

THE BLACK HAT



Gabriola, BC Canada V0R 1X4

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The Black Hat

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DEDICATED TO JUDY

THE BLACK HAT

BOOK ONE
of the
Noir Intelligence Series

A Novel

H.B. Dumont

CHAPTER 1

Alexandra Belliveau had forgotten how much she missed the serenity of the lowlands and the Ardennes. The swaying of the train and the cadence of the wheels on the tracks had lulled her to sleep as a child on those many trips she had taken with her mother, Maria, between Luxembourg City and Dieppe and other locations on the Normandy coast. There they had stayed for days, sometimes weeks. Something about the coach's warmth and movement also triggered memories of returning from trips to Montigny-lès-Metz, in the Moselle Valley, where they had stayed for several weeks.

As the train drew closer to Luxembourg, the signs announcing the stations – Namur, Libramont and Arlon – created context like an artist's preliminary brushstrokes on a blank canvas. The landmarks of the passing countryside and villages were becoming clearer as the ground mist retreated with the warmth of the mid-summer morning sun. Memories of her childhood were gradually revealed as if seen for the first time without the gnawing of incessant migraines. Yet the faint scent of ubiquitous trepidation and accompanying grief lingered.

Her *joie de vivre* from those childhood times had since been beset by the accumulation of hapless events that conjured a raft of unsolicited responses. Some were quiet but not quieting. All too often, she had heard it in the deafening silence and seen it in the blinding shards of muted memories.

There were nights when she did not sleep, would not allow herself to close her eyes. As long as she stayed awake thinking about her mother, she would not lose her or be left to fend for herself like a fawn that had witnessed a hunter take its mother. The law of the

jungle. Rise to the circumstance or fall prey. She was her mother's daughter – *de l'audace, encore de l'audace, et toujours de l'audace* – audacity, more audacity, and always audacity.

She took a slow, deep breath to settle her uneasiness, but her doubts remained and with them, prolonged apprehension.

“The truths of those times are masked in the mists of the Moselle,” her mother had said when Alexandra asked what her mother had done when she was younger. “Your roots and destiny are those of Charlemagne. In them you will discover your strengths and unearth the truths.”

But at this moment, she was just thankful that the modern Eurail first class passenger cars were far more comfortable and had more amenities than the old coach cars of her childhood, a few of which were still standing on abandoned laybys. Were they purposely parked there as reminders, like poppies in Flanders Field, lest we forget those times?

Alexandra would soon realize just how prophetic and ominous her mother's words and these images were. The consequences of harrowing questions remain, decades after the event.

She had felt safe growing up in Luxembourg in the late 1950s and early '60s, living with her uncle and aunt who loved her as if she was their own daughter. But she was not. She missed her mother – her *Maman* – and yearned for the warmth of her touch during those long periods of separation. She mostly missed those tender moments when her mother would lovingly brush her hair while softly singing fairy-tale verses from her own childhood.

Her uncle and aunt had both been schoolteachers. He was proficient in maths, which ran in the family. Her mother could do mental gymnastics with numbers, as could Alexandra. Her aunt taught social sciences. Both tutored her after she returned from accompanying her mother on what were described as business trips.

Their home was situated in a middle-class district of

Luxembourg City on rue Michel Welter. The neighbourhood was south of the colossal fortification of the old city with its commanding cathedral adorned with knobby spires and turreted towers, sentinels which cast furtive shadows over the city.

During the Second World War, the old city had not suffered the level of devastation at the hands of the Nazi invaders that had befallen areas of Holland, Belgium and France. Her mother explained that the Nazis had spared Luxembourg because they believed it was part of the old pre-Westphalia Prussia and the inhabitants were closer Germanic cousins.

Alexandra knew that although Germany had been defeated, the Nazi Party had not. She had recently been involved in the investigation of a murder perpetrated by Fourth Reich neo-Nazis with links to the United States. This nefarious organization was well funded by anonymous sources with roots back to the Third Reich. Interpol had been involved in the homicide case spearheaded by the CIA because of a possible al-Qaeda terrorist connection to the Middle East. The case had become high profile since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. MI6 was also tracking neo-Nazi activities.

She would later reflect on just how eerily predictive these events would be as her world became entwined in the habitual intrigue of global intelligence – espionage, and counterintelligence or spy-on-spy espionage. The latter was renowned for its frequently lethal consequences parlayed by agents of the CIA and MI6, and by her mother who had worked in French counterintelligence. These relationships would lure Alexandra and others into this deadly sphere like moths to a flame.

“Run! Run! That was the impossible shot. You saved my life.” Her mother’s words and images of her bloodied face filled Alexandra’s memory with persistent flashbacks and haunting nightmares.

“Ticket, madame,” the conductor asked. His demanding tone and looming presence amplified Alexandra’s apprehension and made her heart pound. She stared at the imposing, bespectacled man who stood beside her. She squeezed an imaginary pistol grip as she gasped for breath.

“I’m sorry to have startled you, madame. Are you all right?” the conductor asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Here it is.”

The conductor could not help but note the alarm in her response. He forced a reassuring smile as he returned her Eurail pass.

Some memories are like arctic wolves, she thought. You can lock them up but you can’t silence their howls.



HE GLARED INTO THE MIRROR, SPEAKING ALOUD although alone.

