

# **The Paradise Gallery**

## **The Solaire Trilogy, #3**

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### **THE HAGUE**

“Your man was brilliant in London,” the Dutchman said.

“Bloody marvelous, indeed,” the Englishman said.

The man across from them merely smiled.

The Dutchman said, “Your report is nothing short of extraordinary.”

The Englishman said, “I would love to shake your man’s hand.”

“I’ll make sure to pass on your compliments to him,” the man said.

“You must at least tell us his name?” the Dutchman said.

The man shook his head. “It would be better if you didn’t know.”

“This man deserves recognition—a medal, in fact,” the Englishman said.

“I’m sure he’ll be grateful for the accolades, but his identity must remain a secret—for now.”

The Dutchman glared at him. “While I fully appreciate the difficult task that we have placed on you, you have to realize we have responsibilities of our own as well.”

“I understand them,” the man said.

“The Judge has asked about him,” the Englishman said.

“She has?” The man raised an eyebrow in surprise.

“The reports that you provide go directly to her. She is very impressed.”

“I am honored that she is satisfied with our results, but I respectfully say that I still cannot reveal who he is.”

Both the Dutchman and the Englishman went silent.

“As you wish,” the Dutchman finally said. “You have your next assignment.”

“I do, and I have already sent my man there.”

## **MONTREAL**

Roman Solaire held his breath and went down deep into the water. He came up for air and then freestyled down the length of the pool.

Among many other amenities, Hotel Le Crystal had an indoor pool. This morning it was empty, allowing Solaire complete and undisturbed access.

The mission in London had taken a mental toll on him, not to mention on his body as well. The saltwater was the perfect remedy for healing the cuts and bruises.

He completed ten laps and then emerged from the water.

He dried himself with a towel and put on a bathrobe.

He took an elevator to the eleventh floor.

The Penthouse Suite was everything anyone could ask for. It had a separate living room, two bathrooms, a bedroom with a king size bed, and a workspace with a desk and chair.

Solaire ordered breakfast.

While he waited he strolled to the spacious terrace. The morning sky was clear, giving him a perfect view of Mount Royal. Below he could see that downtown Montreal was beginning to get busy with commuters.

He took a deep breath. It felt both refreshing and exhilarating.

He heard a knock at the door.

A man wearing the hotel’s uniform was waiting with a cart.

“Where would you like it, sir?” the man asked politely.

“Outside, please.”

The man rolled the cart to the terrace.

Solaire thanked and tipped him. The man left.

Solaire sat on the deckchair and took a bite of the warm buttered croissant. He rinsed it down with a hot cup of espresso.

From the cart Solaire picked two newspapers: *The Globe and Mail* and *La Presse*. Solaire placed the latter aside. His French was not what it used to be and attempting to read the news in French would only confuse him further.

Solaire was born not far from Montreal to a French father and an English mother. But before he started school his mother moved him to Toronto, thus he missed the opportunity to learn the language at the developmental stage.

The only French he heard was from his father, who made sure to speak to him in his native tongue.

Solaire scanned the first pages of the *Globe*, which included reports on student protests, union strikes, and even a gruesome murder.

Solaire flipped through the pages and stopped on a page in the middle of the newspaper.

A politician was again raising the issue of why the province of Quebec should separate from the rest of Canada. The politician, born and raised in Eastern Quebec, was a hard line “sovereignist” or “separatist”. He believed an independent Quebec was the only alternative for the survival of the Francophone culture.

Solaire found this troubling. He always viewed Quebec as the heart of Canada. Just look at the map, he would say. Quebec was to the left side of the country, where a heart would be on a human body. Remove the heart and the body dies. Remove Quebec and Canada will not survive.

Solaire slammed the newspaper shut and put it aside.

He was proud that his father was a Francophone and his mother an Anglophone. He was a proud Quebecer and a proud Canadian. He felt he had gotten the best of both worlds.

Canada needed Quebec and Quebec needed Canada. That’s the way he saw it.

There was a knock at the front door, breaking his thoughts.

He got up and answered it.

The same man who had earlier brought him his breakfast was now holding a white envelope.

“This came for you, sir.”

Solaire thanked him, closed the door and then tore open the envelope.

Inside was a handwritten note.

*Dear RS,*

*Please meet me at 10:00 am at the Kondiaronk Belvedere on Mount Royal.*

*Signed CT*

Solaire knew who the sender was.

Solaire glanced at the clock. He had more than enough time.

