybrid even came to a full stop several times. This gave the agents plenty of opportunities to behold the sights appearing along the road. As they spotted Stade de France, the famous soccer stadium, they exited the Autoroute and took a left turn. Myka steered the car into Rue Ambroise Croizat which led them directly to the center of Saint Denis.

Some minutes later found the pair driving down Rue Maurice Thorez. After passing by a number of industrial facilities and a boarding school, they entered a residential area. The agents spied the apartment building where Giselle G. was supposed to live on their right,

however, the female agent did not stop the vehicle immediately. Instead she went on for some thirty yards before performing an U-turn, parking on the other side of the street next to a big poplar. The shadow cast by the tree should provide at least a little shielding, preventing the agents from being identified on first sight.

"You stay here while I'll have a look around," the ex-Marine stated as he put on a ball cap and his sun glasses. "Incognito."

Myka jokingly replied, "Totally incognito. I myself couldn't even recognize you!"

As the male agent exited the car he mumbled something about urban camouflage and quickly shut the door. Showing an amused expression, Myka watched her partner crossing the road, walking toward the six-story building which housed approximately thirty apartments all together. Its overall condition revealed slight structural damages, indicating refurbishment was overdue. I didn't want to live here, the brunette thought.

Pete stopped in front of the entrance and studied the name tags as well as the mail boxes near the door. Giving Myka a confirming nod, he turned left and strolled along the street, vanishing around the next corner. A few minutes later, having circled the block, Pete approached the silver rental from behind. Entering the vehicle, he started informing Myka about his findings.

"Yup, Giselle does live here. According to the arrangement of the call buttons, her condo should be on the forth floor." Pointing at aforesaid story, he annexed, "The one right next to us, with the blue drapes behind the windows. Interesting fact: the name tag states nothing more than 'Giselle G.'"

Myka shot him a bemused glimpse. Then she produced the binoculars she had pre-positioned and glanced in the given direction. Scrutinizing the premises, she stated, "Looks like nobody's home."

"Yeah, I saw her mail box being jam-packed! Could mean, she hasn't been here for some time. Maybe because she was out, kidnapping people," Pete assumed pointedly. "What you think? Shall we take a look?"

"Couldn't hurt." Myka impishly smiled at him. "I'll get my tools."

The brunette reached for Pete's back pack resting on the rear seat. Extracting a small, black leather case from the bag, she exclaimed, "Got 'em. Let's go!"

The pair left the car and headed for the building. As Pete observed the area for unwanted spectators, his partner picked two metallic instruments from the case, resembling dental scalers, and swiftly she started working on the entrance door's lock.

"Hey, how long you think this is gonna..." He didn't need to finish the sentence; the door already was open. Myka's features greeted him with a big wink, and he symbolically bowed his head.

As Pete trailed her, ascending to the forth floor, his gaze followed every movement of her backside, the dreamy look on his face revealing his thoughts. Soon the brunette noticed what her partner was after. However, to her own surprise, she somewhat enjoyed his glances, deciding to remain silent until they would reach Giselle's apartment.

Having arrived at the respective door, the female agent turned around and eyed her colleague piercingly. "Even though it's kind of flattering, you've got to stop this, right now. We're on a case, remember?" She realized Pete was still caught in his reverie, and to emphasize her point she slapped the back of his head, maybe a little harder than she intended to. "Pete, focus! Eyes off ass!"



Pete instantly cringed. "OK, OK. Chillax!" Rubbing his head, he quickly annexed, "You're right. I promise I'll try to focus."

Pulling out their SIGs, the agents positioned themselves on either side of the door. They exchanged a short gaze before Myka knocked, asking, "Allô? Quelqu'un chez soi?"

"Giselle? Are you home?" Pete's voice sounded, only a bit louder. After a few moments of silence he nodded at his partner, "Go ahead, Arsène Lupin! Pick the lock!"

Myka slightly giggled at Pete's remark. Crouching, she checked the lock, and a bemused expression came to her face. Gazing at the former Marine, she said, "Uh, Pete, that lock's on a whole different level than the one on the front door. This will take a minute."

"That's odd," he replied. "Why does a thief need that kind of security? Anyways, take your time. I'll make sure nobody interrupts us."

While the male agent was scanning the hallway and staircase, Myka twiddled with the lock for quite some time, applying all her skill to the task. Eventually, a clicking noise sounded, and the door swung open.

Weapons ready, the pair carefully entered, providing cover for each other. Quickly sweeping the space, they found it to be empty. However, both of them were impressed by the generous, upscale accommodation which doubtlessly could be described as luxurious. Myka thought it was quite the contradiction compared to the rest of the building.

As the agents assembled in the kitchen, she stated, "Giselle hasn't been here all day."

"How d'you know?" Pete shot her a curious glance.

The brunette pointed at the sink. "Spaghetti. The leftovers are probably a day old. Besides that, no coffee mug or anything else. That means she didn't have breakfast here."

"So, yesterday she had pasta for lunch, or more likely dinner, and hasn't been home since." Reasoning, the male agent rubbed his chin. "You know what they say? Never go to an abduction on an empty stomach!" he remarked, earning a lame smile from his friend.

Briefly, the female agent sized up the premises and said, "Alright. Let's search this place! Would you mind taking the living room? From there you can also keep an eye on the street, in case Giselle decides to come back. I'll search the other rooms." The former soldier nodded in agreement, and Myka turned toward the opposite side of the condo. "And Pete...don't make a mess. I don't want her to know we were here."

For about half an hour the agents thoroughly combed through Giselle's belongings before Myka exited from the bedroom, a wide smile stretching across her face. She held up an air pistol with one hand, a set of tranquilizer darts with the other. "I guess you can call that incriminating evidence."

With an astonished tone Pete remarked, "Bull's eye! We're going to take that with us, aren't we? You know, just to be sure we don't get shot again."

"I really think we shouldn't. For starters, we were injected with the antitoxin, remember? And furthermore this is the first time we're actually ahead of these guys. I don't want to give away that advantage by letting them know we found this place." Myka fished in her pockets for her phone, stating, "I'll take a photo, so Artie can identify the gun and then put it back right where I found it."

While she took a few pictures of the weapon and projectiles, Pete watched her, ensnared in his thoughts. Still he did not fully concur. "OK...that makes sense somehow. But why don't we just arrest her when she shows up here?"

Glancing sideways at him, the brunette replied, "Well, we will if we get the chance to catch both perpetrators at once, and if they have the artifact with them. You know how these things tend to affect the people using them."

"OK, I see where you're headed," Pete interjected. "If we caught them without Barron's key and lock, you think they wouldn't tell us anything, because of the bad artifact juju." Receiving an affirmative smile from his partner, he ironically annexed, "You know, since we're federal agents, we could at least try to waterboard the truth out of them..."

Although the joke was of rather macabre nature, Myka could not hide a grin completely. However, she swiftly concluded, "OK, Lattimer, time we got out of here. Make sure you put everything back in its place."

As the pair had left the apartment, descending the staircase, Pete wondered what their next move might be. His co-worker gathered her thoughts for a moment before she suggested, "As long as we don't have any other leads, I say we stay here and wait in the car for Giselle to return."

"Fine with me," he gave back. "I'm prepared for a long ass stakeout. But don't think you can have any of the cookies." He gave her a smirking wink. "I got you some Twizzlers, though."

## Chapter Ten

A vigorous and highly frequent snore was resounding in the small cabin of the rental car, the same way it had been for the past two hours. Nibbling on her candy, resembling twisted, strawberry flavored ropes, Myka reflected on the mysterious details of their investigation, noticing Pete's wheezing only as a background noise. There was a number of questions that needed to be answered if they wanted to close the case some time soon. Reaching for the last of their water bottles, she realized it was empty.

Gently at first, then more and more resolutely, she nudged her partner's side until he jerked awake. Taking a sleepy gaze around, Pete tried to orientate himself. His voice sounded quietly, "Uh, what is it? Did anything happen?"

Smiling at his bleary features, Myka replied, "Yeah, we just ran out of water. I'm going to get us some more. I need to stretch my legs, and your shift is about to start, anyway."

"There's some kind of bistro right around the corner. Saw it earlier, when I checked the area." The male agent sat up in his seat. "Oh, please get me something with caffeine, will you?"

Nodding, the brunette climbed out of the vehicle and scurried along the street, soon melting into the dark. It was only now Pete noticed that the sun already had set, and a glance at his watch revealed it was a quarter to nine. He grasped the bag of cookies from the dashboard, in a sad tone saying to himself, "Damn, the last one! Should have told her to bring..."

All of a sudden his cell phone went off with a beeping buzz and interrupted his monologue. As he studied the text message that just had arrived a slight smile came to his features, and quickly he typed a few words in response.

It took not long until Myka came back from her grocery run, carrying a six-pack of water bottles, a small shopping bag and a tray with two paper cups. Entering the cabin, Pete greeted her, "You should have brought snacks, too. I just had the last one."

Myka passed him the shopping bag, along with a wink. As he opened it a satisfied smile stretched across his face. "Cookies! Mykes, how did you know?"

"Well, if there's one thing I know about you for a fact, it's that you're always short of cookies," the brunette chuckled. "And I got us two large French coffees as well."

Leaning over to her, Pete gently kissed her on the cheek. "Mykes...you're the best!"

For a moment she smiled, very much enjoying this little symbol of gratitude. However, she had other matters on her mind. Gently clearing her throat, in an all business-like manner she remarked, "Pete, about the case..."

"Right. I almost forgot...Claudia just texted," he mumbled with a whole cookie stuffed in his mouth. "Artie confirmed the air gun and darts are the same fabrication like the ones from thirty years ago. Just more powerful and upgraded to a semiautomatic mechanism, as it seems."

"Not entirely unexpected." Myka frowned. "At least that backs up our theory, but still...it's not the big turnaround we're looking for."

Now Pete also furrowed his brow. Eyeing his colleague, he queried, "Hey, what's up with you? Where does all this negative energy come from, all of a sudden?"

The female agent glanced to the side. She did not like being accused of negative thinking, however, she felt her partner probably was right. Above most things Myka hated waiting, and usually she was in constant motion when working a case. And now, for nearly an entire day, she had been doing nothing else than sitting in a car, munching candy and staring at an absolutely boring scenery. Becoming increasingly annoyed by the whole situation, she knew if they wanted to make progress, it was time for a drastic change of strategy.

Myka decided to talk to Artie about that, but not unless discussing a few issues with her partner first. She turned her head, back in Pete's direction, and stated, "You're right. Maybe I'm a little bugged out by the waiting and the...you know, doing nothing."

"I know what you mean," the male agent gave back. "It's getting on my nerves, too. Even though, I think, we should try to stay positive and focus on the good things. For example the two of us getting along for a whole day. Never thought that would happen." His features flashed a whimsical smile as he mildly poked Myka's side.

The brunette could not help but giggle at Pete's words and gestures. With a wink she replied, "Yeah, that's a mystery of its own." However, she swiftly came back to the investigation. "Hey partner, can we talk about something that's been bothering me since we searched Giselle's place?"

The male agent just gazed at her, his face showing a curious expression, and Myka started, "You know what I don't get? Why would she leave the air gun here when they had planned on breaking into the museum? Would you leave the Tesla at home, knowing things might get dangerous?"

"No freaking way!" Pete exclaimed. "Forgetting to bring your gun to a heist? This seems pretty loony. Maybe she is nuts?"

"Maybe. Anyhow, this behavior doesn't make sense at all. Take the super fancy lock on her door, for example. This indicates a rather high level of criminal professionalism...and then she forgets her weapon at home? Doesn't add up." Reasoning, she rubbed the back of her neck and stretched her muscles. "And then, there's the thing with the security guard. I never thought they would exhibit this level of violence." Pausing, she briefly frowned. "Maybe it's just me, but the whole thing doesn't fit their profile. I got the feeling there's something bigger going on, and we don't have the slightest idea what it is."

"You got a point," the male agent concurred. "But if we want to find out what they're up to, we definitely are going to need more intel."

Myka agreed with a nod. "Yeah, we...definitely...need more..." The sentence remained unfinished. Myka became absorbed in her thoughts, and for some minutes she just sat there, silently reasoning. Pete knew her too well to interrupt the process taking place in her mind right now. So he gave her the time she needed and occupied himself with hot French coffee and another cookie.

The former soldier just emptied the paper cup as his friend slipped out of her musing. Slightly disorientated, she glanced at him dreamily, her widened pupils flashing a sparkle.

The expression on Pete's face almost mirrored hers, and then it slipped his lips, "God, I really could drown in your eyes! So gorgeous! You, actually, are gorgeous."

Naturally, he had expected her to put him in his place; after all he was supposed to focus on the investigation. However, nothing of that kind happened, and to his surprise he could spot a sheepish smile appearing on her slightly reddened features.

Pete's surprise grew exponentially as his partner fully turned toward him, winding her arms around his neck. As she slowly closed the distance between them she whispered, "Obviously, I underestimated your charms, Mr. Lattimer." Softly, she began to nuzzle his nose. "Do you want to know a secret? These eyes would love you to drown in them."

This was all Pete needed to hear; his arms swiftly looped around Myka's form, and his lips met hers. This kiss started off slowly and gently, but soon it grew deeper, and the pair shared the feeling of a fiery passion rising inside of them. As the embrace tightened, Pete let his hand wander under Myka's shirt, sensually petting the small of her back with his palm and fingertips. When he ran his lips down her neck, she slightly turned her head and lustfully sighed.

Unconsciously, merely out of instinct, she opened her eyes for just a brief moment, shooting an aimless glimpse outside. Feeling her partner's passionate caresses on her skin, Myka's senses needed some moments to absorb and process that impression. Wait, what was that? Quickly, she took a second, keener look, and suddenly she jerked out of Pete's embrace. As the brunette spun around she accidentally hit her friend's forehead with her elbow. Instantly, a painful groaning sounded, however, Myka's attention was drawn to something else.

"Pete! We've got company! Over there!" the female agent exclaimed, pointing at a car in front of the building they were supposed to observe.

Mildly numbed by Myka's unintended hit, the agent rubbed his forehead. Glancing in the given direction, his face abruptly crumpled. As his pupils narrowed on a blue station wagon parked outside the edifice's entrance he could spy a man waiting in the car, lightened by the streetlamp nearby. Raphaël!

Myka placed a hand on her partner's arm, making a whisper out of her remark, "Look at the apartment, the lights are on. She's home."

Instantly, the ex-Marine was on high alert. Evaluating the situation, he suggested, "Shouldn't we grab him right now? Seems like a good opportunity. Then wait for Giselle and catch her when she leaves the house."

"And what if they don't have the artifacts with them?" Myka mused, though, she readied the Tesla, just to be prepared for every possible development. "I think we should make sure of that first before we rush blindly into something."

Pete nodded, "OK, maybe you're right. But..." The male agent paused as he noticed a vehicle heading in their direction. Slowly, the car came closer and right when it passed by the station wagon, its headlights aimed directly at the silver hybrid parked on the other side of the street. For several seconds the rental's interior became brightly illuminated, and before the agents could duck down, Raphaël had already spotted them.

Without any hesitation, the Frenchman climbed out of the car, his right hand reaching for something stuck in his waistband, at the small of his back.

"Shit! He's got a gun!" Pete shouted, in the same second pushing open the passenger door, rolling out of the vehicle.

Myka hastily opened her door, but all of a sudden the thunderous, blustering noise of a gunshot swamped the air. Instinctively she winced, and with a loud bang the wing mirror right next to her burst into pieces; shivers of glass, metal and plastic whizzing in all directions.

"Mykes! Come here!" Pete wildly gestured at her to leave the car on the other side.

Keeping her head down, the female agent bent over the center console, trying to crawl out of the hybrid. Then a second shot was fired, the bullet smashing through the car's windshield and punching in the backrest of the driver seat. Small bits of broken glass rained down on Myka, and she quickly shielded her head with her arms. Unwilling to wait for a third attempt on her life, she wriggled out of the cabin as fast as possible, coming to rest flat on the sidewalk.

In the meantime Pete had taken cover behind the car's front fender and his voice sounded quietly, "You alright, partner?"

Giving him a positive response, Myka switched from Tesla to SIG and crouched behind him. Pete carefully peered in the perpetrator's direction and saw him walking upright in the middle of the road, slowly approaching their position. Pointing his weapon at the Frenchman, he shouted, "Raphaël! Drop it! Or I'll drop you!"

The gunman's answer was a projectile swishing closely over Pete's head. That makes it easy, the agent thought as he aimed at the man's right upper body. The P-228 in his hand went off with a noisy blast, shooting the 9 mm bullet directly through the criminal's shoulder. At once a painful mutter could be heard, followed by the grinding sound of a firearm skidding over asphalt. Myka immediately jumped on her feet. Also taking aim at the attacker, she saw his weapon lying on the ground.

"Don't do anything stupid. Leave it there!" she resolutely exclaimed.

Raphaël seemed paralyzed. Rooted to the spot, he eyed the two agents angrily, his face distorted to a grimace.

As Pete stood up, without taking his gaze off the man, he stated, "Cover me, Mykes. And be careful, I'm getting a really weird feeling here."

As her colleague slowly walked over to Raphaël, the female agent took a few steps to the side in order to have a better angle on the Frenchman. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a figure suddenly appearing in the entrance door of the apartment building; obviously it was Giselle. As Myka spied a weapon in the person's hand, she screamed on top of her lungs, "Pete! Take cover!"

The former soldier spun around, and as the second shooter opened up on him he took a dive over the hybrid's engine hood. The female agent did not need another invitation; by firing two quick shots in Giselle's direction, she forced her to jump behind the blue station wagon.

At the same time Raphaël bent down to pick up his weapon, simultaneously producing a small metal cylinder, throwing it directly at Myka. Immediately, she pointed her weapon at him, but before she could pull the trigger, a dazzling flash pierced her eyes, accompanied by a loud, penetrative sound wave that deafened her hearing.