“I will wear the cherry red lipstick with my blonde wig. That is what I always wear when I enter because it makes me feel strong. I will do the same tomorrow. No one will recognize me but I will be able to identify Maria’s daughter, Alexandra, and those last people on my list, Maria’s friends from the *Maquis*.”

He paused in gratified reflection.

“It was much easier to put them out of their misery when I was younger because I could do it all – the planning, the execution and the silent, disguised escape. But now I have to rely on a select few of my subordinates to hunt them down. Yet I can still complete the final solution. I have done it so many times over the years. I am a faithful Nazi, dedicated to the Fourth Reich that I have inherited. It is my sworn duty to put the others out of their misery, like all the female cats in the barn who lapped at my special milk. They were all weak but I am strong.”

CHAPTER 2

The region defined much of who Alexandra was. Her mother often spoke of the hardships of the pre-war years and particularly of the Depression that she had experienced as a child. In contrast, Alexandra had grown up in what had been described as the golden fifty years of the latter part of the century. The standard of living in Western Europe had been on a steadily upward trajectory since the end of the war. American and Canadian military occupation forces and their families who lived in northeastern France close to the German border had provided a much-needed monetary boost to the economy or at least until President de Gaulle had, on very short notice, ordered the NATO occupation forces out of France in the mid '60s.

Her mother had been employed in some capacity with these Allies, although Alexandra never really knew what she did until later in life. They had money and Alexandra couldn't remember wanting for anything materially. Life with her mother was just transient and incomplete. Perhaps that was why she didn't mind continually moving in her own career as a forensic psychologist to Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux and, most recently, Amsterdam.

She enjoyed travelling to international conferences, particularly those in the United States. There she established a network of professional affiliations. She seized opportunities to broaden her experience which, in retrospect, had helped advance her career. But they had taken a toll on her marriage.

Work had become her partner, filling the void left by the absence of her husband. In the last several years, their relationship had deteriorated exponentially. It could best be described as turbulent and tempestuous. The echo of those routine quarrels persisted like a virulent infection.

When asked about her family, Alexandra responded, “Oh, the kids are doing fine. Collette, my daughter, is attending the Université de Paris pursuing a graduate degree in psychology. My son, Marc, is working in the aerospace industry.”

And then she would pause momentarily before mentioning that her husband, André, was enjoying retirement after a career as a pathologist. She had realized that enjoying retirement was a safe response because there would be no follow-up enquiries but just smiles and perhaps a comment on how fortunate she was to have had such a wonderful, successful family life and how proud she must be of their accomplishments.

“Thank you,” she would reply. “I am really quite blessed.”

The conversation would move on. Few would detect the distance in her demeanour and the detached tone in her voice.

Ah, you are not perceptive, she would mutter to herself, because if you were, you would know the bitter reality of my life.

Sometimes the truth is best left unspoken.

Alexandra had a closeness with Collette beyond the maternal, something absent in her relationship with Marc. Like her mother had recognized in Alexandra that ancient gift of intuition, Alexandra knew that Collette had the aptitude to recognize the implicit.

While studying for an undergraduate degree in psychology, Collette posed questions to her mother that demonstrated the depth of her enquiry into the realm of the spiritual, often mystical. They had frequent debates on the merits of Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian personality archetypes. More often, on the heels of these academic excursions into human behaviour, Collette would pause, occasionally in mid-sentence, and go down the White Rabbit’s tunnel in search of the unknown.

Alexandra recognized these explorations because they had been part of her own escapism as a young girl. As she matured in her own career as a forensic psychologist, she had transformed these

metaphysical abilities into the semi-structured discipline of investigative enquiry.

Like mother, like daughter, she ruminated. *Collette has inherited the gift.*

Pondering her immediate circumstances, she concluded that the retirement literature was accurate. We reflect on life as we approach the end of our working career, meandering from the present to the past and back again, and into the future. *Yes, some memories, like arctic wolves, do need to remain caged and silenced.*

But what would she do in retirement? Alexandra was certain she would not retire to muse like a monk or a nun. The thought of moving out of André's house in Paris and into a home of her own had crossed her mind on more than one occasion, and even more so recently.

She could move to the south of France. Although she had never been to Carcassonne in the shadow of the Pyrénées, her mother had told her stories about her grand-maman who had lived in that region during the war.

"In those times, your grand-maman travelled many nights between Narbonne and Carcassonne," her mother explained.

Alexandra had learned only recently that during the latter years of the war, her mother had worked alongside her grand-maman with the French Resistance, the *Maquis*, smuggling downed Allied pilots and air crew who were on the run from the Nazi SS across the Pyrénées to Spain. Sometime in 1943, her mother had moved to Courseulles-sur-Mer on the Normandy coast because her identity might have been compromised and revealed to the Gestapo by a collaborator. There, her mother stayed with a lady who was referred to as her aunt.

Meanwhile her grand-maman had moved to Ver-sur-Mer in Normandy half an hour west of Alexandra's maman. They felt that it was best to be detached in the event either identity had been

revealed. The anxiety of separation had begun. They could still visit as circumstances allowed but it wasn't the same.

In Normandy her mother had established contact with an American agent of the Office of Strategic Services and other Allied military agents who were working with the French Underground to prepare for the Allied invasion the following year. In the latter months of the war, her mother had continued to work with the OSS and thereafter the CIA. These liaisons would start to affect Alexandra's life now in ways she could never have imagined.

