

Jack Beaumont is the pseudonym of a former operative in the clandestine operations branch of the French foreign secret service, the DGSE. He joined ‘The Company’ after being an air force fighter pilot and later flying special operations and intelligence missions. In 2021 his debut book *The Frenchman* quickly became a bestseller and is now published internationally and in translation. *Dark Arena*, his second book, continues the story of French spy Alec de Payns. Beaumont’s background gives his novels a level of authenticity that few other spy thrillers have been able to achieve.



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DARK ARENA

JACK
BEAUMONT



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PAUL

Prague in early February wasn't all that bad, thought Paul Degarde, even for a southern Frenchman accustomed to the Mediterranean warmth. There was no snow on the ground in the Czech capital, but Degarde waited in the Jungmann Square Starbucks, where his toes wouldn't freeze. He'd been in his holding zone for forty minutes. He'd walked his safety route before arriving at the coffee shop, however last night's insomnia and the seven coffees he'd drunk were not calming. For now, he focused on not fidgeting or looking impatient, both 'tells' that watchers would look for.

At forty-four minutes, Degarde wrapped a plain scarf around his neck, covertly dismantled his phone and poured the pieces into his jacket pocket. Standing, he picked up a tourist camera from the table in front of him, dropped it in his other pocket, and emerged into the afternoon. The cold air tightened his jaw as he moved through Jungmann Square, his gait relaxed but his mind a laundry list of actions and contingencies. Paul Degarde may have been a fully commissioned case officer—an *officier traitant*, or OT—of the DGSE, France's foreign secret service, but he was not from Operations. His academic background in Russian foreign policy, and his fluency in the Russian language,

had seen him recruited as an analyst by the Company twenty years earlier. For analysts who worked with the DR—the Direction du Renseignement, the Intelligence Division of the Company—some basic training in clandestine liaison was required, which he'd used at his two embassy external posts in Greece and Turkey. There were rules for how he conducted himself in the field, even if his job was the relatively low risk processing of human sources.

He had six minutes between Starbucks and his contact point. He had to be nonchalant while detecting and memorising everything on the route. He knew from his field work that once he was back in Paris someone from the DO—Direction des Operations—could gatecrash a debrief and start asking detailed questions about who and what was around him during a meeting or a route.

He walked across Františkánská Zahrada Park, through the Světozor passage with the tourist crowds and came out in Vodičkova Street, where he turned right to create a visual 'loss' for potential followers. He walked fifty metres up the street before crossing it, giving him an excuse to look for traffic and determine followers.

He moved into a medieval walkway, past a line of eight advertising panels and walked at a slight angle to them so as to remove a convenient line of sight for any followers. He advanced to a set of steps at the end of the lane where a luminous sign indicated Kino Lucerna. Inside the building's gallery, a horse was suspended upside down from the vaulted ceiling. He took a few photos, playing out his tourist legend and allowing a final check for followers. By the time he lowered his camera he knew he was clean. If things went wrong, the camera shots would let the Company know his location before he disappeared. He pushed the thought of capture from his head. Unlike the DO operatives, he had his secret weapon, right against his heart in his jacket pocket: his diplomatic passport.

He climbed the stairs to the cafe, choosing a table located slightly back from the bay windows, with a view of the gallery and the stairs. Lotus was due to arrive at 3 p.m., which left Degarde fifteen minutes to sit and watch.

He ordered a coffee and prepared for the wolf to show the tip of his nose. The main operational security method he had to adhere to when managing clandestine ‘drops’ was the *itinéraire de sécurité*—IS—which involved walking routes, finding angles, checking in reflections and creating *points de passage obligés*—zones that a follower had to commit to in order to maintain their ‘tail’, and which made it obvious they were following. Besides the IS there was also a hygiene protocol called the ‘tourniquet’, which involved a team of least two OTs, who would overwatch a security route and ‘clear’ an operative out of their mission zone, ensuring no followers. He didn’t have a team overwatching this operation so he focused on his tradecraft and waited, controlling his breathing and refraining from fidgeting. If Lotus was a no-show after twenty-five minutes, he’d play it by the book: there was never a compelling need to wait more than ten minutes past the agreed meet time.