From his covered position behind the car Pete could see her staggering around helplessly; Myka was blinded and heavily confused. Reaching out with her hands, she desperately tried to find something to hold on to.

As the next gunshot sounded, the female agent was forcefully struck down. But it was not the bullet from Giselle's pistol that hit her. Instead she could feel a strong arm vehemently grasping hold of her and throwing her onto the ground. As she tried to move she could sense the same arm holding her down, as well as a number of shots being fired very close to her. Shortly afterwards, the squeaking noise of a quickly accelerating car reached her ears, and then there was silence.

"Myka!" At first the voice sounded as if it called from miles away, but slowly it was growing louder. "Mykes, are you OK?"

Somebody helped her sitting up, and a caring hand was placed at the back of her head for support. As she opened her eyes the white spots in front of her began to vanish, and her gaze came to rest on her partner's features.

"Pete?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Pete, I feel...really shitty. What the heck happened?" she stated, her tone indicating considerable pain.

"Flashbang. Nasty little sucker!" the ex-Marine replied. "I know how you must feel. Had enough experience with that crap. It should get better soon...an Aspirin will help."

Myka still had trouble focusing, her head feeling at least one size too small. However, her mind already was back on the case. "What about the trigger-happy couple? Did they escape?"

"Yup, they're long gone by now. Got the license plate though." Pete's remark sounded frustrated.

"Yeah, me too. But I don't think this will get us anywhere." Slowly the brunette stood up, holding on to Pete's shoulder for support. Shooting a glance around, she could see a number of curious neighbors watching them from their apartment windows. From afar the sound of police sirens could be heard, and Myka stated, "Let's get out of here! I'm not really in the mood to spend the whole night in an interrogation room."

"No argument there," the male agent concurred. "We'll call Artie later and tell him to inform

Paris PD."

Hastily, he cleaned the hybrid's front seats from the broken glass of the cracked windshield prior to helping his friend into the car. Fortunately, the engine was still intact, and Pete let the tires spin, quickly bringing the vehicle up to speed. The silver rental vanished into the dark only seconds before the police cars arrived at the scene of the shooting.

As Pete maneuvered the battered vehicle through the night-time traffic of the French metropolis, most of the time, he was sticking his head out of the side window for a better view on the streets. Suddenly, his partner noticed a red spot on his right upper arm.

"Pete, you're bleeding!" Myka exclaimed, her voice sounding worried. "What happened?"

"Oh, that's just a graze, barely a flesh wound." Briefly he glanced at the blood soaking through the fabric of his jacket. "Nothing but a little memory of Giselle."

"I'll have a look at it when we're back at the hotel," Myka stated, then frowning her brow. "She actually shot at me, right? And you pulled me to the ground, didn't you? So, in a way you took a bullet for me...thank you, Pete!" Gently she grasped hold of his hand and clasped her palms around it, an affectionate expression on her face.

"That's what partners do, right?" Pete replied smilingly.

Out of the blue, a buzzing alarm sounded from the inside pocket of his jacket. Operating the steering wheel with his left hand, he tried to reach for the Farnsworth with his right when a painful grunt escaped his lips.

"Pete...?" his colleague asked without missing a beat.

"Ah, crap! I can't move my arm like that. Hurts as hell!" Turning toward her, he asked, "Uh, Mykes, can you please get it?"

"Sure." As she leaned over to him to fish for the device in his pocket, their faces came close, only an inch between them, and Myka gave him a gentle nudge with her nose, impishly whispering, "Poor Pete! But at least you can look forward to a little nursing later."

Pete immediately forgot the pain, and a big grin appeared on his features as he was picturing Myka in a nurse costume.

"Man, look at you! I know exactly what's on your mind right now. Don't think this won't get you into trouble," the brunette remarked pointedly before she answered the Farnsworth.

"What the hell took you so long? Don't tell me you fell asleep during the observation," Artie queried, being his usual, disgruntled self.

"Asleep?" Myka's eyes narrowed on the older man's features greeting her from the small, round screen. "Artie, that's the joke of the day!"

"Actually, I'm not at all in the mood for jokes," the grizzled agent replied grumpily. "I have to report rather sinister news. The museum's security guard died of his head injuries this afternoon."

A shadow scurried over Pete's face as he showed up on Artie's screen. "So, our French Bonnie and Clyde added a new trademark to their list...manslaughter." Then he cast a brief glance at his partner. "Actually we're not really surprised. You should know, we were involved in a shootout with them, only ten minutes ago."

"You were what?" Artie's facial expression froze instantly. "How? Where? Did you get hurt?"

"Well, Pete has a graze on his arm, and my head's killing me. But apart from that we're OK." Myka paused, scrunching her neck. "Raphaël was shot, though. Pete got him in the shoulder."

"So, you caught the perpetrators?" The older agent furrowed his fuzzy brow.

"Well, not exactly," Myka replied. "We had the guy disarmed, but then Giselle showed up and started spraying bullets all over the place. And as if that hadn't been enough they also threw a flashbang at me."

"Yup, and then they hit the road," Pete continued the report. "And by the way, that wasn't a regular stun grenade. This thing was just...over the top!"

"A high-tech flashbang? A shootout?" Artie repeated, showing a concerned look. "Do you realize how the pattern is changing? At first they commit almost elegant thefts and prefer to intoxicate their opponents, not trying to kill them. And then they beat a guy to death..."

"...and now they shoot at federal agents without warning." Myka completed his sentence. "Yeah, we noticed that. Believe me!"

"It looks more and more as if there's some kind of driving force behind their actions," the senior agent sounded his thoughts. "And the force is getting stronger, as it would seem."

After a moment of silence and reasoning, Pete suddenly piped up. "Oh, I almost forgot! We got the license number of the car they used to escape. It's a blue Peugeot Station Wagon." After Artie had written down the number, promising to run a search on it, Pete had another matter to discuss. "Uh, and Artie...could you please brief Paris Police on the shooting at Giselle's place? We're not really in the condition, nor do we have time to answer their questions over and over again."

"Uh...and...we have another problem at our hands," Myka stated, her features showing a rather guilty expression. "You see, our rental car might be a total loss. So, maybe you could have a little chat with the rental company before we return it?"

"Excuse me, what?" The grizzled man could not believe his ears. "Why, for crying out loud? Did you crash it or something?"

"Actually, it wasn't our fault," the brunette attempted to explain. "Raphaël popped a few rounds in it..."

"...but it really isn't that serious," Pete continued her statement. "Well, the windshield's broken. Probably the seats, too. And some other minor things...kind of...fell off."

Artie glanced over his glasses at the field agents. "So, you produce the mess, and I have to clean it up. Is that the way things are handled now?" A few seconds passed, and surprisingly, his features lightened. "Well, to be honest, I'm just glad you guys are OK. So, don't worry, I will take care of it all. And you two...go get yourselves cleaned up and get some rest. You are going to need it. I'll call you in the morning, hopefully with confirmation on a lead Claudia and I are working on."

"Alright, Artie. Thanks a lot!" Myka replied. "See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight." The senior agent ended the call by shutting the cover on his Farnsworth.

The pair glanced at each other for a moment, reflecting on Artie's words. Eventually Pete stated, "I was sure he would freak out at the destroyed car, but since he was so cool about it, I



won't complain. And...I wonder what this lead is, he was talking about."

"I guess we'll know when he calls us," the brunette replied tiredly. Casually she took a gaze at the rental's battered interior, and suddenly she chuckled. "Uh, Pete...you know...I'm really glad it wasn't me who signed for the car. I'm so looking forward to hearing your explanation how the bullet-holes got in here."

"Ha, ha! You're hilarious!" Pete gave back ironically. Glancing at his watch, he added, "I'll take care of it tomorrow. Now it's too late anyway."

"Hey, I think I saw an underground garage close to our hotel. We can park this shot-up thing there," Myka suggested. "Might be a good idea to keep it out of sight from curious citizens and Gendarmes."

"Will do," sounded his short answer.

\* \* \*

Hotel Left Bank Saint Germain  
Paris, France

"Ouch!" Pete all but leaped off the couch, covering the graze on his arm. "Are you torturing me on purpose?"

"Shut up and hold still!" Myka exclaimed. "If you keep acting like a little girl I'll never get this rag out of there."

The male agent squinched up his face in a way that left no doubt about his displeasure, however, without another word, he let his partner finish her work cleaning the wound.

"Looks like you won't even need stitches," sounded the brunette's remark, a pleased smile coming to her features. Cautiously she placed a gauze dressing over the injury on her friend's upper arm, fixing it with a few patches. After Myka was done, she kept her hand resting on Pete's shoulder, letting her gaze wander his bare, muscular chest.

"Thank you, Mykes," he stated, looking up at her. Noticing the dreamy expression on her face while she was beholding him, Pete gently placed his hand over hers. "So, the nursing isn't over yet, am I right? You know I have other body parts that could use some attention, too."

Slightly startled by his remark, the female agent pulled her hand back and exhorted him, "Down, boy! Not so fast!" Taking a seat next to him on the sofa, she continued, "Listen Pete, I would be lying if I said I wasn't tempted, however, there are some things we should talk about before we...you know, deepen our relationship."

"What things? What d'you mean?" he replied, locking gazes with her.

"Well, for example the fact that we were pretty much surprised by Giselle and Raphaël tonight, when we were making out in the car. Pete, we can't afford to let this obstruct the investigation or our work in general. And please, don't get me wrong, I like fooling around with you, at least to a certain point. I actually enjoy this little teasing thing we have going on, and in our situation we probably can't be around each other and completely block out the temptation, but..." Myka paused, gently clearing her throat. "But you know the deal, the Warehouse always comes first."

Pete turned his head, glancing to the side. Although he knew his colleague was having a point, this did not mean he automatically had to like it. He remembered himself of the fact that this particular line of work naturally came with certain privations, and since he thought of his employment as the best job in the world, he had to resign himself to the new circumstances, whether he appreciated it or not.

"You're right, as usual." He managed a smile. "I felt somewhat humiliated, too, when Raphaël caught us on the wrong foot. This easily could've ended much worse, and I think we were kind of lucky that it didn't. So I guess, we need to behave from now on...at least when we're at work."

Myka slightly smiled and nodded in agreement. "Well said. We do need to behave."

Applying her statement to the situation at hand, the former soldier stood up and walked over to his travel bag, retrieving a clean T-shirt. Putting it on, he queried, "What about dinner? Are you hungry?"

Although, Myka's face showed a slightly bemused expression at the sudden change of subject, she replied, "Not in the least. I'm totally stuffed with Twizzlers!" Rubbing her stomach, she also stood up. "I'll have a quick shower and then go to bed. That headache's still bugging me."

A bit to his own wonderment, Pete did not feel hungry either, probably because he had eaten two dozens of cookies throughout the day. As his partner disappeared into the bathroom he started making his bed on the couch. By the time she was finished with her shower, the male agent already lay sprawled out on the sofa.

Wrapped in a bathrobe, Myka scurried toward the bedroom. As she was about to enter she suddenly stopped, turning her head in Pete's direction. Seeing him lying on the couch that he repeatedly had said to be uncomfortable, the brunette began musing if she should invite him to share the bed with her. After the shooting earlier and her encounter with the stun grenade, she definitely would feel better if she did not have to sleep alone. In all honesty, Myka was longing for his brawny arms to hold her and give her that certain feeling of safety she always was experiencing when he hugged her. However, she did not want to sleep with him, at least not at that point. Considering the avid looks and innuendos she had been receiving from him all day, she was not sure if he was able to cope with that arrangement. Pushing all opposing arguments to the side, she finally made up her mind.

"Uh, Pete?" she started, her tone almost a whisper. "I was wondering...maybe you would like to sleep in the bed with me tonight?"

Slowly, he lifted his head, blearily glancing at her. "You want to share the bed with me? For real?"

"Yeah, I think there's no more need for this sort of separation. It's kind of childish, actually," Myka stated, swiftly annexing, "But Pete...just to be perfectly clear, we will not have sex! You have to promise you'll keep it in your pants. Understood?"

A big smile came to his features, and he nodded. "Of course! I promise!"

"And I'll remind you of that if necessary, even with a kick in the nuts!" she remarked, giving him a meaningful wink. "Just give me a second to get in my jams."

When Pete entered the bedroom, the brunette already had crawled under the blanket, gesturing at him to join her, and quickly he followed her invitation. As he cuddled up to her, Myka turned toward him, her forehead coming to rest against his, their arms wound around each other.

Glancing deeply in her emerald-like eyes, Pete said in a hushed tone, "You don't have the slightest idea how often I've dreamed about this, you know, being allowed to hold you, Myka Bering, like this, sharing the same bed."

"Right now, I think I really could get used to it," she replied with a little chuckle.

For a while the pair remained motionless, just gazing in each other's eyes before Myka pulled her partner closer until their lips almost touched, whispering, "Pete, will you keep me in your arms until I fall asleep?"

"Don't be surprised if I keep you in my arms the whole night," he gave back smilingly.

Myka sighed and began to softly brush her lips against his, engaging him in a dear and loving kiss. The pair allowed themselves a lengthened moment of intimacy and coalescing passion before Myka gently broke up the embrace.

"Night, Pete. Sleep well," she aspirated.

Shifting positions, the brunette snuggled her back against his chest and pulled his arm around her, placing a number of gentle pecks on the back of his hand. Closing her eyes, she dearly enjoyed the security emerging from Pete's close proximity.

Instantly dozing off, she barely heard his response, "Sweet dreams, Mykes!"

He wanted to stay awake a bit longer, taking the time to savor her presence. However, as Pete deeply inhaled the scent of her freshly washed tresses, feeling her body so close against his own, sleep instantly overtook him.

## Chapter Eleven

Without any obstruction, the early-morning sun intruded the room, spilling warm rays of light across Myka's features. Tiredly winking, she slowly opened her eyes. Damn, forgot to close the curtains last night, she thought. As she tried to sit up she felt Pete's arm looping around her. Realizing he probably had not let go of her for one minute during the past couple of hours, a dreamy smile scurried over the brunette's face. Resting in his embrace, she turned toward him, but all of a sudden she felt something else and froze immediately.

Roused by his partner's movement, Pete yawned and glimpsed at her. "Good morning, beautiful." Gently he pressed his nose against her cheek, mumbling, "Wow, waking up next to you is even more amazing than I imagined."

"Yeah, just as amazing as stiff little Pete!" Myka exclaimed. "Or rather not so little Pete."

Turning on his back, he kept her in his arm and stated, "You know that I can't help it, right? This just happens..."

"I know, nothing to be ashamed about," Myka replied, chuckling. After a second of reasoning, much to her own surprise, she faded out all objections and suggested, "Maybe you would like me to help you with that?"

If Pete's features had ever shown a dumbfounded expression, it was in this moment. However, it did not take him long to process her words, and he replied, "Would've never dared to ask, but since you're offering, I won't hold you back."

A salacious grin appeared on her face, and she moved closer to him, pressing her feminine curves against the side of his body. Immediately their lips made contact and the emerging kiss quickly grew in fervor and intensity. Myka moaned passionately as Pete started placing a series of lustful kisses on her cheek and neck. Determinedly she reached for his shirt and pulled it up, her palm coming to rest on his stomach, avidly caressing his tightened abs.

Just as she was about to let her hand glide further down toward the object of her desire, the quiet air of the bedroom was shattered by a disturbing, ear-battering buzz. Myka loudly yelped and all but jumped on her feet, involuntarily jerking out of the embrace.

Pete was shocked as well, figuratively on the edge to a cardiac arrest. His voice sounding furious, he shouted, "Goddamn, effing Farnsworth! I swear, one more time and I'll throw that thing out the window!"

Myka was the first to regain countenance. "You're right, this totally sucks! But unfortunately, it's part of the deal." Reluctantly, she retrieved the ringing cigar box from the nightstand and opened it.

"Oh, you are awake! Good." Artie's voice sounded from the tiny speaker.

Myka frowned at her boss' logic, and in a mildly displeased tone she stated, "Well...uh, hello to you, too. Why's that good?"

"Because I need you to get up right now! We found something!" The senior agent's tone sounded excited.

"What? Did the license plates of Raphaël's car lead to an address?" the brunette assumed.

"No, that was another dead end," he stated, shaking his head. "However, I need you to secure something that will blow this case wide open! You have to get to the Bibliothèque Richelieu nationale asap. We are going to perform a little heist ourselves!"

"Holy smokes! You want us to break in the French National Library? For real?" Pete's gaze widened as he leaned over Myka's shoulder, his bewilderment evident.

"Well, considering the fact that we have been dragging behind since the beginning of this investigation, I thought maybe it's time for a more aggressive approach," Artie explained. "And you won't have to actually break in. Just be there when it opens, and...well, retrieve a certain document."

"Man, you actually are serious about that," the ex-soldier remarked. "And, put like that, it sounds pretty easy as well."

"Yeah, a piece of cake!" Myka remarked, flashing an ironic grin. In a more serious tone she annexed, "Actually, though, I'm with you on this one, Artie. I've thought about a change of strategy myself. So, what document exactly are we looking for?"

"Claudia and I dug a little deeper into the archives of Warehouse 12," the grizzled man started. "And we uncovered some hints indicating the original manuscript that treats of Barron's key is most likely to be found in that library. Apparently, it had gone missing during the Warehouse's move from England to the US, and it supposedly ended up in Paris, at the National Library, somehow." Artie paused to take a sip from his coffee mug, realizing it was empty. Mumbling,

he continued, "So far we only had a partial copy of that document to work with, but acquiring the entire description of the artifact would definitely give us the advantage over our opponents. So, we need to get a hold of that manuscript!"

"No question about that," the brunette concurred, pulling up the blanket she had wrapped around her. "And how do you suggest we should proceed with this highly illegal operation?"