Stories circulated about *le fantôme*, the ghost. Before her death, her grand-maman had briefly spoken to Alexandra about this elusive member of the *Maquis*, and of a police detective who had previously been part of the French Underground. After the war, *le fantôme* had possibly lived in Alsace-Lorraine close to the border with Germany and Switzerland.

Alexandra felt there might have been a post-war connection between *le fantôme* and this detective capitaine. Was it just a rumour? She never discovered the whole story.

Now that would be a great retirement challenge, she mused – finding the truth, finding le fantôme.

A shiver ran down her spine.

“You don't talk about what went on during those times.”

The words of her mother and grand-maman resonated in her mind, once again reminding her of the need for uncompromising caution and attention to consequences.



“BONJOUR” – HELLO.

“J'ÉCOUTE” – I'M LISTENING.

“Я БУДУ НА СВЯЗИ - YA BYL V kontakte.” – I HAVE BEEN IN CONTACT.

“ДА. ПРИНЯТО - DA. PRIZNANNYY” – YES. ACKNOWLEDGED.

CHAPTER 3

On one occasion only, on the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the end of the war in Europe, did her mother allude to anything concrete about those times. It was 1994 and they were in Normandy attending the D-Day celebrations. Alexandra surmised that the sights and sounds of the celebrations had brought back some distant memories of those times that perhaps her mother had forgotten or had purposely stored in the deep recesses of her mind.

“A penny for your thoughts?” Alexandra recalled asking.

“Thoughts are precious and not for sale,” her mother had replied.

Alexandra was content with the subtle message. Her mother had great wisdom and would spend many hours explaining why it was best to be more curious and less certain, to be more pensive and less provocative, and to pause and quietly reflect.

There were others who attended the 50th anniversary celebrations who appeared to have had similar experiences to her mother. Alexandra’s inquisitive, intuitive mind had been working overtime on that day of celebration.

Had they known each other or worked together during the war? If these associations existed, they did not acknowledge them. Or was it their training to purposefully ignore?

They made subtle nods or fleeting eye contact. Alexandra had learned in her training as a psychologist to recognize such elusive but nonetheless telling behaviour.

These observations and brief remarks from her mother jogged other memories for Alexandra, alluding to some less explicit and more disquieting details of the past.

Her mother never spoke much about her father, only that he

might also have been with the *Maquis*. When Alexandra was in her early teens, her mother mentioned that she had inherited her sixth sense from her own father. It was what her mother called “a sensation of the mind.”

Her mother had been correct. Alexandra had advanced quickly in her career as a psychologist and police profiler because she always listened to her intuition or her *shrew* as she called it. Coupled with her audacity, she had solved numerous cold cases, much to the chagrin of many of her male counterparts who could not fathom her uncanny skill in police investigations.

In their ossified, testosterone-laden minds there was no room for what they saw as whimsical, irrational girlish pursuits. Their discipline was objective. Their training was research-based in applied forensic science.

On those occasions when Alexandra was experiencing one of her sensations of the mind, a male colleague often quoted Joe Friday, the lead character in the American TV police detective series, *Dragnet* – “Give me the facts, ma’am, just the facts.”

Alexandra knew that facts were essential and were derived from the science, but how you got the facts was a combination of the science and the sensations of the mind that she knew was wisdom older than consciousness itself. She would not attempt to defend her actions to her male colleagues. Instead, she would smile confidently, knowing that the combination of the two would enable her to identify the requisite knowledge. With this skill, she was able to engage in the conversations that mattered most to her superiors.

Thinking back, she realized she was the only woman in her training cohort but she didn’t mind that. Because most criminals were male, she learned more about male motivation from her meandering in the recesses of the male mind. That exposure provided her with greater knowledge than anything she might have learned from becoming mired in the minutia of cleavage cackling, which

tended to be the nattering pastime of narcissistic junior females. This self-assurance contributed to the determination she depended on at times like this.

With the thought of her pending retirement in the forefront of her mind, these recollections of happier times helped to soften the foreboding obligations that had consumed her since receiving the news of her mother's death. Until the conductor announced her destination, she would enjoy her memories in solitude.

The reality of the funeral and her duties as the executor of her mother's estate would impose themselves on her soon enough. More pressing was what she would say in the eulogy about her mother, Maria, a member of the secretive *Maquis*. After nearly sixty years, would it be permissible to talk about those times or were some things best left to subtle nods and glances?

"Luxembourg City!"

The conductor's sharp announcement jolted Alexandra out of the tranquility of her all-too-short trip down memory lane.

As the train came to a stop under the canopy, she gazed out of the window across the cavernous, abandoned roundhouse where old steam engines had been maintained from when travel was more leisurely and life was simpler. She saw the broken windows and faded smoke-stained red letters "Luxembourg" painted on a white background, now faded yellow, on the curving brick wall that had greeted passengers decades before.

Now a new roundhouse, set back from the tracks, had no welcoming message. Instead, a standard aluminum Eurail blue sign with white letters on the modern station platform announced the location.

New is good, she supposed, with some reservation.

There was a timelessness in the grandeur and elegance of the station's traditional Moselle neo-baroque revival architecture, with its high vaulted ceilings and a monolithic clock tower. A certain

unspoken yet recognized sophistication and charm in what the French might describe as a *je ne sais quoi* was revealed in the refined traditional craftsmanship.

Practical affairs brusquely confronted her as she walked through the station's cathedral doors onto the bustling pedestrian-filled sidewalk adjoining the multi-traffic lanes of Place de la Gare.

