

The Crystal Towers

The Solaire Trilogy, #1

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THE HAGUE

“This is not good,” he said, in an English accent.

The other man did not reply but understood.

They were in a room staring out onto old cobbled streets below.

“The international community is keeping a close eye on us. Unless we make solid progress we will be deemed irrelevant.”

The other man shook his head and said, in a Dutch accent, “The mission in New York was a total failure.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” a voice said from the other end of the room.

They both turned. They’d forgotten he was still there.

The one with the English accent said, incredulously, “The agent was found shot fourteen times. It was a complete disaster and a foolish mistake.”

“The mistake was that you sent an agent. We were lucky it didn’t lead back to us. We have to send someone else.”

“Another agent?” the Englishman said.

“No. No more agents or spies.”

The Dutchman said, “Then who?”

The man smiled. “I have someone in mind.”

TORONTO

The heavy-set man was sucking down spaghetti like it was his last meal. Sauce covered his lips and chin. He grunted as he inhaled more noodles.

Behind him, two burly men merely sipped water. Unbeknownst to the patrons of the restaurant, underneath their coats the men were carrying automatic weapons.

A waiter approached. “Is everything to your liking, sir?”

“Yeah,” the heavy-set man said. “Get me another plate.”

“Of course, sir.”

A few minutes later the waiter reappeared with another plate of spaghetti.

“Sir, if you don’t mind me saying, you have something on your chin.”

The two bodyguards eyed the waiter, *hard*.

The heavy-set man touched his chin and then turned to his bodyguards. “At least someone’s got the balls to tell me I look disgusting.”

Neither of the bodyguards said a word.

“Sir,” the waiter started. “You would be more comfortable if you took off your jacket. Allow me to assist you.”

The waiter went around and proceeded to remove the heavy-set man’s jacket, which he then placed on the man’s chair.

The waiter snapped his wrist and as if by magic, out came a cloth napkin. “Sir.”

The heavy-set man turned to his bodyguards. “Now that’s what I call service.”

The heavy-set man loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt collar, and allowed the waiter to place the napkin firmly.

“Is there anything else I can do for you?” the waiter said with a slight bow.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll make sure you get a good tip.”

“You’re very kind.”

The heavy-set man then went about gorging his meal.

The waiter disappeared into the back.

Instead of returning, the waiter moved passed the kitchen and emerged from the back of the restaurant.

“Thanks, Luigi,” he said, handing the owner of the restaurant a few bills. He got on an old 1974 BMW motorcycle and rode off.

* * * * *

Two hours later, the motorcycle turned into a back alley. He parked it behind a dilapidated-looking house. He didn't bother locking up the bike. There was no need. It was beat-up and rusted through and through. If anyone did steal it, they'd be doing him a favour.

He headed down the steps to the basement.

When he entered and turned the lights on, he froze.

A man was sitting on his sofa.

The man was wearing a beige overcoat. His hands were in his pockets. His eyes fixed on him.

“Please, come and sit down,” the man said.

He thought about turning and running back up the stairs, but at the angle the man was sitting he'd have no problem firing shots and hitting him.

He wasn't going to risk it, if indeed the man did have a gun.

He sat across from the man.

The man pulled out his hands from his pockets and placed them in front of him.

The man spoke: “Mr. Bind, Jim Bind, isn't it?”

“Yes,” Bind slowly said.

“It's a nice place you have here.”

The man looked around the basement apartment. It was cramped, to say the least. There was a small kitchen that could fit only one person at one time. Beside it was a washroom with a standing shower, and next to that was a bedroom that had a mattress laid on the floor.

“What do you want?” Bind finally asked the man.

“I'll tell you in a minute, but first, that was impressive what you did at the restaurant.”

This took him aback.

“I was there.” The man smiled. “I was impressed at how you managed to pull off the fat man's neck chain without him or his bodyguards realizing it.”

From his pocket Bind removed a silver string with a key on it. “How did you know?”

“I've been watching you. For the past three months you have been *working* at that restaurant, and I'm using the word *working* very kindly. You've been observing the fat man; monitoring his every movement. What time he came in, what he ordered, and who he was with. It was today that you made your move—a very ingenious one, if I may say so. But I have a question: how did you know where the key was?”

“Whenever he sat down and got up, he touched his chest.”

“Won't he realize it's missing when he touches it tonight?”

“I switched it.”

The man raised an eyebrow. "*Impressive.*" He removed a paper-sized brown coloured envelope and placed it in front of him.

"What's that?" Bind said.

"Take a look."

He did. Inside were four black and white photos. One showed Bind on his motorcycle in front of a building; another of him entering a room, another of him coming out of it, and the last of him leaving the building.

"How much did you find?" the man asked.

Bind didn't know how to answer it.

"Okay," the man said. "This is what I know; you can fill in the rest. The fat man's name is Georgio Draggone, a local thug. He's been threatening local shopkeepers. In return for their safety they pay him to leave them alone. It is known that Georgio owes money to some very dangerous people. So he has intensified his visits to these shopkeepers. They, in turn, hired you to find something to get rid of him. You did." The man crossed his legs. "In your possession you have Draggone's entire monetary collection. I'm guessing over fifty-thousand dollars."

Bind said nothing.

The man continued, "What I'm interested in is, what you are going to do with it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Are you going to keep the entire amount or are you going to give it back to the shopkeepers?"

"I'm going to keep it."

The man laughed hard. "Why is it that I don't believe you?"

"It's a lot of money. Why wouldn't I?"

"You've done these... *assignments* many times before," the man said. "And if you do keep the money then why do you live in squalor?"

Bind looked around his apartment. "It's temporary."

"I'm sure it is."

Bind's face tightened. "This is the last time I'm going to ask you, what do you want?"

The man removed a card and dropped it on the table in front of him. "Tomorrow I want you to meet me in this place."

Without looking at it Bind said, "Why should I?"

"Because I have these." The man pointed to the photos. "And you wouldn't want them in the hands of the police, would you?"

Bind said, "They don't show anything."

"Oh, we have more, many more. Believe me."

Bind said nothing.

The man got up and headed for the door. He stopped and turned. "One more thing. I don't like the name Jim Bind. It is so dull and boring. I do like your real name, though; it sounds so much interesting. *Mr. Roman Solaire.*"

With that the man was gone.

* * * * *

The Art Gallery of Ontario, or AGO, as it is referred to, is located in downtown Toronto. Roman Solaire went through the front entrance, purchased his ticket and went straight to level one. He turned left and entered the Thomson Collection.

Inside the vault-like gallery he found the man standing in front of a large painting.

Solaire joined him.

"It is called *The Massacre of the Innocents*, painted by Peter Paul Rubens in 1612," the man said. "There is a second version in Munich." He turned to Solaire. "Do you know how much it is worth? Over a hundred million dollars."

Solaire didn't seem impressed.

The man said, "I know you're not here to talk about art."

They moved to a corner of the gallery.

From his coat he pulled out a folder and held it for Solaire.

He did not take it. Instead, he said, "Your name?"

"Call me Mr. Travers, if you like."

Solaire eyed him.

"That's all you'll get for now." The man smiled.

Solaire took the folder.

Inside, there was a photo of a man coming out of a black vehicle. The man's head was clean shaven, he was of slight build, and he wore an expensive suit.

"His name is Guy Fox. Have you heard of him?"

Solaire shook his head.

"Fox is a real estate developer in New York. He is worth a lot of money."

Solaire looked up from the folder. "If you want me to steal money, I won't do it."

"Not money; evidence."

"Evidence?"

Travers pulled out another photo. In this one Fox was standing beside an African-looking man.

"This was taken in the Congo. We believe Fox is sponsoring state terrorism in the Africas. We have several more photos of him with other unsavoury characters."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"We want you to find evidence that links him to these people."

"What about the photos? Why not use them?"

"Circumstantial. We need something that can hold up in court."

Solaire didn't know what to say.

"Fox is having a grand opening of his new venture, Crystal Towers, in New York City. We want you to go there and find the evidence we need."

"You're not even telling me what exactly I'm looking for."

"If we knew, Mr. Solaire, then we wouldn't need you."

"Why should I do it?"

"We have *your* photos."

"That's blackmail."

"Let's call it incentive."

Solaire thought about it. "You want me to go to New York?"

Travers pulled out another envelope from his coat. Solaire was tempted to ask him how many pockets he had in that coat of his, but decided against it.

Inside the envelope was a bundle of hundred dollar bills, a US passport and a plane ticket to New York.

"Who do you work for?" Solaire said, examining the passport. It contained his name and photo.

"Let's say we can get things expedited. Will you do it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I would love to say yes, but we need your help."

Solaire felt the US bills. "It's a lot of money."

"There's more if you need it."

Solaire stuffed the envelope in his pocket.

"One more thing," Travers said. He held a cell phone. "It's secure. Only I have the number. You answer it when I call."

"If I don't?"

"Then I'll consider you dead."

Solaire took it. It wasn't one of those newer models. It was bulky but looked solid.

Travers moved away from him.

"One last thing," he said. "I would do with a change of wardrobe."

Solaire looked down at his battered jeans, scuffed boots, and faded shirt.

The man disappeared down a room.

Solaire looked back at the painting *The Massacre of the Innocents*.

He felt like *he* was walking into a massacre.

NEW YORK

American Airline flight 3826 landed at JFK International Airport in Terminal 8. After disembarking the plane, Roman Solaire headed for the line that was for US citizens. The line was long but it was moving fast.

Solaire was pulling his sole luggage: a carry-on. He didn't pack heavy so there was no need to worry about baggage claim. But that was not what he was concerned about right now; it was the small blue book in his hand with the words 'United States of America' engraved in silver on it.

The last two days had been surreal. First meeting Travers, and now attempting to enter the United States with false documents. He had spent a great deal of time examining the passport in detail, but he could find no indication that it was forged. It looked like the real deal.

Who was this Travers? And what agency did he work for?

His turn came and he approached the counter, where an overweight officer examined his passport. She looked at the photo and then at him. As if satisfied, she stamped it and said, "Welcome home, sir."

"Thank you," he said and quickly left.

Outside, the air was cool.

He glanced around and found a taxi stand from where he was directed to a taxi.

The driver, a man wearing a turban, placed his carry-on in the trunk.

The driver's name was Jagjit Singh, or Jag, as his friends called him.

Solaire inquired about the best hotels in New York.

Jag rattled off names like the Pierre, Mandarin Oriental, The Plaza, and the Ritz-Carlton.

Solaire asked him where *he* would prefer to stay.

"Ritz-Carlton for me," Jag said.

"Then that's where I'll be staying," Solaire replied.

The ride was forty-five minutes, during which time Solaire kept his eyes closed.

He wasn't sure what he was doing here but a part of him knew he had no choice.

Travers seemed like a man who knew what he wanted and how to get it.

Plus, Solaire was intrigued by this whole 'assignment,' if one could call it that.

The taxi stopped in front of a white building.

Solaire paid and tipped freely.

"I'll be leaving in a couple of days," Solaire said. "Why don't you come by and drive me back to the airport."

"Yes, sir!" Jag said, counting the extra cash.

* * * * *

Solaire rented the Deluxe Room, located on the fourteenth floor of the hotel. It had a king-size bed, interior view of the courtyard, a Sony flat-screen TV with DVD player, two chairs, and a writing desk.

Solaire wasn't sure that he'd write on the writing desk, so instead he placed his carry-on on it.

He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face.

With a hand towel he wiped dry.

He heard a noise.

He went back out and realized it was coming from his carry-on.

He checked and it was the cell phone Travers had given him.

"Solaire," he said, answering it.

