

# Valentin e in Paris

James Davis

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The rain fell in sheets from a leaden sky, so thick and low it felt like a ceiling Nick could reach out and touch. It was only mid-afternoon but the gloom made it seem like twilight. Nick hated weather like this. He'd spent enough days and nights hunkered under oppressive skies in the trenches, to learn to despise the rain and the filthy havoc it wrought on the ground. It was more than that though, the darkness and closing of horizons and sky made you feel small, made you world small.

Nick pulled his damp greatcoat tighter around him and pressed himself further back into the shop front alcove that was providing some shelter. He cast a look at his watch and cursed under his breath. His contact was late. It could be the weather of course, but he doubted it. He'd had an uneasy feeling about this job ever since he'd stepped on the boat that was to take him across the channel and away from London to Paris. He hadn't been there since the war and his memories weren't good ones. He had a horrible premonition that this trip was going to pan out the same way.

The water running down the cobbled streets had started to soak into his battered brogues. He could feel the tweed in his trousers starting to adhere to his skin, as if the wool was trying to graft back onto his flesh for warmth. He glanced at his watch again. The man he was meant to meet was over a quarter of an hour late and Nick had an uneasy feeling in his gut. It was a feeling he'd learnt to trust.

Looking up the alley, Nick's gaze penetrated the rain and he could see a figure making its way towards him. The man's hat brim was pulled down low and he had his hands deep in his mackintosh pockets as he splashed purposefully through the puddles. Nick eased himself upright and balanced his weight, taking his own hands out of his pockets.

As the other man neared Nick's shelter, he glanced up and turned his head around, looking at the shop signs. The man had a couple of day's worth of stubble growth on his face and close set eyes. Nick stepped forward slightly and as the man saw him, he smiled and stepped towards him.

"Mr Valentine?" He asked in a voice that was almost, but not quite English; a hint of a Northern European accent slipped through.

"Yes."

Without removing his hands from his pockets the man swung his right arm up inside his mackintosh, but Nick was faster and Nick's own right hand moved in a blur, that culminated with the gently crushing concussion of brass on bone, as Nick's knuckleduster met the man's temple.

The man dropped to the ground with a sickening exhalation of breath as his back smashed into the cobbles. Nick was on him in an instant; his knee pinning the man's right arm; his bloody fist raised, ready to administer another blow, but the man lay quite still.

Easing up onto his knee Nick pulled the man's hand from the pocket. As Nick had suspected, a pistol rattled out onto the ground. He grabbed the man's collar and shook him. Nick gave a curse and slapped the man's ashen face.

"Damn!"

Nick felt for a pulse. His premonition had been right. This trip to Paris looked as if it was going to be as unhappy as the rest. The man was dead.

A few days earlier Nick had been slumped in a wooden booth at the rear of the Fitzroy Tavern on Charlotte Street in London. He hadn't chosen the Fitzroy for any tactical reasons, but because it was his local, and he'd learned to love it. Here he was another anonymous drinker, well anonymous to everyone but the bar staff, who now knew him by first name. There was always a buzz in the place. It was just north of Soho, on the wrong side of Oxford Street. The place was full of the wrong sort of people, lowlifes, petty criminals, writers and actors. The proximity of the BBC ensured a steady trickle of wireless stars and executives eager to slum it with the post-war underworld. It was the perfect place for a lush; the perfect place for Nick to disappear.

He swirled his Scotch and ice, staring at the amber liquid, wondering what Jessop wanted. He'd heard from him only once since '26; the year Nick had been forcibly retired from the service after the incident in Vienna. Much like Vienna, that one occasion hadn't worked out well, and Nick doubted very much that this would be a social call.

Nick didn't bother standing as he saw Jessop pick his way through the bar. The older man didn't stop to buy a drink, nor did he offer one as he sat down opposite Nick.

"Still drinking?" Jessop observed.

Nick raised his glass with a smile, "Still drinking. Not care to join me?"

"It's a little early," Jessop said curtly. Nick realised he didn't even know the man's first name. Not that it mattered.

"So, I'm guessing you haven't come to enquire about my health?"

Jessop fixed him with cold, pale blue eyes, "I know all about your health Nick, and everything else in your life. You drink too much. You currently don't have a steady girlfriend. You're still alone in the same flat a few yards from here, and you get by on your recompense from the state and doing increasingly unsavoury jobs for local hoodlums."

"I didn't realise you cared so much." Nick said dryly.

"I don't. I just like to know who I'm dealing with."

"Come on, you knew me well enough from the war up until you cashiered me in 1926."

"I knew someone Nick. Vienna showed me I didn't know you well enough. The last outing was a bloodbath, and 1926 was over five years ago."

"Fair enough, but I haven't changed."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

Nick shrugged, "Don't be, I've come to terms with it."

"Looks like it," Jessop said nodding meaningfully at the glass in Nick's hand, "you could always talk to someone about it you know."

"I'm sure his Majesty's government wouldn't like me talking about anything, and you'd like it even less. Besides, once I'd talked, who'd want to listen again?" Nick gave a wry smile, "Cheers". He enjoyed the brief, uncomfortable look his last words had stirred in the man opposite, but the moment was gone as soon as it started.

"I've got a job for you."

"I thought I was retired, unfit for service."

"Unfit for some service, not for others."

Nick sighed and twirled the ice in his glass, "You want someone dead?"

Now Jessop laughed, "Christ Nick, no. I know it always seems to end up that way, but I think that's down to you. No, we need something taking care of."

"I'm sure you have lots of brilliant chaps on the official payroll to take care of things."

Jessop shifted in his seat and looked around the pub warily.

Don't worry, no can hear or cares."

"It's a job in France. We can't send someone with links to us. The French are our friends and allies, so..."

"So why not ask them to help you?"

"Ah Nick, always the simplest questions with the hardest answers. Look, it's a week at most in Paris. We need you to meet someone, find out some information, come back. That's it, a simple reconnoitre job. We're paying cash, but it's off the books."

"Why me? Why now after all these years?"

"Because you were good and we need someone unofficial so we can deny all knowledge if it goes belly up," Jessop smiled and spread his hands, "The usual."

Nick looked down at his drink, then back at Jessop with narrowed eyes. "Sure. Why not?"

"Good. Pick up a steamer across the Channel and get the train into Paris. Find a hotel around Montmartre, that's where you'll meet our contact four days from now. He's got more information, but the nub of it is this: we're increasingly concerned about the French. Now the Depression's biting, they're piling more pressure onto Germany and Austria for reparations. It's breeding nationalism on both sides. We prefer the status quo as it is. More concerning is that, a source has tipped us off, that there are those in French high command drawing up plans for an incursion and seizure of more border lands. We can't allow that, and we need copies of those plans as evidence and the names of those behind them. "What?" Jessop asked, seeing the smile on Nick's face.

“Funny, you had me killing Germans and helping the French, now we’re helping the Germans. Odd the way life goes around.”

“The world keeps turning Nick and we need to keep one turn ahead. The man you’ll meet is called Cedric Gallais. He’ll make contact at four o’clock in the afternoon on the Rue Madeleine, by a shop called La Rose in Montmartre. I can’t give you more details because we don’t have them yet. Gallais insisted on a meeting and we’re sending you.”

“Protocols?”

Jessop gave a wry smile, “Gallais will ask you the time. Tell him it’s two o’clock and he’ll reply that he thought it was four. That’s how you’ll know your man. Mission protocols: You’re on your own. Completely. Oh, yes, and one other thing. No killing. We don’t want this one to be messy.” Jessop passed an envelope across the table. “Cash. Same again when you come back. We’ll meet here a week today, same time, or you can reach me on this number.”

“Any back up assets I can contact if it goes pear shaped?” Nick asked pocketing the envelope.

Jessop was already standing, “Unless you have your own, no. Like I said, you’re on your own.” With that he turned and walked back out.