It would have been comforting to have had some support at this time, she thought.

But André was unable to or simply chose not to accompany her for his own reasons. He had commented many times over the years that his mother-in-law was an interfering nuisance.

The reality was that Alexandra preferred to be far removed from the distraction of his presence. Privately, she referred to him as the emotional vampire. She was tired enough without having to attend to the droning of her husband's constant demands on her time and energy.

Collette and Marc would arrive in time for the funeral.

Her intuition told her that she would find strength elsewhere.

CHAPTER 4

Alexandra checked into the Hôtel Novotel on rue du Laboratoire, a short walk from the station. It was quieter because it was off the main thoroughfare and only a ten-minute walk to her appointment with Father Luke at l'Église du Sacré Coeur.

She stopped momentarily in front of the open doors of the cathedral. *The contradiction of faith*, she ruminated – to listen to her *shrew* or to the voice of her Catholic faith, her God.

Just inside the entrance were the familiar marble holy water fountains. She dipped her fingers in and crossed herself. Father Luke stood on her right.

“Come in, my child,” Father Luke greeted her. “It has been too long since you have entered this house of God and received his blessing.”

“Yes, Father, it has been a long time and I miss the peace which those benedictions had given me and my family. This House of God was a sanctuary for us in those challenging times.”

“Then enter, my child, and you will find peace once again at this time of grief. Jesus brings comfort to those who suffer.”

Out of habit, Alexandra walked to the pew where she had sat so many Sundays ago. She knelt and prayed briefly as Father Luke looked over her as a shepherd watches over his sheep. The familiarity and support brought her a deeper level of inner peace.

“Let us proceed to my office in the rectory.”

Father Luke led the way to the front of the church, through the side entrance, into the courtyard that connected the church to the priest's house, and to the front door of the rectory.

Alexandra felt a little uneasy. Parishioners would only enter the priest's house via the back door where the housekeeper met

them. The front door was reserved solely for high-level religious officials such as the bishop or other important community members including the mayor. Recognizing her uneasiness, Father Luke gave Alexandra a reassuring smile and motioned her to step inside.

They entered his office to the right of the vestibule. The walls were covered with photographs of Father Luke's predecessors. As she scanned the stoic poses, Father Luke commented that they reminded him of a rogue's gallery. Alexandra thought that they bordered the office like a priest's pantheon. She was drawn to the second to last photograph. The facial features and expression were similar to Father Luke's. But perception was just that, an individual interpretation.

The housekeeper entered with a tray of refreshments as they settled themselves around an antique mahogany table that showed the wear of many visitors. Father Luke described the service and asked whether she had any special requests for hymns or prayers that her mother particularly liked.

"Not really," she replied.

Alexandra hadn't given that aspect of the service much thought. Instead, she was hoping that it would be structured in such a way that she would only have to follow the order of service. Other funeral services she had attended appeared to be similar in format.

Father Luke mentioned he had received many inquiries about the date and time of the service. If that was any indication, he calculated that the service would be well attended with parishioners and friends locally and from other places where her mother had worked and established a network of contacts. These included the Normandy coast, the Moselle Valley, the Pyrénées region, the lowlands of Holland and Belgium, and Paris, in addition to England and the United States.

From the tone of his voice and from what he described,

Alexandra deduced that some attendees would be old associates from those earlier times in her mother's life.

Alexandra again pondered what she should say in the eulogy. Should she mention the *Maquis* or leave the past to the historians?

On the horns of this dilemma, she recalled her mother once saying, "There is more truth in stories than detail in facts." If she simply told a story about her mother, others could fill in the gaps in the facts as they wished.

As she left the rectory, she sensed that God and not her intuition, her *shrew*, had spoken. Her dilemma was resolved. The foreboding weight had been lifted. She would not mention the *Maquis* in her eulogy. She would, instead, leave history to the historians.

CHAPTER 5

“The funeral service was wonderful and the story you told about your mother was the most compelling eulogy I have ever heard,” a rotund grey-haired gentleman commented to Alexandra at the reception. He then nervously extended his stubby hand to her.

“You may not remember me but I was your neighbour at 45, rue Michel Welter. I remember your aunt and uncle, your mother and you. Your mother was a kind, giving person, but a bit of a mystery, if I might say. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of assistance to you during these trying times,” he added.

She detected a slight disquiet in his voice. His eyes appeared to be searching for something she did not know.

“Ah, yes, I do remember you, monsieur. Thank you for your gracious words.”

As she spoke, the image of an enigmatic, curious, almost comedic character from a Greek tragedy entered her mind.

Weird, she thought, where did that come from? Perhaps from the stress of the day.

“And your children, I briefly spoke with your son. You must be so proud of him as I am sure your mother would have been. I saw your daughter but have not yet had the opportunity to pass along my condolences. And your husband, I did not see him. But there are over one hundred who have come to pay their respects. It is understandable that I have missed him.”

“Yes,” Alexandra replied, “I have been blessed with my children.”

As she paused to formulate a polite reason for André’s absence, she was rescued by one of her close friends from Amsterdam who,

seeing the awkwardness of the moment, imposed herself in the conversation.

“Alexandra, how are you? Oh, am I interrupting your conversation with this gentleman? I am sorry. Please forgive me. Perhaps we can chat later.”