"I'm glad you made it safely to New York. I hope Customs and Immigration didn't give you a problem."

"Thanks to you they didn't."

"And where are you staying, if I may ask?"

"A hotel."

"It would be nice to know which one, considering we are paying for it."

"The Ritz-Carlton."

"Pricey."

"Like you said, you're paying for it."

"The grand opening of Crystal Towers is tomorrow night. If I were you I would be there."

"Okay."

"And, Mr. Solaire..."

"Yes?"

"I would be very careful."

With that the line went dead.

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Solaire left the hotel and headed for the first place on his agenda: the Brooks Brothers clothing store on Madison Avenue.

A short, slim, and exceptionally dressed man assisted Solaire in picking out a suit. From their 1818 Collection, Solaire picked out a Fitzgerald two-button, dark grey suit, with a Bengal stripe dress shirt and a gold-navy tie. To go with the suit Solaire picked out exquisitely polished black leather dress shoes.

Solaire left his purchases so the man could tailor the suit to his body size and headed to the next location on his agenda: a printing shop.

He ordered a dozen business cards and left.

Along the way Solaire stopped over at a business that provided telephone answering service.

He grabbed a chicken falafel from a food truck and headed for his last destination.

He chewed the bread and meat and stared across at a building.

It was magnificent to look at. A steel structure with glass exterior that rose high up in to the sky, when looked at from afar it resembled a fine piece of jewellery. The grand opening was one day away so there were a lot of people going in and out of the building.

Solaire finished the last bite, crumpled up the wrapping, and after tossing it in the garbage headed for the Crystal Towers.

He spotted a man who looked like he was in charge. He was wearing an open-collared suit and was barking orders.

“When is the party?” Solaire said, going up to him.

“Tomorrow night,” the man answered as if that was public knowledge.

“How does one get into it?”

“By invitation only.”

The man became distracted and began arguing with another man. Solaire took the opportunity and snuck in.

By the looks of it there was still a lot of work to be done. Construction workers were busy sanding, painting, installing; interior designers were removing objects from boxes in order to set up the place; the entire main lobby was loud, noisy and chaotic.

A woman in a tight dress approached him. “Are you from Creative Designs with the displays?”

“No.”

She shook her head and walked away.

Solaire’s foot touched something.

He knelt down and picked it up.

It was a pamphlet for an open house for Crystal Towers. It had the name Manhattan Realtors Inc. on it, along with the address.

Solaire decided to pay them a visit.

Before heading there he made one last visit to a clothing store, where he purchased white casual pants with matching loafers, a designer shirt and a light coloured navy jacket to go with it. He also picked up a silver Esquire watch.

* * * * *

He walked through a door, up a flight of stairs, and found the office of Manhattan Realtors Inc.

Inside, a receptionist inquired if he had an appointment.

He didn't have one, and quite frankly he didn't think he'd need one.

Solaire sounded annoyed when he said the last sentence.

The receptionist politely asked him to take a seat.

He did.

The office hummed with noise. Solaire sensed that there was a lot happening in the back. Telephones were ringing, fax machines were devouring documents, and photocopiers were spitting out papers.

After a few minutes, a woman approached him.

She introduced herself as Sandy Williams.

Her dark brown hair matched her hazel eyes, and her lips were painted red.

She was wearing a black business suit.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

Solaire held up the pamphlet he'd picked up from Crystal Towers.

"That's one of our biggest projects." She smiled. "Follow me."

She led him to a corner cubicle.

"You don't have an office?" Solaire asked once seated.

"I'm a junior agent right now."

"Then maybe I should be talking to someone else," he said.

"I can answer all your questions," she said. She then leaned in. "I could use the experience, you know. But all purchases and sales will be through our senior agents."

"All right," Solaire said, gently crossing his leg over the other. "Tell me a little about Crystal Towers."

"Well, as you may or may not have heard, the grand opening is tomorrow. It's located near downtown Manhattan. It was built with local labour, so all money has gone back into the community." She seemed pleased about the last part. "It has twenty floors with a hundred units. It has your basic amenities: security, gym on each floor, entertainment rooms, a swimming pool, and great view of the city."

"And the cost of all these amenities?" Solaire asked.

"The price ranges from one-point-five million for our smaller units to over ten million for the larger ones. But every unit is custom-made. All the fixtures are from local designers, the best material is used on the hardwood floors, as well as the kitchen and bathroom. It also comes with everything you need to live in as soon as you buy: fridge, stove, television, and furniture."

"Furniture?" He raised an eyebrow.

"It's basic but matches the designs of each unit. Naturally, if the new owners want to change it they most certainly can."

"I should hope so," he said. "For the price they are paying."

“Are you looking for one for yourself?”

“No.” This is when he removed his business card and placed it before her.

It was white and in gold letterings had the words: Roman Solaire, Procurement, Travers Property Management, on it. It had a Bay area address.

Solaire said, “We, at Travers Management, acquire properties for our clients. Our clients are quite wealthy and are always looking at investment opportunities. We try to find investments that meet their business and financial objectives.”

“How many units are you looking for?” she said, feeling the gold lettering with her fingers.

“If the price is right then as many as necessary.”

“Um, I’ll be right back,” she said and left.

Solaire adjusted his shirt and crossed one leg over the other.

* * * * *

She knocked on the glass door and the man behind the desk waved her in.

“What is it, Sandy? I’m busy,” Patrick Carr answered.

“I have a gentleman outside who is interested in purchasing units in Crystal Towers.”

“Did you say *units*?”

“Yes, more than one,” Sandy said.

She handed him the business card.

He examined it and then twisted to get a better view of the man sitting in one of the cubicles.

He picked up the phone and dialled the number on the card.

After one ring a female voice answered, “Travers Property Management. How can I help you?”

After a pause, Patrick said, “Can I speak to Mr. Roman Solaire?” He read the name from the card.

“Mr. Solaire is away on business. May I know what this is about?”

“That’s fine, thank you.” He hung up. He turned to Sandy. “Good that you brought this to me.”

He pulled on his coat, adjusted his tie, and after quickly fixing his hair he left his office.

* * * * *

Solaire had to control himself from smiling once he saw the man approach.

After introducing himself, Patrick said, “Mr. Solaire, if you please, why don’t we make you more comfortable in my office?”

Solaire looked around the small cubicle. “I’m quite comfortable here.”

Patrick glanced over at Sandy, who was smiling.

“As a senior agent I can better assist you.”

“Ms. Williams has been doing a good job so far,” Solaire said. “She seems to know what she’s talking about.”

“I see,” Patrick said. “Then I guess I’ll leave you in her... capable hands.”

Solaire said, “There is something that you might be able to do.”

“Yes?” Patrick sounded eager.

“I hear there is a big party tomorrow night. Maybe you can assist me in...how can I say it—getting an invitation.”

“I most certainly can do that.”

Patrick left.

“Thank you,” Sandy said, turning to Solaire.

“For what?”

“For giving me this opportunity.”

“I haven’t bought anything yet,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to see that look on his face.”

Solaire smiled.

* * * * *

The next day Solaire was back at Manhattan Realtors Inc.

“You’re back, Mr. Solaire,” Sandy Williams said.

“I came for the invitation.”

“I have it right here.” She handed him a blue envelope.

Solaire took it, snuck a quick look inside, and placed the envelope in his inside jacket pocket.

“Have you decided if you want to look at a unit at Crystal Towers?” she asked.

“About that,” Solaire started. “Why don’t you tell me more over lunch?”

“Are you asking me out on a date, Mr. Solaire?”

“I wouldn’t dare.” Solaire shook his head. “But call me Roman.”

* * * * *

They found a Japanese restaurant not far from the real estate agency. They were seated on the second floor.

Like the first floor, the second floor had its own sushi bar with a chef working behind it. The restaurant walls were coloured spring green, the wood décor was light, and the rice-paper-coated lighting was bright.

They ordered appetizers, which consisted of broiled cod marinated in sake paste and crisp lily root croquettes.

With chop sticks, Solaire placed a piece in his mouth. “So, tell me, Ms. Williams...”

“Call me Sandy,” she said across from him.

“Sandy, how long have you worked at your agency?”

“Nine months.”

“Does it pay well?”

“Not as much as I hoped for, but it’s a start.”

“You’re from here?”

“You mean Manhattan?”

He nodded while chewing the cod.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m actually from Illinois.”

“So what is a girl from Illinois doing in a big city like New York?”

“Work. Money. Fame. Like everyone, I came for the big lights.”

Solaire paused. "You mean Broadway?"

She blushed. "I know, it sounds so Hollywood. But yeah, I wanted to be on stage."

"Then what are you doing selling real estate?"

"I'm not actually doing any selling right now, but a girl's gotta pay the bills."

Their meal came.

Trays were placed in front of them. They consisted of nine varieties of sushi, including bluefin tuna, Spanish mackerel, and tamago and shrimp.

Sandy said, "What do you do, Roman, apart from property hunting for wealthy clients?"

"I do everything." He leaned closer. "Do you want to know what I really do?"

She squinted. "Yes."

"I procure information for my clients that they otherwise might not be able to gather."

She looked confused.

"For instance, in New York I'm here to get information that might give my clients the upper hand."

"You mean whether to invest in Crystal Towers, or not?"

"Precisely."

"And here I thought you invited me for pleasure." She smiled.

"Who said business and pleasure can't go hand in hand?" He smiled back.

"Okay," she said. "Now that I know your true motive, ask me what you like."

"Tell me about the developer of Crystal Towers."

"You mean Guy Fox?" she laughed and shook her head. "He's a real piece of work."

"I'm listening."

"I shouldn't be telling you this. You're the buyer."

"I may be the buyer, but *you're* not selling me anything, are you, Sandy?"

"Yeah, I guess. Patrick does the selling," she conceded. "Okay, about Guy Fox. Wherever he goes he doesn't go without his bodyguards."

"Why does a developer need security?"

"That's what I thought, too." She leaned in. "I think he's in business with the wrong people."

"What kind of people?"

"I don't know, but people who he might need protection from."

Solaire said, "Why is your agency in business with him?"

"Why wouldn't they be? If they sell all the condominium units they make millions just on commission."

"Tell me more about Fox."

"He's loud and obnoxious. I've heard him screaming at our agents. He believes we're not pushing hard enough to sell all the units. Over seventy-five percent of them have been sold already, and with the grand opening tonight we hope to sell the remaining in the next month."

“So I still have an opportunity to buy units?”

“You do, except for one.”

Solaire waited.

“The most exclusive unit, which is located on the very top floor, Fox will keep for himself. It’s really to keep his wife happy.”

“He’s married?”

“What I heard is that Guy Fox never does any business under his name. Everything is done through his wife.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t want his wife involved in his *other* business dealings.”

“So he cares about her?”

“Maybe just enough not to get her in trouble.”

“Or to legitimize what he is doing as a developer.”

She glanced at her watch. “I better get back to the office. We’ve got a lot of work to do for tonight.” She got up. “I guess I’ll see you then.”

“Now that I’ve got my invitation, you most certainly will.”

He saw her leave and waited for the bill.

Solaire thought hard about tonight.

At the grand opening he may have to introduce himself to Guy Fox.

* * * * *

The man brushed Solaire’s lapel and adjusted his collar. He then moved back to allow Solaire to view himself fully.

The suit fitted him perfectly. The sleeves were just the right size and the hem was cut precisely to his height.

“How do you feel, sir?” the tailor at Brooks Brothers asked.

“Like a successful property manager.”

Solaire then headed to his final stop.

Several salesmen got up when he entered wearing his suit.

The manager himself came out of his office and introduced himself.