He showered, shaved, and put on a grey sweatshirt, black jeans and slip-on walking shoes.

He then checked himself in the mirror.

The bruises from his last mission had all but healed. Except for some tiny red marks, there would be no permanent scarring.

Satisfied, he left his room.

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The view of downtown Montreal from Mount Royal was picturesque. An early morning fog hung over the buildings, with the hope that the sun would eventually break through.

The 'lookout', as the locals liked to call it, was already filled with people. He spotted people walking, jogging, or even cycling. Tourists and locals lined up along the edge, snapping photographs. Two elderly individuals were practising what looked like yoga or tai-chi, not too far from him.

Solaire felt someone stand next to him.

He turned to find Clive Travers staring across at the city.

Solaire said, "If I were you I would get my camera out and take a picture."

"Beautiful, indeed," Travers replied back. "But I think I'll get a postcard instead."

"When did you arrive in Montreal?" Solaire asked.

"Recently."

Solaire already knew getting direct answers from Travers was never easy.

"Did you do any sightseeing?" Solaire said.

"Not yet, but I'm hoping to once we are done here."

Solaire waited.

"Before we begin," Travers started. "My employers are very pleased with you. One would even like to shake your hand."

"Is that so?" Solaire raised an eyebrow.

"Both New York and London were an outstanding success. I can't tell you how much credibility it has given CIL in the international community."

"I'm glad I can be of some service to the Court of International Law."

"You have been more than that, Roman," Travers said, correcting him. "In fact, you have put CIL in a position where other countries are now seeking our assistance. CIL can and will prosecute those that are affecting international stability."

"So who's affecting international stability in Montreal?" Solaire asked.

From underneath his jacket Travers pulled out a legal-sized envelope and handed it to him.

Solaire extracted two large black and white photos.

The first was of a man in his early to late forties, slim, short with salt-and-pepper hair. The man was wearing a dark fitted suit.

"Julian Barthez," Travers said. "Have you heard of him?"

Solaire thought about it. "The name sounds familiar."

"It should. In the nineties Barthez was one of the hottest young entrepreneurs in North America. He graduated from McGill University, specializing in computer programming. He quickly landed in Silicon Valley, where he started an internet company. That company grew from two people to over a hundred employees.

Several big companies tried to buy it out and there were rumours that one even made an offer of over one hundred million dollars. But Barthez held firm. He believed the company was going to explode, and one day be able to buy those very same companies that wanted to buy them. But then the dot com crash happened and the company went bankrupt. Investors lost millions of dollars. Naturally, they blamed Barthez. Had he sold the company they would have not only recouped their investment but made extra on top."

Solaire nodded. "I remember reading that."

"In the industry Barthez became a pariah. No one wanted to get near him or invest in his ventures, for that matter. He soon disappeared and was not heard from until recently."

Solaire listened intently.

"Have you heard of CTS?" Travers asked.

Solaire shook his head.

"Cloud Tracking System is a company that is developing or has already developed a software application that, when installed, can track just about anything. For instance, it can tell who is doing what on a specific computer, or which location a certain vehicle is in, or even who is watching what shows at any particular time."

Solaire was confused. "Don't they already have programs to track those? I mean, anyone can remotely access someone's computer, a GPS can track where someone is driving to or from, and even which shows the population is watching and at what time."

"Yes, but no one single application can track *everything*."

Solaire went silent.

"Imagine you wanted to know who's doing what in the office, or what programs your children are watching, or how long it'll take your wife to get home; you can do all that *simultaneously* on your phone. The key behind the application is that it'll attach itself to any program and extrapolate the requested data."

"Ingenious," Solaire said.

"Yes, but in the wrong hands it can be highly dangerous."

Solaire waited for more.

Travers said, "After the dot com crash, no one wanted to invest in any of Barthez's ventures, so he has found private investors from all over the world. Our source tells us the investors have links to Iran, North Korea, even China. With money coming in from those countries, who's to say the information will not be passed to them?"

"So, what you are saying is that it can be used for spying," Solaire finally said. "Then why doesn't the Canadian government just stop Barthez?"

"On what basis?" Travers said. "CTS is developing an application that can be used by the general public for their own benefit. CTS has assured all government agencies that it doesn't collect any data or store it. But we have reason to believe otherwise."

"How?"

"You know I said we have a source; what I should say is we *had* a source. Pierre Gauthier was found dead in his home, which he shared with his wife and two children."