Back in his hotel room Nick reviewed what he’d been able to pull from the body of the man: one Mauser automatic, some French Francs, and a wallet with the picture of a woman holding a baby, and little else.

Nick had dragged the body into the shop’s entrance where it was at least partly hidden, searched it, then trudged off, back through the rain, to his hotel. He looked at the items on the bare table in front of him. There was nothing there to help him and this looked like it was going to be a short and fruitless trip. He hadn’t meant to kill the man, but when someone goes to shoot you, well, you hit first and then think about asking the guy questions. Nick poured himself a brandy and sat heavily on the end of the bed. He looked at himself in the mirror as he manoeuvred a cigarette into his mouth. He was still in good shape for a man in his thirties, but then he didn’t have the stress of what most people would call an ordinary life. His hair was short at the sides and back, light brown hinting toward blonde as it lengthened, and a parted fringe that was swept back above a well defined face which could have been described as handsome. The hesitation would have come in the blue eyes, which looked like they should dance with laughter, but instead were cold, almost dead. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, still damp from the rain, which was hammering on the window and streaming down. It was even darker outside and the splashes of colour from the bars of Montmartre were leaking through the pane of his room. Nick got up and paced the room one more time.

The man had known his name, but not the meeting protocol, which was what had made Nick suspicious. It meant that someone knew he was here. By now they’d know their man hadn’t come back and assume that Nick was still around. Nick’s hotel hadn’t been pre-booked, he’d chosen it himself when he got to Montmartre, which meant, that unless he’d been followed, no one knew he was here.

He had a choice: he could lie low and go home to report to Jessop, or try to find out why someone had tried to kill him. He looked out of the window at the lights of the bars. With a sigh he turned and picked up his coat from the bed. It was going to be a long night.

It was the fifth bar Nick had tried when she found him. It was a great little place. Dark interior, three piece jazz band playing their hearts out and rough cafes of French red plonked on the chequered tables as soon as you sat down. Nick would have preferred a martini, but after four other bars, he wasn’t picky.

He clocked her as soon as she walked in, so did every other man in the room as she shook off her umbrella. Her dark hair shone in the candlelight of the bar; it was a little longer than was fashionable, but she had the kind of face and body that didn’t care about fashion. Luminous green eyes were set above rose bud lips, tinted dark red with gloss, and under her coat, her body held the kind of curves that would have made a flapper dress simply impractical. She couldn’t have been

more than twenty-five. Even so she was a woman out of step with time, but she didn't care, and that made her all the more attractive. She looked around the bar and Nick was surprised when her face registered some sort of recognition, even more surprised when she walked over to his table. Surprises weren't good in this line of work.

"Do you have the time?" She asked in French that held an accent of something else.

"Sure, it's two o'clock," Nick answered in English, without looking at his watch.

"Oh, I thought it was four already. May I?" She nodded at the empty seat. She'd replied in English and this time Nick could place the accent, German.

"Be my guest."

She smiled, placed her umbrella against the wall and unaware of the audience of male gazes, shrugged off her coat to reveal a tweed skirt-suit combination beneath, that seemed to accentuate not only the length of her legs, but the narrowness of her waist and her curves. "I'm glad I found you." She whispered.

"I'm not sure yet if I'm glad or not. I was hoping someone would find me, I just wasn't sure who."

"They're looking for you."

"Who?" Nick poured some red into her glass.

"The men who killed Gallais." She took a sip of from her glass and Nick noticed that her hand wasn't trembling.

"I figured something like that had happened. And you are?"

She held out a hand, "Forgive me, my name is Alex, Alex Mench." Nick took her hand, held it and squeezed it hard enough to make her squirm.

"So Alex Mench. I've got a Mauser trained on you under the table and I can break just about every bone in your hand and still make it out of here. How do you know who I am?"

"Ouch, you're hurting me!" She tried in vain to pull her hand away.

"Sorry, it's just that the last person I met tried to kill me."

"I'm here to help you," Alex protested.

"Talk to me and let me be the judge of that."

"Gallais was working with us. He got snatched last night, at least we think he was snatched. We've been looking for him all day, but no sign. We went to the pre-arranged rendezvous but Gallais never showed. We thought the worst."

"Who's 'we'?" Nick squeezed harder.

"Ow! German intelligence. We're working with you on this one. Gallais was our man on the inside."

Nick let her hand go, "Have a drink." She picked up the glass and took a long swig of the liquid. She still wasn't shaking. A tough cookie. "And you found me how?"

"I've been looking all evening in every bar. I figured you'd be in one or another. I read your file." She smiled.

"I have a file? I'm impressed."

Her face darkened, "I wouldn't be too impressed. You haven't exactly been a friend of Germany."

"No. Needs must though, here I am now ready to help you."

"Great job you've done so far."

"Touche, though it wasn't me that allowed the operation to be compromised at my end. The man that came to kill me knew my name and knew the location of the meet, but not the protocol. I'm guessing all of that came from Gallais before he was killed. Thankfully he held back some of the salient details."

She nodded gravely, "I agree, it's likely Gallais is dead. That leaves us with a problem, we don't have anyone on the inside anymore."

"What have we got?"

"A small group of deluded French officers and a cabinet minister planning a border incursion to claim a little more of Germany's industrial wealth. Not officially sanctioned, so far as we know,

but the word is, if it happened the French government would protest, but ultimately turn a blind eye. Gallais was our inside man. He was the secretary of a certain cabinet minister who's involved. We have some names of those involved, an idea of the plan, but no proof."

"And Gallais was meant to deliver what?"

"A copy of plans for the invasion to you, the idea being, the British government could then put pressure on the French government for it not to happen. No one dies, the ringleaders are retired, life goes on."

Nick nodded, "Why not get the plans yourself and have the German government kick up a fuss?"

"Come on Nick, who's France going to listen to?"

"Makes sense, so we need those plans."

"But without Gallais?"

"Then we either wash our hands of it or start paying a visit to the names you have until we strike gold."

Alex smiled, a genuine smile that could have melted hearts at ten paces, "I like your style."

"You may not, by the time this is over."

"I'll risk that. So, where do you want to start?"

"The names, who do we have?"

"Four names: General De Traulle, Colonel Marpauis, Major Vierre and a cabinet minister, Monsieur Lausat."

"I say we start at the top. Do you have an address for De Traulle or Lausat?"

"Yes. But I think we might need to start earlier than that." Alex nodded at the bar's entrance. Two burly men stood there peering intently through the gloom, scanning the tables.

"Looks like it's time for us to go," Nick murmured, causally placing some Francs on the table. He stood and moved in front of Alex then bent over to kiss her. Their mouths locked and she wriggled in surprise, before surrendering to his kiss. Nick held the embrace, watching the two men from the corner of his eye until they turned and left, then released her and stood upright.

"You've got a nerve!" spat Alex.

"And you have beautiful lips. Thank you."

Alex stood angrily and gave Nick a shove. "Never do that again!"

"Point taken, but I think I just brought us some time."

"Next time find another way!"

Nick shrugged and followed Alex's bristling back out of the bar and into the night.

It didn't take them long to pick up the two men from the bar. Nick and Alex slowed to a saunter as the men ahead of them ducked into another bar. They waited, and after a couple of minutes the men came back out.

"We need one of them to talk to. We can't take both, too difficult. We have to lose one." Nick whispered.

Alex nodded in agreement. "Okay, well the chances are they're looking for you, not me. That was your plan wasn't it? Sit in bars until the men who killed Gallais found you?"

"Something like that," Nick murmured not taking his eyes off the men ahead of them. He fingered the knuckleduster in his pocket.

"Well, now's your chance," Alex said as the men entered another bar, "I'll pick one of them up in the bar, separate them. When the other one comes out, grab him quietly. There's an alley there," she pointed, "he'll pass it to get to the next bar. I'll meet you there in a few minutes." Alex stepped forward but Nick stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"What if they're looking for you as well?"

"Then I guess all three of us will be coming out quite quickly." She beamed.