“Welcome to BMW, sir,” he said, extending his hand.

Solaire shook it.

“Any models you have a preference for?”

“I’m not picky.”

“Are you looking to buy or lease?” he said.

“I’m looking to rent.”

The manager looked confused. “We don’t rent vehicles at this location.”

“That’s too bad,” Solaire said. “I need it just for tonight.”

“One night?”

“Yes, for the grand opening of Crystal Towers. It’s a shame you don’t rent, though.”

The manager suddenly smiled. “We can always make exceptions. Please follow me.”

He took Solaire to the back of the showroom.

“This is one of our finest models.”

The black BMW 6 Series glistened in the showroom lights. It was a two-door convertible model.

"I think you would look very nice if you drove up in this," the manager said. Solaire examined the body of the vehicle. "I think I would, too."

* * * * *

The drive to Crystal Towers was quick, but the drive to the front door was not. Cars lined up, bumper to bumper, as they slowly made their way to the entrance.

An attendant held the door open for Solaire as he got out.

"Nice car," the attendant said.

"I know."

Crystal Towers was even more beautiful at night. It glowed under the moonlight, as if light was reflecting off a diamond. The design sparkled, highlighting the exterior of the building.

Solaire strolled over the red carpet and up to the two-door entrance.

He held the invitation up for a guard to see and then entered.

Loud music blared all around. A DJ was in the back, spinning records.

The front lobby of the building had been transformed into a night club. The lights were low and people, with glasses in their hands, were milling about.

Solaire spotted the makeshift bar and approached the bartender.

"Ice tea, no ice," he said.

The bartender looked at him as if he had not heard him.

Solaire said more slowly, "I'll have a glass of ice tea but no ice in it."

When the bartender had comprehended he moved away.

Solaire surveyed the party.

There was no sign of Guy Fox.

He felt someone beside him.

He turned.

It was Sandy Williams and she looked exquisite. She wore a strapless black dress and high heels. Her hair was smooth and fell down her back.

"Glad you made it," she said, holding a glass.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

His drink came.

"Quite a party," Solaire said.

"It's the party to be in."

"I guess I have you to thank for it." He raised his glass.

"Not me, but him," Sandy said.

Patrick Carr approached them. "Mr. Solaire, thank you for coming."

"Thank you for inviting me." He raised his glass, and Patrick raised his in return.

"Do you like what you see so far?" Patrick asked. "Manhattan Realtors can help you get the best properties, at the best price."

"I don't doubt that," Solaire said. "But I don't invest my clients' money until I have, at least, met the developer."

Patrick understood. "Mr. Fox will be arriving soon and I will personally introduce you to him."

"I'd appreciate that."

Patrick walked away.

"I can't stand him," Sandy said.

"He seems nice," Solaire added.

"He's nice only to his clients, not to his employees."

Solaire sipped his drink and then placed it down. "Do you know which way the men's room is? I would like to freshen up."

"I thought only women did that?"

"It's the twenty-first century; the rules have changed."

She pointed to the end of the lobby.

He left her and headed in that direction. He slowed at the elevators. Two seconds ago he had seen two men in dark suits get in one of the elevators.

Solaire pulled out his cell phone and acted as if he were texting someone.

He saw the elevator stop at the twentieth floor.

Solaire then headed for the men's room, but instead of going into it he turned and found the stairs.

He bounced up the stairs to the second floor. From there he took the elevator to the twentieth floor.

He got off and spotted, at the end of the hall, the same two men who had gone up earlier.

Once they saw him they quickly approached.

"You're not supposed to be here."

"I bought one of the units and I just wanted to see it," Solaire pleaded.

"Not on this floor, you didn't."

"This isn't the nineteenth?"

"Nope."

"Sorry, fellas." Solaire went back into the elevator.

He went down to the second floor and took the stairs back to the first floor.

He found Sandy where he'd left her.

"You're sweating," Sandy said.

"Am I?" He wiped his temples. "The washroom was all the way in the back."

* * * * *

There was a bit of commotion and it was coming from the entrance of the building. Solaire turned and caught Guy Fox coming in. On his arm was a stunning woman—his wife.

She had radiant olive skin, jet black hair and dazzling dark eyes.

Guy Fox, on the other hand, looked exactly like the photo Solaire had seen earlier. His head was clean shaven and so was his face. He was of slight build but in person looked much taller.

The couple smiled as they were greeted by the guests.

"They sure know how to make an entrance," Sandy said, sipping her drink.

After a few minutes of pleasantries a microphone was handed to Fox. "Thank you, friends and honoured guests. I can't say enough what a pleasure it is—*on my wallet*—to finally see Crystal Towers complete." There was a spatter of laughter. "It's been a four-year journey, one I thought that would never end. But after two

delays we are finally able to say we have one of the most luxurious buildings in all of New York.” There were cheers. “It has always been one of my dreams to develop a project in Manhattan, and I would like to thank all those that have worked hard in making this dream of mine come true.” Fox smiled at his wife. She smiled back in return. “I think this would also be a good time to specially thank the new owners who bought units at Crystal Towers.” There were a few hoots and even a whistle. “Without you, this building would have never existed.” More laughter. “Enjoy tonight. Tomorrow you will all receive your keys to your new homes. I hope Crystal Towers is everything that you have ever wanted, and more.”

Guy Fox put down the microphone and began shaking hands with the other guests.

Solaire finished his drink.

Patrick brought Fox over. “Mr. Fox, I would like you to meet Mr. Roman Solaire.”

They shook hands.

“Mr. Solaire is looking at investment opportunities for his wealthy clients,” Patrick said.

“We welcome that,” Fox smiled.

“I’ve heard great things about Crystal Towers from Sandy here,” Solaire said.

Fox turned to Sandy, unsure of whom she was.

Patrick quickly interjected. “Sandy Williams works at Manhattan Realtors.”

Fox merely smiled.

Solaire said, “I prefer to know who I’m buying from before I do it.”

“Understandable,” Fox said. “I don’t do any business either, unless I’ve met the other person myself.”

Solaire’s mind flashed back to the image on the photo of Fox with the African man.

“Indeed,” Solaire replied.

“Why don’t you drop by my office tomorrow and I’ll try to alleviate any concerns that you may have,” Fox said.

“I would appreciate that.”

Suddenly, a woman appeared beside Fox.

“Mr. Solaire,” Fox said. “Let me introduce my wife, Jackie Belafonte.”

The woman extended her hand.

Solaire took it and with a slight bow said, “A pleasure.”

She smiled. There was something mesmerizing about her. It was as if she knew what she wanted and how to get it.

Solaire could tell that Fox was enamoured by her.

“Excuse us,” Fox said, and together they moved away.

* * * * *

“So.” Sandy turned to him. “What should we do for the rest of the evening?”

Solaire said, “I would like to see New York.”

Sandy looked at her watch. “I know just the thing. Come, we don’t have much time.”

The attendant brought the BMW convertible, and after tipping him they got in.
“Where to?” he asked.

“The Rockefeller Center.”

After purchasing their tickets they took the last elevator to the seventieth floor.

The Top of the Rock, as it is known, is a deck on top of the Rockefeller building that allows an open air, unobstructed, 360-degree view of New York.

It was breathtaking at night and Solaire couldn't help feeling like he was on the top of the world.

The air was chilly and Solaire took off his coat and placed it around Sandy's shoulders.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Thank you for bringing me here.”

Solaire could see the Empire State Building, Central Park, the Chrysler building, and in the distance the Statue of Liberty.

The city looked vibrant and alive, even at night.

“When I came to New York,” Sandy started, “I felt like I didn't belong here. The city felt like it was moving faster than me and I couldn't keep up with it. I felt like I was falling behind. But then one day I came here and saw this, and I knew I wanted to be here. I made a promise that I would make something of myself, and I would do it here.”

“I hope you do,” Solaire said sincerely.

Sandy smiled. “I feel weird telling you this. I really don't know much about you.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Is there a Mrs. Solaire or even a Mrs. Solaire-in-waiting somewhere?”

“In my line of work their just wouldn't be a place for a missus.”

“So, your work is your life?”

“Sometimes I feel my work will lead to the end of my life.”

Solaire was glad Sandy didn't ask what that meant.

The breeze was cool as it brushed past her hair. “The night is so beautiful,” she said.

“It would be even more beautiful with a kiss,” Solaire added.

She turned to him.

He smiled.

“You're dangerous, Mr. Roman Solaire,” she said.

“Call me Danger Man.”

She smiled.

* * * * *

When Solaire entered his room he heard a noise. He knew exactly what it was.

“Yes,” Solaire said, answering the cell phone.

“I'm glad you are enjoying New York,” replied the voice. It was Travers.

“It's a great city,” Solaire replied.

“I hope you still remember why you are there in the first place.”

“I do. I'm here to search for something that no one knows exists.”

“You sound frustrated,” Travers said.

“I am.” Solaire sat on the bed. “I don’t enjoy playing with other people.”

“You mean that woman, Sandy Williams?” Travers said.

Solaire’s back arched. “How do you know about her? Are you watching me?”

“I’m not interested in your personal life, but I am interested in your progress. In any case, use her as an asset to complete your mission.”

Solaire almost laughed. “You sound like a government man.”

There was no response.

Solaire continued. “Let me make something very clear. I do not work for any government or country. I am not some spy or secret agent who manipulates others for the greater good.”

“Then what do you do, Mr. Solaire?”

There was silence.

“Let me clarify,” Travers said. “If you don’t work for an agency, then what is it that you do?”

After a pause: “I don’t know.”

“Let me tell you what you do. You are good at finding that one thing that otherwise may never be found. You have the ability to search relentlessly, through any obstacles that get in your way, to locate that which you have been hired to find. I’ve been watching you for some time. I was highly impressed at how you were able to reunite that woman with her daughter.”

Solaire’s mind flashed back. A woman had found him somehow and begged him to find her daughter who had gone missing eighteen years ago. The police had given up but she had not. It took Solaire six months to track the girl, but not before rooting himself in the small town the girl was in. It was the girl’s neighbour who had taken her and raised the girl as her own. The town’s folks had become so enamoured by Solaire that one of them led him straight to the girl, who was now a twenty-year-old woman.

Travers said, “You had no problem manipulating the town’s people at that time.”

“I knew what I was searching for and I knew what I was doing was right. I *don’t* know you. I *don’t* know who you work for. And I *don’t* know if what I’m doing is right.”

There was silence on the other end. “I know you don’t know me or my employers so you have no reason to believe me, but I assure you if what you were doing was wrong then I wouldn’t be part of it.”

With that the line went dead.

* * * * *

The next morning Solaire was back at Crystal Towers, but this time he was dressed in a uniform.

Even after the grand opening there was still work being done in the building, from landscaping to renovating to home inspecting.

Solaire took the elevator all the way to the top.

He got off, and as expected was confronted by two men in suits.

“Can I help you?” one said.

“Yeah. I’m from the city.” Solaire quickly flashed a badge. “I’m inspecting all units in the building and I need to inspect that one.” He pointed to the suite they were guarding.

“What for?”

“To make sure that it is energy efficient.”

The guard glanced at his partner, unsure.

“Hey, listen,” Solaire said. “I have to make sure that this building is in compliance with the New York City Energy Conservation Code. This is mandatory stuff. If I can’t do it then I’ll write up a report saying the building doesn’t meet the standards, and then your boss will be in deep trouble.”

The guard scanned Solaire up and down. The uniform looked official. It was. Solaire had ‘borrowed’ it from an actual city inspector.

“Okay,” the guard said. “But make it quick.”