He’d arrived from Paris the previous morning and at his hotel, the Old Royal Post, he’d asked to be moved to another room immediately after check-in. Then he’d walked to the French embassy, located west of the Vltava River. Degarde considered the Vltava to be the natural demarcation between his life and mission zones: in his mission zone, he was a spy whose every movement and interaction was controlled by the Company; in his life zone he was a mid-level diplomat with declared duties, none of them controversial.

At the baroque palace that housed the French embassy, Degarde had met the chief of station, who worked under the cover of cultural attaché of the embassy. He’d briefed the local DGSE man on the real purpose of his visit and the backup he would need if

the contact with his source did not go as planned. Contact with an already-recruited source did not usually necessitate a DO protection scheme, so Degarde was responsible for his own safety.

Now, as he sipped his coffee in the Café Lucerna, his Paris apartment in the thirteenth arrondissement, where his wife Katie and daughter, Louise, were waiting for him, seemed very far away. He tried not to think about Paris. Some operatives in the Company could spend weeks in the field under these conditions, somehow remaining calm and focused and keeping their families in a separate mental compartment. He didn't know how they did it. Instead, he turned his mind to the meeting with Lotus—the codename for Lado Devashvili, a former member of the Georgian government who'd branched into the business world in the early 1990s when the Soviet bloc fell. Devashvili spent very little time in Tbilisi with his family, given his job kept him so busy meeting prostitutes at luxury hotels. Lotus provided everything that might be required by a foreign government or its contractors: drugs, escorts, boats, planes, IDs and weapons. What the DGSE required was hard-to-come-by intelligence. There was no collusion between the Company and Lotus, only an exchange of documents for cash. Degarde had spoken to him once, through the operational agent of the DO who had recruited Lotus and transitioned Degarde to become the handler. That three-way meeting in Vienna had been a memorable one for Degarde—not just because he'd met Lotus for the first time, but because he'd met the well-known Aguilar, from the DGSE's Y Division, the section responsible for clandestine operations. Lotus's face resembled a metal plate chiselled for many years by expensive vodka bottles, in the centre of which sat two small, sunken eyes. Even Lotus had been wary around Aguilar, Degarde noted. After the meeting, Aguilar had warned Degarde to be particularly cautious around Lotus. 'Avoid talking to him, and always be very careful to carry out your

personal security measures. Imagine you're dealing with a cobra in a round room.'

Since that initial encounter, Degarde had met Lotus clandestinely in the major cities of various European countries, always under the guise of business trips. Degarde contacted Lotus via the standard liaison plan, making an appointment and stating his needs, and the Georgian appeared miraculously to pass on information that was generally considered high quality. While impressed by the level of information, Degarde would have preferred not to come within five hundred kilometres of the man.

At 3.01 p.m., a tall, fat man wearing a long coat entered the Lucerna's gallery. Lotus was well within the Company's accepted -1/+2 minutes window for a contact. His tweed trilby hat was in his hand rather than on his head, indicating that he didn't think he'd been followed, however Degarde's position gave him a view of everyone who came into the building behind the Georgian. Degarde took the green *Geo* magazine from his bag and put it on the table in front of him, indicating to Lotus that he'd detected no followers and the exchange could proceed.

Lotus crushed his cigarette beneath his heel and climbed the marble stairs to the cafe, where he sat at a free table between Degarde and the exit. He put his hat on the table, took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and put it next to the hat, then signalled to a waitress and ordered a whisky. Degarde paid his bill—keeping the receipt so he could charge his coffee to his mission expenses—and stood up. Tucking his magazine under his arm, he walked to the exit. As he passed Lotus's table, he let his hand drag and retrieved the packet of cigarettes. Lotus did not react. Everything happened so naturally that only a trained observer would have seen the drop.