She gently squeezed Alexandra’s hand as if to say, “Don’t worry. I am here to protect you from prying questions.”

Father Luke approached calmly yet deliberately.

“Excuse me, Alexandra, there is someone you must speak with in private,” he said quietly.

Alexandra excused herself and followed Father Luke to a side office, as a sheep would follow the shepherd.

“May I introduce you to Madame Deschaume? She is an old acquaintance of your mother. It is important that you listen to what she has to say. I will leave you.”

Father Luke’s reserved demeanour in the short introduction left Alexandra with an ominous feeling. This time, it was her *shrew* and not her God speaking to her.

“Please call me Simone,” Madame Deschaume said in a soft voice that had a mysterious inflection.

“I am old – almost 78 – and my doctor tells me I do not have many more seasons on this Earth. That is why I must tell you of the days when I first met your mother in Carcassonne. You must realize we were very young then. I was just fifteen and your mother could not have been any older. Being so young, the Nazis were less likely to suspect we were part of the French Resistance. Did your mother mention it is still not wise to talk of those times?”

“Yes, she did, many times,” Alexandra responded.

“You must be very careful with what I am about to tell you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. Please carry on.”

“Let me take you back to 1943. It was the way we were in those

times. We did not tell each other who we were or where we lived. We often used a *nom de guerre*, a war name, so if one of us was captured and tortured by the Gestapo, we could not divulge the identity of others in the Resistance, the *Maquis*. Then came a time when many of us were being captured and executed by the Nazi SS. Someone had betrayed us. We never knew for sure, not even if it was a man or a woman. A downed RAF pilot was in our protection at the time. Your mother and I helped him cross the Pyrénées to Andorra. From there, others guided him into Spain, Basque Land and eventually back to England. He named the mysterious collaborator *Thon*. He said in English the word ‘thon’ was an abbreviation for ‘that one.’ Thereafter, we just used the expression, Thon, when referring to this betraying collaborator.”

“Was Thon from the south of France, the Midi-Pyrénées region?” Alexandra asked.

“We never really knew but some suspected that Thon might have been from Alsace-Lorraine, close to the border with Germany. I later heard that Thon might have had family in southern Germany around Baden-Baden, or possibly Metz. You may recall from your history lessons in school that during the period of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, family alliances changed as the borders moved. Even today, those deeply held beliefs influence behaviours and guide the unspoken word.”

Alexandra’s face confirmed her understanding and appreciation of the gravity of what Madame Deschaume had just revealed to her.

Simone continued, “Did your mother mention *le fantôme*?”

“Yes, she did, and so did my grand-maman, but only briefly.”

“None of us ever met *le fantôme* but we were told by others that *le fantôme* did not believe that Thon was from Midi-Pyrénées because his accent was too harsh, perhaps Prussian or Swiss-German. But I never knew for sure. It was very confusing and during uncertain times that was dangerous, not knowing or knowing too much.

It was just before the Gestapo raids that a few of us became aware of the danger. We all moved away quickly, your mother to the Normandy region. I never knew where your grand-maman went. I only knew about your mother because I also left Carcassonne for the Normandy coast, to Le Havre. Your mother and I had some communication when preparing for the Allied invasion that took place in June 1944.”

“I heard there was an American who parachuted into Normandy,” Alexandra queried.

“Yes, you heard correctly. This American was an OSS officer. The OSS was the Office of Strategic Services which, after the war, became the American CIA. Those were dark, menacing times.”

“*Le fantôme*. Do you know what happened to him? And Thon...?”

“I have no hard proof but was told that *le fantôme* was in the Alsace-Lorraine region still looking for Thon, as were others, but that was a long time ago when you were a baby. I also heard that Thon was stalking female members of the *Maquis* and murdering them. That is why we were always careful not to talk of those times. And you, Alexandra, must also be very wary for your own safety and for the sake of your family. We believe that Thon may be still alive. Thon would be closer to my age and, if he’s alive, he’s still dangerous. That is why I am telling you this.”

“I didn’t understand the magnitude of the threat,” Alexandra reflected. “My mother just warned me not to talk of those times.”

“You may hear about a member of the *Maquis* who became a policeman after the war. I heard he became a very good investigator, but alcohol became his nemesis and ultimately sabotaged his early career. His nightmares of those times during the war may have haunted him too often. He solved many cases because he had a special knack for finding criminals. He may have crossed paths

with other former members of the *Maquis* but I cannot confirm this.”

“Do you know if my mother knew him?”

“She may have, perhaps well. Your mother became a French Intelligence operator after the war and worked with the Allies, mostly Americans, Canadians and British, initially hunting Nazi war criminals. Later, she became involved in French Counterintelligence and Counter-terrorism. I believe she maintained contact and worked closely with the American OSS officer she met in Normandy in 1944 when he joined the CIA. She also worked with a British MI6 agent.”

“Thank you so much for telling me this information, Madame Deschaume. I can now appreciate the need for sensitivity and caution. I never knew exactly what my mother did. All this makes sense now. It explains the reason for all the moves and the mysterious business trips to the Moselle Valley and Normandy, and the occasional trip to the south.”

“I saw you and your mother in Normandy in 1994 at the 50th anniversary. Your mother and I did not speak or even acknowledge each other for fear that Thon might be there and stalking us. He may be here, today. It is bad to still live in fear after all these years. That is why we do not talk of those times and I caution you, Alexandra, to be very careful.”