“Are you sure he is dead? You know what happened in London.”

“I know, and yes, he is dead. His wife discovered the body and there is even a coroner’s report.”

“What did he die of?” Solaire asked.

“That’s the problem. We don’t know. The coroner’s report shows death by heart failure, which is unusual because Gauthier was not even forty. He jogged every morning and there are no known heart issues in the family. It was as if one day he just died.”

“You think Barthez had something to do with it?”

“I don’t know, but it seems like more than a coincidence that around the time we were informed of what CTS was working on, our informant suddenly and inexplicably dropped dead.”

Solaire flipped over to the second black and white photograph.

It was of a man, extremely large, with a slicked ponytail and a stylish goatee.

“Marcel,” Travers said. “He accompanies Barthez wherever he goes. He may be far more menacing than he looks, but this I cannot confirm. Just be careful.”

“I always am,” Solaire said, touching the marks on his face.

“CTS has provided the application to a number of companies in order for the beta users to help identify any kinks it may have. I hear so far there were no issues found, which means the application may be rolled out soon across the board. I also hear that the Canadian government is also interested in the application. This can have dramatic effects to your country’s national security if that were to happen. As per Gauthier, we know CTS is storing the data from the application, even if they tell everyone else otherwise.” Travers turned to Solaire. “Roman, we need to find where they are holding this information. If we can do that then we can not only charge Barthez with providing information to dangerous individuals and regimes, we can also stop the application from spreading.”

Solaire looked across at the buildings. The fog had disappeared and the sun was now shining brightly at the city of Montreal.

“All right,” he finally said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire returned to his suite and pulled out his laptop.

He spent the better part of the morning researching CTS.

There wasn’t much information on-line. CTS was still private and wasn’t obligated to reveal their operations to the public, but he did find something interesting on Barthez.

Barthez was an avid art collector. Before the dot com crash he had amassed a collection that included a Rembrandt, a Picasso, an Andy Warhol, and even a Van Gogh. After the crash Barthez was forced to sell—if not all, then most of his prized possessions. Now he collected artwork by local or emerging artists.

Solaire spotted one article and clicked on it.

Barthez had recently purchased several pieces of artwork from a boutique gallery. Solaire clicked on their About Us link. A photo of a woman appeared. Solaire raised an eyebrow: she was stunning. She had long dark-brown hair, emerald green eyes, and she wore a tight red dress. Underneath the photo was

her name, Sophie Paradis, and she was the owner and curator of the Paradise Gallery.

Solaire leaned back in his chair.

Maybe later today he would pay Ms. Paradis a visit, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire took a taxi to an address in Saint-Henri. What he saw before him did not look like a software company that was developing a sophisticated computer application. It was a rundown building with boarded windows and doors. Paint had long ago faded, with graffiti covering much of the walls.

Solaire looked down the street. All the buildings were in similar or worse state.

Solaire should have become suspicious when, after hearing the address, the taxi driver gave him an odd look.

Solaire now wished he hadn't sent the taxi driver away.

He looked around again and saw no one nearby.

He was already here, so why not check it out?

He examined the wooden board nailed over what used to be a door. He found an opening, eased his fingers in between and pried the wood back.

With just enough space, he entered the building.

It was dark and damp.

As he proceeded further he noticed light coming through the back windows, which were not boarded.

The interior was in a horrid state. There were holes the size of a basketball in the walls. Pieces of materials were hanging from the high ceilings, including light fixtures. The floor was covered in dirt and debris.

Solaire nearly hit a desk, which upon closer inspection was missing its legs. There were broken tables and chairs, balls of mangled wires, and even computer equipment scattered here and there.

Solaire's foot hit a cardboard box. With his boot he pushed it over. Binders and other reading materials poured out.

Solaire examined them. There was no indication as to whom they belonged to.

Solaire did a 360 of the surroundings. Satisfied there was nothing of importance to be found, he left.

Outside, he took a deep breath of fresh air.

He pulled out a cell phone given to him by Travers. He dialed a number.

"Yes," Travers answered.

"You gave me the wrong address," Solaire fumed. "CTS is not here."

"That can't be right," Travers said. "Our source was certain of the location."

"The only thing certain is that the building is vacant and has been for some time."

Travers repeated the address.

"Yes, and there is nothing here."

"I am sorry, Roman," Travers said. "Pierre Gauthier provided us this address. As he is no longer alive to confirm or deny this, you are on your own. I trust your ability to find it."

The line went dead.