Degarde walked down the marble stairs to the foyer, and left through an exit that neither man had used when they arrived. He turned right and headed towards the National Museum, pausing

along the way to take tourist snaps. At the statue of Saint Wenceslas he entered the adjacent Metro station, turned left at the bottom of the stairs, and walked with the crowd towards the disabled toilet. After locking himself in, Degarde pulled the packet of cigarettes from his pocket and opened it to reveal four tightly folded A4 sheets. Three of them were printouts of emails, containing the names and addresses of the senders. Degarde skimmed them: in Russian, the writers of the emails asked Lotus to set up various services for their benefit in the Cypriot city of Larnaca, and also on the Lebanese and Syrian coasts in the Mediterranean. Degarde felt his blood run cold as he unfolded the fourth sheet and saw the letterhead. It was a classified document from the Russian defence ministry indicating the appointment of specialist agents from the SVR, the civil foreign intelligence agency, at the Russian military base at Tartus in Syria, and the deployment of intelligence drones at the Khmeimim Air Base, another Russian facility in Syria. He wondered how such a significant document had fallen into Lotus's hands, and decided it warranted staying an extra night in Prague to play out his tourist legend. His training emphasised that if an OT had any doubts while in the field, or had a sense of heightened risk, they should put any followers 'to sleep' by spending hours wandering a city in tourist mode, with no hint of training.

He took his small camera out of his pocket and, after setting the sheets flat on the floor, photographed them twice each, making sure to erase each photo as soon as it was taken. His glasses slipped over his nose and his hand was shaking. The Company's Technical Division would retrieve data from the camera's memory card upon its return, and the numbers of the remaining photos would follow each other in the event of an inspection.

Having roughly verified the content of the drop, it was time to move to the second phase of his contact: remuneration. Degarde

tore the sheets into tiny pieces and let them fall into the toilet. He would have liked to proudly exhibit the Russian classified document to colleagues at his intelligence desk, or ‘BER’—it was quite a coup—but he wasn’t going to travel across Europe with such a dangerous prize in his possession. He flushed the toilet several times, removed an envelope from his bag which he placed in his jacket pocket, then he left the bathroom and took the westbound Metro line. No longer carrying compromising material, he began to feel calmer as the train picked up speed. But he would only breathe easily on the plane back to Paris, he knew, when this was all over.

He emerged from Mustek station and walked through the pretty streets of old Prague until he arrived at Svateho Jilji church, entering the building through the side door on Zlatá Street. Lotus sat alone in the first row of the left aisle, seemingly deep in prayer. Degarde wondered which saint would listen to him. Apart from a few tourists and a priest checking his candles, the church was otherwise empty. Degarde sat at the other end of Lotus’s pew and, without turning his head from the transept, took the envelope from his pocket and placed it gently between them. Inside was ten thousand euros, which Lotus would probably spend on vodka and a girl. With this Christian thought, Degarde stood and crossed himself, as Lotus put his hat on the envelope.

Degarde walked down the central aisle and stepped out onto Husova Street. He plunged into the small passage in front of the church, to the left of the beer museum, and set about exiting his mission zone.

He walked past the medieval torture museum and over the seven-hundred-year-old Charles Bridge, which was the *point de passage obligé* leading to his life zone. For followers to stay on his heels, they would have to reveal themselves on the bridge. He breathed out slowly when he reached the far bank and took

some tourist snaps, turning to face the way he'd come. He was on the alert for someone he might have noticed earlier in the day, without announcing that he was looking. But he saw no faces he'd seen before, and no 'parasite gestures' that were supposed to look natural but were forced.

He took another photo, committing to the role of tourist now. He would spend the next twenty-four hours meandering the streets and visiting museums, taking a hundred shots of Prague. He wished he could show his wife and daughter this city, so beautiful under the late winter sun, and so relaxing when you didn't have to retrieve secret documents from one of the Company's most dangerous sources.

Considering himself clean, he hurried up the stairs into the lobby of the Old Royal Post and asked to extend his stay for an extra night; there was just so much to see in this beautiful city, he told the woman on reception. Then he went up to his room and changed his flight.