Nick watched her disappear into the bar. He didn't like her taking a chance like this, and he hoped there wasn't another way out of the place. He walked by, slowly peering through the window. He could see the men at the bar and Alex. She had positioned herself between them, had

her hand resting on the shoulder of one of the men engaging him in flirtatious conversation, her back blocking the other guy. He took the cue. The two men exchanged a few words and with a grin over Alex's head, one of them started towards the exit.

Nick quickly moved to the shadow of the alley. He looked up it and for once blessed the heavy rain. The passage was narrow and dark. No one was around in such filthy weather and it would muffle the sounds of what he hoped would be a short struggle.

Ducking just inside the shadows of the alley's entrance Nick waited, as the man came out in to the drizzle and started off at a brisk walk towards the next blur of light on the street. Nick gripped his knife and poised on the balls of his feet. The man had his head down and was in a hurry to escape the rain. He never saw Nick. One moment he was walking up the street, the next his air supply had been cut off by a vice like arm around his neck and the point of a knife was already drawing a thin, but painful stream of blood close to his jugular. He knew better than to resist.

Nick dragged him to the shadows, then deeper down the alley.

"Who are you?" Nick asked in French.

"Screw you." Spat the man. Nick tightened his grip and the man began to choke. Nick released the pressure slightly.

"Wrong answer." Nick flicked the point of the knife to just under the man's eye and the man squirmed. "The next wrong answer means you lose an eye, then the other, then an ear. Do I need to go on?" The man shook his head as best he could and Nick felt the fight go out of the man's body.

"Who are you?"

"French Interior Ministry. We're looking for you, if you are Nick Valentine, which I am guessing you are?"

"Why?"

"I don't know why. They have put teams out to search for you. We had a briefing that you were here, that you were engaged in espionage against France and that we were to find you and bring you in."

"You're with the Interior Ministry?"

"Yes."

Nick's mind raced. If these men were on official business then that meant the renegade plotters either had more clout than he thought, or had managed to engineer the search through misinformation."

"Do you know Gallais?"

"Who?"

Nick tightened his grip.

"No, I don't know a Gallais, I swear." The man said hoarsely.

A slight figure appeared at the end of the alley way and began to cautiously edge down it. Nick gave a low whistle and Alex joined him.

"Search him, where's the other one?"

"I asked him to buy me a drink then said I was going to the bathroom. We've got a few minutes." Alex replied as she rifled the man's pockets. She removed a revolver, and a wallet. She opened it and peered at the contents in the gloom and gave a curse.

"Ministry of the Interior?" Nick asked.

Alex nodded.

"Okay. We'd better get out of here, but we can't have this guy raising the alarm."

"No problem," Alex replied, bringing the butt of the revolver down on the man's head. With a grunt he sank to being added weight in Nick's arms.

"He's going to have one hell of a headache." Nick commented as he rolled the body to the ground.

"Occupational hazard. What now?"

"Well, now we know that the French are officially looking for me, it's going to make our task a little harder. I can't risk moving about in the open. The question is, how much clout do De Traulle and Lausat have? Do the Interior Ministry know about the plot or have they been sold a line to do



the hard work and bring me in? This guy didn't know the name Gallais, but then he's just a foot soldier."

"So we pay du Traulle or Lausat a visit?"

"I think they may be expecting that. I'd like to find out a bit more first."

"And how do we do that?" Alex asked, struggling to keep the exasperation out of her tone.

"I've only got one contact in Paris, but if anyone can help, she will. I'll explain on the way, come on." Grabbing Alex's hand he pulled her up the passage way, away from the street and into the winding streets of Montmartre.

As they neared the top of one of Montmartre's steeply shelving passages Alex stopped for a second.

"Let me get this straight. We're going to see some old lady who used to run revue bars here during the war, because you think she can help us?"

"She's not any old lady. In her youth she became notorious, not just as one of Paris' foremost performers, but as a detective and adventurer. She was ahead of her time, that's for sure. Anyway, the point is, she is very well connected. She knows most of what's going on in France, nearly everything happening in Paris, and definitely everything going on in Montmartre.

"Why would she help us?" Alex demanded, "I don't like it."

"I don't like it either, but we're not exactly spoilt for choice, but she'll help us. We have history."

They rounded a corner and found a thick set, oak door in a dark house that soared above them into the night. "Here we are." Nick lifted the wrought iron knocker and gave a complex series of knocks. Alex looked at him puzzled.

"Old code," Nick explained. After what seemed an age they heard bolts being drawn and the door cracked open to allow a narrow spill of light.

"Pigalle?" Nick whispered.

"Nick?" The voice sounded old.

"Yes, it's me. I'm with a friend."

"Come in." The door opened wider and Nick and Alex stepped through. From somewhere above them a gramophone crackled mournful, classical music. The stone flagged hall was quite bare apart from a huge chandelier, but somehow it was the slight old lady before them who dominated the space, despite her diminutive size. Her hair was pure white, but her green eyes dance in a face that was now elegant but had once been beautiful. She embraced Nick as the door shut behind them. Alex held out a hand, but the old woman ignored it and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Come, come, upstairs. I don't use the downstairs anymore." With surprising speed she ascended the stairs, Nick and Alex trailing behind. They entered a drawing room and Alex let out a gasp.

The gramophone crackled in a corner, but what had made Alex gasp was the room. It was like stepping back to a bygone age, heavy red velvet drapes, dark wood, gilt edged furniture and walls covered in art and sepia photographs of a beautiful woman in exotic locations throughout the world.

Alex peeled away from Nick's side and studied the walls, "Is that a...?"

"Yes, I knew Toulouse quite well. Ah happier days. Then they all were before the war." She sat down and pointed to a small bar, "Please help yourselves to a drink, then tell me what brings you here. I had hoped not to see you again Nick, but only because I know Paris was not a happy place for you."

Nick poured some brandies from the bar and handed them around Alex was moving slowly around the walls transfixed by the photographs and art.

"And it's not a happy place now I regret to say. I'm here on a job."

The old lady nodded and watched Alex, "She's very pretty." She observed. Alex blushed and moved to a chair opposite the old lady.

“I was sent here to meet a man we think is dead. Whoever came in his place tried to kill me and now the authorities are looking for me.” Nick said. “I came here because I thought you might be able to help.”

The old woman smiled, “Ah Nick, you never change. Yes, I can help. You are after Du Traulle and Lausat no?”

“How do you know that?” Alex asked incredulously.

Pigalle spread her hands, “I don’t know everything. I didn’t know about you my dear, for example. I do however know about Du Traulle and Lausat. Lausat frequents a club I know, and when he’s drunk, which is often, he is boastful. So yes, I have heard about this plan of theirs.”

“So why would you help us when you are French yourself?” Alex asked, her eyes taking on a harder light.

The old woman studied her for a moment and sighed, “Did you not lose anyone in the war my dear?”

Alex looked down, “Yes.” She mumbled.

“Who?”

Alex dabbed at her eyes, “My father, both my brothers...” her voice cracked and trailed away.

“I’m so very sorry. We all lost something in that horror. Me included. Men like Lausat and Du Traulle and the others, they don’t care. They don’t go to fight themselves, simply send others to die for whatever cause we are all meant to believe in today. None of it is important. I have seen too many great lives ended early, too many people I cared about, too many innocents die.” She sighed, “I fear it will happen again anyway. It is just the way of the world. Nevertheless in this case, it is wrong. I will help you.” She took a drink from her glass and stared into space for a moment. “Du Traulle and Lausat are not even doing it for the patriotic aims they would claim. They have invested in a consortium that has purchased factories and mining rights in those territories. If France seizes that land, their stock soars and they become rich. So you see, as always, it is about greed.”

“You’re sure?” Nick asked.

“Lausat has been bragging about it to the girls. He and Du Traulle are in on it. There are many powerful people in that consortium, which explains why you are probably the most hunted man in Paris right now. Marpauis and Vierre are the puppets. They’re not in the consortium, don’t even know about it. They are just blind patriots being used for the men they control beneath them. There’s more.”