"First of all, it isn't illegal! Well, at least not entirely," Artie remarked. "We're only going to take something that technically belongs to us and should have never left the Warehouse in the first place. However, according to Claudia's research, the document isn't among the exhibits in the public area of the library; it's stored in the archives. Getting in there shouldn't be too difficult, regarding we were able to locate a side entrance to the storage area, observed by just one security camera. Oh, and our teenage tech geek prepared location plans and a description of the manuscript. I'm going to send them to your cell phones right away."

"So, this is Claudia's plan then?" Myka queried, raising her brow.

"Yes, more or less." Artie held his Farnsworth closer to his face. "Once again she has proven to be quite resourceful when it comes to criminal activities."

"Yeah, I think we don't need to be reminded of that," the brunette remarked. "Anyway, tell her we said thanks!"

Artie just nodded, and Pete impatiently piped up, "Alrighty then, let's get this show on the road!"

"Hold your horses!" The senior agent glanced directly at him, frowning. "There is something else. I have a feeling our perpetrators may also be looking for the manuscript, meaning you two have to make sure you get your hands on it before they do. You know the drill, just snag and bag that thing!"

"Why do you think they even know about it?" the former Marine queried.

"Let's just say I have another hunch," Artie replied in an arcane tone. "Nevertheless, you should be prepared for another encounter with those friends of yours. And maybe this time you can manage to not let them get away?" he concluded tauntingly.

Myka and Pete briefly exchanged gazes, however, neither of them would respond to Artie's statement.

"So, I suggest you get going then. You have less than an hour until the place opens, and at this time of the day, it's at least a thirty-minute's drive," the grizzled agent stated. "And call me if something happens, you hear me? Adieu."

"We'll keep you in the loop," sounded Myka's reply. "Bye, Artie."

Shutting down the device, she placed it back on the nightstand. Turning toward her friend, she stated, "Looks like we can't go to Paris without having to break in somewhere..."

"...and steal some shit," Pete finished the sentence in her stead, his tone rather harsh.

"Hey, what has gotten into you?" She eyed him thoroughly. "You aren't mad because we were interrupted earlier, are you?"

"What d'you think? Of course I am!" Pete gave back grumpily.

"Oh, come on!" Myka looped her arm around him, placing a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Don't

think this was your one and only chance to get some action. I promise I'll make up for it." Swiftly she crawled out of the bed, marching in the direction of the door. Glancing over her shoulder at him, she teasingly stated, "In the meantime I would recommend a cold shower."

"Better a freezing shower!" The male agent grimaced.

"Maybe I should get you some ice cubes from the fridge as well?" Myka joked, quickly adding, "Enough of that already! Come on, Agent, focus! It's about damn time we stepped it up a notch!"

Pete watched behind her as she picked up some clean cloths and left the room. He could not help but resent the interruption by Artie's call. His face showing a crabby expression, he yawned and stretched his limbs. Absentmindedly, his hands reached under the pillow, coming in touch with something soft that apparently had been hidden there. As he pulled the object out from beneath the cushion, his features instantly froze. Pete held an 'Iron Shadow' T-shirt in his hands, looking exactly like his own. Then he realized, Wait, this is my shirt! Why did Myka have it? She definitely had not borrowed it; he would remember if this had been the case. Staring at the piece of cloth, he tried to make sense of this little mystery. After a while he heard Myka exiting from the bathroom, and quickly he put the shirt back where he had found it.

Glimpsing through the half-opened bedroom door at him, the brunette exclaimed, "Pete, why the hell are you still in bed? Get your ass up! We have to be off in a few minutes."

Grumpily, the male agent mumbled some incomprehensible syllables, rolled out of bed and shuffled in the direction of the bathroom, on the way there picking up a clean shirt and underwear.

Having showered in record time, Pete entered the kitchen only a couple of minutes later. He found his colleague near the steaming coffee machine, pouring the black fluid into two mugs she had placed on the counter. The former soldier walked up behind her and wound his arms around her waist, burying his face in her auburn curls. Myka giggled as she felt her partner's breath on her neck. Setting the coffee pot down, she slowly turned around, crossing her arms behind his neck.

"Nice to see your mood's getting better," she smilingly remarked.

Pete returned the smile and winked at her. "Well, a cold shower does help," he impishly stated. "As well as holding you in my arms."

"I bet it does! I have to admit I also enjoy this, though." Myka softly nudged his nose and placed a tender kiss on his lips, yet a brief one. "However, you do remember what we agreed on?"

"Yeah, I do. No distractions during work."

Myka nodded, and reluctantly, the pair let go of each other, but not without sharing another dear kiss. As she handed him one of the mugs she pointed at a basket resting on the kitchen counter.

"That apple there is the only food around, but I'm willing to split it," she stated. Glancing at her watch she added, "We don't have time for a big breakfast anyway. So, let's finish the coffee, grab our stuff and get out of here!"

"Right. No playing around today!" Pete replied as he fetched the red-colored fruit from the basket, along with a large kitchen knife from the counter. "Time we got our game faces on!" Performing a powerful thrust, he split the apple in half.

Bibliothèque nationale – Site Richelieu  
Paris, France

"I'll never forget that rental clerk's look when he saw the shot-up car!" Myka giggled impishly.

"He wouldn't even want to take back the keys in the beginning. Actually, I think he was close to tears," Pete replied, flashing a smirk. "I bet, he's never seen anything like it!"

"Certainly not," she gave back. "I'm just thankful, though, Artie had taken care of insurance and everything before we showed up there."

"Yeah, it was embarrassing enough the way it was, without having to handle all the legal issues," the former soldier concurred. "By the way, I don't think they will rent a car to the Secret Service ever again."

"Well, I'm pretty sure you wouldn't either," Myka remarked.

The taxi, carrying the agents through the streets of Paris, suddenly slowed down, and Pete exclaimed, "Hey, look! We're here."

Shortly afterwards, the cab rushed off and left the pair standing outside the main entrance of Bibliothèque Richelieu, one of four compounds constituting the French National Library. The magnificent, sand-colored edifice very well resembled a palace, stretching across an entire city block. Tilting her head back, Myka beheld the imposing architecture. Overwhelmed by the elaborately designed building, she opened her mouth, although, no sound could be heard.

Pete watched his partner with an amused expression on his face. Giving her a mild shove, he remarked, "Wait until you see the inside. I googled some pics on the way here, and I'm pretty sure you'll completely freak out!"

"Well, then show me around, Mr. Google." The female agent gave him a look, slightly wrinkling her nose. "We better get going; they opened about fifteen minutes ago."

The lobby and adjoining buildings alone were truly impressing, however, a five stories high reading hall presented itself as the heart of the compound. An enormous glass dome spanned the large, oval room whose walls were entirely covered by ceiling-high book cabinets. It offered approximately one hundred reading desks, but due to the early morning hours only a handful of them were occupied. Fortunately, the agents found not more than two employees supervising the place.

Following Claudia's instructions, displayed on their mobile phones, the pair crossed the room and headed for a door on the opposite side. A sign fixed above the frame read 'Toilettes'.

"Agent Bering, you wouldn't, by coincidence, happen to be in need of a bathroom, would you?" Pete asked with exaggerated eloquence, flashing her a whimsical grin.

"Well, Agent Lattimer, you must have read my mind!" the brunette replied ironically, her face showing an intrigued smile.

Myka and Pete waited for a moment when both librarians were distracted before they passed through the door, entering an unexpectedly spacious hallway. Besides the restrooms, they found a number of other entrances labeled as maintenance and different secondary rooms. As the door closed behind them, the two glanced up at the ceiling, locating a security camera right where Claudia had predicted it to be.

Raising her brow, Myka produced a small spray can from her coat's pocket. Aiming at the lens, she pressed the container's push-button, releasing a purple gleaming cloud of mist that quickly engulfed the observation device. Immediately, the foggy matter had an effect on the camera, causing it to throw out blazing sparks and small bolts of flashing light, prior to shutting down.

"Ah, our mysterious contact breaker. Don't leave home without it," Pete remarked, a wide grin stretching across his face.

Now that the agents could conduct their investigation without being noticed by the library's security, they made their way along the corridor, on the other end coming up against a door marked with 'Zone d'accès limité'.

"That's it, the side entrance to the archives," Myka stated as she fished in her coat's inside pocket for the lock pick.

Holding her back, Pete placed his hand on her shoulder. "You won't need that. Look, it's open." Intuitively, he took his sidearm from the holster, releasing the safety.

Myka eyed him confusedly. "What is it? Are you getting a vibe or...?"

"I don't need to. Obviously something's off. Very off!" Pete shot a meaningful glance at her. "Ready the Tesla, Mykes. I wouldn't be surprised if we had company."

The female agent did as she was told and charged up the antique stun gun. After exchanging gazes and a nod, the agents carefully entered the archives, their weapons at the ready, both very anxious not to reveal their presence. Covering each other, they thoroughly explored the large storage space filled with a great number of bookshelves, cabinets and steel lockers. It was divided by several motions running orthogonally towards each other. Approaching the far side of the area, they could hear snippets of a conversation in French between a woman and man. Hidden by a couple of big, wooden pieces of furniture, Myka and Pete silently advanced the location where the talking sounds were arising from.

Suddenly Pete stopped, holding a finger to his lips. "Shh! They're right on the other side of this shelf," he whispered, barely audible to Myka's ears. "I'm pretty sure the male voice is Raphaël's. At least it sounds like him."

Glancing through a split in the back board of the cabinet, the agents could spy the pair of thieves standing in front of a large steel locker, leaning over a thick, yellowed bundle of paper, engaged in an intense discussion.

Myka mused for a brief moment, then she turned toward her colleague. "You're right, it's them!" Translating, she said, "They're not sure if they've got the right manuscript, and they're pretty deep in their argument. We should use this opportunity and take them by surprise."

Pete nodded in agreement.

"You sneak around the shelf's left-hand side, I'll approach them from the right," she stated in a susurrant voice, gesturing at him to perform a pincer movement. "We have to make sure to hit them exactly at the same time. Wait for my sign...and, Pete, please be careful!"

Smiling, he grasped hold of her arm, squeezing it gently. "You, too!"

The pair split up, moving in different directions until each of them had reached the respective end of the grand cabinet. Briefly peering around the corner confirmed that Giselle and Raphaël were still in the same position. Leaning back, Myka locked gazes with her partner, and both signaled they were ready. The brunette took a few deep breaths and then, without a sound, she moved her lips. "Go!"



Simultaneously, the Warehouse Agents pointed their weapons around the corner, ensuring their bodies remained covered by the shelf, and they took aim at their targets.

"Raphaël, Giselle!" Myka's loud, resolute voice echoed in the spacious archive. "We got you! Hold it right there!"

As the heads of both perpetrators spun in the female agent's direction, Pete's call resounded from the opposite side. "You're surrounded. Now show your hands!"

Raphaël's features revealed his great puzzlement, and Giselle's expression mirrored his. It took him a moment to assess the situation, but soon a superior grin came to the Frenchman's face.

"Mademoiselle Bering, Monsieur Lattimer," he started, his voice sounding slightly agitated yet determined. "I'm truly disappointed, especially in you, Pete. You promised to leave Paris. And still here you are! By the way, I very much enjoyed the little charade you pulled off at Gare du Nord. Chapeau!"

"Shut the hell up!" the ex-Marine exclaimed. "No chance you're going to talk you out of this, so don't even try."

At that point Giselle slightly turned, moving her body between Pete and her accomplice, and instantly, the male agent shouted, "Hey! Freeze, lady! You won't get another warning."

The burglar pair lifted their arms, however, they did not appear to be very impressed.

"Pete, you seem quite nervous," Raphaël said provocatively. "Is there a reason why we cannot have a cultivated conversation? You see, there are some things you certainly do not understand."

"And what would that be?" Pete eyed him keenly, taking a step forward. "Do you want to tell me again how superior your organization is?"

What is he doing? Myka thought as she noticed her friend moving out of his covered position behind the shelf. Why's he even talking to the guy? The brunette prepared herself for the worst case and kept a sharp eye on the two delinquents. This was when she realized, for the first time she could see Giselle's face clearly, without a ski mask pulled over it, and Myka came to realize something interesting.

"Mais non, we all know this already." Raphaël flashed the male agent a dismissive wink. "What I have to tell you concerns the key. You must know, you will not be able to stop us, because we simply cannot stop! Using this artifact inflicts a certain longing, a very strong longing, and...let's just say, we are more than determined to follow that urge."

"What urge, Raphaël, huh? What is this longing you're talking about?" Pete took another step in the Frenchman's direction, completely exposing himself.

"All you have to know is that it makes us untouchable to you." With a slight, unnoticed movement Raphaël narrowed the gap to the opened locker behind him. "I could not even begin to tell you how this feels...but I could show you."

"Show me what?" Pete asked, lowering his weapon just a bit, only for a second.

The two thieves had been waiting for such an opportunity, and instantly Raphaël signaled his companion, "Vas-y!"

In one elegant move Giselle swiftly ducked down, reached behind her head and produced a

metallic dart, forcefully hurling it at the male agent. Pete instinctively pulled the trigger of his SIG, but in the same moment a small, sharp object penetrated the skin of his neck, missing his wind-pipe by less than an inch.

In a flash, Myka fired the Tesla at Raphaël. Hopefully, she might get lucky and hit both targets with one single shot. However, anticipating her intention, the Frenchman quickly jumped behind the steel locker's open door, using it to shield himself from the bolt of white and blue electricity shooting out of the old-fashioned stun gun. Hitting the sheet metal, the electron beam was reflected back at Myka, sending sparks of blinding light in all directions.

The bullet had missed its target, with a loud clunk smashing through the metal cabinet's casing. Pete was struck with surprise, though, it took him only a second to react. Removing one hand from his weapon, he vehemently pulled out the little arrow stuck in his neck, giving a wince of pain. As he pointed his P-228 back at the female delinquent to shoot another round at her, it already was too late. Squinting his eyes, he tried to focus on his attacker, but his vision blurred and he could see at least three Giselles approaching him.

This short lapse of bafflement and hesitation was all the woman needed. Out of her crouching position she sprung forward, with lightning-speed sprinting up to the male agent. Just as he was about to get off a second shot, Giselle took a flying dive and rammed her shoulder against Pete's left knee. The SIG hurtled through the air as the agent lost his balance; his legs buckling, he broke down on the floor.

At this point Myka was not aware of her colleague's distress, she could barely see her own hands before her eyes and everything appeared to be whitewashed. Briefly blinded by the reflection of the Tesla's energy pulse, she was not able to intervene. As she heard fast footsteps right next to her, a commando order was yelled in French, and she understood Raphaël had told his partner in crime to get the manuscript and leave with him.

Suddenly, Myka's vision started to come back and she noticed a figure scurrying along the hallway, right in her direction. It was Giselle, carrying the document, trying to pass by her. However, Myka had the presence of mind to quickly perform a roundhouse swing, presenting the other woman with a powerful close-line to her chin, sending her to the ground.

The female agent regained full control over her senses and she could spot the manuscript lying on the floor next to Giselle. Swiftly bending down, she piked it up and tried to put a few yards between her and her opponent. The woman, though, still lying on the floor, immediately spun around and reached out with her leg, causing Myka to trip and hit the ground as well.

"Donne-le-moi! Give me that book, putain!" A hoarse female voice sounded from behind the agent's back. As she turned around, trying to aim the Tesla at Giselle, Myka's hand became the target of a skillfully executed kick which sent the stun gun skidding over the archive's floor.

Giselle was on her feet; pulling out her own pistol, she approached the agent lying in front of her, gesturing at her to hand over the document treating of Barron's Key. Myka nodded and slightly leaned to the side, reaching for said bundle of paper. She was trying to trick her opponent into believing she actually was giving in.

Then Raphaël's voice resounded in French from across the storing space, asking if his accomplice had taken possession of the manuscript. Giselle confirmed she soon would have.

Myka caught this distraction quickly enough to grasp hold of her firearm instead of the papers. Swiftly she jerked up the P-228 and let a shot run out toward the female criminal, simultaneously shouting, "Who do you call a bitch, huh?!"

In a blink of an eye, Giselle abruptly leaned back, bending her knees. Performing a flik-flak, she removed herself out of the bullet's direction. Nevertheless, the weapon she was holding

slipped from her hand and landed a couple of yards away. Realizing she resembled very much a sitting duck now, the delinquent rolled to the side, jumped up and sprinted toward the end of the grand shelf.

Myka sprung to her feet, instantly pursuing the fleeing criminal. After a few hasty steps she stopped; aiming her SIG at Giselle, the gunshot blasted from the barrel. However, the thief vanished around the shelf's end just as the projectile punched a hole in the cabinet vis-à-vis.

Following her first impulse, Myka chased after the thieves, but soon she realized she did not stand a chance. They probably were long gone by now. Quickly she turned around, sprinting back to her friend, to the place where the fight had gone down.

She found Pete lying on his back, motionless and unconscious. As she came closer she noticed some blood spatters on his shirt and on the floor next to him. Instantly, she cringed. Stumbling, she fell on her knees, leaning over her partner's body.

"Pete, what is it? Talk to me, buddy!" Placing two fingers on his neck, she was feeling his pulse and her features lightened visibly when she sensed the blood continuously pumping through his veins. Examining his wound, Myka diagnosed that it was nothing serious, and she wondered why he had lost his conscience. After she provisionally had treated the injury, using a tissue from her pocket, she glanced around the area, looking for an explanation. Her sight came to rest on a small metallic object just a few feet away. Picking it up, the female agent identified it as a dart, resembling a tiny throwing knife. Probably poisoned, she thought, and immediately her mind became clouded with concern.

All of a sudden, a painfully sounding cough startled her out of her thoughts, and Myka's head spun around. "Pete! Are you alright?" she asked worriedly. Still coughing, the ex-Marine tried to sit up. Promptly, she was on his side, assisting him by gently pushing against his back. "Hey, partner! You OK?"

"I don't know. I think so," Pete replied, his voice a raspy whisper. "A little giddy maybe."