Solaire shoved the phone back in his pocket.

He looked around. The streets were empty. He decided to walk to the main road. Maybe there he'd be able to find another taxi.

When he was behind the building, he stopped. Near the back door was a blue colored piece of paper.

Upon picking it up he realized it was a plastic sticker. A section of it was torn off but Solaire could make out the name of the company.

Solaire had an idea.

\* \* \* \* \*

He stood in front of Leblanc & Leblanc Movers.

The building was surrounded by a ten-foot chain-link fence. Solaire counted nine large moving trucks and vans in the front.

He went inside.

Behind the counter was a pale looking girl with light blue eyes.

"*Bonjour*," she said with a smile.

"Hello," he said. "I wonder if you can help me."

Solaire hoped she spoke English or else he would have to resort to his broken French.

To his relief she said, "I will try."

Solaire noticed that when the sun hit her eyes the blue became even lighter.

"I left my cat with my friend and when I returned he had moved away. I was hoping if you can tell me where he moved so I can pick her up."

"My manager is not here," the girl said. "I can call him and find out if we are allowed to give that information."

"Why bother him for something this small?" Solaire said, softening his voice. "I would call my friend but his cell phone is not working and his telephone number from the old address is no longer in service."

The girl bit her bottom lip. "I don't know."

"I haven't seen Celine in weeks," Solaire said.

"Celine?"

"That's my cat's name."

"It's such a sweet name," the girl said.

"It would be even sweeter if I can see her again." Solaire was almost pleading.

The girl looked at him and then said, "What was the address?"

Solaire gave the address in Saint-Henri.

The girl checked the computer and gave another address. This one was in Centre-Ville.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire stood in front of the building. It was granite and reached up at least twenty floors.

He entered through the revolving doors and was in the front lobby.

He approached the building directory on the wall and searched up and down.



He glanced at the piece of paper the girl had given him and then up at the directory again.

The ninth floor was for Direct Logistics Incorporated, not CTS.

He had hoped the moving company would be the link to finding where CTS might be located. But this was not the case.

He spotted a fast food restaurant opposite the building.

Throughout the day he hadn't had time to eat anything, and now his stomach was beginning to grumble.

He crossed the street and entered the restaurant.

He ordered a large bowl of poutine, which was essentially French fries covered in brown gravy and cheese curds.

He found a seat near the windows and began devouring his meal.

It had been many years since he had had it and now he remembered why he loved it. He had tried something similar in other countries but it did not compare to the way the French-Canadians made it.

He was almost at the bottom of the bowl when he noticed something.

A large man in a black suit came out of the building that Solaire had just been in ten minutes ago.

Solaire immediately recognized him.

It was Marcel, Barthez's bodyguard.

Marcel walked through the side of the building and then disappeared in the back.

Solaire rushed out of the restaurant and within seconds had crossed the street.

The back of the building was a parking lot and it was entirely filled with cars.

Solaire walked past the rows of cars but could not find Marcel.

He retreated back to the front of the building, passed the revolving doors and was in the lobby again.

He took the elevators up.

On the ninth floor he was confronted with a closed door that had a sign-plate with the words Direct Logistics Inc. on it.

Solaire was certain CTS was behind that door. Now if he could only gain access to make sure.

There was a card reader next to the door.

Solaire thought about procuring an access card from any one of the employees that were bound to come out, but he didn't want to raise any alarms.

He would have to find another way in, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire headed back to the hotel, but first he stopped at a printing shop.

He changed into a white dress shirt, beige dress pants, and black dress shoes. He pulled on a blue blazer and then left.

The Paradise Gallery was located in Vieux-Montreal, or Old Montreal.

There were several paintings displayed near the front windows.

Solaire entered.

He could tell the gallery was small, but with high ceilings and open spaces it looked bigger.

He saw a man and a woman placing a frame on a wall.

Once the woman spotted him she immediately came over.

“*Bonjour*,” she said with a smile. “*Soyez bienvenus à la Galerie de Paradis*.” Solaire understood that she had welcomed him to the Paradise Gallery, but he hesitated in speaking to her in French out of fear there may be some things lost in translation.

“Thank you,” he said.

Her smile widened. She was even more stunning in person and Solaire had to control himself from staring at her.

“Welcome,” she said in her French accent. “My name is Sophie and this is my gallery.”

“I see you have some wonderful pieces here,” Solaire said.

“Is there something specific you are looking for?” she asked.