“Go on.” said Nick.

“They fully expect the League of Nations to kick up a fuss and demand the withdrawal of French troops.”

“Then why go through with it at all?”

“They plan to sell their investment. They’ve bought cheaply. They’ll sell high from a market move they’ve made. It’s manipulation of the markets through military means.”

“And Germany is left humiliated again, even if the lands are saved.” Alex said angrily.

“Marpauis and Vierre wouldn’t like that.” Nick said thoughtfully.

“Even less if they’re the ones left to carry the blame for an illegal act of war.” Pigalle said.

“But if you know all this, why not go to the authorities and expose it?” Asked Alex.

“Because of the people involved in the consortium. A lot of rich and powerful people stand to become even more rich and powerful.” Pigalle smiled sadly.

“At the expense of more lives!” Alex cried indignantly.

“So this is all about greed and nothing to do with patriotism,” Nick said wearily.

“Exactly. The military men involved are the only ones who think they’re helping France in some misguided way. It’s rumoured that it’s not just French industrialists involved in the cabal who are behind this, but German, British...”

Alex let out a gasp and shook her head disbelievingly as Nick cut Pigalle off.

“When does Lausat go to the club and how many guards does he have with him?” Nick queried impatiently.

“Ah, at last we cut to the chase. I thought you’d never ask. Tonight. He’ll be there now, alone apart from the girls. Even though he knows you’re here, he thinks that the others will take care of you and that he’ll be safe. He’s an idiot. The club’s close to here, Rue Chapelle, The Lunette.”

“Then I suggest we start there.” Alex said firmly, rising from her chair.

The other two stood, Nick embraced the old lady.

“Thank you, is there anything you need Pigalle?” Nick asked.

“She waved a hand around the room. I have everything I need Nick. Life has been kind and unkind, but I endure. For now.” She laughed, “Go. God speed and I hope I don’t see you again.”

“Au revoir to you too.” Nick said softly.

Stepping outside into the darkness, it felt like they had left one century and entered another. The rain had eased and they made their way to The Lunette quickly, sticking to the quieter back streets.

Once they’d been scrutinised through an iron grille in the door they were allowed in. Thick wreaths of cigarette smoke hung in the air, the stale tobacco mingling with cheap perfume to give the distinct odour of a certain type of late night haunt. On a small stage a band, that was too big for it, were hammering out the latest swing numbers for a group of dancers on the barely lit dance floor. Red velvet booths lined the edges of the dance floor, lit by thick candles and filled with middle aged men and much younger and prettier girls.

“Now we just have to find Lausat.” Nick murmured, ordering two martinis and scanning the tables behind him via the mirror behind the bar.

“I already have.” Alex replied taking a sip of her drink, “Second booth on the left.”

Nick studied the mirror. There was one man in the booth with a girl on either side. Lausat had thinning, swept back hair, a small moustache and jowls rolling over his collars that contrasted with the pinched nervy look of his face.

“Now what?” Alex asked.

“Now we wait until Lausat needs the bathroom, then I follow him and we have a chat.”

“Okay. Want to dance while we wait?”

Nick looked at her in surprise, “I don’t dance.”

“Shame. So how does this play out?”

“Gallais was meant to give me the names and a copy of the invasion plans. I’ve got the names but I still need the evidence. I’ll convince Lausat to take us home and we’ll see what he has there.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It’s easy if he has a copy of the plans and he gives them to us. All I’ve got to do then is get back to London.”

“And if he doesn’t have a copy?”

“Then we’ll have to see the general. He’s bound to have them, but he’s also more likely to have men around him who will know how to fight. Looks like we get to find out now.” Nick nodded and finished his drink in a single swallow, as Lausat got up from his cubicle and made his way towards the bathroom. “Meet me outside the bathroom.”

Lausat was leaning over the urinal, one arm propping him against the wall. Nick busied himself in front of the mirror, fiddling with his hair until Lausat had finished and buttoned up. As the cabinet minister moved to the basins, Nick struck. Bitter experience had taught Nick that sudden, overwhelming violence was key to subduing someone. Accordingly he stamped on Lausat’s instep, anchoring his foot to the floor, while simultaneously slamming the man’s head sideways against the wall. Not hard enough to knock him out, but enough to stun him, and more than that, frighten him. Nick had his knife at the man’s windpipe in a flash, as he slipped his leg inside Lausat’s and put an arm around him to hold him up.

“Listen carefully Lausat. I’ve got a knife to your throat. I’m going to move it to your back then you and I are going to walk out of here. If you try to alert anyone, try to get away, try to resist, you’re dead. Do as I say and you’ll live to see tomorrow. Do you understand me?”

The man nodded.

“Good. Move.” Nick pushed him roughly forward. Lausat was trembling but Nick knew it wouldn’t last. They had to get him out fast. As they exited the washrooms Alex came up on the other side of Lausat and together they walked him out.

“Had a bit too much to drink,” laughed Alex to the doorman as they wheeled Lausat out and past him. Making steady pace they were soon swallowed up by the gloom. Nick looked around for some cover, saw a small alley and steered them towards it. Once in its darkness Nick slammed Lausat against the wall and held the knife to his face.

“Please,” the man whimpered, “Take my money, don’t hurt me.”

“We don’t want your money,” Nick snapped, “Where are the invasion plans?”

Lausat’s eyes registered shock and he blanched, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he stammered.

“Wrong answer.” Nick rabbit punched the man to the kidneys with his knuckleduster. Lausat doubled over and was sick. Nick hauled him upright. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“At home, in my safe. I have them.”

“Who else is at your house?”

“No one, I live alone.”

“Then I guess we’re going to your house.”

“You won’t get away with this!” Lausat’s face was a mask of fury. He struggled against the ropes holding him to his chair. His safe sat open. Nick was studying the plans, share certificates and assorted papers strewn on Lausat’s desk.

“Actually, I think it’s you who won’t be getting away with it.” Nick nodded at the papers, “I’m not sure your own government would look too kindly on this, let alone anyone else’s.”

“Fools! You think you can stop it? Too many people have too much at stake.”

“We’ll see,” Alex murmured quietly.

“You can tell that to whoever finds you in the morning.” Nick said, tidying up the paperwork. He started to slip it into his pockets, but as he turned the door swung open and a tall, stocky man in a French army uniform stood there with a pistol covering Alex and Nick.

“Good evening. Did you really think we wouldn’t keep an eye on Lausat when we knew you were running around Paris Mr Valentine and...?” He looked at Alex, “Throw your guns to the floor.”

“Thank God you’re here!” Cried Lausat in relief, “Vierre, call your men and have these two taken away and silenced.” Lausat gave Nick an ineffectual shove as he pushed past.

“I’m sure our silence is necessary,” Nick said hurriedly, “You wouldn’t want people finding out about your little business deal would you? How you aim to profit off the back of Major Vierre’s patriotic intentions.”

“What?” Vierre’s brow crinkled.

“Ignore him. She is German intelligence,” Lausat spat on the floor, “They’ve concocted a ridiculous story around the invasion. It’s nonsense.”

“Such nonsense that you want us silenced now? Why don’t you show Vierre those share certificates and consortium directors’ list?”

“What list? What consortium?” Vierre asked, “What are they talking about?”

“Take a look for yourself Vierre,” Alex motioned a hand towards the table, “It’s all there. The names of the men who stood to profit from your military misadventure, which incidentally Lausat had already planned to have you tried for, once French troops had been forced to withdraw. It’s all there.”

Vierre took a step forward. Beads of sweat stood on Lausat’s forehead and he lunged forward making a clumsy grab for Vierre’s gun. The two of them tumbled and Nick was on them in a flash. There were three muffled bangs in quick succession and the pile of men on the floor lay still.

“Nick?” cried Alex.

Nick slowly hauled himself up, wincing, a dark red stain spreading across the front of his shirt.