Solaire entered the suite and was taken aback at how luxurious everything was, from the frames on the walls to the marble floor to even the furniture.

Guy Fox knew how to live in style, Solaire concluded.

Solaire quickly scanned the interior. There was a spacious living room in front, with an open kitchen to the right and a hallway to the left; a spiralling staircase led up to another floor.

Solaire felt the guard hover behind him.

“I can do this by myself,” Solaire said.

“I’ve got my orders.”

Solaire flipped a notepad and began walking around the living room. He scribbled something and then went around, peeking into the nooks and crannies.

Near the windows he pulled out an object and pressed it. Brown powder sprayed from the tip of the object.

“What’s that?” the guard said.

“It lets me know if there are any air leaks.”

He heard footsteps and turned.

From the stairs she came down.

Jackie Belafonte was as stunning as last night. She wore a full dress, but this one was more modest than the one the night before.

“What’s going on?” she asked the guard.

He looked nervous. “He’s... he’s an inspector from the city, ma’am.” He looked in his direction for help.

“As part of the New York City Energy...” Solaire started.

“No, you’re not.”

“I’m sorry?”

“We met last night at the party,” she said.

“I think you have me mistaken for someone else.”

“I don’t think so. I never forget a face.”

The guard looked in his direction. His demeanour had instantly changed.

“Leave us,” she said.

The guard looked confused.

“Now,” she demanded.

* * * * *

When the guard was gone she turned to him and said, "It's Mr. Solaire, I believe. Yes?"

He gave her a slight bow.

"Can I get you a drink?" she asked.

"Ice tea, but hold off on the ice."

"You're not a hard drink-type of man?"

Solaire shook his head. "It upsets my stomach."

"Please have a seat."

He did.

The white leather sofa was soft and comfortable.

She returned and sat across from him.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" She took a sip from her drink.

"Well," Solaire started. "I'm not sure how I can explain this..." He pointed to his uniform.

"Don't. My husband told me about you and your interests in Crystal Towers. Isn't it extraordinary?" She moved her hand around the suite.

He nodded. "It is."

"Unlike my husband, I like theatrics."

"I'm not sure what you mean?" Solaire said, confused.

"City inspector?" She raised an eyebrow. "It would have been easier if you merely requested a tour of the building."

Solaire understood. "But the tour would show me only what I need to see. This allows me to see what doesn't need to be seen."

"You sound like a private investigator. I hope your clients are paying you well."

Solarie thought of Travers. "Believe me, money is not a concern."

She smiled. "As you can see, it's not for us either."

"Ms. Belafonte..."

"Call me Jackie."

"Jackie, why the guards?"

She put the glass down. "As you are aware, my husband is a very wealthy man. And in today's economic state he is one of the few people who have actually made money in the real estate market. It's a very competitive business and there are some who will do anything to get ahead." She sighed.

"You sound like you don't want to be part of it?"

"Don't get me wrong. Who doesn't like luxury? But I have other interests than my husband."

Solaire waited.

"Charity," she said. "The Jackie B. Foundation donates food and clothing to children all over Africa. My husband's passion is real estate, while mine is helping those in need."

"I'm sure your husband's work helps you in yours."

"It does," she finally said.

He got up. "Thank you for your time and your hospitality."

* * * * *

Solaire was having lunch at a diner when he noticed a man across the street. The man was wearing a large trench coat, with black sunglasses propped up on his nose and an old-style press hat on his head.

The man stuck out amongst the urban and hip crowd. He looked like a spy from a cold war novel.

The man kept looking in his direction.

Solaire finished his beef sandwich, gulped down the ice tea and went to the back of the diner.

Instead of going into one of the washrooms, he turned left and went straight through the kitchen. He apologized to the staff, who were shocked to see him, and exited through the back.

He circled around the building.

The man was no longer standing where Solaire had last seen him; instead he was standing in front of the diner, peering through the window.

Solaire approached him from behind and stuck his two fingers in his back.

“Don’t turn,” Solaire said in a deep voice.

The man was startled.

“Follow me,” Solaire commanded.

He obliged. Together they walked down the street and into an alley.

“Turn,” Solaire instructed.

The man did so.

He was middle-aged, slightly overweight, with green eyes which now looked concerned.

“Who are you?” Solaire demanded.

“Are you going to shoot me?” the man asked.

“It’ll depend on your answers. Why are you following me?”

“I was asked to.”

“By whom?”

“I can’t say.”

“You better start talking or else...”

“Listen, I...” Suddenly the man stopped. His body relaxed and he smiled. “You don’t have a real gun.”

“Are you sure?” Solaire said.

“I am.”

“You want to bet your life on it?”

“No, but I’m pretty sure of it, Mr. Solaire.”

Solaire removed his hand from his pocket.

“How do you know my name?” he asked.

“Mr. Travers told me.”

Solaire almost laughed. “So he sent you to watch me?”

“No.” He shook his head. “To assist you.”

“I don’t need help.”

“That’s not for me to decide.”

“You go back and tell Travers that I work alone.”

“I have my orders.”

“I *don’t*,” Solaire said. “I can handle this myself.”

"That's fine by me." The man shrugged. "I get paid either way. Plus, New York is a nice place to visit. Can you recommend any fun attractions while I'm here?"

Solaire paused.

"Donald Levack." He extended his hand.

Solaire didn't take it.

"Listen, I get it," Levack started. "You're a lone wolf. You like to hunt by yourself."

Solaire wasn't sure where this was going.

"Like you, I'm a lone beast, too. How about this? I do my thing and you do yours."

"What is that you do?" Solaire finally asked.

"Let's say, if I were the one bringing you into this alley, talking is something we wouldn't be doing."

Solaire understood. "You're a hitman."

Levack cringed. "I don't like that word. It's so sinister. I prefer to think that I get things done."

"Whatever you are, you don't hide very well." Solaire moved his eyes up and down Levack's attire.

"Really?" Levack looked surprised. "I thought it made me mysterious."

"Maybe in a book, but not in real life."

Solaire started to move away.

"You wanna go for a drink?" Levack asked.

"No, thanks. You stay away from me." Solaire stopped at the end of the alley. "And tell Travers not to send anyone else to help me."

* * * * *

Solaire stormed down the street with his hands in his pockets and his head down. He moved passed pedestrians who were busy enjoying the many sights and sounds of New York City. Vendors lined the streets, hawking designer sunglasses to personalized T-shirts to stylized artwork.

Solaire stopped at one. Movie posters lined the wall.

"Them are all originals, brother," said the seller.

The posters ranged from the classics to the contemporary.

"I give you the best price in the city," the seller said.

Solaire glanced left and stopped.

A man in a black jacket and red hair stood staring in his direction.

Not another one of Travers' goons, Solaire thought.

But there was something different about the man. He made no effort to hide himself from him.

"What you like, brother?" the seller interrupted his thoughts. "James Bond? Indiana Jones? Die Hard?"

"No, thanks."

Solaire turned and began walking in the other direction.

He sensed the man follow behind.

Whoever he was, Solaire didn't want to find out.

Solaire quickly crossed the street and hurried his steps.

He noticed the man did not cross but kept pace on the other side.
Solaire turned sharply around the corner. He then dashed down the block,
narrowly missing pedestrians.
When he had passed two full blocks he stopped and glanced back.
The man was nowhere to be found.
Solaire controlled his breathing.
He quickly steadied his heartbeat.
This was too easy, he thought.
His instincts were correct.
A block away the man reappeared.
They both locked eyes.
The man went into a full sprint. Solaire did the same in the opposite direction.
Up ahead, at the end of the block, were stairs leading down to the subway.
There he would have a better chance of disappearing.
Solaire sped up.
Suddenly a black SUV appeared around the corner, cutting him off.
Solaire tried to manoeuvre around it but something or someone pushed him
from behind.
The momentum propelled him forward and straight to the open doors of the
SUV.
A man grabbed him and another placed a bag over his head.
He was shoved into the backseat.
His hands were fastened together.
In the darkness, Solaire felt the SUV lurch forward and then squeal away.

* * * * *

The bag was pulled off his head. A chill hit his damp face.
He blinked.
It was dark.
Then a bright light was flashed in his eyes, blinding him.
He squinted.
Two more lights were turned on.
He quickly took in his situation.
He was on a chair with his wrists tied behind his back.
He moved his head around.
He was in a room, but where?
Then it dawned on him. The metallic sounds of the walls informed him that he
was in a shipping container.
Solaire shivered.
It wasn't particularly cold, but the feeling of emptiness made him so.
Behind the strobe lights, a figure emerged from the shadows.
It took Solaire a second to recognize him.
It was Guy Fox.
"You have not been honest with me, Mr. Solaire," Fox said, standing before
him. "If that is your real name."
"It's the name I go by," Solaire said.

"I'm sure." Fox curled a smile.

"Is this how you conduct your business?" Solaire said.

"No, but you're not really a businessman, are you?" He smiled again.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure you don't." Fox walked around him, his hands behind his back as if he were a teacher reprimanding his student who had been a very naughty boy.

A chair was placed and Fox sat down.

Behind him, Solaire caught the man with the red hair.

There was a twinkle in the man's eyes.

Fox crossed his leg and said, "My wife told me you had dropped by *unexpectedly*."

"It was for my business."

"Ah, yes," Fox said. From his jacket pocket he pulled out a card. He read from it. "Travers Property Management. How fascinating. What is it that you do? Let me remember. You provide investment opportunities to your clients, yes? Well, we called the number and we spoke to a very nice woman. She assured us that Travers Property Management did in fact exist but she failed to realize who she was talking to." Fox's smile widened. "I know people who know other people. We sent someone to the address and surprise, surprise, there is no Travers Property Management. Why is that, now?"

"I can assure you there is a Mr. Travers," Solaire interjected.

"And who is he?"

"I wish I knew."

Fox adjusted his jacket. "Then let me ask, who are *you*?"

"You already know my name."

"Okay, then what do you want from me?"

"Information."

"Information?"

"Yes. You are funding terrorism in the African region and I want to know how."

"Terrorism?" Fox almost looked offended.

"We have photos of you with known terrorists in Angola, Sudan, Congo; the list goes on."

Fox paused and sized Solaire up. "Yes, it's true that I've been in those countries, but not for the reasons you think."

"Then for what?"

"Business relations."

"You can call it whatever you like."

Fox's eyes narrowed. "It is unwise to accuse someone when you are in the position you are in now."

Solaire fidgeted but the restraints held tight.

Fox said, "Even if you found something that somehow linked me to the crimes that you are accusing me of, what could you do? I am an American citizen. I cannot be extradited. Who has the authority to prosecute me, except for the Department of Justice? And..." Fox leaned forward. "They won't do anything for crimes outside the US soil."

Solaire didn't have an answer.

“Plus, I’m a citizen in good standing.” Fox beamed proudly. “If you had stayed at the grand opening I would have introduced you to the mayor.”

The restraints cut into Solaire’s wrists.

“Who do you work for?” Fox asked.

“I don’t work for anyone.”

Fox almost laughed. “You take me for a fool, Mr. Solaire? You want me to believe that you are here, on your own, to find some evidence that links me to crimes in another continent?”

Solaire said nothing.

“I was wrong about you. I thought you were a smart man, but we all make errors in our judgement.” Fox got up. “The biggest error you made is to believe that I’m involved in terrorism.” Fox got closer, their faces inches apart. “Look at my eyes. Do I look like someone who is capable of that?”

“We are all capable of much worse,” Solaire said.