After buying souvenirs in the airport's departures concourse, Degarde sat at the bar and ordered a whisky. He was exhausted. The extra day in Prague had been spent walking in his office shoes, and his feet ached. Easing back in his seat, he rummaged in his jacket pocket, took out the various pieces of his phone, put it together, and turned it on. He was pleased to see that there was no missed call from Katie. Even though he'd been away a night longer than planned, she would have understood that he couldn't break from his legend to call her. He sent a text to the embassy's 'cultural attaché', thanking him for his time and his welcome, then pulled the battery from the phone again. The chief of station would understand that Degarde was at the airport and all was well.

Degarde took a sip of his drink, thinking of those documents he had briefly seen in the bathroom. Tartus and Khmeimim. Why would Moscow send more SVR men there? What were the Russians preparing in the Mediterranean?

The flight to Paris was announced. Degarde drained his whisky and joined the queue to board, thinking that James Bond could not have done better.

PARIS

It was 9.32 p.m. when Paul disembarked at Charles de Gaulle and headed for the RER to get lost in the crowds and complete his last safety route alone before returning home. At the boarding area for the Paris-bound RER, the information panel indicated that the next train had been delayed by forty-five minutes due to a signal failure. Degarde was tired and wanted to go home. Though he knew he should follow procedures, he considered that no opposing service was following him, so he returned to the terminal and went to the taxi stand. Putting a slight feeling of professional guilt to the back of his mind, he got into his assigned taxi and gave the driver his address, then he turned on his phone and texted his wife: *Just leaving the airport. I'll be home in 35 minutes.*



The following morning, Degarde ate breakfast with Katie and Louise and then took the Metro to Porte des Lilas, emerging in the twentieth arrondissement just before 9 a.m. It was still cold enough to warrant gloves and his black woollen beanie as he walked towards the Company's headquarters. He wasn't too

concerned with his ‘hygiene’—he’d walked his security routes the previous day in Prague before going to the airport, and he didn’t feel the need to do another before entering the Centre Administratif des Tourelles, known colloquially as the Cat, even though he knew many OTs did. Instead, he was anticipating his debriefing with sector manager, Marie Lafont, at 3 p.m. He’d have time to drop the camera’s SD card with the Technical Division—the DT—before writing his report. He was eager to get the photos of the documents before lunch so he could analyse them before the debriefing. Lafont could be forensic about source materials.

He entered the DGSE building on Boulevard Mortier, known as La Piscine by many employees because it was beside an indoor swimming pool where so many of them exercised. He passed through the many security points. A hotchpotch of Napoleonic and late 1960s architecture, with a modern American overlay, the headquarters of France’s foreign intelligence service looked like it had been constructed to completely confuse an outsider.

He walked downstairs to the DT’s basement level, which was vast and ran under Boulevard Mortier into the building over the road. In the administrative area he dropped the SD card with a techie who sported a Flock of Seagulls haircut and a t-shirt with a picture of an audio cassette, and asked for the ‘prod’ to be sent to his office.

Degarde went back upstairs to the cafeteria to grab a coffee and *pain au chocolat*, and seeing four of his colleagues on the velvet benches at one of the round tables he wandered over to join them.

‘Haven’t seen you for a couple of days, Paul,’ said Stefan, a DR analyst on Degarde’s floor who worked at the Africa section. ‘You been on a trip?’

‘Yes,’ said Degarde, unable to repress a proud smile. ‘But I can’t tell you more than that. You don’t have the need to know.’

His colleagues laughed.

‘James Bond for a day,’ said Romain Precheur, the Counter-Proliferation analyst.

‘Well, he’d better learn to drink a martini,’ said Stefan. ‘Last time I saw Paul drinking gin, he threw up on himself.’

‘Bond drinks vodka martinis,’ said Romain.

‘Even worse,’ said Stefan. ‘Paul passes out with vodka.’

‘Okay, okay,’ said Degarde, smiling as he stirred sugar into his coffee. ‘The only thing I can tell you is that the quality of the prod is as good as the girls in the country I visited.’

‘Let’s hope you weren’t in Pakistan then, *mon pote*,’ said Stefan, which triggered more laughter.