“You’re hurt!”

“No, not this time.” He wiped ineffectually at the blood and looked at the motionless men, “I think we just lost two of our plotters.”

“And now you lose me.” Nick looked up from the bodies and across at Alex. She now had her own weapon trained on him. Covering him, she moved to the table and began scooping up the documents.

“You’re not working with British Intelligence at all are you?” Nick said. He walked over to the fire place and reached above the mantle.

“What are you doing?” Alex barked.

Nick smiled and opened the small box sitting above the fireplace, “Just taking a cigarette. Stay calm, you’ll live longer.”

“You should be the one that’s worried about living longer,” Alex retorted, stuffing the last of the papers into her jacket.

“Oh, I don’t think so. I’ve known from the start. I was told I’d be on my own. You see, I suspect you or one of your compatriots grabbed Gallais. The guy at the meet was a German wasn’t he?”

“Yes, Otto. You killed him.”

“He pulled a gun and it was an accident.”

“How very convenient,” Alex sneered. “Yes, we grabbed Gallais. He gave us the details of the meeting, though not all of them. He gave up the protocols later, which is how I was able to win your trust. Or perhaps not. If you knew...”

“I wanted to see how it would play out. Why are you doing this? It’s better for Germany if I take the plans back and this plot is stopped.”

“Is it? Or is it better for it to go ahead, so the people wake up and we can start to reassert ourselves and win back our pride!” Her eyes shone.

Nick blew out a puff of smoke and looked at his cigarette then back at Alex, “You really buy that Alex? Who’s giving you your orders?”

“I don’t know if I buy it or not, but it makes sense and I just do as I’m told. But I’m not telling you who I’m working for.”

Nick spread his hands, “So what happens to me?”

Alex looked around the room, “I lock you in here, call the police. At the very least you’ll be held for more than long enough for me to get away.”

“You won’t get away,” Nick said softly.

Alex laughed, “What? Why do you think that?”

“I’m going to take a guess here that the man you’re working for is called Von Statz, an attache at the German embassy here in Paris.”

Alex’s face gave nothing away, but Nick’s experience allowed him to see the flicker in her eyes.

“Von Statz is from a wealthy German family, old nobility. They invested in industry. Otto Von Statz has a position in the diplomatic corps but has worked for German Intelligence since 1916. You see I read my files too. His name is also on that list of directors.”

“You’re lying.”

“Alex, listen to me. He gets the plans, he’s got something over the French plotters, the invasion goes ahead and he makes a fortune. No one is the wiser except for them and they’re in on it, and you.”

“But if I know...”

“His name’s on the list. You figure it out.”

“He might not know about the plot, the Von Statz family invest in many things.”

“I never look kindly on coincidences in our line of work.” Nick stepped forward, grinding the cigarette butt under his heel.

“Stay where you are. You’re staying here Nick to speak to the French police.”

“Don’t do this Alex. Let’s go see Von Statz together. Make your choice then.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Are you? I don’t have a gun anymore.” He nodded at the Mauser on the floor. “If I’m wrong Von Statz deals with me and you get a reprimand. If I’m right, we find out just how far this goes and you get to live.”

“Von Statz wouldn’t have me killed.”

“No? Not even to protect a possible fortune and avoid the risk of being branded a traitor?”

Alex chewed her lip. “Okay Nick. We’ll go and see Von Statz, but it’s your funeral. Try anything stupid and I’ll shoot you anyway.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less,” Nick said, stepping through the door ahead of her.

Von Statz had an apartment on the riverfront overlooking Notre Dame. A man sulkily let them in and ushered them into a drawing room without offering them a drink. After a few minutes the door opened and Von Statz walked in, a tall, elegant man, clad in a velvet smoking jacket over evening dress. His face was a mask of barely controlled fury.

“Are you mad? Bringing him here? You were meant to go to the boat!” Von Statz barked.

“I didn’t give her a choice,” Nick answered before Alex could get a reply out. “You see, I have a question of my own.”

“Ha! This will be good. What?”

“How much did you stand to make from the plot?” Nick asked quietly. Von Statz paled. He shot a look at Alex who was staring at him intently, then looked back at Nick.

“You’re as good as they say you are. Well done.” He shrugged, “Why not make some extra money? This is a tough business we’re in. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Then you won’t mind me passing these plans and documents up the chain of command?” Alex cut in.

“I’m afraid I’d mind very much.” From nowhere a small pistol appeared in his hand.

“So it’s true,” Alex sighed wearily.

“What’s true is that the war finished Europe as we know it, and we have to work on new opportunities, even with old enemies. People talk of patriotism and borders. It is the old way of thinking. We have to seize the chances we have now.”

“For personal gain? What about the greater good?” Asked Alex.

“The greater good is what sent millions of men to their deaths and will again if we’re not careful. We need to forget about language and borders and concentrate on ourselves. Maybe you still have time to learn that Alex?” He added more gently.

“Don’t try to justify your greed on the graves of those who died believing in something. I lost everything in the war and you stand there and dare to...” Alex’s voice wavered, the emotion in it breaking through as she trailed off.

Von Statz shrugged, “The world moves on and so do I.”

“Even if people die as a result?” Nick asked.

Von Statz moved to train his pistol on Nick, “Unfortunately so. No one should have died here, and the invasion should have been largely unopposed.” He shrugged, “Loss of life would have been minimal and the rewards fantastic.” He smiled.

“I would still have been dead.” Nick reminded Von Statz.

“And you still will be,” Von Statz lips curled cruelly, “Guards!” He yelled.

A shot rang out, Nick flinched, but he wasn’t hit. Instead Von Statz was crumpling to the floor, a look of surprise on his face and a sobbing Alex was already out of one of the drawing room doors. The other door flew open and three men piled in, fumbling for their guns as they took in the scene.

Nick didn’t wait for them to finish fumbling. He was out the door behind Alex.

She was flying through the drizzle and Nick struggled to keep up with her. Both of them soon lost the men behind them. The river shimmered ahead, Notre Dame looming out of the darkness and light fog hanging on the Seine.

Alex disappeared down a flight of steps to the river path. Nick sprinted to the top but paused.

“Alex?” He hissed. “Don’t shoot. I just want to talk.”

Nick gently started treading down the stone steps.

Alex moved from the shadows at the foot, her revolver trained on him. “Why are you still here?” She sobbed.

“To stop you getting on that boat.”

“Why?”

“Von Statz arranged that meeting. You hand over the plans. You’ll never make it to shore.”

She shook her head, “I have to not believe that Nick. That boat takes me home and out of this nightmare.”

“Don’t get on the boat Alex.” They could both hear the splutter of an approaching motor launch. “Look, I go back to London with the invasion plans and the names. It will never go ahead now with the trail of bodies. Once Von Statz’s part in it becomes known you’ll be in the clear. They’ll probably even give you a medal.” Nick was close enough now to see the doubt in her eyes.

“I don’t know Nick, I don’t need to know, I just follow orders.”

“Killing Von Statz wasn’t in your orders.”

“He was a traitor!” Alex choked, somewhere between a sob and a snarl.

“But by the time you explain that, you may be dead. Besides, following orders is a good way to get killed, trust me, I know.” Nick spoke softly, but his next move was a blur, as he grabbed at the gun and delivered an open handed slap to her face that sent her reeling. He pushed forward with the momentum and pushed her to the ground, straddling her.

“You bastard!” She snarled, kicking under him, struggling to get her gun hand free.

“Listen to me! I saw the names on that consortium list. Not just French names, German names, British names. They want that part of it silenced. You get on that boat, you don’t get off.” He tugged at her jacket.

“What are you doing?” She screamed. His hands closed on the papers and he pulled them out.

“I’m taking these and saving your life.” He ripped the gun from her hand and tossed it into the river. “Now get up and run and don’t get on that boat!” He hauled her upright, and gave her a push. He could see the launch dimly through the rain now. She hesitated, looked at the launch then looked at Nick. “Go!” he shouted. She turned and ran, swallowed up by the inky blackness of the night.