Fox nodded and moved away. “You are right, I suppose. For what it’s worth, I am only a businessman, nothing more, nothing less. My ambitions have nothing to do with what happens in another country—or continent, for that matter. I’m only interested in making money and leaving my mark in this world. My buildings will outlive me. And if you want to outlive anyone else, Mr. Solaire, my advice would be for you to take up another line of work.”

Fox moved to the edge of the light. “One more thing. There was another person who I caught trying to meddle in my affairs. He was found shot many times. I assure you that I had nothing to do with it. It is, however, regrettable what happened to him. But I suspect he had other enemies than me, and they weren’t very forgiving.” Fox turned to the red-haired man. “Show Mr. Solaire our hospitality and then send him on his way.”

With that, Fox disappeared into the shadows.

* * * * *

When the metallic door of the shipping container closed, the red-haired man turned to Solaire.

He had a smile on his face, which was both menacing and threatening.

He rubbed his knuckles and tightened his fist.

He then swung hard across Solaire’s face.

The impact knocked Solaire and the chair over.

Blood spurted out as his upper lip was cut open.

They lifted him up and placed him back in a sitting position.

Solaire could taste the blood in his mouth. He spat it out.

“Okay, I get the point,” Solaire said. “Are we done?”

The red-haired man smiled, this time revealing his crooked teeth. “No, Mr. Solaire, we are just starting.”

He swung the back of his fist across Solaire’s temple.

Pain shot through Solaire’s head.

Solaire tried to shake it off.

The side of his face burned and his temple ached and throbbed.

The next hit was straight to the midsection.

Solaire almost keeled over.

He coughed. Blood shot up his throat. He vomited.

“You are making such a mess,” the man said.

Between breaths Solaire said, “Then maybe you should stop.”

“Maybe you should just die first.”

“Your boss wouldn’t like that.”

“He’s too soft,” the man said. “Our orders don’t come from him.”

He swung again and again.

He then pulled out his gun and aimed it at Solaire, who was barely able to keep his eyes open.

“Two bullets,” the man said. “That’s all I need for you. The last guy was a professional. He required many, many more than that.”

Solaire made no attempt at a response. The look on the man’s face told him what was next.

“The last guy thought he was some sort of spy,” the man snickered. “He worked in secrecy, like he was in a covert operation. So no one asked too many questions when they found his body looking like Swiss cheese. But you are different. You made yourself known to everyone.” The man lowered the gun. “Making you disappear will be much harder.” He then leaned closer. “If I were you I would go back to wherever I came from.”

With the butt of the gun, he hit Solaire across the head, blacking him out.

* * * * *

He felt something wet over his cheek. First they were droplets and then they became heavy.

Within seconds his face was soaked.

He opened his eyes and blinked.

It was raining, and hard.

He was on his side, lying on a hard surface.

He felt it and it was wooden.

He heard noises in the distance.

He pushed himself up.

He was on a bench, surrounded by trees.

A man and a woman were laughing and walking toward him.

Once they got near the man said, “You okay, buddy?”

“Where am I?” Solaire asked.

“Central Park.”

Solaire’s entire body hurt. His face probably looked much worse.

The man eyed him. “You sure you’re okay?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“I can call 9-1-1.”

“I just need to get home.”

* * * * *

The cab driver dropped him off at the entrance of the Ritz-Carlton. The doorman was shocked to see him enter, but Solaire brushed by him before he could say anything.

He caught the elevator up.

An old woman wearing an expensive mink coat and fine jewellery stared at him. Even her little dog kept his big round eyes suspiciously on him.

He got off on the fourteenth floor and went to his room.

He slowly and painfully removed his clothes.

He then went into the bathroom to survey the damage that had been done on him.

It wasn't as bad as he had imagined. It was worse.

Solaire's face was covered in cuts and bruises.

With a hand towel, he cleaned his wounds.

Pain shot through him whenever he took a deep breath.

Dark purplish patches were on the top and side of his stomach.

His ribs weren't broken, that would have been too painful to bear, but were bruised. So was his midsection.

He avoided touching them.

He turned on the shower and let the cold water flow over his battered body.

He pulled on a bathrobe and went out.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

His mind was too exhausted to think.

He placed his head on the soft pillow.

He closed his eyes.

Within seconds he was in deep sleep.

* * * * *

A noise woke him up.

It was annoying but familiar.

Solaire tried ignoring it but it was relentless.

He pushed himself off the bed and went to the writing desk.

He picked it up and said, "What do you want, Travers?"

The voice on the other end said, "I'm glad you are still alive, Mr. Solaire."

"I'm glad, too."

"I hope the damage wasn't permanent," Travers said.

"I'll have to wait and find out."

"It seems this may have been too much for you to handle."

"I can handle it just fine."

"Even after all that you have endured?" Travers sounded surprised.

"Yes."

"I did send help."

"You mean an assassin."

"He can be whatever you like him to be."

Solaire could feel rage inside him. "If you wanted Fox dead then why send me?"

"No, we do *not* want Fox dead. Please get that straight. If we wanted him dead he would have been years ago. We want him alive."

“Then why send Donald Levack?”

“He’s not there to kill Guy Fox. He’s there so that you don’t get killed.”

“It sounds like you care, Travers.”

“I don’t. We just don’t need another dead body.”

“You mean the previous man you sent?”

“He was an agent with another organization—British Intelligence. They had sent us their best man but what happened to him was unfortunate.”

“The same could have happened to me. And where was Levack when I was getting my face pummelled?”

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Solaire didn’t know what to say.

Travers then said, “I’m afraid I may have overestimated your abilities. It was, perhaps, not right to put you in this situation.”

“I can finish it.”

“I’m sure you think you can, but it has gotten very dangerous. We don’t need another casualty on our hands.”

“I can and will finish this.”

“Are you sure?”

“Something doesn’t add up and I need to find out what that is.”

* * * * *

Solaire went back to bed and closed his eyes.

His mind was racing now, analyzing everything that had transpired earlier.

Body language, specific conversations, what was said and most importantly what was not. All was now very crucial.

He had missed something.

But what was it?

He had been very careful in planning it out.

Soon his mind got tired and he fell asleep.

There was a knock.

His eyes snapped open.

He listened.

It was coming from the door.

He jumped to his feet.

The knock came again.

He went into the bathroom and removed the metal rod from the towel hanger.

He approached the door.

“Who is it?”

“There’s a package for you, sir,” a male voice said.

At this late hour, Solaire thought.

“Sorry to bother you, but it was dropped off just now and it says it’s urgent.”

Solaire opened the door.

A boyish-looking man with a white jacket stood smiling. He was holding a brown box.

“Thank you,” Solaire said, taking it. “Remind me to tip you the next time.”

Solaire shut the door and after locking it went to the writing desk.

He examined the box.
It was the size of a hardcover book.
Solaire weighed it on his palm. It was slightly heavy.
He gently tore the side, pulled open the flap, and extracted a piece of paper.
It was handwritten and read: *This might be useful the next time.*
Solaire placed his fingers inside the box and pulled out a gun.
It was silver, compact, but with a good grip.
Solaire immediately knew who it was from. Travers.
He placed it back inside, sealed it, and called the concierge desk.
When the same boyish-looking man appeared, Solaire tipped him and said,
“Send it back. It’s for someone else.”
He then went to bed.

* * * * *

Solaire sat on the patio of a restaurant, sipping his ice tea.
It was mid-morning and the streets were packed with people rushing by. The roads were even worse. The traffic congestion was making motorists chomp at each other’s throats. There were honks, curses, and the occasional waving of the middle finger.
Solaire observed it all through the dark sunglasses, which also protected his eyes from the blinding sun.
He felt a man sit at his table.
“I didn’t think you’d show up,” Solaire said.
“I didn’t think you’d still be in New York,” Donald Levack answered. A waitress showed up. “I’ll have what he’s having.”
“I thought you were a drinking man,” Solaire said.
“I used to be, but I’ve been sober for eight years now.”
“Congratulations.”
“Best thing I ever did.” Levack’s drink came and he sipped it. “How come there’s no ice in it?” he asked the waitress.
“You asked for what he had,” she replied.
“Bring me some ice; the more the better.”
The waiter took the drink back.
Levack turned to him. “What kind of man doesn’t put ice in his drink?”
“This kind.” Solaire smiled and sipped his ice tea.
Once his beverage arrived, Levack said, “You had a hell of a night.”
“You could say that. I spoke to Travers, and from what I gather you were supposed to watch me.”
“Who said I wasn’t?”
Solaire looked at him.
“Check your pocket.”
Solaire placed his hand in his jacket and pulled out a small device.
“I snuck it into your pocket when we were in the alley.”
“You heard everything?”
“Loud and clear. I gotta say, though, you took one heck of a beating.”
“And you didn’t think to interfere?”

“Nah, I knew you could handle it.” Levack squinted and examined him up and down. “Yep, you look like you’re still in once piece.”

“What if I was in actual danger?”

“Oh, then I would have rode in on my horse and rescued you.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Solaire finished his drink.

Levack said, “I hear you’re not a member of any agency, is that right?”

“Yep.”

“Not even CSIS?”

Solaire laughed. “The Canadian Security Intelligence Service wouldn’t know what to do with me.”

“I don’t know what to do with you,” Levack said.

Solaire looked at him.

“Listen,” Levack said. “I was told to fly here and help you find something.”

“Travers told you?”

“Yeah, who else?”

“What are you, CIA?”

“Used to be. There’s not much use for forty-year-old agents anymore.”

Solaire looked at him again.

“Forty-ish, all right.”

“You have family?” Solaire asked.

“Whoa, let’s not get too chummy. We’re not friends. No personal questions, agreed?”

“All right.” Solaire got up. “I have to go.”

“What do you want me to do?” Levack asked.

“Right now, nothing.”

* * * * *

Solaire waited for her outside Manhattan Realtors.

She came out smiling, but it quickly faded once she saw him. “What happened to your face?” Sandy asked.

“Can we talk?”

“Do you want to come in?” she asked.

“It’d be better if I don’t.”

They walked down the street.

“I need your help,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, unsure.

“But first I have to be honest with you.” He faced her. “I’m not into real estate.”

“I kind of knew that.” She shrugged.

“You did?”

“For a big time investor you were too nice. Most of these guys only care about dollar and cents—more dollar than cents, though. They’d never spend time with a junior agent because they know it’s the senior agents who get the big deals made.”

Solaire couldn’t help but smile.

“So, what are you?” she asked.

“I’m someone who is trying to find information on Guy Fox.”

“Okay. What type of information?”

"I need the list of names of individuals and businesses that invested in Crystal Towers."

She made a face. "That's going to be tough."

"I know, and I wouldn't have asked if there were any other way."

"Why Fox?"

"We feel he is in association with the wrong people."

"We?"

"I thought I was working alone, but I'm not anymore."

"And who do you work for?"

"I've been asked that before, and I wish I knew. After this is over I'm going to have a lot of questions of my own."

They stopped at the end of the block.

"So, is it Fox that did that to you?" she asked.

"It was, but I don't think he wanted it to go this far." Solaire touched his upper lip.

She stared at him. "Who are you, Mr. Roman Solaire?"

He didn't know how to respond.

"You show up unexpectedly. You make a girl feel like a diamond. And then you ask her to do something that could get her in deep trouble."

"Didn't I say, 'Call me Danger Man'?"

"You are dangerous." She eyed him. "But I'll help you."

"That's good to hear, but may I ask why?"

"I always had a feeling Fox was involved in something, and it'd be nice to know what that is."

"When can you have the list?" he asked.

"It'll involve going through Patrick, but I'll try to get it to you as soon as possible."

"The sooner the better. I'm not supposed to be in New York anymore."

* * * * *

Solaire was back at Manhattan Realtors, but this time he met Sandy a block away.