He walked the stairs up into the main building, and entered his office by inputting the week’s digital code. In front of him were various files containing information grabbed by sources over the previous months. He was expected to take in strands of information and synthesise pieces of a puzzle. He had barely closed the door behind him when there was a knock. He opened it to find an internal courier, who handed him a sealed envelope containing the printed documents retrieved from his SD card. Closing the door again, he perused the contents closely. One of the documents Lotus had supplied was an email in Russian about an event scheduled for two weeks’ time in Monaco, aboard a yacht called *Azzam*. Degarde couldn’t remember this email from his quick verification in Prague. The Russian term for ‘making a deal’ was used in the email and the language suggested a very high level of discussion. There was also a phone number listed for an unidentified person who seemed to be a person of interest, a POI, for the Russians.

Degarde knew immediately that Lafont would want more detail, so he left his office and walked down to the department that generated intelligence from Open Sources. He asked them

to research *Azzam* and have the information for him by 2 p.m. Back in his office he called the DT, thanked them for the SD images and asked for a 'phone environment' on the phone number in the email; if they succeeded, it would tell him where the phone was being used. Then he opened the reports section of the DGSE computer system and wrote two reports. One was for the analysts, an 'O' report written objectively that did not allow the reader to see the identity of the writer or the sources of the intelligence, and the other one was called 'R' and explained how the contact with Lotus was done and the security measures he took around it.

As Degarde filed the reports, the internal courier knocked at his door and dropped off a file that contained pictures, specifications and ownership details of *Azzam*. It was an eighty-two-metre, ten-stateroom motor yacht, Degarde learned, built in the Netherlands in 2017 at a cost of seventy-eight million euros. It was owned by a UAE shell company and its home port was Port Vell, Barcelona. It didn't feature in any social pages and it didn't appear to be owned by a movie star or a Silicon Valley billionaire. There wasn't much on *Azzam*, but that wouldn't stop Lafont asking for more.



At 2.58 p.m. Degarde dropped his iPhone in the box outside the E sector briefing room on the third floor and took a seat at the large oval meeting table, across from the current head of BER-Europe, Lars Magnus. Magnus was tall and youngish and seemed a little spooked by the presence of his immediate predecessor in the role, Marie Lafont, who sat beside him. Marie Lafont was a well-dressed brunette in her early forties. She was smart and driven and had field experience, which set her apart from many of the careerists at the Company. Now a sector manager,

she was running this operation. She didn't acknowledge Degarde's arrival; she was on the phone, asking someone to join them. After a quick conversation she hung up and turned to Degarde. 'Based on the prod I received this morning, I asked Briffaut to sit in. He should be here soon.'

Degarde nodded and smiled but his stomach clenched. Dominic Briffaut was the head of Y Division; he didn't often leave the Bunker, as the headquarters of clandestine operations was known, to come for idle chats at the Cat.

'We need to know what they're planning on that boat,' said Lafont. 'And we need a phone environment to locate this number in the email.'

'It's done, boss,' Degarde said, relieved he'd taken the initiative.

The bearish form of Dominic Briffaut entered the room, mug of coffee in his hand. He threw his coat on one of the spare chairs before taking a seat. 'I have twenty minutes,' he said. 'Tell me what you've got.'

Lafont took Briffaut through the document drop in Prague and the information gained from it, including the intelligence drones being staged in Khmeimim Air Base, the new SVR intelligence postings at Tartus, and the meeting in Monaco aboard *Azzam*; so far, there was nothing to connect the phone number of the POI to the meeting on the yacht, she added.

Briffaut nodded through the briefing, asking only a few clarifying questions. The two senior people were economical with their words, Degarde noticed. And Magnus—despite being the head of BER-E—stayed out of it.

When Lafont had finished, Briffaut turned to Degarde, focusing on him. 'You've dealt with Lotus more than anyone. Was there anything different about our Georgian friend in Prague?'

'I don't think so,' said Degarde. 'I never talk to him. I collect the prod and I give him the money.'

‘Sometimes a man doesn’t speak with words,’ said Lafont, with a very faint smile.

‘Was there more eye contact than you’re used to?’ Briffaut pushed. ‘Did he try to start a conversation?’

Degarde shook his head. ‘It was business as usual.’