His attempt to stand up misfired completely, and with his head swimming he plumped right back on the floor.

"A little giddy?" Myka eyed him with a slightly amused expression on her features. Without missing a beat she annexed, "Come on, pal, we've got to get you on your feet. Let me help you."

A painful sigh left Pete's lips as his partner pulled him up. "How long have I been out?" he queried, looping his arm around her shoulders for support.

"A couple of minutes," sounded the female agent's reply. "Hey, can you even walk?"

Pete nodded. Gazing in her eyes, he asked, "What happened? Did they get away again?" He briefly paused, a shadow scurrying over his face. "And I'm sorry by the way, I was acting like a fool."

"Hey, it's OK," Myka remarked and thought, At least for now. Flashing a brief smile, she continued, "And yeah, they did get away, however, they left the manuscript behind."

"They left it behind...?" Pete's facial expression revealed bafflement.

"Yeah, I'll tell you later. I think we should get out of here first." With gentle force she urged him on to start walking. "I'm sure somebody must have called the cops by now."

As Myka left him to himself for a second, picking up the document as well as Giselle's pistol,

Pete felt his strength slowly coming back to him. Slightly limping, supported by his friend, he even quickened his steps on their way out of the archive room. As they passed the exit leading to the restrooms they could hear a number of people entering the storing space through the main entrance on the opposite side. Silently, the agents closed the door behind them, finding themselves safe and sound back in the library's public area.

As they reached the door connecting the corridor to the great reading hall, Pete suddenly stopped, grasping hold of her arm.

"Vibe?" Myka's simple question sounded.

"Yup. There's somebody coming," Pete replied.

Only a moment later, they heard the excited voices of several persons, apparently all of them male, approaching from the other side of the door. Quickly, Myka stuffed the manuscript in Pete's waistband, together with the captured gun, hiding them beneath his jacket.

"I've got an idea!" she whispered. Swiftly, the female agent unbuttoned her blouse all the way down to her navel, revealing some of her brassiere, as well as plenty of naked skin. Turning toward her greatly surprised partner, she pushed him against the door of the ladies' room. Just a blink of an eye later, a trio of police officers stepped into the hallway, entering from the reading room.

"Just play along!" Myka hissed, and quite roughly she shoved her mouth against his, engaging him in a wild, lascivious kiss, simultaneously letting her hands glide all over his body. Instantly, Pete returned her aggressive caresses, and from the corner of his eye he could spy the policemen staring at them bemusedly. As the three Gendarmes haltingly came closer, the brunette tilted her head to the side, moving her lips along Pete's jaw line to cover the wound on his neck with her curly mane.

"Eh...Madame, Monsieur," the highest ranking officer started. "Excusez-moi, allô?"

Pete turned his head toward him, deliberately flashing a dreamy look, and he asked, "Excuse me, what?"

"Américains?" The Gendarme eyed him curiously.

Myka turned her upper body in his direction, keeping Pete's neck hidden behind a curtain of long, dark hair.

"Yeah, we're Americans," she said, her tone sounding girly and somewhat naive. "Sorry, are we doing something wrong? You must know, we're here on our honeymoon, and we were just kind of overwhelmed by our...feelings." Inwardly, she was equally amused and satisfied, noticing the officers' glances wandering about her cleavage repeatedly.

"Ah, je comprends," the policeman remarked, and impishly he grinned at his colleagues. In a more serious tone he queried, "Alors, have you seen anybody passing through here in the past couple of minutes? Or did you hear anything out of the ordinary, perhaps a gunshot?"

"Huh, a gunshot? Are you serious?" Myka's eyes widened at that question, and her features showed a well-played terrified expression. "Why would people start shooting at a library? No, we haven't heard anything. But I have to admit we were a little distracted, if you know what I mean. So, maybe we missed it."

The officer gestured at his companions to proceed with investigating the archives before he stated, "Bon, I understand. But for your own safety I have to insist you leave the premises immediately!"

The pair thanked him and promised to retread right away. As they headed for the exit door they could hear the Gendarme whispering, followed by his colleagues' laughter.

"What was that about?" Pete asked in a baffled tone.

"He said something along the terms of stupid horny tourists," Myka replied, giving her friend a smirk. Then she exclaimed, "Ha, that actually worked! We should get an Academy Award for our performance!"

It was only now she realized her partner, similar to the French policemen before, could not take his eyes off her breast, and she stepped closer to him. A playful smile appeared on her features as she slowly buttoned up her blouse. "Seems as if there wasn't much acting required on your part. Just FYI, though, I actually had to fake the whole thing!"

Without another word she turned on the spot and marched toward the door, vanishing into the reading hall. For some seconds Pete stood there, processing the events that just had taken place, his features carved in stone. Then he suddenly slipped out of his trance, hurrying to catch up to his partner.

## Chapter Twelve

Searching for a private place to conduct a call, Myka had found this children's playground around the corner from the medical practice where Pete was having his injuries treated. She just had taken a seat on a bench and opened the Farnsworth, finding Claudia's features appearing on the small, black-and-white screen.

"Hey! What's up, sister?" the teenager started. "How's life in the capital of love?"

Myka slightly giggled at the salutation, replying, "Hey Claud! As it seems things are getting better over here. Well, aside from the fact that Pete's seeing a doctor as we speak."

"What? Did he get hurt?" Claudia asked, delivering a worried undertone. "Tell me it wasn't you!"

Myka had to choke down a laugh. "Nope. It wasn't me, not this time. Giselle did..."

"Giselle? So, you ran into our lovely pair of thugs?" The redhead held the old-fashioned cell phone closer to her face. "C'mon, spill! What happened?"

"Uh, I'll tell you in a second." She paused, and Claudia could see a shadow scurrying over her face. "By the way, where's Artie?"

"Taking a nap. You know, he pulled two all-nighters in a row," the IT technician stated. "So, what's up? Did you get the manuscript?"

"Yeah, we caught the dynamic duo just when they were about to grab it," the brunette gave back. "As we expected, they wouldn't hand it over without putting up a hell of a fight. But we managed to acquire the document. However, Pete took a little beating."

"No way!" the younger agent exclaimed. "Pete got beaten up by that chick? Ha, he's never gonna hear the end of this!"

"Well, in his defense, that chick isn't only an investment broker, she appears to be some sort of ninja-cat-burglar, obviously well-trained in martial arts. I had my trouble with her as well," Myka remarked, rubbing the bruise on her wrist, which appeared to be a bothersome reminder of Giselle's kick. "And in addition, Pete also took a poisoned throwing dart to the neck."

"Wait, did you say poisoned dart? And he was knocked out by it?" Claudia's eyes narrowed on the screen in front of her. "What about the antitoxin you were injected with? I thought you'd be immune..."

"See, we asked ourselves the same question," Myka interjected. "Pete said, he passed out much faster than before, only in a span of a few seconds at most. And considering he was gone for just some minutes, not hours as last time, I think they used a different kind of neurotoxin."

"Sounds plausible. Still, the question remains, why did they change the toxin." The teen furrowed her brow, propping herself on her elbows.

"Well, I may have a theory on that," the older agent remarked. "It has something to do with the recent leak of information that we detected."

"You found our mole?" Claudia shouted, suddenly on the edge of her seat. "Damn, I knew it! Artie's a double agent, isn't he?" she jokingly added.

"Don't freak out, but I think, Artie actually is involved," Myka replied, her tone surprisingly serious.

The redhead almost fell off her chair. "Dude! You got to be kidding, right?"

"Not really."

Claudia had trouble processing these words. She could have sworn she was right at the epicenter of an earthquake, everything around her seemed to be shaking. Showing a highly confused look, she stuttered, "B-B-But...you can't be serious! N-Not Artie!"

"Claud, relax! I didn't say Artie was the mole." Myka tried to calm her down. "However, Pete and I believe someone's pulling information from him. Perhaps he's being played, I don't know. But as long as we don't have any proof, I think it would be best not to tell him anything. Can you promise to keep this to yourself, at least for a while?"

"Yeah, alright. If you say so," the teenager concurred. "But you have to tell me who you think it is!"

The brunette nodded, reluctantly at first, then she stated, "OK, just ask yourself the following question, how is it even possible that Giselle and Raphaël knew about the manuscript?" She shot a meaningful glance at Claudia. "Only if they had access to the intel that Artie was giving us this morning, right? Besides, this information had less than an hour to travel across the ocean. So, since neither of you, Pete or me have any connections to France, it's pretty safe to assume our senior agent must be involved somehow." Myka paused for a moment, slightly frowning. "Hey, did you happen to hear him talk to anybody on the phone, maybe Dr. Gardin?"

"Holy eff! Actually, Artie did talk to him! Just this morning when I showed up for the early shift." The tech geek teared at her hair, biting on her lips. "So...you think Artie's good friend Gilbert is spying on us?"

"That's our presumption," Myka stated. "You see, I had the opportunity to take a good look at Giselle earlier, and believe it or not, she looks damn similar to Gilbert, only younger of course. I wouldn't be surprised at all, if she turned out to be his daughter."

"Shut the front door!" Claudia's pupils widened considerably, and she had to swallow a big lump in her throat. Gazing at her features revealed the great number of thoughts, simultaneously flashing through her mind, and after a certain lapse of reasoning, she remarked, "If you're right, this lowlife skunk has been deceiving Artie since the first time they'd met. And that was thirty freaking years ago, for crying out load!"

"I know it's hard to believe, but when you think about it, this all makes sense," Myka remarked, her arms akimbo. "The only explanation, why the thieves could manage to stay ahead of us the whole time, is that somebody kept them in the loop about our investigation. Take our first encounter with Raphaël, for example. He was observing us at the museum, just one day after he had robbed the place. That can't be a coincidence, he knew for sure that we would be there..."

"...because Artie told Gilbert, who in turn told Giselle and Raphaël!" The redhead finished Myka's thought. "You are right! This totally fits! Old grumpy face will be really pissed when he finds out!"

"You can bet on it!" The brunette flashed an ironic smile.

"So, what's our game plan now?" Claudia queried.

"First and foremost we have to figure out how these artifacts really are connected, and how we can neutralize them," the brunette stated. "You know, apparently there's more to it than we thought. The key seems to have a great influence on our delinquents, just as if it was driving them somehow, perhaps even providing them with certain powers." Noticing the bewildered expression on her friend's face, she explained, "You see, Raphaël was shot in the shoulder yesterday, and only a few hours later he moves as smoothly as if nothing happened. And there's something else; he actually said, they were experiencing a strong longing and couldn't be stopped."

"Sounds kind of delusional to me," the young agent piped up.

"Yeah, artifacts do have that nasty habit of messing with one's head," Myka remarked.

The teenager nodded, flashing a knowing smile. "So, did you have the chance to check out the manuscript yet?"

"Well, kind of. However, we couldn't find anything helpful so far. The lock might be split into two pieces, though, we don't know if this is leading us anywhere." Myka wrinkled her nose. "Altogether the document's quite a read. I thought, maybe you and Artie could take a look at it as well. Two additional pairs of eyes couldn't hurt...and I already took some pictures."

"Sure! Send 'em over, girl! We'll figure this out." Suddenly Claudia paused, frowning. "Guess this means I'll have to wake up the old dinosaur. Damn is he going to be delighted!"

"OK, thanks. But remember, don't tell him about Gilbert yet. I'd like to verify this first before confronting Artie," the brunette concluded.

"Right-y-right. I'll inform you when we find something. And you do likewise." Showing The Vulcan Salute, Claudia ended the call. "Live long and prosper!"

Restaurant Le Mesturet, Rue de Richelieu  
Paris, France

With misty eyes Myka observed the ruggedly handsome man who was sitting at the dining table opposite of her. She was playing with a strand from her dark-brown hair, while she watched him digging into his Quiche du Chef. Simultaneously, he was examining the old document in front of him. Although, her mind was clouded with concern at that point, she thought it was a truly beautiful sight, as insignificant as it might have appeared to somebody else. The brunette had been staring at this scene for quite some time, only now being startled out of her thoughts by a waitress, asking if she wanted a coffee refill.

Pete glanced up from his reading, smilingly stating, "Pour moi aussi, s'il vous plaît."

After the diner's attendant had filled both their mugs and left, Myka stated her admiration. "Hey, look at you. Your French is actually improving!"

"Yeah, as I said, I'm starting to like it here. And the language seems to be a part of that," he replied with a smirk. "Well, aside from these people who won't stop shooting and throwing stuff at us. The city certainly would be nicer without them!"

"Agreed," Myka concurred. "By the way, how are you feeling?"

"Much better! The knee's fine, I think. These stitches are pretty itchy, though." As if to emphasize his words, Pete started scratching the plaster covering the wound on his neck.

"Stop that! You'll only tear it open." Myka reached over the table and grasped hold of his hands, enfolding them in hers, and she directly gazed in his darkish eyes. "Hey, partner, can we talk about what's going on between you and Raphaël?"

"What d'you mean?" He eyed her somewhat confusedly. "There's nothing going on."

"Don't play dumb with me, Lattimer! We had this discussion before, remember?" she stated, her tone suddenly quite resolutely. "As it appears, that guy really knows how to push your buttons. And...I have to say, I'm a little worried. You know, back at the library, when he tricked you into leaving your defensive position...things could have ended badly. What if Giselle had used her gun instead of that throwing dart?"

She paused, waiting for her partner to respond, but Pete just glanced to the side, trying to hide his mortification. Of course, the former Marine knew exactly what his partner was referring to, and he had been musing about this incident, fearing the moment when Myka eventually would bring it up. And now here it was, however, his ego prohibited him from speaking his mind.

Purely out of instinct, Myka started to pet his hands, and in a quiet tone she started, "Pete, you really need to face this. You know you have to deal with it, right? And I want you to know that I'm here for you. I really want to help you, because I'm not going to lose you! You understand?"

Resisting the urge to pull his hands back and quickly disappear to the restroom, he decided to accept his friend's offer. "Alright, it's true. The bastard knows how to get to me...and I could bite my ass for letting him. Maybe he's right, you know, considering how I acted...maybe I am a simplistic fool after all."

"Bullshit! You'll drop that right now, you hear me!" Myka exclaimed loudly, her features visibly reddening. As she noticed the other customers turning their heads in her direction, she



continued in a lower yet upset voice. "Pete, I won't listen to this crap anymore! Yes, you made a mistake. So what? Everyone makes them. You would only be a fool if you let your pride get the better of you. And excuse me for being blunt, but if you'd conquer your weaker self, you know, learn to live with it instead of feeling sorry for yourself, you'll have no more problem dealing with Raphaël's provocations. Believe me."

Glancing downward, Myka realized how hard she was pinching Pete's hands and instantly let go of them. However, the female agent was not yet finished with her remarks, taking a deep breath before she calmly spoke. "I thought, you would know by now, how much I think of you. Pete, you are an exceptional partner...the best I've ever had. And I can't imagine doing this job with anyone else. But if we want to get it done, I need you to trust yourself...so I can trust you. And in case you've forgotten, there's absolutely no doubt about you being one of the best in this game! Or as Claudia would say, dude, you're the shit!" Myka could not completely hide a chuckle at her own statement. Then she concluded, "So, please, do me a favor and start to believe in yourself the way I do!"

Pete felt thoroughly overwhelmed by his colleague's speech and surely would need some time to comprehend its full magnitude. However, to the agent's own surprise, he was not in the least upset, furthermore, he instantly felt better.

His features flashed a thankful smile as he locked gazes with her. "Thank you, Mykes, that makes my day. I think I really needed this. You know, I'm starting to believe that getting my butt kicked by you, from time to time, really is a good thing. You wouldn't happen to consider this as a full time job, would you?" He paused, gathering his thoughts, and he repeatedly cleared his throat.

Myka inwardly cringed, her features showing a truly baffled look. Had he just asked her to be his girlfriend? She must have been mistaken. Certainly, he meant it in a different way.

Way to go, Lattimer! You made it sound like a proposal. Idiot! Pete thought, while trying to maintain a deadpan expression. However, he was well aware of the fact that his partner, without any doubt, would notice the Freudian slip that just had spilled from his mouth.

Then, all of a sudden, something caught his attention, something Myka had said, and a wide smile stretched across his features. Placing his hands on her forearms, Pete stated, "Now I get it."

The brunette eyed him bemusedly, the level of her confusion being eleven out of ten. "Uh...Pete...what d'you mean? Did you have too much sugar again?"

"No! The T-shirt, Mykes! The reason why you took my shirt!" he replied, his tone indicated understanding. "It's your fear! You're frightened of losing me, aren't you? That's why you snatched it."

Myka was struck with sheer perplexity, her eyes growing wide at her friend's assumption. Little by little, she was wrapping her mind around the perception of Pete finding his shirt under her pillow. Her cheeks flamed as embarrassment overwhelmed her, and quickly she removed her arms from his hold, bashfully gazing to the side. The brunette knew Pete was right. She was afraid of losing him.

In this exact moment Myka came to realize that this fear could be the reason why she was struggling so hard with her feelings for him. Appraising this cognition, it dawned on her how she had been ignoring this anguish for quite some time. However, this was something she simply could not face at that point. As she felt tears welling up behind her eyes, she decided to bury these thoughts, quickly banning them from her mind, at least for now.

Clearing her eyes from unshed tears, the female agent came back to the situation at hand; she

eventually plucked up her courage and stated, "It's true, you know, I took your shirt because I felt lonely at that point. I just wanted to have something I could hold on to. Considering the many arguments, we've had lately, I was afraid that I really could lose you, as my partner and my best friend. I'm sorry, Pete. I didn't want..."

"No, don't be," the former soldier interrupted her. "It's fine, believe me. I totally get it. You see, I kind of had the same feelings, and I can't imagine losing you either."

Slowly, he reached out and with his thumb gently wiped away a tear rolling down her cheek.

Myka swiftly grasped hold of his hand and pressed it against the flank of her face. "Pete, thank you. I'm so glad you understand." Smiling through her tears, she whispered, "I really thought you would be pissed."