She handed him a maroon folder.

"All the investors' names are in there," she said.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank me after," she replied.

Without looking inside, he stuffed it in his jacket.

He found a quiet spot inside a café.

After ordering a coffee, Solaire pored over the list.

Twenty minutes later he closed the folder.

The list was useless. It contained names of numbered companies, meaning they could be from anyone, and tracking them would not be easy.

It never was, Solaire knew.

He was hoping to find a link between Fox and the Africans. But there were none; at least, not from the list.

Solaire left the café and, using a payphone, called Levack.

He found him standing outside an electronic shop window, staring at a 52” LCD TV.

“That one would look perfect in my living room,” Levack said.

“And where would I find this living room of yours?” Solaire said.

“Now, wouldn’t you like to know that.” Levack smiled.

Solaire quickly got down to business. “I have the list that contains the names of companies that invested in Crystal Towers. But it is useless.”

“Okay,” Levack said, hoping for more.

“It does give us the name under which Crystal Towers is being developed—The Jackie B. Group.”

“Isn’t that the name of his wife?” Levack said.

“Yes.”

“He must really trust her.”

“Or he’s very careful.” Solaire faced Levack. “Apart from being a professional hitman can you do other things?”

“First, I don’t like the way you phrased that, and two, yes, I can be accommodating in other ways.”

“Can you get me the bank accounts of The Jackie B. Group?”

Levack pondered. “I can make some calls.”

“And I need it urgently.”

“I’m beginning to think you always do.”

The office was located in the back of a commercial building.

Solaire had to go up three flights of stairs and down a narrow hall to reach it.

Rizzutto & Sons Construction was not busy save for an old lady answering a telephone call.

Solaire approached her.

She was speaking fast and in another language. It took Solaire a minute to realize it was Italian.

When she hung up he said, “Hello. I’m looking for the owner.”

“Why?” the woman said in a heavy accent.

Solaire removed the Travers Property Management card and displayed it for her.

She examined it.

“You want to do business?” she asked.

He nodded.

She got up and went around to the back.

A few minutes later she returned, followed behind by a man.

He had thick white hair, a protruding belly and big rough hands.

“I’m Mario,” he said in the same accent as the woman.

“My name is Roman Solaire. Can we talk?”

Mario took him to a congested office. The room was filled with all sorts of construction materials.

“What can I do for you?” Mario said, taking a seat.

“You worked on Crystal Towers, yes?”

Hearing the name, Mario’s face turned red. “Big mistake of my life,” he said.

“The day before the grand opening I saw you arguing with a man.”

“I argue with lots of people.”

“He was wearing a suit and giving orders.”

“Oh, that was Anthony. He hire my company.”

“Where can I find him?”

“He lives in Crystal Towers.”

“What do you know about Guy Fox?” Solaire quickly asked.

Mario’s face turned red again. “He is sneaky, like a fox. And he is a crook.” He pulled open a drawer and retrieved a file. He opened it and placed it in front of Solaire. It contained yellow coloured invoices. “See. This is the work I do. I put tiles in half of the bathrooms in the building.”

“And you were never paid?” Solaire asked.

“I was, but they promised to pay more if I did the job by the time of the opening. I told them it was too early and I cannot to do it. They said they would give me bonus if I did. I hire more people out of my pocket and when the job finish they don’t pay me.”

“You have a contract?”

“Not for the bonus.” He shrugged. “I’m an honest guy. If I give you my word that I finish job then I do it. I take Guy Fox word that he pay me. He is lying bastard.”

“You didn’t try to get the money?”

“I did. I send my son, Maurizio, and they beat him up.”

“You didn’t go to the police?”

“Everybody knows Guy Fox, even the mayor. I am just a small businessman. I am nobody.” Mario looked at his face. “He owe you money, too?”

Solaire touched the cut on his upper lip. “You can say that. That’s why I’m here. I need your help.”

Mario leaned forward, interested.

“When you were working at Crystal Towers, did they give you a master key?”

“Yes.”

“Do you still have it?”

Mario’s left eyebrow rose. “Yes.”

“Can I have it?”

Mario leaned back in his chair. “You want the master key to Crystal Towers?”

Solaire nodded and smiled.

“Why I should give you?”

“I can get your money.”

“How?”

“Leave that to me.”

“Why I should trust you?”

Solaire pointed to his face.

Mario understood. He pulled open the drawer again and brought out a small black box. With a key he unlocked it and then placed another key in front of Solaire.

Solaire took it.

“You get me my money and I say I never saw you.”

* * * * *

With the key in his hand, Solaire considered whether to go back to Crystal Towers or not. More specifically, to Guy Fox’s unit on the top floor. The guards would recognize him, and more importantly, this time they wouldn’t be very forgiving.

But he needed to get access to Fox’s home.

Right now he was at a dead-end.

If there was something it had to be safely hidden inside that suite. But how would he get in and out?

Levack approached him.

“You have it?” Solaire asked.

“It took some arm twisting...” Levack started.

Solaire’s eyes narrowed.

“No, I didn’t shoot anyone, but to expedite it I had to be a little... *demanding*.” Levack held the envelope for him.

“I don’t want to know.” Solaire took it and began scanning the bank statements.

“I never took you for an accountant,” Levack said.

Solaire ignored him.

“I did have a look at it,” Levack continued. “And there are many pages of deposits, withdrawals, transfers, payments, and the like. Not exciting stuff. Honestly, if I had a job where I had to go through that each and every day I would put a bullet through my head.”

Solaire flipped a page, stopped, flipped back, and then flipped forward again.

“You find something?” Levack asked.

“There is money being transferred to the Jackie B. Foundation.”

“So?”

“Why is the corporation using investors’ money to donate to a charity—specifically, to a charity they control?”

“I don’t get it?”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to collect funds straight for the foundation instead of having the money go into the corporation’s account and then to the foundation?”

“Maybe it’s a tax thing,” Levack shrugged.

“I have a feeling it’s more than that.” Solaire flipped more pages. “It’s a lot of money being transferred to a charity.”

“Maybe Fox is a philanthropist.”

“I doubt that. From our last meeting he made it quite clear that he was a businessman, looking to make a mark on the world.”

Solaire placed the statements back in the envelope.

“Now what?” Levack asked.

Solaire thought about it. “I have to go back to Crystal Towers.”

“You sure about that?” Levack questioned. “They used your face as a punching bag.”

“I will not be visiting Fox’s home. I have someone else in mind.” Solaire turned to him. “You want to help?”

“Do I ever.” Levack clapped his hands.

* * * * *

Donald Levack entered Crystal Towers and went straight to the security guard.

“Hi, you gotta help me,” Levack said, out of breath. “I live on the eleventh floor and I forgot my access card to parking. I’ve got my car running outside and I don’t need to tell you I’m gonna get a ticket if I don’t move it.”

“What’s your name?” the security guard said.

“Look.” Levack pointed across the street to one of the many cars parked. “My car will get a ticket unless I get access to parking.”

“Sir,” the guard said. “I need your name.”

“My name?” Levack sounded offended. “I bought a very expensive unit in this building and you don’t know who I am?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t help you unless...”

“Fine.” Levack raised his voice. “Guy will hear about this.”

“You know Mr. Fox?” The guard became concerned.

“Know him? I practically taught him everything he knows.”

“Okay, let me see what I can do.”

While the guard was busy on the phone, Solaire entered the building and quickly snuck into an elevator.

“You know what?” Levack said when Solaire was out of sight. “My wife just texted me and she has the access card. Silly me. Keep up the good work.” Before the guard could say something, Levack was out the door and gone.

* * * * *

Solaire took the elevator up to the eighth floor. He got off, walked down the hall and stopped in front of a door.

He gently knocked and waited.

When there was no answer he inserted the master key and entered.

The apartment was relatively small when compared to the other units in the building, but it was still luxurious with its fine carpet, leather furnishings and expensive paintings.

Solaire placed himself onto the leather sofa and waited.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long.

The door handle slowly turned and in came Anthony Scottson.

Anthony shut the door, locked it and proceeded further into his home.

That’s when Solaire saw him and froze.

Solaire got up, his hand still in his pocket.

“Are you armed?” Solaire asked.

Anthony shook his head. “I don’t carry a gun.”

“Turn around and put your hands up in the air,” Solaire demanded.

Anthony did.

Solaire quickly patted him down.

He then went back and sat on the sofa.

Anthony faced him.

Solaire said, "Quietly sit down or else they'll find your dead body in the hallway."

The colour in Anthony's face drained. He did as instructed.

"What... what do you want?" he asked.

"I want to know about the Jackie B. Foundation."

"It's a charity."

"Yes, I know. What do *you* do for it?"

"I administer it."

"Now, I have to ask myself, how can an administrator of a charity own a unit that is over a million dollars?"

Anthony didn't say anything.

"I'll tell you how," Solaire continued. "He must do something that warrants substantial compensation. So what is it that you do?"

Anthony's face tightened. "You do know *who* Jackie Belafonte is married to?"

"Yes, I think everyone knows it."

"Then you would know that Mr. Fox would not be pleased if he found out there was someone meddling in his business."

"I think Mr. Fox is already aware."

"Then you are foolish for coming here," Anthony spat.

"Let me be the judge of that," Solaire replied. "Right now, you will be foolish if you don't answer my questions."

Anthony listened.

"I know that the Jackie B. Foundation is a front for illegal activities," Solaire continued. "And I want to know what that is."

Anthony laughed. "What proof do you have of that?"

"We have your bank accounts."

"So what? What will that show?"

Solaire said nothing.

Anthony said, "We ship food and clothing to the needy in the African region. We are a well-respected charitable organization. And we are well-connected in New York's upper society." Anthony emphasized the last sentence.

Solaire said, "I just came down to inform you that we know what the foundation is being used for. We know that money is being funnelled to aid terrorism. We will soon come knocking and there will be severe consequences. My advice to you, Mr. Scottson, is to decide whose side you are on when the curtain comes down." Solaire got up. "Here is my card. If I were you, I would seriously consider speaking to us before the day comes when it is too late."

With that, Solaire walked out.

* * * * *

As Solaire rushed down the hall the elevator doors opened.

It was one of Fox's guards.

Solaire doubled back and took the stairs.

He raced down, leaping over steps.

He paused and looked up; the guard was not following him.

Solaire didn't wait to see why that was.

When he was down to the third floor the door swung open and hit him squarely in the face.

He fell back, nearly falling onto the concrete steps.

His eyes watered as pain shot up his nose.

A shadow loomed over him.

When he looked up, it was the same guard.

He had a menacing look over him.

He growled and grabbed Solaire by the neck.

He lifted Solaire up and threw him against the wall.

Solaire's back slammed into concrete, knocking the wind out of him.

The guard swung his fist at Solaire's stomach, but Solaire blocked it with his thigh.

The guard aimed for the head and swung. Solaire dropped to the ground. The fist missed and slammed into the wall.

The guard howled, clutching his hand.

Already in a crouched position, Solaire bounced and tackled him.

With all his might, Solaire pushed him, hoping to take him over the edge and down the stairs.

He did, but the guard held on to him.

The guard slammed into the steps with Solaire on top.

They both rolled down and stopped when the guard's head hit concrete at the bottom.

Solaire was disoriented.

He was still on top of the guard, who was now motionless.

Solaire shook his head. He felt dizzy.

He looked and the guard's eyelids were open but his eyes were rolled up.

Blood oozed from the back of his head.

Solaire tried to move but his left leg was pinned underneath the guard's body.

He pushed him off and stood up.

Pain shot down his leg.