The Y Division chief stared at Degarde in silence for a few seconds, then he stood, grabbed his coat and, talking to Lafont, said, ‘I’ll leave you to find out more about that phone number and I’ll investigate a way on to the boat. Let’s talk tomorrow.’

And then he was gone.



Back in his office, Degarde found a message from the DT: the phone number on the Lotus prod had been used in Genoa several times in the past twenty-four hours. He sent an internal email to Lafont to let her know, then put all the material he’d amassed in his office safe, shut down his computer and headed to the Metro. He mulled over the debriefing as he travelled home. It had not gone terribly—after all, he’d retrieved the documents without screwing up the mission—but the prod had delivered more questions than answers. The Russians were increasing their presence on the Syrian coast, and the Palais de l’Élysée would expect the French security services to tell them why. And it was important that the Company get the information to the President before the Americans or the British could do it.

It was a little before 7 p.m. when he turned the key in the door to the mid-nineteenth-century apartment in the thirteenth—the rent was subsidised, thanks to Katie’s connections—and let himself in. No murmur of a TV or squawk from an Xbox. That meant Louise might be reading, which made Degarde happy; he was tired of nagging her about screen time.

He hung up his coat, walked past the kitchen and froze at the tableau before him.

Three men in black balaclavas. His child on the sofa, crying. His wife on her knees, hands tied behind her back, a hand holding her blonde hair in a gloved fist.

‘Who are you?’ Degarde demanded, but instead of answering the man closest to him took one step towards him and swung a black handgun that caught Degarde in front of the right ear. Degarde staggered sideways into the sideboard, and a vase toppled from it and smashed on the floor.

‘Dad!’ screamed Louise, and the third masked man slapped the child hard with the back of his hand. Her mother screamed before a big hand was clamped over her mouth.

As Degarde pushed himself off the sideboard, he could see his wife’s blue panties on the Persian rug beside the television screen, ripped at the sides. As he tried to stand, his vision swimming, his assailant kicked him in the balls. Degarde sagged to his knees, retching from the pain.

‘So,’ said the man holding his struggling wife. ‘Our friend lives like a king in beautiful Paris, eh boys?’

His French was good but heavily accented. Russian.

‘What do you want?’ gasped Degarde, switching to Russian. ‘My family have no part in this.’

‘So why bring them into it?’ asked the Russian, his grip on Katie’s face tightening. ‘You make another country your business and then claim you are immune? The French have such a sense of humour.’

Louise stirred on the floor. Degarde could see she was crying, tears running down her bruised face onto her Paris Saint-Germain shirt. She didn’t have Katie’s blonde hair, but the dark curls of Degarde’s mother. They framed a face full of fear and despair, and this hurt Degarde more than his aching testicles.

‘Let them go,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you what you want to know.’

The lead man chuckled. ‘You hear that, boys? He’s offering to talk.’

The man who'd assaulted Degarde also laughed. He grabbed the collar of Degarde's woollen jumper and leaned in. 'You'll talk, all right, Comrade. You'll *beg* to do it.'

Degarde tried to reply but the handgun slammed into his face again, and the scene before him went black.

CHAPTER
ONE

Alec de Payns walked in the morning sunlight across the Pont des Bergues, spanning the Rhone, aiming for Geneva's *rive droit*. He'd been walking for sixteen minutes, which had given him time to relax into his legend of a design student named Guillaume Roger, while also checking for followers. Geneva gave the surface impression of a wealthy, civilised city, however it was also a historic crossroads of national interest and money, and de Payns was always careful in this city of spies.

He stepped onto the Quai des Bergues, turned right and walked along the river to where it opened into Lac de Geneve, a haven for cruise boats and waterside bars and restaurants. He crossed onto the Quai du Mont-Blanc, where the buildings became grand. One of them was the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, where he was due to meet his new friend Nikolai, a fellow student at the HEAD design academy, and his father.

De Payns walked past two black Mercedes-Benz SUVs parked on the Ritz-Carlton apron, and entered the impressive white marble foyer with its black-and-white marble-tiled floor. There were two military-looking men in the lobby, dressed in black suits

and tactical boots. De Payns had been expecting to see them, just as he was expecting to see the tall blond student standing by the marble staircase, his red woollen scarf a raffish contrast to his expensive sand-coloured suit.