A cold shiver ran down Alexandra’s spine at the possibility of Thon being there.

“Yes, I remember seeing you, and that my mother reminded me to be wary on our way to Normandy and again when we left.”

“Your mother and I met several weeks after the anniversary celebration at her request. I promised her I would tell you the story of those times and about Thon, if she died before me. That is why we are talking now. Father Luke was to be our liaison.”

Simone stood up and with a reassuring smile, extended her

gloved hand. As Alexandra felt her firm grip, she thought, *Madame Deschaume, you are a lady of elegance. You may be frail in body now but you would have been a force to be reckoned with in your youth, and even today. Thon would be wise not to tangle with you.*

Alexandra thanked her for passing along missing pieces of the puzzle from those times.

CHAPTER 6

By the time Alexandra returned to the funeral reception, some of the attendees had left. She spoke with Collette who told her that those who departed had passed along their condolences and signed the guest book with brief messages.

Alexandra paused to glance at some of the notes and gather her thoughts after the encounter with Madame Deschaume and before engaging with other guests.

“AV, how are you?”

Alexandra’s heart immediately jumped as she caught her breath. There was only one person who had ever called her AV and that was when she was thirteen years old, temporarily living in Montigny-lès-Metz on one of those extended business trips she had taken with her mother. Could it be? She looked up and saw an older yet still youthful and strikingly handsome man who had been her first puppy love.

His dress and deportment were exquisite and complemented his confident six-foot muscular physique. She was struck by his clothes, a tailored Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé-designed suit, Egyptian cotton French cut white shirt complete with pearl cuff links inlaid with miniature gold Eiffel Towers and a matching gold and pearl tie tack attached to a silk tie. He might have just walked off a fashion runway in Paris, Rome, London or New York.

She recognized superior quality in men’s clothing from boutiques along the Champs-Élysées whose proprietors greeted sophisticated shoppers. This level of quality was in stark contrast to André’s bohemian peasant wardrobe of mismatched frayed polyester clothes purchased from aisles of on-sale racks in second-hand warehouse outlets. To even suggest that André’s taste in clothing

was *via media* would be a huge exaggeration. His investment in their mismatched marriage was also polyester and frayed.

“Paul,” she gasped with astonishment. Her immediate urge was to hug him but she held out her hand instead.

“How are you? How did you know about the funeral? Did you travel far? Do you have time to get together before you have to leave?”

She had so many questions. The surge of adrenaline from hearing his voice and seeing him again had excited her in a way she only imagined in those fantasy-filled private moments. She felt a blush on her cheeks and neck that she had not experienced for many years.

She realized she was still holding his hand. Her palm was moist. There would have been an advantage in wearing gloves, like Madame Deschaume, to mask the emotions on such occasions, if not just to be elegant. But she had not broken eye contact either and you could not mask those emotions with a glove, well perhaps with sunglasses, but not inside a church reception hall.

Her thoughts were racing, as was her heart. She needed to regain her composure but that meant letting go of his hand. She did not want to let go.

Here she was, like an awkward teenager, not knowing how to respond maturely to strong hormonal urges.

Paul’s immediate thought upon seeing her after all these years was *foxy lady!* But that would remain a thought for the moment. He too was oblivious about their extended handshake and mutual eye contact.

With an almost critical tone, Alexandra asked, “Why didn’t you reply to my letters? I wrote to you several times.” Her question was terse and rebuffed him in one respect but was as inclusive as an endearing hug in another.

“I did reply but only to one letter. Why didn’t you answer my letters?” he asked in an equally assertive manner.

“Because I didn’t receive any replies to my letters. I thought you didn’t reply because you didn’t care or weren’t interested,” she shot back. “Did you address them to our home at 47, rue Michel Welter here in Luxembourg?”

Paul acknowledged the tattered piece of paper that Alexandra had written her rue Michel Welter address on all those years ago. Its existence in his wallet had been a talisman throughout the decades that marked their separation.

“Yes, that was the address you gave me just before you and your mother left Montigny-lès-Metz. I’ve kept it with me after all this time, with the faint hope that we would meet again. This morning, just before the funeral, I walked by your home. It was dilapidated and the shutters were broken. It looked abandoned. I didn’t know what had happened to you.”

“There are other guests I must speak with, Paul. Do you have time to meet later this evening?”

“Yes, of course. Where?”

“Do you know the courtyard where the Hôtel de Ville is, in the old city centre across the Viaduct?”

“I can find it,” he assured her.

“Across the courtyard, opposite the Hôtel de Ville, there is a coffee shop and restaurant, the Café Kaempff-Kohler. It is beside Café Beim Rénert. Can you meet me there for dinner?”

“Yes. What time?”

“How about 7:00 p.m.?”

“I’ll be there.”

Alexandra took a moment to compose herself before speaking with other guests but found herself distracted by the brief encounter with Paul and the prospect of an evening rendezvous with her first love.

“Who was that you were talking to, Maman?” Collette asked.

“An old friend, a colleague, we worked on a case together, and he was bringing me up to date on some recent facts that have come to light. We’ll need to meet after the reception so I won’t be able to have dinner with you and Marc at the hotel.”

She was always evasive when responding to questions about her work and associates so she had no problem being elusive now with Collette.

“That’s all right. We don’t have to meet, Maman. Marc said he had to leave and I met a friend who has invited me out to dinner. Is that fine?”