“I can’t say I’m pleased Nick.” Jessop glared at Nick. They were sat in the same booth they’d been in a few days earlier at the back of The Fitzroy.

Nick shrugged, took a slug of his whisky and tossed a manila envelope over the table. ‘Here are the plans, and an interesting list of names involved in a consortium I’m sure you already know all about.’

Jessop picked up the envelope gingerly, squinted through the flap at the contents with a frown, then folded it and pushed it into his jacket.

“Well, you came through I suppose. But I also said no deaths. Hell of a mess.” Jessop shook his head.

“Someone had got Gallais, they tried to kill me. That was the only death I was responsible for.”

“I’m not fussed about him,” Jessop said in exasperation.

“No. You never are.”

“Look, the French are hopping mad, even with the plans it doesn’t look good. Couldn’t you have done it quietly?”

“I tried.”

Jessop was silent for a moment. He looked at Nick sternly.

“Speaking of them, Alex never made her final meet. Do you know what happened to her?”

“No. I can guess what might have happened to her if she’d made that meeting.”

“Just how much do you know?” Jessop asked quietly.

“Von Statz’s name was on that list. He was in on the plot. She did what she had to. I know enough, but not enough for you to kill me. I’ll settle for a favour.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to ask for anything.”

“Oh, but I think I am. I saw the names on the consortium list. I know who you’re protecting. No wonder you didn’t want it to be an official job.”

Jessop gave a wry smile, “Then maybe you do know enough for me to want you silenced.”

“Maybe. But that’s not going to happen to me or to Alex.”

“What did happen to Alex?” Jessop asked.

“I think she decided she’d take her chances on her own until this blew over. That’s what I need your help with.”

“So she doesn’t know who’s on the consortium list? Other than the plotters and Von Statz?” Jessop leaned in keenly.

“No.” Nick lied firmly.

“Well, that certainly changes things then.”

“Good. I hope we understand each other on that point.”

“We do, but what are we to do about you?”

“Well, you can pay me for a start.”

Jessop laughed, and tossed an envelope across the table. “Nick, I like you.”

“You also know I can keep a secret. I’ve got more than a few.”

Jessop nodded and gave a sigh. “What’s one more?”

“Oh and just in case, if anything should happen to me, it would be a shame if all those documents became public.”

Jessop shook his head. “You play a dangerous game.”

“It’s the only one I know.”

“Okay Nick. We’ll be watching though.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Jessop levered himself away from the table, “Until we meet again.”

Nick raised his glass, “Cheers.”

He watched Jessop leave the pub. A figure peeled from the booth behind Nick’s and sat opposite him where Jessop had been.

“You heard that?” Nick asked.

“Yes. Thanks Nick, I owe you.” Alex smiled and took his hand across the table, “Perhaps I could stick around a bit longer.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Nick replied. He saw the look of hurt in her eyes and looked away.

“Nick, look, we...”

“Alex, we talked this through already. You need to go.”

She hung her head. “Okay.” She stood up. “So long Nick.” She bent over the table and kissed him gently on the cheek, lingering for a moment. Then she turned and walked stiffly away without looking back.

“So long,” Nick murmured.

He watched her go then signalled to the barman for another Scotch.

Outside London went about its business and Nick already had another job lined up. The names on the list hadn’t surprised him, except for one. He needed to pay an old friend a visit. Sooner or later everyone had to settle up their moral account in life. He looked at the fading sun slanting through the grimy pane of the window, a fleeting flicker of something that looked like anguish flitting across his face before he tipped the glass to his mouth. Soon he’d be back out there, doing the dirtiest business of all...



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# Prologue

Nick woke with a jolt, instinctively throwing himself to the floor, his reactions running a split-second ahead of his sleep-dulled mind as he clawed his way across the carpet towards the window. He lay still on the floor for a few seconds, listening, trying to hear over the racing of his own heart and calm the tremor in his hands. Another nightmare?

In his dreams he'd been back there, the front, in the mud and filth with the rounds popping round and the stench of the bodies rotting in the wire, but there was something else. Something had snapped him back to the present, to now. What?

He took a deep breath in an attempt to calm his hammering heart, trying to still the shaking adrenalin rush surging round his body. Gingerly he rolled over, he could feel dampness on his leg, for a moment he had the absurd thought that he'd been shot. He shook his head, how would he be hit, up here in his flat, above the quiet London street? Old habits died hard. He looked down at his leg. A bottle of Scotch lay rocking on its side next to a shattered crystal tumbler, the dark stain in the carpet seeping into the leg of his trousers.

Nick sat up, ran a hand through his dark hair, pushing back the fringe from his eyes, feeling the shaking subside, already replaced by the familiar nagging of fatigue and the thump of an imminent hangover. Clambering to his feet he kicked at the bottle of Scotch in annoyance, sending a spew of amber splashing over the threadbare carpet. The clock said it was just after five. He peered out of the window into the dying night. The dreams, the nightmares, he normally woke up shouting, bathed in sweat, he had a horrible feeling the sound had been real rather than phantasmal, a slightly uneasy moving of the gut, but that could be the drink. He couldn't even remember getting home.

Outside the roads were dark and silent, the hissing gas lamps long since extinguished, the dawn not yet arrived. There was a not a soul to be seen, but the sound, had been close. A shot? He was almost sure. Familiar and close enough to register in his slumbering mind and for his body to react. One more legacy of his bitter experience. He looked down at the now empty bottle weeping its last upon the carpet, sighed and moving to the front door slipped a battered greatcoat over his athletic frame.

The stairs creaked in complaint as he negotiated their crooked tangle, stumbling against the wall as a dull rush of nausea swept over him. Shrugging it off with a deep breath he left the security of the house and moved to the middle of the empty road and listened. People said the city was never quiet, but they were wrong. In those long lonely hours from two until four there was barely ever a sound as seemingly the whole of London slumbered. An illusion in itself, as Nick knew too well; behind innocuous looking doors the jazz age was swinging towards what must surely be its last hurrah in an orgy of dance and drink. Nick's street was quiet, but less than two streets over in any direction he knew a handful of places he could get a drink, and company, even at this hour.

He shivered, even in the heavy greatcoat the dampness of the night held a chill, and he felt another chill, the chill of a memory of first light stand to's and imminent death, that he hurriedly pushed to the back of his mind. Just up ahead Newman Passage slipped from Rathbone Street beside a pub into a small courtyard, and as Nick gingerly approached he was already wondering why he hadn't brought a weapon of some sort with him. He peered carefully down the claustrophobic darkness of the alley, but could see nothing beyond the empty cobbles. Stepping carefully along the passage with his back tight against the cold wall he stopped. In the shadow of a corner in the small courtyard ahead lay a bundle of rags he instinctively knew was a body.

# CHAPTER 1

Nick hated the smell of official buildings, the sterile disinfectant and wood polish tinged undertones that spoke of efficiency and order. More than he hated that though, he hated the boredom and suspicion filled atmosphere of police stations, particularly this one, Tottenham Court Road, his local. Which was why he would have given almost anything not to be here again, slouched in a chair in the waiting area enduring the suspicious glances of passing policemen, not to mention those of the other occupants of the room; the snivelling woman in the fur coat, stopping her sobbing to glance around fearfully every once in a while, the man Nick felt sure was a career criminal, hard face set looking unblinkingly straight ahead, and the tired father with his little girl. All of them waiting, all of them suspicious of each other and their reasons for being here, guilt by association.

Nick let out a sigh, rather more loudly than he'd meant to, drawing more glances from the other occupants and a disapproving stare from the desk sergeant. Nick focussed on his own shoes, shuffling the scruffy brown brogues across the floor, he flicked a look at his wristwatch, wondering how long he would be here. There was always a gnawing fear you may not come back out, or at the very least by stifled for hours or even days by inane questions and procedures. You'd have thought a murder would have jumped the queue. Just then a young man in a smart suit came through the internal door and cleared his throat.