“No; I scour local art establishments in search of something that will blow me away, as they say. Oh, how rude of me...” Solaire put his hand in his blazer pocket and pulled out his card.

“Roman Solaire,” she said, reading it. “Travers Private Art Collections.”

“My business is uniting clients with pieces of art that were made just for them.”

“Really?” she said, revealing perfect white teeth. “I’m sure we have many pieces that your clients will enjoy owning. But I must warn you, our collection isn’t...how you say, very pricey. We feature mostly works by local artists and some of them are my friends.”

“I completely understand,” Solaire said. “If I wanted pricey I would have gone to Christie’s. I have an eclectic list of clients whose tastes vary from one to the other. These clients are art connoisseurs so they do appreciate art for art’s sake, not for any monetary value it may hold.”

“That is good to hear,” she said. “Let me show you around.”

They walked around the gallery, stopping at each piece of work. Sophie explained the history behind the work, including who the artist was and how it could fit into someone’s collection.

Solaire nodded and occasionally smiled. In reality, he didn’t really appreciate art. He felt it was pretentious. He never understood how people could spend millions, and in some cases hundreds of millions, on a single piece of artwork, while there were millions upon millions of people starving in the world. In some ways it felt like the industry was self-indulgent.

As they moved from one piece to another he found the paintings to be more and more obscure. One was completely baffling as it had nothing but a single tiny dot in the middle of a large white canvas.

Solaire leaned closer, hoping the dot would reveal something of significance, but it didn’t.

It would be entirely incorrect to say Solaire hated art. He admired realistic painters. He was fond of works by Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman. As a kid his family had dining table placemats with Bateman’s paintings on them. He clearly remembered eating his cereal while a Bengal tiger stared at him from underneath the bowl.

They were at the end of the tour when Solaire said, “Thank you, Ms. Paradis, for taking the time to show me around.”

“Call me Sophie,” she said. “Can I ask if anything blew you away?” From her voice it sounded like she was hoping that Solaire would buy a piece today.

Solaire looked around. “I can’t say it did.”

“Well, I have good news for you,” she said. “We have many more wonderful works that you can look through in our catalogue.”

Solaire looked at his watch. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid I have another engagement later today.”

She looked disappointed but she kept on her smile.

“I have an idea,” Solaire said. “I’m only here in Montreal for a few days. Tomorrow night why don’t I take you out to dinner and perhaps you can show me the catalogue then.”

“Yes, I would love that.”

“Well then, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Roman Solaire left the Paradise Gallery utterly relieved that Sophie Paradis had not turned him down.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire walked down Old Montreal. The sun had come down and the streets were now illuminated by streetlamps.

The cobbled stone lanes and architecture made it look like he was back in 17th century France.

When Solaire passed by City Hall he stopped.

On the side wall of the building was a graffiti-style painting. Solaire leaned closer and examined it.

The outline was shaped in a square with the interior painted in bright yellow. Inside the square was a woman, on her knees, praying. The woman was drawn in great detail.

Solaire continued walking.

When he passed Bonsecours Market he stopped once again.

There was another painting on the side of another building. This time the outline was in a triangle. The inside was coloured in bright blue with a detailed drawing of a boy, in his bed, praying.

Solaire didn’t know what to make of it.

A young couple stopped and began taking photos of it.

Solaire moved down the street.

Behind him, in the distance, he heard a noise.

Solaire paid no attention to it.

The sound became louder.

People turned and looked in its direction. Solaire did so too.

A single headlight flashed his way. Solaire squinted to see what it was. A man wearing a black leather jacket, a black bandana, and dark sunglasses was riding an over-sized Harley Davidson.

The motorcycle was half a block away.

Not making much of it, Solaire kept going.

He had not even taken twenty steps when he realized the motorcycle had not passed by him.

He turned and found the Harley three cars' lengths behind him. It was going at a slow but steady pace.

Solaire had a sinking feeling that he was being followed.

He quickened his steps.

At the end of the block he turned right.

To his horror he saw the single ominous light also turn into his street.

Solaire began to jog.

Suddenly, from behind, the roar of the motorcycle became loud. The Harley had come alive.

Solaire spotted another turn. He took it.

He was now in a narrow lane. Without pausing he rushed forward. His feet pounded on the cobbled stone.

There was a turn up ahead. When he came around it he was confronted with a wall.

It was a dead end.

Solaire retreated back but stopped when he heard footsteps.

He now regretted not entering any one of the restaurants he had run passed.