“Yes, that’s fine, dear, but be especially careful. Now go and have a wonderful time. It’s been a long day for you.”

Collette paused, tilted her head slightly and stared at her mother. “You have always asked me to be careful and I respect that. But rarely have you told me to be especially careful. Is there a particular reason? Is there something I should know?”

Alexandra reached out and firmly took hold of her hand. Collette recognized the gesture and the inherent message. There were other times when she had known that she needed to raise the radar higher and be more aware of her environment.

Collette never asked why but she knew caution was in order. That was part of her life, living under the same roof as a forensic psychologist who worked on gruesome criminal cases. Her mother kept most work at her office, but there were times when the cases closed in on their home like the hordes approaching the ramparts of the castle. During those times her mother would remind her that she needed SA – situational awareness.

As Collette turned to leave, she motioned to her mother.

“I almost forgot. A distinguished elderly English gentleman gave me a letter and told me to give it to you personally. He was adamant that I was not to leave it but to hand it to you. He emphasized

“personally.” So here it is. He said you would understand. He also wrote a condolence note in the guest book and signed it, Group Captain. . . . I can’t remember his name. But there were some initials after his name. They may have related to the military. Thinking back now, Maman, I felt that he might have known Grand-maman, perhaps during those times. When he shook my hand, there was something there. You know, the feeling.”

“Thank you, dear. Now have a good time, and. . . .”

Collette cut her off politely. “Yes, Maman, I know. I’ll be careful, extra careful.”

Alexandra put the letter in her pocket. She would read it later when she was less distracted.

After the last guest departed, she gathered up the other letters and cards and the guest book and thought to herself, *Another time constraint has been lifted from my shoulders and I’m now free to meet with Paul.*

Remaining on the to-do list was a big task – dealing with the estate, but it had no looming timeline, as she was both executor of the estate and sole beneficiary. She should send thank you notes to all those who left their condolences with their addresses. But that could wait too.

She took a deep breath then noticed Father Luke silently watching her. He approached and she thanked him for all his assistance, and especially for the introduction to Madame Deschaume. She spoke no further about what Simone had told her but sensed he knew that what needed to be said had been relayed.

He gave Alexandra a final blessing before she departed and reminded her she was one of God’s special children.

Did he know of her talents to differentiate the good from the bad? Was he aware of her attuned intuition, her *shrew*? Was that the reference to “special” in his blessing?

The reception had taken longer than anticipated because of her

meeting with Madame Deschaume. In addition, the large number of people who wished to speak with her in person extended individual conversation times.

The setting sun was casting long shadows as Alexandra departed. She walked briskly back to her hotel to shower and change. Immediate and most important decisions had to be made. What would she wear to meet Paul? Should she wear slacks or a dress? Or should she select a skirt and blouse with a jacket? After all, she was a professional lady with a long and distinguished career. Which shoes should she wear? She had not brought many with her. What should she do with her hair? Did she have time to shampoo and curl it? There was a hairdresser just around the corner from the hotel. And what about earrings or a necklace?

She was fretting like a nervous schoolgirl about to go on her first date. She didn't have to worry about all these things living with André because he never noticed and certainly never complimented her on her appearance. His manners were like his wrinkled, frayed polyester suits.

CHAPTER 7

As Paul sat waiting for Alexandra at the Café Kaempff-Kohler, a little girl walked across the square with her parents. The image flashed before him of another little girl lying face down in a ditch, her thin arms tied behind her back with barbed wire that had ripped into her wrists, and her light blue dress stained with blood that had oozed out of a bullet hole in the back of her head. His mouth dried as his heart began to pound, battling for space with his lungs that fought back in his ever-tightening chest cavity.

Du calme, du calme, he repeated to himself as he took slow deliberate breaths in an attempt to wrestle for possession of his mind and soul. He felt light-headed. In the depth of such mental duels, he was unable to recall a solitary image of his puppy love. Yet he could describe every vivid detail of the emaciated little girl in the blood-stained light-blue dress. He searched desperately for a distraction.

There it was. Alexandra was approaching. The setting sun created a glowing halo around her chestnut hair and accentuated every contour of her supple physique. Her luminous eyes captivated him. Her natural beauty absorbed him. Her closeness excited him. Her subtle scent embraced him. He stood and kissed her cheeks as they briefly embraced. Her presence replaced the image of the little girl in the light-blue bloodstained dress. He pulled the chair out for her.

Such etiquette was unknown to André, Alexandra lamented. How long had it been since she felt cared for in any special way? How long had she yearned for such a cherished moment even if fleeting? Was it just in fairy tales? She had retreated into the security of that sanctuary of make-believe often as a child and many times as an adult. But childhood fairy tales were just that, to be replaced by reality.

“You look wonderful, AV.”

“Do you remember, Paul, when you first called me AV?”

“I certainly do. When we first met in Montigny-lès-Metz all those years ago, I called you *mon petit chou-fleur* – my little cauliflower.”

“You have an excellent memory. I told you in no uncertain terms that I was not yours and I was not a cauliflower.”

“Yes, you certainly did. You then explained that your name was Alexandra Vanessa and that you had been named after your grand-maman. I replied that Alexandra Vanessa was a mouthful, so I would just call you AV.”