"Oh, Mykes, why would I?" he replied, also smiling. In an attempt to coax a laugh out of her, he stated, "I'm just happy you didn't use my shirt as a weird sort of sex toy or something. Or did you?"

At first Myka was very much baffled, but after a moment her face flashed an impish grin, and she chuckled, "Well, the thought did cross my mind."

Pete gave her a wink and began to slightly pet her cheek with his fingertips. For a lengthened moment he deeply glanced into her eyes before he stated, "Myka, listen...I know you're worried, but I promise, you're not going to lose me. At least not because of something stupid like this."

Without a single word, the brunette leaned forward and planted a kiss of appreciation on his cheek. Instantly, Pete clasped her face in both his hands and lightly nuzzled her nose. Leading his lips toward hers, he started to caress them tenderly. Myka closed her eyes, a deep sigh escaping her mouth, and the kiss was returned devotedly, covetously and full of passion.

It was not until the waitress appeared at the table that the pair let go of each other. The young woman greeted them with a bashful smile, and Pete had to swallow a lump in his throat before he was able to order another quiche. The attendant just nodded and quickly left the agents to themselves.

Noticing the questioning look on his partner's features, Pete remarked, "What? I'm hungry. I haven't eaten anything the whole day, besides half an apple."

The brunette smiled at his statement, inwardly admitting, even after two years, he still manages to surprise me. Nonetheless, she forced her thoughts back to the investigation, again delving into the manuscript, while Pete was waiting for his second order to arrive. After the ex-Marine had finished his opulent meal, he joined his partner in her research.

\* \* \*

Two hours plus as many coffee refills had passed, and only now the bustling silence between them was broken; Myka had found a clue on how to possibly neutralize the artifact's powers.

"So, you think the pieces of the lock have to be put together, then we just stick the key in there, and we're done?" Pete gave her a bewildered glance, scratching his head. "I'd be surprised if it was that simple."

"Of course not," Myka gave back without missing a beat. "It seems that Robert Barron's

obsession to create the perfect locking mechanism has caused the key, as well as the lock itself, to absorb a great deal of his determination and compulsion. You see, the agents of Warehouse 12 believed, the artifact would transfer Barron's mania and emotions to the person using the artifact."

"This would explain why our thieves experience that strong longing, Raphaël was talking about," Pete piped up. "And also why they behave so strangely. You know, like forgetting their gun at home, or standing in the middle of the road, just waiting to get shot, and all the other loony stuff." He paused, rubbing his chin. "But still, I don't believe that simply throwing the lock together will solve the problem."

"Well, actually you're right. Check this out." Pointing at a certain paragraph in the document, the female agent explained, "It says here, the pieces have to be 'converged in a very specific way'. And further down, it reads, 'If one was to subdue the anomaly's potency, a stupendous amount of sensation must be bestowed on the convergence'."

The former soldier rolled his eyes at these quotations. "Man, this old-fashioned fancy talk makes my head swim." Reasoning, he trenched through his hair. "But I get it. You have to feel a strong emotion when assembling the pieces, otherwise they won't come together in the right way. So, if we want to neutralize the thing, we have to be really excited, or totally pissed off, or..."

"...or maybe in love?" Myka spoke her mind, although, she had not meant this comment to be audible.

Her statement served to confuse him greatly, but Pete tried his best to keep poker-faced, deciding not to enlarge upon the matter. However, he made a mental note.

Casting a gaze at her partner revealed his features being carved in stone, and Myka was almost convinced that he had missed her remark. Quickly she continued, "Anyway, I found something else that could help us. Back in the day, the agents thought it was Barron himself, who took the lock apart. They believed he wanted to destroy it, because he knew of the mystical powers he had created and wanted to undo his work. However, by dividing the lock, he accidentally multiplied the driving force behind the artifact, and the key started being drawn to its counterparts."

"Well, this explains the whole mystery. And now, all we got to do is find the thugs, and..."

Rudely, Pete was interrupted by the Farnsworth's tinny buzz, and he slightly cringed. Myka produced the device from her pocket, earning a couple of curious glances from the customers occupying the neighboring tables.

"Oh, c'mon Mykes! When are you going to get a new cell phone? That old thing's so frigging annoying!" Pete stated in a deliberately raised voice, flashing his colleague a wink.

Much to Myka's surprise, the feint actually worked out, and she was able to answer the call without being monitored by other parties.

"Hey, Claud! What's up? Any news?" Myka saluted the young redhead.

"You bet! Actually, we dug up a lot! I don't even know where to start," Claudia stated feverishly, her tone oozing with excitement. "Alright. First of all, we know how to neutralize the artifact..."

"Yeah, we figured that out ourselves," Pete interjected. Rising from his chair, he moved to the opposite side of the table, taking a seat next to Myka. "Assemble lock pieces, stick key in and show emotion. Check. What else you got?"

Caught slightly off guard, the apprentice continued, "Uh...well, maybe then you also know that we're kind of on the clock here." Noticing the baffled expressions on their friends' faces, she started explaining, "OK, get this! As it seems, the artifact's powers build up with time, and the people using it become increasingly affected. So, if you want to catch our perps before they go completely bananas, you gotta get your move on, right about now!"

"Well, we didn't know that. But it makes sense." Turning her head in Pete's direction, Myka asked, "Did you notice the crazy look in Giselle's eyes, earlier? And Raphaël seemed pretty off, as well."

"Off? That dude is a total nut-job!" Pete replied. "We better find him and his accomplices before even more people get hurt...or killed."

"Yeah, about the accomplices..." Claudia pointed over her shoulder at Artie who just had entered the office. "There's someone here who'd like a word with you."

The young redhead disappeared from the screen, and the senior agent took her place. Propping himself on the desk, he glanced at the video screen. Myka and Pete exchanged a brief gaze as they noticed the truly upset expression on their boss' features.

"So, you found the leak?" he started, his voice sounding hoarse. "And you wouldn't want to tell me? What did you think? That I couldn't handle it? Or even that I was working together with the spy?"

"No, of course not!" Myka replied. "Look, Artie, I'm sorry! I would have told you eventually, but I just thought it would be better to have proof prior to start making accusations."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait! So, you knew that Gilbert's the mole?" Pete threw in, eyeing the older agent piercingly. "Since when have you known? And why didn't you tell us?"

The grizzled man moved closer to his Farnsworth, stating, "I did not know. As I said this morning, I had a hunch. And I deliberately called my friend, after I sent you to the library..."

"...because you wanted to see if Raphaël and Giselle would show up there." Myka finished the sentence in Artie's stead. "And now, we know for certain that Gilbert is the one who's pulling information! I really like that trick! Although, I would've preferred it if you'd let us in on it."

Artie's features darkened even more as he remarked, "Well, you don't have to know everything. Especially when it comes to people that I consider my friends, or considered, to use the correct tense. After all, it was me who introduced Gilbert to the Warehouse, therefore he's my responsibility." The stocky agent paused. A wave of fury flashed through him, and he had to take a deep breath before continuing, "I can't believe it...he has been one of my best friends for thirty years! At least so I thought. He helped me to solve two dozens of cases, maybe more. And now I realize, the bastard only did it to gain more knowledge about artifacts and...and us. You know, that's really...really..." His voice trembled considerably, and he was not able to finish his statement.

"Yeah, that's really messed up," Claudia remarked, noticing his misery, and she gently planted her hand on his shoulder. "If I was in your shoes, I would completely freak out. But let me tell you, this happens to the best of us."

"You know, she's right, Artie," Myka concurred. "We all have been betrayed before, and it's..."

"You stop that right know!" the senior agent exclaimed. All at once showing a furious expression, he removed Claudia's arm from his shoulder. "I don't need to be comforted! And I suggest, you focus your energies on the case. All of you! So far, we've accomplished literally

nothing, and it's about damn time that we did!" For a moment he turned his back to the Farnsworth, wiping away an unshed tear. Then, addressing the field agents, he queried, "By the way, how did you manage to see through Gilbert's game?"

"So, Claudia didn't tell you yet?" the brunette assumed. "Well, maybe you'd like to sit down before I start."

"What? Nonsense. Come on, tell me already!" Artie stated, his patience decreasing.

"OK, uh...look..." Myka started, searching for an adequate phrasing. "When I first saw Giselle's face, earlier at the library, I noticed quite a resemblance...to Gardin." She briefly paused, raising her brow. "Artie, we think Gilbert is her father."

The older agent's eyes grew wide at this assumption. He opened his mouth to speak, but not a single word spilled from his lips. His knees weakening, he staggered considerably before falling on his chair.

"Hey, you OK?" asked Claudia, her tone clouded with concern.

Artie slowly nodded, evidently he was overwhelmed. As he was struggling to process the information, an eerie shadow darkened his features. For a while, silence lay the air, and the other agents' eyes rested on their boss.

Then, suddenly, Pete piped up, "Wait. I thought Gardin was gay. So..."

"So what?" Myka interjected, casting an equally amused and baffled look at him. "You know, homosexuals actually are allowed to have kids."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," the ex-soldier replied, slightly irritated. "It's just that...I didn't see this coming at all."

"But I should have!" Artie exclaimed. Obviously, he had gathered his thoughts. "I'm so damn stupid! I should have seen through this from the beginning! The entire time I've been wondering why only Giselle happened to wear a mask during Myka's abduction, and not Raphaël. It's so obvious, when you think about it!"

He began to stroke his beard as he sat up in his chair. "As well as the fact that they switched to a different neurotoxin. Gilbert had Vanessa's formula, so he could easily have found another poison, one that wouldn't be neutralized by the antidote." The grizzled man face-palmed himself. "I should have realized this right away, thirty years ago. It was the same situation as it is today; the burglar gang was always one step ahead, because he kept them in the loop."

"Well, now that we know, this won't happen again," Myka remarked.

"Right. This will not happen again!" Artie exclaimed, punctuating each word for further emphasis. "And perhaps, now, we have something that may give us the advantage." He turned in Claudia's direction. "What about your thing-y? Is it working?"

The teenager moved her straightened hand to her right temple, saluting. "Yes, Sir, Artie, Sir. I have it right here."

Myka and Pete watched her curiously as she retrieved an antique-looking device from her desk. It was encased in a brazen box, not unlike a Farnsworth. The gadget was about the size of a book, featuring a small parabolic reflector, as well as a screen-like display.

Pete's eyes narrowed on the queer object in Claudia's hands. "Hey, Leonardo, what the hell did you throw together this time?"

"Lady and Gents, Claudia Donovan Fabrications proudly introduces the ultimate cell phone locating device." Presenting the apparatus to her fellow agents, the redhead flashed a triumphant smile.

The confusion on Pete's features increased visibly. "Uh...dude, I can locate a mobile with my laptop. So what's the big deal?"

"Of course you can," she gave back, her tone slightly grumpy. "But, can you do it without knowing the phone's number?"

"Whoa! Really? This thing does that?" The ex-Marine stared at her, his mouth wide open.

"Yep, it kind of isolates a certain phone's signature, regardless of the network that it's connected to, and it also tells me the location of the device. So, with the help of this sexy, little tool, I should be able to find out which cell phone has been next to yours, each time you were in close proximity of our delinquents. Using Pete's mobile as the source, I started the search a few minutes ago; it should give us a location soon."

"Girl, look at you! You never fail to impress us!" Myka stated her appreciation.

"Yeah, but you definitely need a cooler name for it!" Pete smiled whimsically. "Something like The Mighty Cellucator..."

"Agents! Let's not get overexcited, shall we," Artie interjected crabily. "You have not caught the thieves yet, so I suggest you pipe it down a little, until you actually do." Raising one finger, he added, "This is serious. Remember, the key's powers grow exponentially, and if we don't snag the artifact soon, nobody knows how crazy these criminals will get." His voice grew angrier by the second. "And by the way, when you encounter them, don't feel obliged to use the Tesla. No need to take any risks. If they're asking for a bullet, then give them a bullet, goddamned!"

"Alright! That's what I'm talking about!" An enthusiastic grin stretched across Pete's face, and in a cowboy-like voice he stated, "Don't worry, pal. We're gonna Bruce Willis the shit out of them!"

"OK, guys, this is getting a little too intense," Myka pitched in, her tone indicating worry. "Why don't we all just take a deep breath, and focus on what's really important, like...for example...protecting people from being hurt or killed."

Artie and Pete exchanged glances, both their expressions caught between irritation and guilt. A brief moment of musing passed before the older agent replied, "Actually, you're right, Myka. We may have gotten a little carried away here. Naturally, we don't want anyone to get hurt, however, these people are dangerous, and I'm just concerned about that."

"Yeah, sorry, Mykes. We kind of overshot the mark there," the ex-Marine stated. "Listen, in the end, I think, we're all on the same page."

The brunette placed a hand on her partner's arm, giving him a gentle squeeze. "I know. I just wanted to remind you of it."

Suddenly, an excited voice called from behind Artie's back. "Hey, peeps! I think I got something!" Claudia reappeared on the Farnsworth's screen. "On every occasion when you came close to Raphaël, there was the same mobile phone in the near proximity of yours, Pete. So, I would say, this one belongs to our loony perp."

"Are you sure?" Artie queried, pulling the locating device out of her hands. "Let me see this."

After studying the display for some seconds, he remarked, "How do you even use this thing, assuming it actually works. Is that little gizmo there Raphaël's phone?"

"Of course it works! I built it. C'mon old man, give it back. You'll only break it," Claudia replied, her tone sounding slightly miffed. She grasped hold of the brazen box and pointed at different sections of the display. "Look, this map shows the location of the phone. And here you see the address...wait...that's near Place des Vosges. Ha! That's Gilbert's place!"

Artie nodded, "Yes, that's exactly where The Doctor lives!" Pausing, he held a hand to his forehead. "Agents, this could mean that at least Gilbert and Raphaël are in the same place at once, right now. And presumably the girl is there, too. This could be our unique chance to catch them all together!"

"Right," Myka concurred with her boss. "And assuming they're all together, it's very likely that they have the artifacts with them."

Giving his partner a slight nudge to the side, Pete enthusiastically stated, "So, what are we waiting for? I'm really getting tired of these thugs. Time to seize 'em and grab the key!"

"Yes, indeed! You need to get there asap!" the grizzled man remarked, pointing his index finger. "However, remember that you are most likely going to be outnumbered, and probably outgunned, too. So, caution is of the essence!"

"Alright. We promise to be careful," Myka gave back. Addressing the teenager, she annexed, "And Claud, excellent job by the way! Keep us posted in case the signal moves."

"Rest assured that we will," the senior agent replied in Claudia's stead. Gazing over his glasses, he stated, "Good hunting!"

The field agents thanked him and bit farewell, ending the call. Glancing at his colleague, Pete showed a confident smile. "So, Mykes, what d'you say? Time for a little snag and bag?"

"Damn right!" she said, returning the smile. As Myka stood up, gathering the manuscript, she annexed, "And this time we'll bring our A-game!"

## Chapter Thirteen

"Is it just me, or do all of Artie's old friends turn out to be evil villains?" Pete asked, after they exited the cab that had taken them to Place des Vosges.

"Hm, you're right, there seems to be a pattern," Myka remarked, frowning. "Anyhow, we've got other things to take care of. Come on, let's get going."

Pete nodded in agreement, and the pair made their way to Rue du Pas de la Mule, where they hoped to encounter the burglar crew. Fortunately, they found themselves alone in the street, due to the late evening hours. Approaching the location, they checked on their weapons, and the female agent readied the antique stun gun.

"Hey, Pete. Why don't you take the Tesla this time?" she suggested, casting a sideways

glimpse at him.

"Why would you want me to have it?" He eyed her, slightly baffled, before stating, "Ah, now I get it. You want to keep me from doing something stupid, like blowing Raphaël's brains out."

"Well, uh...kind of," she admitted. Raising her brow, she continued, "I just don't want you to act imprudently, and later having to regret it. Believe me, I know how it feels to have remorse, and I want to save you from that experience. That's all."

Pete's facial expression was a blend of discontent and appreciation. Musing about Myka's remark, he swallowed repeatedly. Suddenly, a smile scurried over his face, and he planted his hand on the small of her back, starting to mildly rub it. "Who knew, I'm really getting used to this kind of supervision." Noticing the bemused look on his friend's features, he quickly added, "I mean, you always look out for and take care of me, and somehow I've come to appreciate that. Thank you, partner!"

Flashing a satisfied smile, Myka gave him a gentle shove. Handing Pete the Tesla, she asked, "So, you're ready for this, or what?"

"You can bet your sweet little butt on it!" the ex-soldier replied whimsically, sticking the stun gun in his waistband.

The agents almost had arrived at Gilbert's condo, approximately forty yards away from the edifice, when they suddenly spotted a man exiting the building through that eye-catching blue front door. He stopped just beneath a streetlamp, producing a pack of cigarettes from his jacket's side pocket. As he lightened up his smoke, Myka could cast a glance at his features. Judging by his swarthy appearance, he was of Arabic ancestry, and she also noticed him being clad in a dark-green suit, the same kind as the attendants of their hotel used to wear.

Grasping hold of her colleague's arm, she hissed, "Pete, look! It's our concierge!"

"Haziem Marchand? No way!" Pete shot a closer gaze at the figure and cringed abruptly. "Holy cow! It is him! And there's his crappy car!" The former Marine pointed at an orange vehicle, positioned across the street.

Quickly, Myka pulled her partner to the side, the pair hiding in the shadow of a minivan that was parked nearby. From their covert position, they observed the porter turning into their direction, haltingly strolling along the sidewalk, taking hasty draws from the cigarette. Every few yards he stopped, shaking his head and glancing over his shoulder at the blueish doorway where he just had exited from. His face showed a resentfully disgruntled expression.

"Mykes, do you think he was at Gilbert's?" Pete whispered, leaning in closer to her.