Solaire searched and found a piece of two-by-four wood.

He held it firmly in his hands.

He controlled his breathing in order to listen clearly.

The footsteps were approaching fast.

He braced himself.

Just when the rider turned the corner, Solaire swung the piece of wood at his head.

It connected across the rider's forehead.

The rider fell back, clutching his face.

Solaire dropped the piece of wood and without another glance at the rider ran through the narrow lane.

When he was at the end he heard a familiar voice: "Roman!"

Solaire stopped and turned to face Donald Levack.

Levack was middle-aged, slightly overweight, with green eyes. His dark glasses were on the ground in two pieces.

"Aw, you broke them," Levack said, picking them up.

Solaire had met Levack in his previous missions. Levack had, on occasions, saved his life.

Solaire walked up to him. "You're lucky I didn't break you. Why are you dressed like that?" Solaire eyed him up and down.

"What? You mean this?" Levack tugged at his leather jacket. "All the locals wear them."

"No, they do not," Solaire said. "You look like a member of Hell's Angels."

Levack had a blank look over him.

"They are a notorious biker gang, unpopular with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

"Oh." Levack's face flushed. "I was wondering why people were giving me dirty looks."

They walked down the narrow lane.

Solaire saw the Harley. "Where did you pick it up?"

"It's a rental," Levack said, holding his head. "I wanted to blend in."

"You're lucky the real Hell's Angels didn't catch you."

Levack rubbed his forehead. "Is it bad? Will my wife notice it?"

"You're married?" Solaire said, raising an eyebrow. "The things I learn about you when I visit different cities."

Levack shrugged. "You were bound to find out anyways. So, what's the damage?"

Solaire examined him. "It looks quite nasty actually. I think we should take you to the emergency."

"Really?" Levack looked worried.

"Yes, but I hope you have hitman insurance."

Levack relaxed. "I didn't know you had a sense of humour."

Solaire said, "I guess we both learn something new when we visit different countries. Come; I know a place around the corner where we can get some drinks."

"I hope you remember I've been sober for over eight years now."

"I do, and I wouldn't want you to start drinking now," Solaire said. "My offer is for non-alcoholic drinks, of course."

Levack nodded. "I think I better take these off." He pulled off the bandana and the leather jacket.

"It's a good idea, considering we are going to a place owned by the Hell's Angels." Solaire laughed.

"Funny," Levack said as they walked down the street. "I think I preferred the dull and boring Roman Solaire."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning Solaire sat on the balcony of his hotel room reading *The Globe and Mail*. His breakfast consisted of eggs on an English biscuit, hash browns on the side, with a pastry for desert. He rinsed the meal down with a cup of black coffee.

Solaire had a long day ahead of him and so he thought he might as well stuff up now.

When Solaire was almost to the end of the *Globe*, there was a knock at the door.

He answered it. It was Levack.

Unlike yesterday, Levack was wearing a dark blue jacket over a green golf shirt, with black pants and black shoes.

"Wow." Levack looked around the Penthouse suite. "They do take care of you."

"Where are you staying?" Solaire asked.

"Ah, some dump in a questionable neighbourhood. There is no hot water and the toilet doesn't flush right. But I do get fifteen channels on my black and white TV."

Solaire knew Levack was joking. One thing he had learned by now, both Travers and Levack never gave a straight answer.

Maybe that was how all spies or government agents worked. Information was power and they kept it close to their chests even when dealing with fellow agents

or co-workers. There was always a chance one of them could turn to the enemy's side. Better to be safe than dead.

"Can I order you breakfast?" Solaire said.

Levack tapped his protruding belly. "I already ate, but what are you having?"

Solaire told him.

"All right, but skip the hash brown. I gotta maintain my handsome physique."

When Levack was done he let out a loud burp.

"Pardon moi," he said, imitating a fake French accent. "De meal was delicious."

Solaire said nothing. He just looked over the balcony at the sprawling city below.

"So, what's the plan?" Levack said. "Cuz I came prepared." He pulled up his jacket and Solaire spotted a firearm.

"You know I don't like guns."

"Yeah, I know, but I love 'em. I don't leave home without a pair of washed underwear and my little friend here."

"I'm hoping this time we won't need to resort to that level of violence."

"Remember London?" Levack said.

Solaire touched his left eyebrow. He shook his head and turned to Levack. "I believe I have found where CTS is located."

"Great!" Levack clapped his hands. "Let's go nail these suckers."