He tried to shake it off.

He limped down the steps and onto the second floor.

When he stuck his head into the hall he saw a guard by the elevators.

Solaire knew going through the front entrance was no longer an option.

He peeked again. The guard was pacing impatiently with his right hand on his hip.

He was carrying a gun.

Solaire took a deep breath and entered the hall.

He had taken two steps when the guard saw him.

The guard reached for his weapon.

Solaire quickly pulled the fire alarm.

Sirens went off.

Suddenly, a door opened.

A woman popped her head out, unsure of what was happening.

"Sorry, ma'am," Solaire said, rushing past her and into the apartment.

A man was on the sofa, watching TV.

“What are you...?”

But before he could finish his sentence, Solaire grabbed a vase and threw it over the man’s head.

The vase flew and shattered the back sliding door.

Glass flew everywhere.

Using his shoulder as protection, Solaire burst through the glass.

He took one step and then leaped off the second floor balcony.

He landed on grass and rolled twice.

He stood up and ran hard and fast away from Crystal Towers.

* * * * *

“You sure that was a good idea?” Levack said.

They were sitting in a rented Pontiac Sunfire. In the distance Crystal Towers was clearly visible.

Solaire grabbed his ankle and grimaced. It had been taped heavily and the painkillers hadn’t kicked in yet.

“I had to spook him,” Solaire answered.

“And why is that?”

“We have wasted too much time already. We need to find out how they are operating this *other* business. The best way is to apply pressure, make them do something that they wouldn’t necessarily do.”

“And when they do this, you expect us to follow them?” Levack tapped the steering wheel.

Solaire nodded.

“Isn’t it risky? I mean, what if we lose them?” Levack said.

Solaire finally smiled. “That’s where *your* tracking device comes in.”

“I see.” Levack smiled back.

“When I patted down Anthony Scottson I snuck it into his pocket. Wherever he goes, we will know.”

“I like your style.” Levack rubbed his hands. “After this is over we should go for a drink.”

“I thought you didn’t drink anymore?”

“I don’t, but that’s the only thing I could think of to say.”

A black SUV emerged from the underground parking.

Levack pulled out his cell phone. The screen had an image of a map with a red blinking dot in the middle. The dot was moving.

The SUV turned left and drove north.

“No need to keep them in sight,” Solaire said. “They will be extra vigilant after my visit so they’ll sense anything out of the ordinary. All we need to know is where they stop.”

“Gotcha.” Levack put the car in gear.

They drove for twenty minutes, weaving through traffic, twisting and turning from street to street.

“They are not using the main roads,” Levack said. “They know if they are being followed it’ll be easier to lose them in these streets.”

The dot on the map finally stopped.

The Pontiac accelerated and then slowed once they saw the familiar SUV parked in front of a building.

It was the Bank of America.

“You think they are depositing or withdrawing?” Levack said.

Solaire said nothing but kept his focus on the bank.

A short while later Anthony emerged from the front doors. With him were two other men, dressed in black. They were holding large silver cases.

“That’s a lot of money to be carrying around,” Levack said.

They got in the SUV. It did a 360-turn and sped away.

“Let’s go,” Solaire said.

They spent another forty minutes weaving through traffic, manoeuvring around vehicles, but this time they drove on the main roads.

“Where are they going?” Levack said.

“I think the New York harbour,” Solaire replied.

They were confronted with rows upon rows of shipping containers.

“I should have guessed,” Solaire said.

“What?”

“This is where I was brought and roughed up by Fox’s goons.”

“I could’ve told you that,” Levack said.

Solaire eyed him and then remembered that Levack had put a tracking device on him first.

They drove up carefully.

“There are hundreds of them,” Levack said, staring at the various coloured rectangular containers.

“My guess would be in the thousands,” Solaire answered.

Levack kept one eye on the wheel and the other on the cell phone.

“Looks like they are still moving.”

They drove deeper into the harbour, passing the giant metal containers.

“Okay, they’ve stopped,” Levack concluded. “My guess is they are not too far up ahead.”

“Park at the side,” Solaire said. “We are walking.”

The sun had started to set.

Soon it would be dark.

They jogged up along the rows of containers that reached eight feet in height and twenty feet in length.

“We should split up,” Solaire said.

Levack nodded.

He went down another path while Solaire moved further.

Twenty yards in, Solaire heard noises.

He paused and listened.

They were coming from up ahead.

He peeked from behind a container.

Two vehicles were parked in the middle. One was the black SUV and the other a grey Mercedes.

Men were unloading the silver cases from the SUV.

Anthony was talking to another person.

Solaire couldn't see who it was. His view was obstructed by the SUV. He thought about changing positions when something cold touched his neck. He looked up. A man in a suit was holding a sub-machine gun.

* * * * *

He did as instructed with the barrel of the gun in his back. As he walked to the SUV he recognized the other person. It was the red-haired man.

The man did not smile. Instead his eyes were filled with venom. "Get down on your knees," he heard the voice from behind. He did as told.

The man approached him. "You should have taken my advice and left New York, Mr. Solaire."

"I hadn't seen all the sights yet. The harbour was my last stop. Now that I have seen it I'll be leaving."

The man finally smiled. "This time you won't be going anywhere."

Solaire had a feeling the man was more interested in continuing the beating he had inflicted upon him earlier.

Suddenly, the door of the Mercedes opened and out came a woman. It was Jackie Belafonte.

She was looking as stunning as ever. Her olive skin glowed in the light. Her jet black hair flowed down her shoulders.

She walked up to him. Her dark eyes sparkled.

"You don't look surprised to see me, Mr. Solaire," she said, smiling.

"I knew I had made a mistake somewhere."

"And what was that mistake?" she inquired.

"Failing to realize the target wasn't Guy Fox but *you*."

"You thought my husband was involved in this?" She laughed. "My husband is a businessman. He cares only for me and money."

"What do you care for?"

"I care for my people."

Solaire was confused.

"If you haven't guessed, I'm half African. My father was born in the Republic of Congo, my mother in Ohio, while I was born in this very city."

"How nice," Solaire said.

She wasn't offended by his slight. "I have family all over Africa, which means I have a lot invested. There are those who want to bring democracy to the African region. Democracy is just not possible, Mr. Solaire," she said. "People want democracy but they don't know how to maintain it. Only people with iron fists can control the population, and my job is to make sure that these people are fully supported."

"You mean pay for dictators and their militia to kill innocent people."

This time she was offended. "Like everyone, you are also foolish. There is no such thing as pure democracy. Even the Western countries that strive for democracy are corrupt themselves. Look at the rich and see how much influence

they have on their own government. It is all about self-interest. Why a country invades one country and not the other. Why money is sent to one country and not to the other. Why one country's interests are supported and not the others. It is all about what we get back in return and who is giving it."

Solaire said, "I'm not an expert on international relations or even foreign diplomacy, but sending money to individuals who will use it to buy weapons to massacre innocent people sounds like a crime against humanity. There's no other way of looking at it, no matter how you sugar coat it."

She did not say anything. Her stare bore into him. Then she said, "You will never understand."

She turned away when Solaire said, "Why use your charity?"

She faced him. "It's not easily traceable. In today's electronic world there's no way to transfer money without leaving a trail. I'm sure that's how you found us. Cash, on the other hand, can disappear. The charity allows us to deliver this cash to those that require it."

"I'm sure the poor and less fortunate could use it more."

She smiled. "I'm sure they could."

"Was it you who had the British agent killed?" Solaire asked.

"Yes. He was getting too close."

"Your husband isn't aware of your involvement in his death?"

"No; he loves me too much to even consider I'm capable of that. I'm capable of much worse." Her eyes revealed that she was. "The first time you got off lucky, Mr. Solaire, but now your luck has come to an end."

She motioned to the red-haired man, who cracked his knuckles. He was ready for more fun at Solaire's expense.

"No," she said. "End it quick."

He pulled a gun out from behind and aimed it directly at Solaire's head.

"Goodbye, Mr. Solaire," Jackie Belafonte said.

* * * * *

Solaire prepared himself for the end when he heard a noise.

He turned toward it. They all did.

A Pontiac Sunfire roared at them at high-speed.

They fired. Hails of bullets ripped through the windshield, tore into the doors, shattered the side-view mirrors. But the vehicle did not slow down.

Like a freight train, it smashed into the SUV.

The impact was deafening. The SUV flipped onto its side with the Pontiac thrusting it forward.

Along the way it clipped the Mercedes—spinning it 180-degrees—and then the SUV rolled twice before coming to a halt some twenty feet away.

It all happened in an instant.

Solaire couldn't believe what he had just seen.

Suddenly, there was a smell.

He knew what it was.

They all did.

Petrol gushed out of the SUV as it lay upside down.

Before anyone could do anything, it exploded.
The power of the blast threw Solaire ten feet in the air.
He landed hard on the ground.
A door of the SUV flew over him and cut into a metal container.
Flames rose up into the sky.
Solaire's face burned from the intense heat.
His hands and knees were badly scraped.
Skin had torn off his knuckles.
He looked around. Everyone was scattered on the ground.
This was his chance.
He got on his feet.
His knees stung but he ran.
Darkness had fallen, making visibility poor.
Solaire pushed forward.
When he felt he was a good distance away, he stopped to catch his breath.
He looked back. The fire had subsided, leaving a cloud of smoke.
He shook his head. He had come here for a reason—to gather evidence. He couldn't leave without it.
Against his better judgement, Solaire turned and headed back.
He approached the scene of the explosion and carefully surveyed the destruction.
Pieces of the burned SUV lay scattered everywhere.
The Pontiac stood to one side, its front completely crushed in.
The Mercedes was gone, and so were the guards and their boss—Jackie Belafonte.
Solaire headed for the first open shipping container.
Barrels were piled inside.
Solaire picked up a crowbar and snapped open the lid of one of the barrels.
Inside were cans of non-perishable food.
He grabbed a can of corn, and using the edge of the crowbar cut it open.
He drained the contents and found a small plastic bag in it.
The bag contained rolled up hundred-dollar bills.
Solaire pried open the next container.
This one had clothes stuffed in it.
Solaire pulled out a hooded shirt.
He felt it. There was a tiny bulge inside the hood.
He examined it. A patch had been sewn into it.
Solaire tore it and out came more hundred-dollar bills.
Solaire removed Travers' cell phone and quickly took photos of both the can and the hooded shirt.
He then proceeded to take more photos: the barrels, the contents inside them, and then the entire shipping container.
When he was certain he had enough evidence, he placed the phone back inside his pocket.
He exited the container when something hit him hard across the chest.

* * * * *

Solaire fell to the ground, clutching his chest.

He looked up.

It was the red-haired man.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance.” The man paced around him.
“Now I will.”

He kicked Solaire in the stomach.

Solaire grimaced.

“I don’t know who you are, but you have caused us a lot of trouble.”

He swung his leg again, but this time Solaire blocked it and countered with a kick to the man’s shins.

The man howled in pain.

Solaire was on his feet in an instant.

He jabbed his fist at the man’s face, connecting with his nose.

Blood spurted down the man’s mouth and chin.

“This time my hands aren’t tied,” Solaire said.

The man tried to swing back, but his fist hit only air.

Solaire clutched the man’s wrist and twisted it, *hard*.

There was a crack.

Bones snapped.

The man cursed.

Solaire kicked his legs from underneath him.

The man lay on his stomach, writhing and holding his hand.

He tried to crawl away, but Solaire hovered over him.

When Solaire turned him over he didn’t realize the man was holding a piece of metal from the SUV.

He swung it hard, connecting with Solaire’s forehead.

Solaire stumbled back.