"Where else would he have been?" the female agent replied. "Remember, there's no such thing as coincidence. My guess would be, he works for Gardin, probably keeping him posted about our moves."

"Oh, that bastard!" Pete's voice sounded upset. Eyeing him keenly, he stated, "Hey, the guy looks pretty pissed. Maybe there was a dispute or something."

"We'll find out. Come on, let's pick him up!" Myka urged her friend to action.

Pete, however, held her back, a wide grin stretching across his face. "Wait until he's close to the car. I have an idea. It's time for retaliation!"

Just a couple of steps away from the automobile that kept the agents out of his sight, the short, wispy man turned in the direction of his Renault and crossed the road. He took a last,



deep drag from his smoke prior to flipping it away. As he reached the car, Myka and Pete scurried around the minivan, silently sneaking up on their target, approaching him from his blindside.

Applying great caution to his timing, Pete waited for the concierge to open the driver's door. Suddenly, the agent leaped forward and pushed Marchand hard in the back, the impact causing the porter to stumble forward, his head crashing into the top frame of the vehicle. A loud, painful grunt escaped his lips. Instinctively, he wanted to turn around, however, Pete quickly slammed the door in his back, pinching Haziem's neck between the edge of the car's roof and the door frame, leaving him unable to move.

"Gotcha!" the ex-soldier exclaimed. In a deliberately casual manner, he leaned against the door wing, forcing the man to remain in this highly uncomfortable position. Pete flashed an ironic grin as he remarked, "Hey, look Mykes! It's our good friend Hazy Haziem!" Addressing the clerk, he joked, "Hey, man, how ya doing? It's so nice to see you, buddy!"

"Yeah, of course, what an unexpected pleasure!" Myka started, willing to play her part in this scheme. "Isn't it funny that we meet here, so coincidentally?"

Naturally Marchand was enraged, his face resembling a distorted grimace. But no matter how hard he tried, he was not able to escape his misery.

"Merde, alors!" he railed at his attackers, his voice nothing more than a hoarse whisper. "What the hell...is this? Êtes-vous fous? Are you people crazy?"

In the meantime, Myka had circled the vehicle, propping herself on the roof of the old Renault, opposite of the concierge. She looked him straight in the eye, and in a dead serious tone she stated, "You shut up and listen! We just saw you coming out of Gilbert Gardin's house, and you're going to tell us what you were doing there. And don't even think about lying to me!" Her tone grew harsher. "You should know, my friend here holds quite a grudge against you, and he would hesitate not for a second if I told him to beat the living hell out of you!"

To emphasize his partner's threat, Pete pushed harder against the door, causing the frame to bite deeper into Marchand's neck. In an equally sarcastic and menacing tone, he said, "C'mon Hazy, don't be rude! Answer the lady's question. What were you doing at Gardin's place?"

"Please...stop...it!" the porter wheezed, his voice oozing with pain. "I'll tell you everything, I swear. Just let me out of here!"

Myka looked him over; after a moment, she stated, "Pete, I think he's had enough. You can let him out now, but keep an eye on him, OK?"

The ex-Marine nodded and took a step back, letting Marchand escape from his predicament. Being released, the man began coughing heavily as he rubbed his throat, desperately gasping for breath.

"Oh, c'mon! You're really overplaying it," Pete stated. "I wasn't pushing that hard. So, I suggest you start talking!"

Haziem gave the agent a daunted look, and the coughing quickly died down. His voice mildly scratchy, he started, "Alors, yes, I was at Dr. Gardin's apartment, but it is not what you may think. You see, I only work for him on occasion." He paused, clearing his throat. "As a concierge, I can easily acquire certain information, which I sometimes pass on to him. But this was the last time, I can assure you!"

"And why is that?" Myka furrowed her brow.

"The only reason why I was here today is because I did not get paid for the information I had given him...about you." A flash of guilt scurried over his face.

"And I guess you still have empty pockets, don't you?" the brunette assumed. "That's why you are so angry."

"Yes! I am very much angry! I am pissed!" Marchand pointed in the direction of Gardin's apartment, wildly gesturing and yelling a highly indecent French profanity.

"Hey, keep it down, will you!" the tall woman reproved him. "No need for language like that! Tell us instead what happened. Did you get into an argument with Gilbert?"

"No, not with the doctor, with the other man, the young one," Haziem replied.

"Raphaël?" Pete queried.

"Oui, he is completely insane! That lunatic even pulled his gun on me!" the porter stated furiously. "Until today, I have never met him, but all of a sudden he seems to be the boss. Dr. Gardin was willing to pay me, but Raphaël started to act crazy and told me that I would not get one cent." Again, he had to swallow a lump in his throat. "But this is over anyway, I want nothing to do with these people anymore. You must believe me."

"OK, we do," Myka remarked. "Just tell us one more thing. Who's at the condo right now? Only Raphaël and Gilbert?"

"No, there's also a woman; I did not get her name. She did not say anything the whole time," the concierge responded.

The agents exchanged meaningful glances, and Myka stated, "Alright, Haziem, that would be all. You're free to go."

Marchand eyed her confusedly, stuttering, "Excusez-moi, you a—a—are not...going to a—arrest me? But...you are Secret Service, non?"

"Yes, you're damn right we are. And that's why we have bigger fish to catch," the brunette said, not completely hiding a smirk.

A short moment of reasoning passed before Pete annexed, "There's one thing, though. You will have to hand over your phone and car keys. You can pick 'em up at the hotel tomorrow, but today, you're on foot, pal."

The concierge sighed, reluctantly passing the male agent said objects. However, he also felt great relief at the thought of not having to face criminal prosecution.

Pulling the mobile phone and keys from the porter's hands, Pete shot a stern gaze in his eyes, stating, "You stay out of trouble, you hear me! Rest assured, next time I won't be so gentle. And now...buzz off!"

Haziem did not need another invitation. Turning on his heel, he left the agents behind and ran along Rue du Pas de la Mule, soon vanishing around the next corner.

As Myka watched behind him, she held a hand to her mouth and started giggling. "Oh my god, was he scared! Pete, that was brilliant! I had to fight so hard to keep a straight face!"

Flashing an impish grin, the male agent replied, "Yeah, tell me about it. I think, the poor guy may have even shot his underwear."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Hopefully, this makes him re-evaluate his criminal carrier," she remarked. "Hey, why did you take his stuff, by the way?"

"Not quite sure. Call it a hunch, some sort of vibe maybe." Pete turned toward her, pocketing Haziem's phone and keys. "So, thanks to our buddy Hazy, we know that probably the entire family of villains are gathered up there. Any suggestions on how to proceed?"

"Well, since we're on a truncated timetable, we don't have much of a choice, I'm afraid," the curly-haired agent stated, playing with a long strand from her tresses. "I don't like the perception of raiding the place with the whole gang inside, not in the least. Regarding Raphaël's agitated temper, things could possibly get really ugly."

"But you said it yourself, we don't have time to sit around and wait for them to leave the house." Pete shrugged his shoulders. "Can't think of any other option at the moment."

All of a sudden, he noticed a whimsical smile scurrying over his friend's features. "What is it? You look like you're having an epiphany or something."

"Kind of. I just thought, maybe it's time we opened a can of worms," Myka gave back with a wink, her tone slightly excited. "Perhaps we're able to lure them out of there. Can I have Haziem's phone, please?"

"Here you go," Pete stated, shooting a questioning glance at her.

The brunette took the device and searched its contact list for Gardin's number. It did not take her long to find it, and she quickly typed a short message, sending it to the doctor's phone.

As the pair walked away from Marchand's vehicle, headed in the direction of the apartment building, Pete queried, "What did you...I mean, what did Haziem text?"

"Haziem told the good doctor to get the hell out of there, because he spotted the two Americans, and they're only ten minutes away." Myka wrinkled her nose. "I know it's kind of lame, and I don't know if my French is good enough for texting, but maybe he'll fall for it."

"Why do you think it's lame?" He furrowed his brow. "Mykes, that's an awesome idea! And as far as I can tell, your French is flawless!"

Suddenly, the brunette stopped, not far away from the blue-colored doorway, and she pointed at the windows of Gardin's condo. Looking up, the agents could see the lights inside the lodging being turned off.

"As it appears, your plan is working," remarked the former soldier.

The pair exchanged telling gazes, and Myka stated resolutely, "OK, time to get down to business. I think Raphaël is our main problem, so our best move would be to disarm him first. And, Pete, I need you to take care of it. Are you up for this?"

"Sure, partner," he replied, giving her a confident look.

"If Gardin or the girl comes out first, we let them pass, OK? We can deal with them later." Myka paused, shooting a brief glimpse around, suddenly pointing at a small recess in the wall near the entrance. "Hey, you can hide in there, and I'll cover you from this car here."

Without waiting for a response, she quickly moved in position behind a dark-gray Mercedes limousine, parked close to the building's front door. She kneeled down and drew her weapon, releasing the safety. Pete disappeared in his hideout next to the door and charged up the Tesla.

A minute of tense silence passed, and inwardly, both agents prepared themselves for the upcoming encounter. As Pete heard footsteps emanating from the inside of the building, he cast an encouraging glance at his colleague, his lips moving without a sound. "Showtime!"

Only seconds later the blueish door flung open and a tall, slim figure with short, ginger hair appeared in the opening, followed by a much chunkier person. Out of her crouching position behind the vehicle Myka shot a furtive look over the trunk lid at them, identifying the pair as Giselle and Raphaël. Judging by their hasty movements, they were in a hurry.

Peering around the recess' corner, Pete could see them leaving the edifice, and immediately he pointed his stun gun at them. Just as he was about to pull the trigger, Raphaël spotted him out of the corner of his eye. Instantly, the man spun around and grasped hold of his accomplice. In this second, the Tesla's electron tube lightened up, sending a flickering beam of light toward the two criminals. But in a flash, the Frenchman took a dive on the sidewalk, dragging Giselle down with him. As they hit the blacktop, the bolt of electricity whizzed over their heads and vanished into the air, without having any effect on the targets.

In this second, Myka rose up, aiming her SIG at the couple lying on the ground. "OK, that's enough! Stay down and show me your hands!" Her voice echoed back from the neighboring buildings.

However, this was not the only sound that could be heard. There also was a quiet scratching noise from a metallic object skidding over the asphalt. The female agent instinctively cringed, and in the same moment her partner's yelling voice penetrated her ears. "Flashbang!"

Quickly, Myka ducked down, covering her ears with her hands, and Pete did likewise. Just as they closed their eyes, a vociferous bang filled the air, accompanied by a dazzling flash of light. Both car windows on the passenger's side burst with a loud crack, scattering bits of broken glass all over the sidewalk. Fortunately, the grenade had rolled under the Mercedes before it went off, the auto body absorbing most of its effects. Nevertheless, both agents were slightly confused, at least for a few short seconds.

The perpetrators also were affected by the stun grenade, however, having been prepared for the explosion, they recovered quicker, taking the opportunity to get up from the ground. Raphaël immediately turned on his heel and approached the male agent, while Giselle moved around the gray Mercedes, headed in Myka's direction.

As Pete's gaze focused on the massive figure who was about to pull his gun at him, his arm instantly shot up, ready to fire the Tesla a second time. His actions caused the Frenchman to freeze in his movement, but all of a sudden, a powerful strike hit the agent's hand and sent the stun gun flying away. Shocked by the unexpected attack, he turned his head to the side, realizing that Gilbert had appeared in the doorway, swinging a walking stick. Being cornered by the two men, Pete found himself in quite a situation.

"Je t'éclate la tronche!" Raphaël shouted angrily, a lunatic sparkle in his eyes, as he produced a pistol from his waistband.

I'll show you whose ass is going to be kicked here, Pete thought, and quickly he leaped forward. Forcefully, he swung the edge of his left hand against Raphaël's forearm, causing the weapon to slip from his grip, simultaneously smashing his right fist in the man's jaw. The blow certainly would have knocked out every other fighter he had ever encountered, however, very much to Pete's surprise, the tall delinquent only stumbled slightly, shaking his head. The ex-Marine knew there was no time to waste, and as he sensed Gilbert approaching him from behind, he spun around, with a roundhouse swing punching the walking stick out of the man's hand. Continuing his movement, the agent completed a full turn and leveraged a sweeping kick to Raphaël's lower leg that was powerful enough to drop the massive body on the floor.

As he turned to face the doctor, Pete suddenly realized he had underestimated the older man. Before he was able to react, Gilbert passed by him, throwing his elbow into the former soldier's solar plexus, the impact taking his breath away. Gasping for air, Pete fell to one knee, and he watched behind the Frenchman as he quickly stepped toward the gray Mercedes.

In the meantime Myka had been forced to deal with the female perpetrator. After recouping from the affects of the flashbang, she found herself being approached by Giselle who had almost circled the limousine.

Briskly, the brunette came to her feet, but before she could raise her weapon, the attacker took a leap, thrusting forward with her legs. Performing a scissors kick, she knocked Myka's gun high in the air. A second later it crushed on the road's surface, several yards away.

The agent instinctively jumped backwards, and the two women came to stand opposite each other, about four or five feet space between them, both anxiously waiting for their respective opponent to make a move.

"Cette fois, je te truciderei! Salope!" Giselle yelled, her fury evident. Pulling a curved knife from a hidden pocket on her leather jacket's back, she exclaimed, "I will tear your guts out, bitch!"

No gun this time, Myka stated mentally. That's a mistake, kitty cat. Dwelling in patience, she observed the other woman who was excitedly chomping at the bit. In an attempt to provoke her, the unarmed agent abruptly leaned to one side, pretending to launch an attack. The sudden action caused Giselle to draw aside, and Myka, anticipating that move, skillfully robbed the delinquent of her balance, throwing a well-placed kick to her kneecap. The redhead's body slammed into the side of the car, a cry of pain escaping her mouth. Just a short moment of hesitation passed before the agent decided not to take any risks. Determinedly, she closed the distance on her opponent. With a powerful thrust, she pushed her opened hand into the woman's upper jaw and nose. This punch appeared to be very well executed; Giselle immediately collapsed on the ground.

The brunette straightened her stance, her arms akimbo, in a satisfied tone remarking, "I told you before, don't call me a bitch! You see what happens."

At the same time, a few yards away, Pete was struggling with the pain and numbness induced by Gilbert's hit. Looking up, he saw the man running toward Myka. Desperately, he wanted to warn her, but he still was unable to breathe, and his call was reduced to a soundless whisper. His features resembling a distorted grimace, Pete clenched his fists in anguish and frustration as he helplessly observed the attack on his partner.

Suddenly, Myka sensed a breeze of danger, and quickly she turned her head, realizing that Gilbert was approaching her with fast steps. Her thought of counterattack was interrupted by a heavy impact. The older man had given her no time to react and literally ran over her. Caught off guard by the assault, Myka was knocked down hard, her head hitting the asphalt. A tormented groaning resounded, and the agent's vision temporarily went black.

Hastily, the doctor opened the Mercedes' rear side door, picked up his daughter's unconscious body and set her down on the seat bench, briefly checking her vital signs. Pulling a remote control key from his pocket, he climbed on the driver seat and slipped the black piece of plastic in the respective slot near the steering wheel. A button next to it was marked with 'Engine', and Gilbert pushed it down, however, the six-cylinder would not start.

From his position near the doorway, Pete had to watch the scene playing out before him. The well-trained ex-Marine still felt dizzy and wanted to lie down, though, he forced himself to stand up, noticing that Raphaël synchronously came to his feet. For obvious reasons, he

needed to end this confrontation quickly. Facing the tall man, he briskly threw a two-punch combo, a right hook to his side, a left straight to his face. Although, the agent knew his strikes had found their targets, they proved less effective than he had hoped. The well-built man was only slightly stunned and therefore had little trouble warding off the next punch. In the same move, Raphaël was able to grab Pete by the arm and haul him into a mighty right cross.

Fortunately, the agent avoided a direct hit by bending down rapidly, and the huge fist scraped past his forehead. However, the strike did not fail to have an affect on him, and Pete staggered, trying to keep his balance. Just as the Frenchman was about to land a double-handed blow on his back, the former soldier sprung forward, with all his strength, and rammed his shoulder into the guy's stomach. The impact caused Raphaël to stumble backwards and smash into the doorpost behind him. Before he was able to recoup, Pete approached him again, relentlessly swinging his elbow into his chin. He heard the jawbone break with a loud, bloodcurdling crack, and the large body slumped on the floor. That should do it for now.

In that instant, his partner's well-being became Pete's only concern. As he turned on his heel to come to her help, he suddenly noticed the German V6 roaring. The limousine shot forward and left a cloud of burned rubber in its wake. Ignoring the waves of pain that flashed through his body, the agent took a few quick steps until he reached the middle of the road. Swiftly drawing his P-228, he aimed at the gray vehicle that was moving away from him, vastly accelerating.

Spitting flame and smoke, the gun went off, unleashing three bullets. The first round missed its aim completely, while the second one clunked into the Mercedes' rear bumper. The third projectile, however, penetrated the left rear tire, bursting it to pieces and causing the car to skid and spin wildly out of control. Only seconds later, the automobile crashed sideways into a large garbage container, sitting on the sidewalk.

Instantly, Pete turned toward his friend, holstering his weapon and kneeling down at her side. Finding her in a state of nausea and confusion, lying on her back, he teared at her coat and shouted, "Myka! You OK? Please, wake up!"

Seconds later, the female agent opened her eyes. Locking gazes with Pete, she suddenly sat up, reminding herself of the situation at hand. "What the hell happened? Are they gone?" she queried, her voice trembling, her face showing a baffled expression.

"Nope, they had a little accident." Pete helped her on her feet, then picking up her firearm and handing it to her. Pointing at the scene of the crash, about one hundred yards down the road, he stated, "We don't have much time, I think Gilbert isn't done yet. C'mon, let's go!"