"Not so fast," Solaire said. "We first need to gain access to this location without being detected. We don't want to alarm Barthez. We already know what they are developing..."

"The application," Levack interjected.

"Precisely. What we need to find is where they are storing the data accumulated from the application."

"And you don't think it's at CTS?"

Solaire shook his head. "They are assuring their clients that no data is kept by CTS, and they would be risking it if they received a surprise visit by any of their clients. I believe it is somewhere else."

"So how're we going to find it?"

"I'm not sure. I am hoping that once we are inside CTS we will find something that'll lead us to it."

"So, we're pretty much going in there with blind hope?" Levack said.

Solaire didn't have an answer.

Levack said, "Why don't we just follow Barthez to where he's keeping this data? He's got to go there once in a while."

"I thought about that. But Barthez is too smart. He knows the data can be stored in a remote location without the need for his constant supervision. He may already have technicians keeping an eye on them."

"Then why don't we find these technicians and follow them?"

Solaire gave him a look.

"Oh, yeah," Levack said, almost slapping his forehead. "If we already knew who the technicians were then we would have already found the location, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, we go with your plan." Levack stood up. "Let's go visit CTS."

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire waited across the street. He was back in Centre-Ville, but this time with Levack, who was in the CTS building.

Twenty minutes later Levack came out and approached him.

“What did you find out?” Solaire said.

“His name his Dominique Roy,” Levack started. “He will be on shift tonight.”

They already knew the name of the company that provided cleaning services for the CTS building. Now they knew who they had to approach to gain access to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Are you sure this is the right address?” Solaire said, looking up at the apartment building. They were in Griffintown, a neglected neighbourhood south of Montreal.

“That’s what the guy at the building told me,” Levack said.

“I am curious as to how he gave you this information,” Solaire said.

Levack leaned in and winked. “I have my ways, and don’t worry; I didn’t even have to pull out my special friend.” Levack tugged at his jacket.

They took the stairs up and stopped on the third floor. They knocked at a door. A woman answered it.

She was plump and stocky, with freckles all over her face and body.

“Hello,” Solaire said. “Does a Dominique Roy live here?” Solaire knew Griffintown was a predominately Irish neighbourhood so he hoped the woman spoke English or else he’d have to revert to French.

The woman eyed them both. “Yes, but what’s this about?”

“It’s better if we speak to him,” Solaire said.

“I don’t know. Dom’s sleeping.”

“Do you mind waking him? It’s important,” Solaire said.

She still didn’t move; instead she crossed her arms. “I ain’t going anywhere unless you tell me why you are here.”

Solaire was about to say something when Levack spoke up. “Listen, lady. Go in there and wake your man up.” Levack opened his jacket, revealing his gun. “If you don’t then I’ll go and wake him up myself, but then I won’t guarantee he’ll stay awake after I’m done with him.”

The woman turned pale and then disappeared.

Solaire looked at him.

Levack shrugged. “Sometimes you gotta talk *their* talk.”

A man came out. He was unshaven, balding with wisp of hair flying here and there.

“What can I do for you?” he said, blinking.

“Mr. Roy,” Solaire started. “We are from the Casino de Montreal. We understand you are a regular there.”

Roy’s eyes widened. He turned and closed the door to the apartment. “My wife doesn’t need to know this.”

“That is exactly why we preferred to speak to you directly. We know you owe quite a bit of money to the casino.”

“And I’m going to pay it, I swear.” Roy lifted his hand up.

“Please remind us how much it is that you owe,” Solaire said.

“Fourteen hundred bucks,” Roy said.

“That’s quite a bit of money.” Solaire turned to Levack.

“Indeed, it is. Enough for someone to have their legs broken.”

“But.” Solaire turned to Roy again. “You are in luck.”

“I am?” Roy said, confused.

“Yes. We need your help. In return we will give you the fourteen hundred dollars in order for you to repay the casino.”

“We will?” Levack said, confused.

“Yes, we will. But we need you to do something for us.”

Roy’s face brightened up. “Yeah, anything.”

“We need you to not go into work today.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was coming down when Solaire entered the CTS building wearing a cleaning service uniform. It was Roy’s, but at least it fit—in most places.

The security guard at the front desk looked at him.

“Where’s Dom?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but my supervisor told me to come down.”

“Can I see your ID?” the guard asked.

Solaire handed it to him. It was Roy’s but with Solaire’s photo and name on it.