‘Guillaume!’ Nikolai waved flamboyantly, his Russian accent echoing around the huge room. ‘Over here.’

Nikolai moved in for a hug and de Payns could sense the security people watching them.

‘I hope you’re not freaked out by these apes,’ said Nikolai, cocky and rude and eminently likeable. ‘My father only visits once a year, and he travels with this zoo. Is it okay?’

‘I hardly noticed,’ said de Payns, with a smile. ‘Thought maybe Putin was in town.’

Nikolai laughed then, suddenly serious, said, ‘Dad has to have these people around him when he travels because of his work. Please don’t be scared.’

‘Thanks for the warning—I’ll try to look brave,’ said de Payns. He started to walk away, but Nikolai grasped his bicep to stop him.

‘Dad and I love each other,’ he explained earnestly, ‘but he thinks that the Russian climate is not good for me right now.’ Nikolai bit his lip and looked away. ‘It just doesn’t . . . agree with me.’

De Payns felt for him. Their friendship hadn’t touched on the subject of Nikolai’s sexuality. Now Nikolai was trying to find a way to warn his French friend that the Russian military and intelligence worlds did not accept gays. Even the sons and daughters of senior officers could find themselves sent to rehabilitation camps, to be physically and psychologically broken down, and turned into *real* Russians.

‘I understand, my friend,’ said de Payns. ‘I guess you are much better off in Geneva, especially for the arts.’

They moved into Fred by Fiskebar, a pricey bar favoured by Nikolai. De Payns usually avoided drinking there; Geneva had much better taverns. But his social manipulation had succeeded and Nikolai now wanted his father to meet his new friend. Nikolai was not aware that also dotted around the hotel was de Payns' mission team, consisting of Templar, positioned in the hotel for threats, and Danny, who was in the van controlling the comms. They'd both cover de Payns when he left the hotel, doing counter-tailing, and if necessary they'd run a tourniquet. Aline, a petite blonde who worked for the Company, was sitting alone in the Fiskebar, drinking a Coke. She'd been recording audio and HD video of the bar with a hidden device for ten minutes before de Payns arrived, and she'd clandestinely record the meeting from her table.

Nikolai's father was already seated at his table when the two students arrived. De Payns flashed his big smile, in keeping with the youthful student persona he'd cultivated. 'So pleased to meet you, Mr Beshivsky,' he said, using the surname assumed by Nikolai. 'Welcome to Geneva.'

As they made small talk, de Payns assessed the man in front of him: he was around fifty, with pale, cold eyes, a full head of salt-and-pepper hair, and a strong body. De Payns could feel the other man's eyes scrutinising him in return, the father trying to work out if Nikolai and de Payns were lovers. After all, that was why Nikolai had been exiled to Geneva under a false name.

When Nikolai rose to go to the bathroom, de Payns was left alone with his new acquaintance, whose real name was Lazar Suburov, a full colonel in the Russian FSB, the country's federal security service. Suburov was the number two ranking officer in the Intelligence Directorate for Chechnya. The Company had codenamed him Keratine, and he was of value to France, which was why de Payns was going to try to turn a senior FSB officer while armed Russian henchmen stood guard outside.

‘So,’ said Keratine, ‘Nikolai tells me you share a passion for art and for partying? I’m glad to hear he has found a like-minded friend, given he doesn’t see his family much anymore.’

‘Well, actually,’ said de Payns, letting his expression harden, ‘I’m not your son’s friend. I work for the French services—and from now on you’ll work for us too.’

The blood drained from Keratine’s face. De Payns recognised real fear in his eyes.

‘You could refuse,’ continued de Payns, ‘but I guess you know what happens if your colleagues discover that your son is not dead, like you told them, but hiding out in Switzerland because he’s gay?’

Keratine cleared his throat, his pupils dilating. ‘Exiling a gay son isn’t so unusual . . .’

‘Even if he’s in contact with a foreign intelligence service?’

‘Fuck,’ mumbled Keratine. He slumped in his seat, rubbing his face as if trying to make the conversation go away.