"Nick Valentine?"

Nick climbed to his feet and gave a weak smile that was returned with a disapproving grimace. He sighed, resigned to what was to come. Reaching the man Nick held out his hand. The man looked at it before awkwardly shaking it.

"Nick," said Nick.

"Yes, I know," the man said coolly. "Detective Miller. This way." He ushered Nick down a corridor filled with the racket of clacking typewriters and into the relative silence of a small interview room. The iron radiator in the corner gave a groan that reverberated around the pipes. A uniformed constable came in and stood by the closed door as they sat, keeping his eyes professionally locked on the middle distance. Nick leaned back in his chair, hands splayed across the table in front of him. Detective Miller spent what seemed an inordinate amount of time shuffling papers in a manila folder in front of him. Finally he stopped and fixed Nick with a cold stare.

"I don't like men like you, let me start by saying that. Your war record speaks for itself up until the time it disappears into a load of quite unsatisfactory dead ends. Then you resurface, discharged from the Foreign Office from places unknown in 1926, for conduct unbecoming. Yet they let you keep your pension. Why?"

"I thought we were here to discuss the body I found?"

"We are here to discuss a murder and your role in it. From what I see, you are something of an unsavoury character, well known to this station and with possible, might I add, very likely, criminal affiliations." Miller glared at Nick.

"Supposition on your part. Shouldn't there be a good cop here as well?" Nick quipped.

"What?" Miller seemed confused.

"Never mind. Look, let me guess, you're new here right, your first spell out of uniform in a new station, trying to make your mark. I get it. I should imagine that you're really popular around here, bellowing out orders and pulling all the strings you can get your hands on." Behind Miller the uniformed constable suppressed a smirk. "But I'm just a concerned citizen reporting a crime, nothing more, nothing less."

"I'll be the judge of that!" barked the detective, Nick noted with satisfaction that he'd stung him. "Where were you between 1919 and 1926 I wonder Mr Valentine? What were you doing, that you wash up here flitting around dance halls and bars, working as some sort of liquor soaked private detective? If you can even call it that. Amateur detectives? Those days are long gone Mr Valentine."

“Well I guess that’s why I’m not trying to solve this murder and they’ve got a hotshot like you on it instead. I’m not a detective, I’m a security consultant, and if you want to know what I did, then go see the Foreign Office and see how far you get with them. Now, do you want to know what I saw and heard or are we going to waste anymore time?” Nick sat forward and fixed Miller with a hard stare. The man flushed and seemed lost for words for a minute, something he attempted to disguise by fiddling in his jacket for a pen. He flushed harder as he scoured his pockets unsuccessfully, “Here, borrow mine,” said Nick holding his pen out. Miller looked at it, then took it with a mumbled thanks. He started to scribble some notes, then clearing his throat he spoke without looking up.

“Can you tell me in your own words how you found the body?”

“Of course. It was just after five this morning, I was up in my flat when...”

“How do you know what the time was?” interrupted Miller.

“I looked at the clock.”

“Fine, please continue.”

“Thanks. Like I said I was up in my flat and I was woken up by a noise. I think.”

“You think? What kind of noise?”

“I have nightmares. About the war. I think it was a shot that woke me up.”

“Or a nightmare?”

Nick shrugged. “Something woke me up. There’s a body.”

“Why do you think it would be a shot though?”

“She was shot wasn’t she?” Nick retorted, struggling to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Just answer the question.”

“Call it instinct.” There was a long pause. Miller looked up into Nick’s challenging gaze and quickly looked back down at his paper.

“Please go on,” he mumbled.

“So, I headed outside to see...”

“You think you heard gunfire and you went outside?”

“Jesus Miller, we’ll be here all day if you keep this up, yes I thought I heard gunfire and I went outside.” The door swung open with a bang.

“That’s enough.”

Miller span round angrily and glowered at the new man who’d entered. Nick sized him up. He was tall and wiry, and young, a sparse fair moustache perched uncomfortably above thin lips, his suit was expensive and he wore a Cambridge college tie. His piercing pale eyes fixed on Nick, who had a feeling this wouldn’t be good.

“I thought I gave instructions that I was to interview Mr Valentine?”

“With respect, this is a police matter and...” began Miller.

“Not anymore. I suggest you go and see your superintendent for an update detective?”

“Miller,” said Miller in a tone somewhat lacking certainty in the face of the new man’s authoritative tone.

“Miller, good, noted, now get out. Both of you.” Miller looked like he was about to say something, looked at the uniformed constable, who shrugged, and thought better of it. He stood stiffly but as he went to leave he turned to Valentine.

“I’ll be watching you,” he warned. Nick raised an eyebrow.

“Then that makes two of us, now leave please.” Commanded the new man. Nick watched as the two policemen filed out. The man in the smart suit shut the door behind them then turned and fixed Nick with an unconvincing smile from those thin lips. “So Mr Valentine, or should I say ‘major’”, he sneered, crossing to the table and sitting down stiffly, back ramrod straight, “what an ‘honour’ to meet you.”

Nick decided that he really didn’t like this man, he’d met many of his type, and typically disliked them all. The type with the arrogance that comes from having everything handed to them on a plate, and the expectation that everything always would be. Nick slouched lower in his seat and

took his hands off the table. "And who do I have the honour of meeting?" Nick asked with as much disdain as he could muster. The man sniffed and looked at Nick closely as if deciding what to impart.

"My name is Carruthers. I work for the Home Office, I'm sure for a man of your background I've no need to expand on that?"

"Not at all. Since when is a murder in Fitzrovia a Home Office matter?"

"That is rather what I was hoping to ask you."

Nick kept the surprise off his face and fished in his jacket pocket for packet of cigarettes. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Actually I do." Nick curled the corner of his mouth and lit up anyway, pleased at the flicker of annoyance he elicited. A long silence passed between them, Nick had nearly finished his cigarette, and he had a sudden longing to leave this place and get some fresh air. The man thought he was good but he wasn't.

"You know the silent treatment usually only works with nervous people who have something to hide. I'm neither. Like I told the police at the time, I just found the body. There's no more to tell than that, so I'm a bit bewildered as to why you're here."

"Let's just say I'm a man who doesn't believe in coincidences and there are already one too many in the this case Mr Valentine, and I don't like that one bit."

"Well would you care to enlighten me, or I don't think we're going to get anywhere terribly fast."

"Very well. You knew the deceased?"

"I don't know who the deceased is, I didn't touch the body."

"How did you know they were dead?"

"Have you seen the body?"

Carruthers shifted uncomfortably and paled. He obviously had.

"Then you'll know that she was shot in the back of the head and the exit took most of her face off. Large calibre weapon at point blank range. Anyway, generally when the front of someone's head is missing, they're dead."

"Quite," swallowed Carruthers.

"So no, I don't think I know the deceased."

"Really? I think perhaps you do, in the circles you keep," again the slight sneer.

Nick dropped his cigarette and ground it under his heel. He looked up at Carruthers and shrugged.

"Julia Ramon Cortez, you might know her better as Ramona?" In spite of himself, Nick started. He thought for a second, a second that Carruthers felt obliged to fill, "I believe she's in the same circle as your 'acquaintance' Clara De Vere?" Nick narrowed his eyes.

"Yes, I knew Ramona," he said quietly, "She was part of Clara's circle, but that's a big circle, I knew her by sight, saw her out, but probably only ever said a few words to her."

"You see my problem here? I've got you at the murder scene, with a victim that you knew." Carruthers let that statement hang while Nick lit another cigarette.

"I can see it, but I still don't understand why that means you're talking to me rather than the police." Carruthers looked irritated, perhaps it was the smoke, Nick hoped so.

"The reason I'm talking to you is that Cortez was a person of interest to us, we were watching her, now she's dead and you're the one that finds the body. Who knows where your loyalties lie with a background like yours. Like I said, I don't like coincidences."