He shook his head and saw the man crawling in another direction.

Solaire realized why.

A gun lay to one side.

When the explosion had occurred the impact must have forced the gun out of the man’s hands and over there.

Now he was going for it.

Solaire raced after him but was too late. The man grabbed it, turned and fired in Solaire’s direction.

Solaire ducked, rolled, and in one motion grabbed the crowbar and threw it at the man.

The crowbar spun in the air and then wedged into the man’s arm.

He screamed.

The gun dropped from his hand.

Solaire dashed and retrieved it.

The man was clutching his arm and thrashing in pain.

Solaire got on top of him and punched him several times in the face.

The man was covered in cuts and bruises.

“Now you know how it feels to have your face pummelled,” Solaire said.

The man had nothing but contempt for him.

Solaire aimed the gun between the man’s eyes.

He tightened his grip on the handle, his finger on the trigger.
Every fibre in his body was saying to pull it. He had endured so much, and now he wanted to end it.
But then his body eased and he relaxed.
“I don’t kill,” Solaire said. “It’s not my style.”
Solaire left the man lying on the ground.

* * * * *

The red-haired man watched Solaire disappear into the shadows.
He would go after him, he knew. He would find Roman Solaire and he would kill him.
He got on his feet.
He pulled the edge of the crowbar out of his arm and hurled it far.
He spat blood.
Solaire had made a huge mistake. A mistake he would regret.
He heard a noise.
He turned.
Out of the shadows emerged a figure.
Before the man could say something, two bullets were fired. The first one tore through his chest. The second went straight between the eyes.
The man fell to the floor like a rag doll.
Donald Levack placed the gun back inside his jacket.
“I do kill,” he said. “It is my style.”

* * * * *

Solaire unlocked the door to his room and entered.
He was battered and bruised. But he didn’t care. It was over.
He turned on the lights and stopped.
Sitting near the balcony doors was Travers.
“Why am I not surprised to see you?” Solaire said.
He walked straight to the bathroom.
He cleaned himself up and came out.
Travers said, “I spoke to Levack and he told me how the money was being smuggled across the ocean.”
Solaire pulled out the cell phone and threw it in Travers’ direction.
He caught it.
“It’s all in here?” Travers asked.
Solaire nodded and sat on the edge of the bed.
“We were certain Guy Fox was involved, but never in a million years did we suspect his wife,” Travers said.
“Well, it could have saved me a lot of trouble,” Solaire answered back.
“I’m being honest with you,” Travers explained. “If we had known that then the British agent would have still been alive now.”
“You don’t seem too upset by his death.”
“I did send Levack to protect you,” Travers replied.

“You sent him so I could finish the job,” Solaire retorted. “You were protecting your asset. Isn’t that what I am to you? What is it that you said? ‘Use the asset to complete the mission?’”

Travers said nothing.

“Well, the mission is complete. What now?”

From inside his coat Travers pulled out a paper-sized brown envelope. He placed it on the bed.

Solaire knew what it was. The photos of the job he did in Toronto.

“They are all there,” Travers said. “The originals were destroyed.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Solaire wasn’t convinced.

“I never intended to blackmail you, Roman.”

“Are we on a first name basis now?” Solaire said. “And what should I call you?”

Travers paused and then said, “It’s Clive. Clive Travers.”

“Nice to meet you, Clive,” Solaire said half-heartedly.

“I guarantee you that even if you weren’t able to complete the mission, those photos would never have been seen by another person.”

Solaire stared at him. It looked like Travers believed every word of it. Or he was a very good liar.

“What you did tonight,” Travers started. “You have no idea how much good it will do for the world.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” Solaire said. “Saving the world? The last time I checked I was posing as someone else, lying to people, breaking into homes, and beating people up.”

“A necessary evil, I assure you.”

“I’m sure it is.”

Travers uncrossed his leg. “I think I owe you an explanation.”

“It would be nice.” Solaire touch his forehead where the red-haired man had hit him earlier.

“Have you heard of CIL?” Travers asked.

Solaire shook his head.

“The Court of International Law. Our mandate is to prosecute those that affect international stability.”

“Okay.” Solaire was intrigued.

“We are an international governing body fully supported by the United Nations. For months now we have been trying to find evidence against Guy Fox—which we now know was incorrect. A grave and severe error on our part, I concede. The international community has been closely watching us. We have tried, and failed, on numerous occasions to prosecute war criminals, dictators, government leaders, all those that affect peace and harmony in the world.”

“Jackie Belafonte is none of those,” Solaire said.

“Yes, but she was funding state terrorism. With your help we have enough evidence to prosecute her and those she was providing money too.”

“They are just photos,” Solaire answered.

“Yes, but they provide us with information on how the operation worked. Right now, as I speak, with the help of the local authorities we have those shipping containers secured. Roman...” Travers paused for a second. “There are countries,

including the United States, that do not want their citizens prosecuted in a foreign court, even if that court is recognized by the United Nations.”

“So, what you are saying is Jackie Belafonte will not be charged?”

“No, she will be. The new administration is willing to recognize CIL, if CIL completes its mandate with care.”

“I don’t think anything I did would be called *completing with care*.”

Travers smiled. “That is why no one will ever know that you work for CIL.”

“Who said I do?”

“I’m hoping you would consider.”

Solaire thought about it. “Does Levack work for you?”

“Not directly. Let’s say he’s a hired consultant.”

“And what would I be?”

“An advisor.”

Solaire finally laughed. “You people have a way with words.”

“So, are you interested in assisting in the capture of international criminals?”

Solaire got up from the bed. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “Right now, I think my mind and my body could use a bit of rest.”

“Right.” Travers nodded and stood up.

Solaire said, “What about the money? I may have spent it all.”

“CIL has no problems when it comes to money. In fact, we can provide it to you in any denomination that you like.”

“Does CIL have its own credit card?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Cash only?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Solaire understood.

“Goodnight, Mr. Roman Solaire,” Travers said. “I hope you will consider my offer. Your services will be a benefit to people all over.”

Solaire watched the door close.

He dropped back on the bed.

His head was pounding not only from the beating he had taken earlier but from what Travers had just said.

He turned off the lights and instantly fell asleep.

* * * * *

The next day Solaire lay in bed in his hotel room. He ordered breakfast, which consisted of fresh fruits, a glass of orange juice, scrambled eggs and a cup of steaming tea. Lunch consisted of chilled cucumber soup, a light salad, and a pan-roasted halibut with rice.

He spent the time watching the news.

There was a brief story of a raid at the New York Harbour, but no mention of anything specific.

If Travers was telling the truth then more details would come to light in the coming days.

There was something, though, that caught Solaire’s attention. A dead body was found at the harbour.

They described him as male with red hair.

Solaire was certain the red-haired man was alive and breathing when he had left him.

But Solaire had a hunch.

He took two more painkillers and went back to bed.

Late afternoon, Solaire strolled out into the New York streets.

He didn't know if it was safe to be out and about. What if Guy Fox's goons came after him?

He didn't care.

He had spent too much time in New York working, and not enough time enjoying its sights and sounds.

He walked over to Rizzuto & Sons. He returned Crystal Towers' master key and gave Mario a thick envelope of money. Travers wouldn't miss any of it.

He then stopped at a restaurant and ordered an ice tea.

When he was halfway through his drink, a man came over and sat down at his table.

"Ice tea with no ice?" Donald Levack inquired.

Solaire nodded.

"Heck, why not?" he said and ordered one just like Solaire.

He took a sip and licked his lips.

"I see why you do that," he said. "The ice dilutes the taste."

Solaire said, "They found a dead body in the harbour. Any idea why that might be?"

Levack shook his head. "I wouldn't know. After we split up, I got tired of walking around the shipping containers so I went home. I was able to catch the second half of the Knicks versus the Lakers. Great game; came down to the wire."

"And you wouldn't have any idea how a Pontiac Sunfire ploughed into an SUV, would you?"

"Really?" Levack looked shocked. "That must have been dangerous. Glad I wasn't around to see that."

Solaire finally laughed. "Where are you off to now?" he asked.

"I don't know." Levack shrugged. "Haven't got my orders yet. What about you?"

"I haven't decided."

Levack slurped more of his ice tea. "Maybe we could work on the next one together."

Solaire looked at him. He was serious.

"Hey," Levack said. "In my line of work you don't make too many friends; at least not friends who live long enough to become annoying."

Solaire stared at him. This time he wasn't serious.

"Thank you for saving my life," Solaire said.

Levack finished his drink and got up. "I don't do man hugs."

Levack held his hand out.

Solaire shook it.

"Maybe I'll see you again," Levack said. "In another city, perhaps."

Solaire didn't know what that meant, but said, "Perhaps."

He watched Levack walk down the street and then disappear.

* * * * *

Solaire waited outside with his hands in his pockets.

The air had gotten unusually chilly. Maybe it was because night had fallen.

He watched a few people come in and out of the building.

When she came out, he smiled.

"I didn't think I'd see you," Sandy said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just had a feeling."

"Well, you were wrong and I am here."

"Okay." She smiled.

"I was thinking," Solaire started. "Why don't I take you to a Broadway show?"

She eyed him.

"Listen," he said. "I can't leave New York without at least seeing one show.

What's the point in coming all the way here?"

"You're leaving?" She seemed disappointed.

"My flight's tonight."

"You can't stay?"

He shook his head. "I've got my orders. So, Ms. Sandy Williams, would you like to take Mr. Roman Solaire out on the town?"

"Yes." She smiled and put her arm around his.

* * * * *

After watching the musical they walked down the brightly lit New York street.

Solaire was now convinced New York was the one place where no one slept.

Even at night it was as alive and exciting as ever.

"So where's home?" she asked.

He considered whether to tell her or not, but then said, "Toronto."

"You're Canadian? I'm not surprised."

"Why would you say that?"

"You're too nice."

"I'm not as nice as you think I am."

"You're nice to me." She smiled at him.

They continued walking.

"Did you get in trouble for the list?" Solaire asked.

"No, Patrick has no idea it was missing. Did it help?"

"In more ways than you think."

She stopped. "There was something odd I heard today. Some murmurs about Jackie Belafonte. Did you have anything to do with that?"

He put his hands up. "I plead the fifth."

"You can't plead the fifth. You're not an American."

"Then I plead innocence."

She stared at him. "You *are* dangerous, Mr. Solaire, very dangerous."

"Guilty as charged."

They continued walking and then stopped in front of a building.

"My place," she said.

“You still enjoy working at the real estate agency?” Solaire asked.
“What can a girl do?” She shrugged. “I’ve got rent to pay.”
Solaire put his hand inside his jacket and pulled out an envelope.
He held it for her.
“What’s this?” she asked.
“Take it.”

She took it and opened the envelope. Inside was a card. It read: *Go live your dream. Be a star on Broadway!*

The envelope was filled with hundred-dollar bills.

“That’s a lot of money,” she said.

“My way of saying thanks,” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Do you want to keep working for Patrick?” he asked.

She thought about it and then kissed him on the cheek.

“Goodnight, Ms. Williams.” He bowed.

“Goodnight, Mr. Solaire.”

* * * * *

Solaire went back to the Ritz-Carlton.

He packed his bag and then waited by the hotel door.

A familiar taxi halted and Jagjit Singh came out smiling.

He placed Solaire’s carry-on in the trunk and they drove off.

Jag had a million questions regarding Solaire’s visit to New York.

Solaire politely answered all of them, without giving any details.

They reached JFK International Airport.

Jag quickly retrieved Solaire’s carry-on.

“So, will you come back to New York?” Jag asked.

“I think I will, but next time it won’t be for business.”