‘I understand the Russians like to *re-educate* homosexuals,’ said de Payns, keeping his voice flat but strong. ‘The Chechens in particular. It’s not pretty, but highly effective, I hear.’

Keratine winced. ‘Look, I love my son. He’s not here because I’m ashamed.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ said de Payns, seeing that Nikolai had moved to the bar and was ordering drinks. ‘Nikolai is an impressive young man.’

Keratine sat up, seeming unsure whether to be sad or angry. ‘I knew this moment would come one day. Please don’t do this. There is no need.’

De Payns kept talking, knowing the entire interaction was being recorded by Aline from the bag on her table. ‘You will be contacted in Russia by a man named Guy. He’ll introduce himself as a friend from Geneva. I suggest you respond positively to his

requests, for the survival of your son—and perhaps to also stop your career from submerging?’

Nikolai returned with the drinks and resumed his seat. ‘So, have you got acquainted?’ he asked, a boyish quality evident now he was less nervous. ‘How do you like my friend, Dad? I told you he was fun.’

‘Your friend is very nice,’ said Keratine, eyeballing the Frenchman.

De Payns stood. ‘Well, I know how much you have missed each other, so I’ll leave you to have some quality family time.’ He turned to Keratine. ‘Sir, it was very nice meeting you. Maybe we’ll meet again?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Keratine, with a brief hate-filled glance, ‘but you never know.’



De Payns passed the Russian thugs in the lobby and stepped out into the street. He crossed the road and walked north along the Quai de Mont-Blanc, finding some shade from the trees that separated the famous street from the lake. He now had to conduct a tourniquet overseen by the three-person mission team, ending at a *plan de support*—an advertising poster at a bus stop on the Rue des Pâquis, which would feature a sticker, or *gommette*. If the sticker was red, he was being followed and he’d move to an exfiltration plan.

The route took sixteen minutes, his team detecting if he had followers and communicating with one another over the radio net. He walked to a Coca-Cola ad on a bus stop and saw the red *gommette*. Yet just because there was a tail, it didn’t mean he could break from his legend and start acting like a spy.

He kept walking and entered Geneva’s central railway station, walking to a magazine stand where he pretended to be interested in a publication. He waited for a train to arrive and, when there

was a crowd pouring down the main concourse, he joined them. After ten seconds, he took a sudden turn to the right and walked out a side passage into the sunshine and onto the grounds of the art and design school. He walked out the other side of the campus, leaped onto a tram and rode it four blocks west before jumping off and treating himself to a browse through a three-storey department store. When de Payns was sure he no longer had a follower, he moved to the dead mailbox that had been set up along with the tourniquet and had now been ‘armed’ with a white *gommette* at the end of a street called Rue Jean-Gutenberg. He followed the street for twenty seconds before seeing a red bicycle with a wicker basket parked outside a bakery. From the basket he grabbed a white envelope—left there by Aline—and quickly dropped his French ID card in the name of Guillaume Roger in another envelope in the basket. De Payns kept walking and at the end of the street put the sticker he was carrying on a concrete lamppost, which told Aline he’d made the exchange and she could return for the envelope.

De Payns walked to the Crowne Plaza, where a room had been booked under the name on the new ID card he’d just picked up, Benoît Droulez. The booking had been made by Renan, an infrastructure Honourable Correspondent—HC—working in the hotel. An HC arranged important matériel and services for visiting OTs. Renan worked in the Crowne Plaza and would ensure no bank details were needed and there was no trace for the Russians.

In his room, de Payns lay on the hotel bed, cycling his breathing. He felt safe in this hotel because Renan was a clan member, one of a secret group that included Shrek, Templar, Rocket and himself, who were sworn to support one another. That’s how de Payns worked and it was what he relied on for his sanity. He visualised every step of the morning and the tourniquet. He thought about faces he’d seen in the hotel and on the tram,

and what he might have missed. He thought about Nikolai, and about Nikolai's father's face when de Payns had given him the facts, the *dévoilement*. He thought about how the scenario could be turned on his own family, and quickly pushed that thought down as far as it would go.