Myka felt her colleague's hand grasping hold of her arm, and abruptly she was pulled forward, being dragged behind him as he ran in the direction of the crashed Mercedes. Already after a few steps, the pair could hear the limousine's engine sputter to life again, and the car slowly set in motion. As it gained speed, the left rear wheel ground over the blacktop, sending a chain of fiery sparks in the air.

As Myka realized they were not going to catch up to the vehicle, she suddenly stopped and pulled at her friend's jacket, holding him back. "We're not going to make it. We need a car!"

Immediately turning on his heel, Pete sprinted in the other direction, and again he dragged her along. "Mykes, we have a car!" Without slowing down, he produced Haziem's keys and tossed them to her, shouting, "Go, fetch the Renault! I'll make sure Raphaël stays where he is. And don't forget to pick me up!"

"You're hysterical!" she ironically shouted back.

While Myka ran in the direction of said vehicle, Pete headed back toward the entrance of

Gilbert's apartment building. He found the knocked out delinquent lying on the ground where he had left him. The agent grabbed him by the shoulders and slightly pulled him up. Drawing on all his strength, Pete managed to drag the massive body to a large alloy bicycle rack, a few yards away from the blue-colored door. Pulling out his handcuffs, he wound Raphaël's arms around one of the rack's metal holders and chained his wrists together. Then he searched the Frenchman's pockets, looking for the artifact, but unfortunately, he could not find anything.

Briefly, he was reminded of the fight that had taken place here, only a couple of minutes ago, and he flashed a satisfied grin, playfully tapping on the man's head. "Sleep tight, little soldier."

Pete suddenly looked up as an orange vehicle screeched to a stop right next to him.

"What are you waiting for? Come on, Lattimer!" Myka's voice sounded from the inside of the Renault R5 while she pushed the passenger door open. Swiftly, the ex-soldier entered the cabin, and before he could shut the door, the front wheels spun wildly, setting the aged automobile in motion. Myka was flooring the gas pedal uncompromisingly, only letting it come up when she knocked the shifter into next gear.

Having taken a left turn into Boulevard des Filles du Calvaire, a four-track road leading to the north of Paris, the pair spotted the Mercedes a couple of hundred yards in front of them. Due to its condition, the gray limousine was not even reaching the speed limit, and the Renault was quickly gaining on the damaged vehicle. Nevertheless, the compact car appeared to be in bad shape as well, the rattles and creaks emerging from the gearbox and chassis were growing louder by the minute. The background noise forced the agents to shout at each other if they wanted to communicate.

"I think the gears are falling apart!" Myka exclaimed, nodding in the direction of the transmission tunnel. "Feels like the lever is coming off any second. It's broken, look!"

Giving her a baffled glance, Pete queried, "Huh? I didn't get that. What's broken?"

The brunette pointed at the cracked casing enfolding the gear lever, yelling, "The thing that holds the shifter in its place!"

"What? You want me to 'sing and throw my drifter in your face'?" Pete's features dropped instantly. "Right now?"

Rolling her eyes at the misunderstanding, she shouted, "Forget it! There's nothing we can do about it, anyway."

As if to emphasize her statement, the next gear shift was accompanied by a deafening clunk, and the entire car gave a sudden jerk. The pair exchanged worried gazes, but Myka was not intending to slow down. Fortunately, they were facing only light traffic, allowing the small R5 to accelerate to almost seventy miles an hour on the wide boulevard.

As they were about to pass a platoon of three road maintenance trucks, for no apparent reason, the rearmost vehicle abruptly veered to the left. Obviously, the driver had failed to check the rear mirrors prior to changing lanes, and the three-axle vehicle came dangerously close to them. With great presence of mind, Myka rapidly turned the wheel and steered the car across the center line, crossing over to the opposite roadway. All of a sudden the loud honking of a horn could be heard, and the agents were blinded by the flashing headlights of an oncoming station wagon.

"Incoming!" Pete's alarming yell resounded in the tiny cabin.

As Myka realized that the approaching car was in the act of overtaking a large SUV, both lanes being occupied, she found herself left with only one option. Skillfully, she forced the Renault

into a drift by pulling the handbrake, simultaneously spinning the steering wheel. A banging noise sounded as she yanked the vehicle over a high curb and onto the sidewalk. Finding the walkway deserted, the brunette immediately stepped on the gas pedal again.

Just as she spotted a passage that would lead them back to the road, the front door of a nearby bistro flung open, about fifteen yards in front of them. Unleashed was a very corpulent, obviously drunk man who was wildly staggering back and forth, blocking the way. Pete's jaw dropped, and as he pointed at the pedestrian his partner abruptly engaged the brakes. After a second, she released them again, but only to jerk the car hard to the right.

Instinctively, the male agent covered his head with his arms when he noticed the newspaper stand that they were about to crash into. As the front end of the R5 broke through the kiosk's wooden rear side, practically in unison, the pair screamed, "Holy shit!"

The vehicle's metal body perforated the newspaper booth and shredded it to bits, shooting pieces of timber and glass through the air. Leaving behind a considerable trail of debris, the dented vessel made its way back to the boulevard. With all four tires loudly squeaking, it skidded over the asphalt, however, Myka was able to regain control over the car. Showing only little signs of shock and surprise, she let the Renault veer to the right, directing it back to the lane where they were supposed to be driving. Although, the carriage had taken quite some damage, the vital parts of the automobile itself remained intact, surprisingly, and the agents were able to continue the pursuit.

"Oh là là, Mademoiselle!" Pete stated his admiration. "That was some pretty fancy driving, there. From now on, I'll call you Myka McQueen!"

"Thanks, partner," she chuckled and shot a smiling sideways glimpse at him. Then, something caught her attention. "Hey, do you hear that? Our rust bucket sounds different now."

Pete nodded and turned around to cast a gaze backwards. "I think the exhaust took some damage. Maybe we should..."

His statement was rudely interrupted by a clamorous crash, and the aged R5 was shaking heavily as the silencer of the exhaust pipe was ripped off, sent grinding over the blacktop. All of a sudden; an ear-battering noise filled the inside of the compact car, and the agents glanced concernedly at each other. Nevertheless, they knew it was unthinkable to let Gilbert get away, and Myka spurred the crippled vehicle forward.

After a few minutes, they had gained on the Mercedes just enough to spot it turning into Boulevard de Magenta, and the brunette followed in the same direction. Soon, she noticed that the traffic was becoming heavier, and she had trouble catching up to the gray limousine. However, she made some smart moves, maneuvering the compact through Paris' night-time traffic, and she was able to close the gap on the absconding perpetrators.

## Chapter Fourteen

A mile or two and some sharp turns later, the agents found themselves chasing Gilbert's Mercedes along a narrow road called Rue Custine, leading up the hill of Montmartre. With the streetlamps being turned off, the scenery was completely wrapped in black, only illuminated by



a huge shower of gleaming sparks, left in the wake of the gray limousine.

The two vessels repeatedly came in contact with each other, bumper to bumper, as Myka tried to find a way around the much larger import car. Just as she was about to start another overtaking attempt, Pete was struck by a strong premonition that sent a frightening chill down his spine, and she instantly noticed her partner's anxiety.

Drowning out the loud noises emanating from the Renault, she shouted, "What is it, Pete? Are you having another vibe?"

"Yeah, a really bad one!" he gave back, gazing in her eyes. "Something's about to happen, and I think it involves Gilbert...or Giselle...I can't put my finger on it."

The brunette's features showed a worried expression, and she queried, "So, do you want me to fall back, or..."

"No, no! We need to catch them, no matter what," he interjected, trying to downplay his concerns. However, the male agent kept a sharp eye on the other vehicle, musing about his presentiment of danger.

Suddenly, Giselle could be spotted sitting up on the Mercedes' rear bench seat, a large stain of dried blood in the middle of her face. Pete saw her touching her nose, her features distorted by pain. Obviously, she was enraged.

Gesturing at Myka to shoot a glance at her, he exclaimed, "Wow! She's mad! You worked her over pretty good."

"Yeah, she kind of deserved it." The brunette's face showed a rather satisfied expression.

Pete raised his brow, flashing a smirk. "Man, I wish I could've seen this cat fight! Although..."

"Whoa!" Myka's yell interrupted him in mid-sentence as a piece of smoking rubber from the Mercedes' destroyed tire hurtled toward them and smashed against the windshield, almost cracking it.

"Time to end this," the brunette stated. "I don't think this jalopy can take much more."

"You're right," he replied. "What d'you have in mind?"

Instead of giving an answer, Myka floored the gas, and when they came close to the next intersection, she let the Renault bump into the left rear end of the Mercedes. The impact instantly caused the bigger limousine to spin around, sending bits of broken plastic and glass in all directions. Though, Gilbert was able to keep the car on the road, avoiding a crash only by fractions of an inch. He pulled to the left, sharply, entering Rue Lamarck, giving the female agent less than a second to react. In order to stay on the other vehicle's tail, she engaged the handbrake, yanking the R5 around, barely making the turn as well.

As they sped along the slightly rising street, the agents could spy a huge, white cupola and a tower of the same color, gleaming through the trees lining the road. Myka realized they were on a direct route to the world-famous Basilica Sacré Coeur.

"Hey, I know this place. It's a big tourist attraction," the female agent remarked. "There will be lots of people, even this late into the evening. I bet this is how they want to get rid of us."

"So, we have to stop them before they get there!" Pete said, a very serious expression on his features. "OK, hit 'em hard!"

Myka nodded in agreement, and suddenly she directed the roaring Renault to the right, accelerating until its front bumper came abreast the limousine's rear fender. Vehemently, she threw the steering wheel to the left, and the orange compact slammed into the big import car. The deafening noise of cold-formed metal shattered the air, and Myka saw the Mercedes spinning wildly over the cobbled pavement.

In the next second, she felt a heavy jerk shaking their own vehicle, caused by the gearbox that just had burst into pieces. Immediately, the front wheels stopped spinning, and she lost control over the R5, rotating and skidding sideways.

Pete instinctively leaned over to Myka, shielding her body with his arms, noticing a large stone wall, bordering a parking space, rapidly coming closer. With an ear-piercing bang, the rear axle was torn out of its mount, and most of the car windows broke as the Renault dashed against the wall, boring its way into the stony structure.

Two or three seconds later, a gray, cubical object smashed into the same wall, only a couple of yards away. The noise of that crash stirred Pete out of his torpidity. Confusedly, he cast a glance around, finding his partner leaning against the car's center pillar. Her eyes were closed, and a small rill of red liquid streamed from under her curls down her face.

"Mykes! How bad is it?" his concerned voice resounded in the scrunched cabin.

Just as he planted his hand on her neck, checking her pulse, she abruptly jerked awake. With a baffled expression on her features, she locked gazes with him. "Pete, are you OK?"

The male agent had to swallow down a chuckle, and he nodded, "Yeah, girl. I'm fine. But what about you?"

As she touched the wound on her head she replied, "I think I'm good." Pulling a tissue from her pocket, she quickly wiped away the blood, and added, "Going to have a headache, again, but it's nothing...serious..."

She stopped at mid-sentence, her eyes growing wide as she shot a look at the other crash scene. Noticing the change in her facial expression, Pete's head spun around, and he saw that Gilbert had exited his wrecked Mercedes. Just now, he opened the rear side door, trying to pull his daughter out of the completely destroyed vehicle.

"They're making a run for it!" he shouted. "C'mon, let's get out of here!"

With the passenger side of the two-door car huddled against a stone wall, the only way to leave the cabin was the driver door. Hastily, Myka pushed against it, only to realize that it was stuck.

"Wait, let me handle this," Pete remarked. He swiftly turned in his seat, his legs coming to rest on his friend's lap, his feet pressed against the door. A few strong kicks did the job, and the door flung open.

As the the agents climbed out of the car, Pete stated, "Mykes, remember, Giselle isn't our only problem. That old fart is pretty wicked, too."

Myka nodded, and the pair readied their firearms; the Tesla vanished into the inside pocket of Pete's jacket. As they turned in the direction of the Mercedes, they spotted father and daughter running across the parking lot, headed for a stairway leading up the hill toward the backside of the imposing, white-colored basilica.

"We have to stop them before they can disappear into the crowd!" Myka yelled, and the pair set off after the delinquents. Having taken a number of quick steps, she suddenly stopped and

pointed her SIG in the air, firing two warning shots.

Simultaneously, Pete took a balanced stance, aiming his weapon directly at the absconders. "Freeze! You won't get another warning!" His resolute voice echoed back from the surrounding buildings and trees.

The fleeing pair froze on the spot, and it actually appeared as if they were about to give in, slowly turning, raising their hands. Nevertheless, Giselle covertly produced an air gun from her waistband. Just before having turned around completely, the redhead gave her father a strong shove, pushing him away from her.

"Vas-y!" she shouted, her voice cracking.

However, Pete had anticipated a ruse and instantly pulled the trigger, with a fiery blast sending a bullet in Giselle's direction. Launching herself into a flying dive, the woman heard the projectile whizzing over her head as she took a sideward roll over the cobblestone paving. In an highly agile movement she came back to her feet and quickly pointed the weapon at her opponents. Shooting a number of tranquilizer darts at each agent, she forced them to take cover. Pete jumped behind a small Volkswagen, Myka swishing into the shadow of a Volvo van. Using one of the many stationary cars in this lot as a shield for herself, the redhead fidgeted with her air gun, reloading it.

The field agents exchanged brief glances, and Myka gestured at her partner to approach their attacker from behind. Pete gave a nod and scurried away. Hidden from Giselle's sight, he quickly melted with the darkness.

While the brunette waited for her colleague to make his move, she noticed that the bystanders, having been lured here by the noises of the car crashes, were now buzzing off in all directions. Apparently, they were petrified by the gunshots.

Good, she thought, one less problem to take care of.

Peering over the hood of the van providing her with cover, she could see that Giselle had not moved yet. Anxious to avoid any sound, Myka moved her gun over the edge of the auto body, roughly aiming at the perpetrator's hideout. Suddenly, she heard Pete's yelling voice addressing the female criminal, and she spotted the redhead spinning around, leaving her covered position. That was the moment Myka had been waiting for, and without another warning, the P-228 in her hands barked loudly, twice.

Instantly, a painful cry filled the air, and Giselle stumbled forward, her body coming to crush down on the ground. Hit by both of Myka's bullets, one stuck in her thigh, the other one in her upper arm, the delinquent did not pose a threat anymore. However, the brunette would not take her eyes off the woman until Pete had disarmed her.

As she ran toward the spot where the woman was lying on the pavement, the female agent shouted, "Pete, search for the artifacts!"

Shooting a gaze around the environment, Myka realized that Gilbert had taken advantage of the situation and was running up the stairway, headed for Sacré Coeur. By now, he was already halfway up the church hill.

"Found it!" Pete exclaimed. His features showed a satisfied expression as he held up two skillfully designed pieces of brass. "Only the lock, though. No key here."

"The doctor must have it," the brunette assumed. Tossing him a static bag, she annexed, "Throw it in there. Maybe it will lessen the key's influence on Gilbert." Turning on her heel, the female agent took off, yelling, "I'm going after him!"

Pete opened the silvery shining bag and let the two parts of the lock slip into it. Expecting a huge, energetic sparking, he ducked his head, however, nothing of the sort happened. Inwardly, he cursed his bad luck, Damn those bifurcated sons of bitches! A deep sigh of frustration spilled from his mouth as he stuffed the bag in one of his jacket's pockets.

His gaze fell back on Giselle; just now she rolled onto her side, and conscience left her with a moan. A brief examination of her body revealed her wounds to be nonfatal. Swiftly, he cuffed her wrists behind her back. Directing his glance toward the footpath leading to the basilica, he spotted Gilbert approximately fifty yards below the top of the hill, Myka hot on his trail. Without any hesitation the agent went after them, simultaneously pulling out his phone and calling an ambulance for Giselle.

Loudly wheezing, Pete sprinted uphill to quickly catch up to his partner. The closer he came to the top of the ridge, the more he could feel his vibes changing their nature, turning from alarming to sinister. Following his instincts, he replaced the half-emptied magazine of his SIG with a full one.

Having reached the end of the stairs, he shot a glance around the sprawling compound, in its center the impressive, white cathedral. Unfortunately, Myka had been right, and he found the place crowded by a relatively vast number of tourists and photographers trying to get a good shot of the avowedly picturesque night-time atmosphere.

After a couple of seconds, he noticed a bulk of people running toward him, appearing from behind the church, wildly gesticulating and screaming; obviously they were scared of something. Pete did not need another clue, and rapidly, he approached the location where the crowd was fleeing from.

\* \* \*

The female agent had followed Gilbert up the hill and around the basilica, increasingly gaining on him, before she had been close enough to confront him. Now holding him at gunpoint, she yelled at the bystanders to retreat from the scene. Terrified by the firearm, the visitors scurried away in all directions, leaving Myka and the doctor alone on the large terrace surrounding the church.

As they stood facing each other, about twenty yards between them, Myka spied an air gun in his right hand, however, it was not aimed at her, the barrel pointing to the ground.

"Gilbert, it's over! Drop the weapon and hand over the artifact!" she exclaimed, her voice loud and steady.

"Non, Mademoiselle Bering. I will not! So, what are you going to do?" he stated, his tone provocative. "Are you going to shoot me? Because that is what you have to do if you want to stop us."

Myka observed him piercingly, and she was rather shocked noticing the aggressive, lunatic gleam in his pupils. Naturally, she had to think of their first meeting back at his apartment two days ago, when he had appeared to be a perfect gentleman, and now, she found an entirely different person staring at her.

With a baffled expression on her features, she queried, "What do you mean...us?"

A wide grin stretched across Gilbert's face as he produced an antique key from his pants

pocket. The brunette's eyes grew wide at the sight of the brazen object that was radiating a mysteriously golden shimmer, and for a lengthened moment she could not take her gaze off the fascinatingly glowing piece of metal.

"Regarde donc, that is what I mean," the older man replied, his excitement evident. "The key and me...we are one now!"