“Again, I compliment you on your memory. My job would be much easier if everyone I met had such accurate recall. I liked AV because it made me feel special. After that turbulent first *rencontre*, I liked you much better. You were the only one to ever call me AV, so when you greeted me as AV at the funeral reception, I was taken aback. I hope I didn’t appear impolite. If I did, I apologize.”

“On the contrary,” Paul replied, “you were just as I imagined after all these years, gracious, elegant, and, if I might add, most attractive. I was taken aback as much if not more than you were. You just mentioned that your job had to do with people’s memories. What have you been up to?”

“Please, you start, Paul. But first, how much time do you have? I have all evening as my children told me after the funeral service they have made their own plans for this evening. My son lives a carefree Pompeii life and my daughter less so but still quite independent.”

“I don’t have anything on my schedule either. Shall we order dinner before we start so we won’t be interrupted? Between the two of us, we have about eighty years to catch up on! Have you eaten here before and, if so, what do you recommend?”

A gentleman asking me what I recommend, she thought to herself. *This start to the evening is showing definite promise.*

"I recommend the beef bourguignon."

"One of my favourites," Paul replied. "You have excellent taste. And a wine, what is your favourite?"

"I've been exploring Burgundies, lately," Alexandra responded. "I lived in Dijon some time ago and gained an appreciation for the Pinot Noirs from the Morey St-Denis and Chambolle-Musigny districts. The Côtes du Rhône produces some superlative wines from just a few small vineyards. Well, there is some production of Pinot Noir in Alsace and the Loire Valley but they're not really comparable to those of Burgundy. What tempts your palate, Paul?"

"I'm impressed. We're too much alike. I've never lived in Dijon, but I spent several vacations touring the region from Gevrey-Chambertin south to Nuits-Saint-Georges. I've always enjoyed Pinot Noir, especially those from the higher elevations of the Côte d'Or that used to be reserved for the kings. Even Napoleon knew where the best wines from Burgundy could be found, and before him, the Cistercian and Benedictine monks knew the secrets of the calcium-rich soil. So that's settled."

"You know your wines. I've also hiked those slopes," Alexandra acknowledged with admiration in her voice.

"We can consider after-dinner drinks with our coffee and dessert. I see on the menu that they serve Rémy Martin. May I recommend this cognac if the occasion allows, perhaps with crème brûlée?"

"Absolutely."

She could not recall any time in her marriage when André had asked her what she liked. Instead, he just ordered whatever he wanted. For wine, he had a *patois* palate, always ordering a *verre de vin*, a glass of the house wine. André never knew what brandy tasted like, let alone cognac or an excellent cognac like Rémy.

He never once acknowledged her certification as a credentialed sommelier.

“Well then, let me begin, AV. The philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, said that life must be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward. So, I’ll start in Montigny-lès-Metz. You may remember that my father was a policeman in Montigny. Sometime after you and your mother left, he was promoted and we moved to Strasbourg. He did quite well there and was quickly promoted to capitaine. We then moved to Paris where he finished his career in the Criminal Investigation Division.”

“How long has he been retired?” Alexandra asked.

“Let me think. Ahhh... it has been too long for me to recall exactly. Why do you ask?”

“It’s nothing, sorry for interrupting,” Alexandra gently replied. “Carry on.”

“I attended the Université de Paris and completed an undergraduate degree in biochemistry. I liked the sciences but wanted another interest so I took courses in Latin and Greek studies. I really enjoyed reading the Greek tragedies – Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and so on. Learning Latin actually helped me with my French grammar that had only been fair until I entered university. But I digress.”

“I’m intrigued with your love and knowledge of the ancient arts and culture,” Alexandra exclaimed.

“I worked for a few years in a chemical lab before returning to university where I completed a graduate degree in biochemistry, specializing in pathogens carried in human blood. I graduated at the top of my class and was offered a job working in the police crime laboratory. I think my father may have had an influence. But I didn’t mind his meddling because I was able to work in a field that I enjoyed and was good at. I ultimately completed a PhD,

part-time while working. I just retired a couple of weeks ago. I'm actually on retirement leave for the next several weeks."

Not wanting to interrupt his story but seeking clarification, Alexandra asked, "Did you ever hear of *le fantôme* in the Moselle Valley or Alsace region who might have been with the French Resistance, the *Maquis*, during the war?"

"It sounds vaguely familiar. I think I might have heard rumours but never knew for sure. Although my memory is good, it's not that good. There was someone in the police station in Montigny-lès-Metz who was a bit different, according to my father. He had a special knack for solving cases and might have been working on a case involving the *Maquis*. When we were in Paris, I think my father spoke about it a few times. He might know more. Why do you ask?"

"Just an interest," Alexandra answered nonchalantly. "Where is your father now?"

"He's in Paris in a seniors' home. His health is poor after years of smoking and a diet too high in cholesterol. I'm surprised that my mother and I didn't die of lung cancer from all his second-hand smoke. He has the constitution of an old bull. Analyzing a sample of his blood would be a case and a half."

Paul paused for a sip of wine while gazing at Alexandra over the brim of his wine glass. Her beauty consumed the moment that lingered in boundless space. He had neither seriously looked at nor felt such attraction to another woman since taking his wedding vows. His thoughts at this moment were with his young love all those years ago and their first kiss. But they were just reflections of another time. He gathered his thoughts.

"I'm married with a couple of kids. My wife, Suzette, had been a lab technician but didn't work after she became pregnant. She was just content to stay at home and do nothing much except spend all my money shopping for what I don't really know."