"You weren't watching her very well." Nick said quietly. The other man flushed and banged the table. Nick noted the unprofessional display of emotion, this man was raw.

"Stop trying to misdirect me dammit!" Carruthers blustered, he paused and took a deep breath. "Look, we need to find out who killed Ramona."

"Sure. What about Ramona though, why her?"

"Ramona's not important. Who killed her is!" snapped Carruthers irritably.

"I'm sure she was important to someone." Nick said quietly.

Carruthers flushed, "Yes, I, I meant..."

"I know just what you meant."

"There's more to this than a murder." Carruthers finally spluttered.

"Really?" The question hung in the air, after a time Nick gave a wry smile shook his head and ground his cigarette out.

"If you've no more questions I think I'll be going," he made to stand but Carruthers leapt to his feet.

"You'll be going nowhere until you tell me all you know about this."

"I already have. What I think you want is my help, you just don't know how to ask for it. How about you tell me why you were watching Ramona and maybe I can help you fill in some of the gaps?" The younger man paced the room, shooting glances at Nick, before finally settling behind the chair.

"What I'm about to tell you is confidential. Cortez was Spanish, on the surface of it, a Republican sympathiser from Madrid, working over here as a dancer." Nick nodded, "We have reason to believe though, that, that was a cover and her real loyalty lay slightly farther to the right. She came to London from Italy and had plenty of opportunity to mix with the fascists there in her role as a nightclub entertainer. We're not sure if she may have been turned to the cause there, or indeed sent there by elements in Madrid. As you are only too aware, the Soho demimonde gives people the opportunity to mix with all kinds of foreign elements and it's devilishly hard to keep an eye on it all." He sat down in exasperation.

"We've got Italians, Spanish, French, Swiss, Jews, God forbid, even Germans multiplying in the streets of Soho, drinking together in bars, all bringing in strange ideas of nationalism, religious fervour, bolshevism, any other kind of 'ism' you can mention and all kinds of strange customs. It will not have escaped your notice that Europe seems to be heading towards a tense period once more. My job is to try and monitor all these types, it's near impossible."

"I shouldn't think everyone that's come here is looking to overthrow our government, or their own, some people actually like the freedom they get here." Nick observed.

"And that's the kind of thinking that's dangerous. We've already had the war to end all wars, we can't afford another."

"Economically or idealistically?" Nick asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Both. The point is, we're trying to observe a multitude of elements, most of whom seem to cooperate and fall out faster than we can keep up. It's bad enough that these people are fermenting trouble in their homelands but some of them may be even plotting outrages here as part of some wider game, we just don't know."

"And Ramona was a lead?"

"She was moving in circles that brought her to our attention, specifically with some of the German company she was keeping. We're increasingly worried about the situation in Germany and in particular the aims of some factions with respect to Britain."

"Do you know the names of anyone she met?"

"Yes, we observed her talking to men affiliated with the Italian government and with the German national socialists on two occasions at clubs." To Carruthers' obvious astonishment, Nick let out a laugh.

"Talking to men? She was a nightclub hostess."

"Quite, but these men were not savoury types."

"Most men in nightclubs aren't." observed Nick dryly.

"Something you would know all about."

"You know what I think? I think you're clutching at straws because you're frightened of what you don't know. Maybe Ramona was a lead, maybe she wasn't, but when you heard I'd reported the murder you leapt it because it slotted into place because of my past. You hoped if you leaned on me you might learn something new. Or, should I say, something, because you seem to have an awful lot of nothing at the moment."

Carruthers shuffled his feet. "It's complicated. We don't want to compromise what we've got."

"You don't appear to have an awful lot." Nick sniffed.

"We have you."

"I already told you..." Carruthers waved his hand impatiently.

"Irrelevant. You can help us, you're trained in this, you know these streets, these people, the clubs and bars they go to."

"I was cashiered."

"Think of your duty man!"

"I did my duty from 1916 onwards, more than my fair share," Nick said quietly, "so don't talk to me about duty. Besides duty doesn't pay the bar tabs."

"Ah, now we get to the crux of it. I forgot, you spend your time swilling around the West end in a haze of liquor, those must be some awfully large tabs."

"Exactly."

"Why does a man like you walk away from the King's commission? For what? To spend your time skulking around the West End with gangsters and immigrants," he shook his head, "an officer," he sneered, "slumming it. I don't get it."

"You don't have to get it."

"It helps me if I do get it, why aren't you sticking with your own kind?"

"I had enough of what you'd call my own kind in the war. Have you been to war?" Nick let the question hang enjoying the fleeting look of discomfort on Carruthers' face before he brusquely changed the subject.

"I'll have to get authorisation, but I'll offer you a weekly wage of half pay from what you were on. Cash."

"Half?" Nick shook his head.

"Look, this might be a chance for you to get back in the game, look at you, early thirties already washed up and washed out, living off a pension and scratching around for work from petty gangsters and their molls. This could give you something worthwhile."

"You presume to know an awful lot about what I consider worthwhile Mr Carruthers. Someone is already dead, I have no intention of joining them."

"Really. I'm told you don't remember getting home last night. No one saw you after you left the Black Horse pub dead drunk just before midnight. You can't even tell me where you were apart from at home, on your own. You could have killed her."

"Could of, we both know that, but didn't."

"Funny, our man's at your apartment, he just found the gun there that was used to shoot Julia Cortez..."

Nick thrust his hands into his trouser pockets and felt the comforting smooth warmth of his brass knuckleduster. He had to fight the urge to smash it into Carruthers' face. He calmed himself. "You wouldn't."

"And I wonder if your companion Miss De Vere would be quite so keen if she knew what happened in Vienna, and why you had to leave the FO quite so soon. Not to mention some of the very patriotic, but thoroughly nasty things you did before that. "You know how this works Mr Valentine. Hell, are you even sure you didn't do it? I'm not."

Nick felt his jaw twitch and he was suddenly aware of the pressure on clenched teeth. He exhaled with a hiss of air. Carruthers had voiced something that Nick had been wrestling with since he stumbled onto the body in the alley way. He didn't think he'd done it, but he had to admit, the possibility existed, only that would have made no sense, but then experience told him death rarely did. What price his own piece of mind?

"Well, in that case, I suppose I've got myself a job." Nick replied after what felt an age.

"Good. Find out what you can. I can give you some names; Jurgen Platt, German, closest known associate of Cortez is someone we're interested in at this point. His known associates, Bruno Manzelli, political consul at the Italian embassy, Gunther Braun, German also. Gunther and Jurgen

share a flat and run an import export business from an office in Soho, with a warehouse in Wapping. However, you're most likely to find them at the Blue Rose club. You know it?" Nick's face gave nothing away, but his blood chilled, Clara, his girlfriend worked at the Blue Rose. She'd been working there last night.

"I know it," he said quietly. "Have you searched Ramona's flat?"

"Of course. We've been over it with a fine toothcomb, it's clean. Find out what you can. I want you to report only to me, we'll meet at the Fitzroy Tavern on a Friday, when it's busy, the artists bar downstairs, six tonight. I'll have your money for you next time we meet. Any questions?" Nick shook his head.

"Just so you're clear, I don't trust you. We'll be watching."

"The feeling's mutual," replied Nick, standing and moving to the door.

"Oh, one more thing."

"What?" Nick paused with his palm on the door handle.

"The body had been searched, but they missed this," Carruthers held out a small tattered piece of paper, eyes narrowed. Nick took it. His stomach lurched. Scrawled on it in barely legible writing was Nick's address. He nonchalantly stuffed the note in his pocket.

"Any idea why she had that?"

"None at all."

"Of course. We'll be watching," Carruthers flashed that thin-lipped insincere smile.

Nick nodded. He headed out the door, feeling Carruthers' eyes on his back. He needed fresh air, needed it now. A prickling sensation of dread was already rising like nauseating bile, bitter in his dry mouth. The handwriting on the note was his own.

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