Keeping a sharp eye on him, Myka mused about his statement, trying to find a solution that did not involve shedding his blood, or hers for that matter.

The agent lowered her SIG a little, but not completely. In a softer tone she stated, "Listen, Gilbert. You're heavily influenced by that key, and the longing you are experiencing right now will only get stronger. So strong that it will make you go insane."

"Ha! I don't care!" the doctor shouted. "You have no idea of the powers that I can feel running through my veins! It's almost ridiculous, you will never be able stop me!"

"And what about Giselle? What about your daughter, Gilbert?" Myka spoke slowly, a certain warmth in her tone. "Don't tell me you don't care about her either."

The mad sparkle in his eyes disappeared for a second, and he whispered, "Giselle..."

The brunette took a couple of small, quick steps toward her opponent. "Yes, Giselle. Right now, she's lying in that parking lot down there, with two bullet-holes in her body." She paused, giving him time to wrap his mind around that perception.

"Oh non! Ma pauvre enfant..." Apparently, the Frenchman was struck with worry.

"Yes, Gilbert. Your poor child. Don't you see? That's what the key does to people." Cautiously, the agent approached him further. "It makes you act crazy, takes control over you. And in the end somebody gets hurt. That's exactly what will happen to you, if you don't let me help you."

All of a sudden, much to Myka's surprise, the air gun slipped from the man's hand and plumped on the floor. A glance at his face revealed that the belligerent expression had vanished entirely, Instead, tears were welling up behind his eyes.

The doctor just stood there, a slouching silhouette against the dark sky over Paris. The agent walked up to him, her P-228 still at the ready. Swiftly, she kicked the tranquilizer gun away from him, letting it spin over the terrace's pavement. Only then, she lowered her firearm.

"OK, everything's going to be fine," she stated, reaching out with her hand. "Just pass me the artifact, please."

The older man bowed his head, gazing at the golden glowing key in his hand, and a deep, poignant sigh escaped his lips. The brunette's eyes also were drawn to the obscure object, therefore she failed to notice the drastic change in Gilbert's facial expression.

Abruptly, the Frenchman spun around, his sudden movement catching Myka absolutely off guard. Swinging his forearm against her hand, he knocked the SIG out of her grip, at the same time leveraging a kick to the hollow of her knee, well-placed enough to send the agent slamming on the ground. Hastily, Gilbert bent down and grasped hold of her weapon. As she was about to get back to her feet, he quickly turned toward her and smacked her across the face with the gun. Instantly, Myka fell back on the paving, a tormented cry spilling from her mouth. Squirming with pain, she held her hands to her left brow, feeling a stream of warm liquid running down the side of her head.

The hard strike had left her muzzy, and it took her a few seconds to come back to her senses.

As Myka sat up she suddenly looked down the barrel of her own firearm. The man stood with a wide stance, a wicked grin on his features. He pointed the gun directly at her forehead.

"Now, Agent Bering. Now it is over!" The doctor's tone oozed with spite.

The brunette was shocked by the viciousness embedded in Gilbert's scheme. She could not believe that he had been able to play her, to trick her into trusting him. However, staring in his coldblooded, piercing eyes, she realized these could be her last seconds on earth.

"Hey, dipshit!" Pete's furious voice echoed back from the walls of the church. He came sprinting around the basilica. Leaping over steps, benches and other obstacles, he shouted, "Take your stinking hands off my partner!"

The male agent had been observing the scene for a couple of seconds, planing to sneak up on Gilbert, however, the severity of the situation had forced him to act quickly. Knowing he had been too far away for a clean shot, fearing he could hit Myka, he had decided to make himself a target for Gilbert, trying to lure him away from his friend.

Immediately, the doctor turned in Pete's direction and, without hesitation, opened up on the agent who was quickly approaching him. The SIG barked repeatedly, shooting five or six rounds toward the former soldier before Myka could punch the weapon out of Gilbert's hand. Swiftly standing up, she thrust a relentless uppercut into the man's scrotum. Hearing his painful grunt, she swung the edge of her hand against his Adam's apple, causing him to choke and stagger backwards. Then she spun around, throwing her leg up, and a mighty roundhouse kick to his head lifted the Frenchman sideways off his feet and knocked him to the floor. Only a second later, she saw blood dripping from the corner of his mouth, as well as from the back of his head; he was done for.

Casting a glance around, the brunette suddenly spotted a motionless body on the cobblestone surface of the terrace, approximately one hundred feet away.

"PETE!" Myka screamed on top of her lungs.

As fast as her feet allowed, she shuffled toward her partner. Coming closer, she noticed him lying in a big puddle of blood, the sight sending a frightening chill down her spine. Stumbling, staggering, she fell to the ground next to him. Leaning over him, she realized that one of the bullets had struck his upper body, a stream of red-colored fluid poured from the wound, soaking through his shirt and jacket.

"Pete, wake up!" She shouted, her voice trembling from shock and fear. "Please...wake up, partner. Please!"

Quickly, she ripped the cloths from his form and pressed her hands on the injury. Tears spilled from her eyes as she felt the sticky blood pumping through her fingers. With shaking hands, the brunette tore two pieces of cloth from her blouse, rolled one up and planted it on the split in his skin, fixing it by wrapping the other stripe around his shoulder and armpit.

All of a sudden, she yelped. Her features were distorted by fear. The pumping of the blood abruptly had ceased. For a moment she just sat there, struck by horror and shocked to her bones.

Taking a long, deep breath, the well-trained agent managed to pull herself together. She produced her cell phone from her pants pocket. With a few hasty words she made an emergency call before she turned back to her partner, quickly beginning to apply CPR on him.

\* \* \*

Tears and sweat were running down Myka's face, seeping from her nose and chin, the drops mingling with Pete's blood. Heavily breathing, she was leaning over his body, both her hands pushing down his thorax over and over again, frequently interrupted as she pressed her lips on his, blowing air into his lungs.

When she felt her strength slowly fading, panic took possession of her. The question of how long she would be able to continue her efforts pushed her mind to the verge of madness. The thought of Pete dying in her arms cast a horribly dark shadow over her conscience. Myka's entire body clenched in pain as she felt her heart, her very existence, being shattered into pieces.

The brunette was well aware of the fact that this was her fault, and her fault alone. She just should have put a bullet in Gilbert's skull. Instead she had wanted to talk to him in order to solve the situation without bloodshed. And now Pete lay before her, his features turning pale as life was leaving him inevitably.

Wildly sobbing, she pounded her fists against her partner's chest, screaming in agony and helplessness. She instantly knew, for all the world, she was about to lose her soul mate, the purest human being she could think of, the person who had known her best and who had been there for her, always. Myka ultimately realized she was losing the man she was in love with.

Her exhaustion could not be measured, and she collapsed over him, her head falling on his bloodied chest. In a final, desperate attempt, her tormented soul called out for all the universe's powers to come to her help, saving him from certain death. Barely audible to her own ears, she whispered, "Stay with me. Please, stay with me! Don't leave me now. Pete...I...love...you."

At first, Myka thought his body was shaken by her own movements, caused by the spasms of her weeping. However, she slowly glanced up at his face and could not believe the sight that greeted her. Blinking, he slowly opened his eyes and stared at her.

"P-P-Pete, you...are...alive?" she stuttered, her features caught between pure confusion and overwhelming joy.

"Of course. What d'you think?" His voice was nothing more than a hoarse breathing, however, he managed to flash her a brief smile.

"Oh Pete, I thought I'd lost you." Tenderly, her hands enfolded his face as she planted a soft, loving kiss on his lips.

Then, much to Myka's bemusement, her colleague tried to sit up, and carefully, she assisted him. Eyeing him keenly, she queried, "Are you sure that's a good idea? You lost a lot of blood."

"It's OK. I don't feel so bad," he gave back, though, his tone indicated that he was in great pain.

With another piece of cloth ripped from her shirt, the brunette reinforced the bandage around his shoulder. As Pete noticed her blouse being all torn apart, allowing him a glimpse at her brasserie, he could not help but chuckle, which turned into a slight cough.

"Hey, I think that bandage needs at least a few more stripes," he whispered, his tone dry and exhausted, yet whimsical.

As Myka glanced down at herself, finding the shredded piece of clothing dangling from her body, she was about to give her partner a friendly punch, as usual. However, regarding his

condition, she said instead, "Be careful, Lattimer, or you might catch another bullet."

Both agents giggled at that remark, as well as the whole situation. Myka softly looped her arms around him, careful not to touch his injury, and she hugged him dearly. Just as she leaned her head against his, Pete cringed considerably, and his eyes grew wide.

"Mykes...turn around!" he aspirated, pointing at something behind her back.

Swiftly, she glimpsed in the given direction and spied Gilbert standing on his feet, staggering from left to right as he stumbled toward them. Instinctively, Myka's hand flew to her right hip, only to find an empty holster. In the same second she spotted her SIG in the Frenchman's hand, shakily being raised and pointed at them.

Time to end this for good, she thought, and in one rapid movement the brunette rolled forward over the pavement, grabbed Pete's gun, lying on the ground next to him, and aimed it at the opponent. Instantly, the barrel spit flame, smoke and steel, sending two rounds in the doctor's direction. Shortly afterwards, the sound of a metallic object falling on a stony surface could be heard, accompanied by a painful groaning. Gilbert took another shivering step before his knees weakened, and he collapsed on the ground.

Turning toward her friend, Myka stated, "Pete, we need to neutralize that goddamn artifact now! I think we've had enough surprises for one day."

The former soldier just nodded, and she went to retrieve her SIG and Barron's key from Gilbert. Returning to her partner, she held the golden glowing piece of brass in her hand, protected by a purple glove that she had put on. In the meantime, Pete had produced the parts of the lock from the static bag and placed them on the floor. As Myka lay the key next to them, all three objects started to vibrate, and by now, the lock also was radiating a mysterious shimmer.

"So, you think we're emotional enough to make this work?" The female agent gave him a curiously questioning look.

Pete flashed her a knowing wink and replied, "Should be no problem, now, that we both know you love me, too."

Immediately, Myka's features froze, her pupils growing wider and wider. It took her a moment to wrap her mind around the fact that he obviously had heard her confession earlier. However, she was not embarrassed at all. On the contrary, she felt a huge burden being lifted from her chest. Little by little, an equally exempted and pleased smile stretched across her face.

Kneeling down beside him, she grasped hold of his left with her right. With their free hands, each of the agents took a piece of the lock, and slowly, very cautiously, they started to converge the two objects. The closer they came, the pair could feel how the vibrations intensified, and so did the golden shine, emanating from the brazen counterparts.

As the bits were only an inch or two apart from one another, the brunette leaned in closer to Pete, gazing in his warm, dark-brown eyes. Myka's heart was pounding heavily, her hands shaking, and she had trouble drawing breath. In a deeply moved tone she whispered, "I love you, Pete."

"And I love you."

Suddenly, the pieces of the lock moved toward each other of their own volition, and as a metallic clicking noise sounded, Myka and Pete shared the purest, most loving kiss. With their eyes closed, the pair could not see the brightly flashing shower of sparks that was sent in the air by the fusing lock, having been divided for centuries, now joined again. The firework



illuminated the walls of Sacré Coeur and the surrounding tree line. The hairs on their necks stood up, and an intense shiver ran down both agents' spines.

It was not till long after the sparking had ceased that the agents let go of each other. Both their features showed relieved expressions as they noticed the convergence had taken place successfully.

Myka was the first one to regain control over her emotions, and she stated, "OK, let's finish this."

She grasped Barron's key and led it toward the locking mechanism. Just as the agent stuck the key into the perfectly fitting hole, she could feel it moving. The piece of brass turned as if by an invisible hand, and suddenly a flashy, dazzling glint scurried over the scenery. Protecting their eyes from the gleaming rays of light, they turned away. As the pair glanced in Gilbert's direction they noticed a heavy tremor running through his body, and they could hear a loud sigh of liberation escaping from the doctor's mouth.

Flashing an impish grin, Pete remarked, "Looks like nobody's going to die today after all."

## Epilogue

The Warehouse  
Univille, South Dakota

"So, all the perps made it out of this alive, huh?" Claudia queried, lolling in a chair, her feet on her desktop.

"Well, it would appear so," Artie replied. "However, it is a little mystery of its own, you know, how Gilbert survived, having taken two bullets to the chest."

A brief moment of musing passed before the young redhead stated, "And what about you, old man? I mean, you must be very pissed!" She swallowed hastily. "But let's not forget that Gilbert has done all this under the influence of an evil key-thingy!"

"No, Claudia. I'm afraid you're wrong." Turning toward her, a shadow scurried over the senior agent's face. "He has been playing and betraying me since we'd met. And that was long before he became influenced by an artifact."

"Listen, Artie...I don't wanna be disrespectful or anything, but I think he's been influenced by artifacts since the day he'd known about them." Removing her feet from the desktop, she gazed directly in his eyes. "Now that we know he's the half-brother of master thief Claude Richard, I guess it's pretty safe to assume he was kind of driven from the beginning. He has been a part of that burglar gang all the time."

Stroking his beard, the older agent gave back, "Actually, this is a good point, Miss Donovan. Nevertheless, if I had seen behind his ruse, none of this would've happened, and..."

"C'mon, Artie!" she exclaimed, interrupting him. "We know by now what a reckless schemer he is. The guy approached you thirty years ago with the intention to gain insight in that

investigation, and he didn't give a crap about the consequences of his doing, nor does he now." She paused for a second, continuing in a more moderate tone. "Considering how he tricked both our field agents into believing him, I would cut myself some slack, if I were you. As I said earlier, this happens to the best of us...and only to the best. Because we want to believe in the good of people."

Waiting for an answer, Claudia soon realized it was not going to be given, and after a few seconds she said, "So, do we know how Giselle and Raphaël got involved in the whole thing?"

The question jolted Artie out of his reasoning, and he gathered his thoughts, stating, "Well, after Richard's death, Gilbert sort of adopted Raphaël and raised him and his own daughter to become the sophisticated criminals they are today."

"Yep, they made quite some opponents," the teenager remarked. "What's going to happen with them, by the way?"

Artie gave her a telling glance, raising his fuzzy brow. "You see, I don't think they would have done what they did without being controlled by Barron's key, however, they still killed a man. So, The Regents decided to let French authorities deal with them."

Swallowing a lump in her throat, the tech geek replied, "It seems everybody got what they deserved." Leaning back in her chair, she annexed, "Speaking of which, what about our two lovebirds? How long can it take to fly back here from Paris?"

Gazing at her over his glasses, the older agent stated, "After what they've been through, I thought, you know, it might be a good idea to give them a few days off."

"Ahhh...a romantic vacation in the capital of love." Claudia's features showed a dreamy expression. "On their behalf...thank you, Artie!"

\* \* \*

Hotel Left Bank Saint Germain  
Paris, France

Myka had taken an extended shower; just now exiting from the bathroom, she was clad in nothing more than a large, white bathrobe. She found Pete sitting on the couch in front of the ridiculously big television, watching cartoons and munching potato chips. Tiptoeing, she approached him from behind and wound her arms around his neck, her curly mane spilling over his shoulder.

"Hey, handsome. Good morning," she whispered in his ear.

"Hmm...morning, baby," he replied, practically purring.

"You haven't shaved in over a week now, right?" she remarked as she softly rubbed her cheek against his. "You know, actually, I kind of like that."

Shoving a handful of chips in his mouth, he gave back, "Well, then I should think about cultivating a new look."

"I wouldn't mind," the brunette stated, then suddenly pausing. Frowning her brow, she said, "Chips? That's your idea of a nutritious breakfast?"

She saw Pete just nodding, and in an instant, she climbed over the back of the sofa and let herself slip on his lap. Kneeling, her thighs enfolded his waist. A slightly crabby grunt escaped his lips, and he leaned to the side, his glance still focused on the huge flat screen. However, Myka clasped her palms around his face and gently forced him to lock gazes with her.

"Listen, I know you were shot only a few days ago...and the doctors said you needed to rest, but this is going a little too far." She tilted her head to the side and gave him a whimsical smile. "If you spent our whole vacation sitting here, I'm sure you'll start melting with the pillows sooner or later."

A short moment of musing passed before he stated, "OK. You know what, you're right. Since I feel a lot better already, I think it's time to engage myself in some activities." Swallowing the rest of the chips in his mouth, he returned her smile. "So, what d'you wanna do? Let me guess...go sightseeing, visit some museums maybe?"

"Actually, something else comes to mind," Myka remarked. Slowly, she led her lips toward his and started to tenderly brush against them. In an insinuatingly playful tone she aspirated, "I think I know exactly how to persuade you to get up from this couch."

In the very second Pete was about to kiss her, she suddenly leaped up and jumped down from the lounge. Quickly, she turned around and headed for the bedroom, winking over her shoulder at him. His features showing a bewildered expression, he followed his partner with his eyes.

Abruptly, Pete's jaw dropped as he noticed her untying the knot at her waist and parting her robe. Halfway across the room, she turned back toward him and let the piece of clothing slip off her shoulders and slide to the floor.

Raising her brow, the curly brunette teasingly stated, "Is this motivation enough for you?"

In an instant, he was on his feet, exclaiming, "Oh, I'll show you my motivation!"

Myka giggled loudly as she made a run for the bedroom, Pete hot on her trail. But all of a sudden, he stopped. Swiftly turning around, he fetched the Farnsworth from the coffee table and stuffed it between the sofa cushions, placing a few pillows on top of it.

No interruption this time, the agent thought as he quickly vanished into the bedroom. Behind him, the door clunked shut.

## Thank You...

Jo – for being who you are, accepting me for who I am. I love you.

Samien – you are my world's heart and conscience.

Mom & Dad – for me, and for the opportunity to live my dream.

Jessy – my dearest critic and partner in madness.

Marc, Vanette, Hans, Vous, Eddie, Alli, Jack,  
Brandon, Derek, Drew, Bernd & Taina, Selim & Nili.

–

Without you, this would have taken a different path.

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