“Bind. Jim Bind?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

The guard looked at Solaire and then at the card. “All right. Do you know what to do?”

“It’s my job.” Solaire gave him a smile. “Just point me to where the supplies are.”

“Level B1, on your right.”

“Thanks.” Solaire headed for the elevators.

Solaire grabbed the cleaning cart and headed straight for the ninth floor. He stopped in front of Direct Logistics Incorporated.

He scanned Roy’s card but instead of the light turning green it stayed red. He scanned it again and again. The doors did not open.

Solaire was certain Roy would have access to all the floors and units.

He then had an idea. He quickly looked through the cleaning products in the cart. Most, if not all, were eco-friendly products. Ones if drunk by accident would not cause permanent damage to the drinker.

Solaire pulled out a pen, filled the cap with the liquid from one of the cleaners, and sealed it with tape. He now had a laxative.

He then took the elevators down to the ground floor.

He placed the cleaning cart to the side, removed the bucket and mop and began polishing the floor.

He worked his way around the floor until he reached the security guard’s desk.

The guard was busy reading a sports magazine. He had his feet up and he was leaning back on his chair. He made no effort to engage Solaire in any way.



When Solaire passed him, in one quick motion he poured the liquid from the cap into the guard's coffee mug.

He then moved away.

He continued mopping but this time at a much slower pace.

Not even twenty minutes had gone by when the guard immediately got up and ran for the washrooms.

Solaire dropped the mop and rushed to the guard's desk.

Earlier, when he had first met the guard, he had seen a set of keys and passes on the desk. Solaire hoped that the guard had left them behind in a hurry.

He had.

Solaire grabbed them, and after collecting everything in the cart he took the elevator back to the ninth floor.

He scanned the guard's card and this time the light turned from red to green. The door unlocked.

Solaire pulled it open, placed the cleaning cart in between—so that it didn't shut—and then took the elevator back to the ground floor.

The desk was still empty.

Solaire returned the keys and passes from where he'd found them and then went back up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire entered the office. The room contained rows upon rows of cubicles with laptops and desktop computers.

Solaire was not completely sure if it was CTS, or in fact Digital Logistics Incorporated, as the name on the door had indicated.

He was going based on his instincts. If Travers was correct about the address in Saint-Henri then the moving company records would indicate that they had moved to this location.

He peered into the cubicles, hoping to find some sign that this was CTS. But he found none.

Any documents he picked up contained the header DLI.

Solaire passed a room. He stopped and entered. It looked like a boardroom. It had a large table in the middle with chairs around it. Around the walls were white writing boards with all forms of codes, numbers, letters, acronyms, and even flow charts. None of it made any sense to Solaire, though. He might as well have been reading a foreign language. Either this was a code for the application or for some human resource program.

Solaire left the room.

He looked around and found the main office. It was locked.

He searched each cubicle and returned with two hairpins.

He examined the lock and then, using the hairpins, raked it until he heard a *click*. The lock was broken.

He entered.

The room was small with a desk in the middle and a chair.

There were no cabinets, shelves or other items.

Solaire placed himself behind the desk but found there was no computer; just a cord for where a laptop would be.

He pulled open the drawers but found nothing of importance; only writing materials.

He locked the room and then left Digital Logistics Incorporated.

He took the elevators down. The security guard was still behind his desk, but instead of reading his magazine he had his head down as if he were in considerable pain.

Solaire waited until the guard hurriedly got up and left the desk.

Solaire rushed to the front, unlocked the door and then left the building.

Across, he met Levack.

“So, what did you find?” Levack asked.

“Nothing.” Solaire shook his head. “The excursion was a waste.”

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” Solaire said as he moved away.

“Where are you going?” Levack said.

“I have to meet someone for dinner.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She looked stunning, even in the low light.

Solaire was escorted to a table near the windows.

Sophie Paradis smiled once she saw him.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, sitting opposite her.

“It’s okay. I’ve only been here a couple of minutes.”

“Splendid choice,” Solaire said, looking around.

The restaurant had a modern look to it but an old fashioned feel. The walls were metallic with water trickling down, giving the place a futurist design, but the lamps with their shade of yellow light gave it a homely ambiance.

It felt like a fusion between the new and the old.

The waiter came over. “Welcome, madame and monsieur. My name is François and I’ll be your waiter for today. May I interest you in a bottle of wine?”

“Nothing for me; just water,” Solaire said. “But the lady may like some.”

“What do you recommend?” she said to the waiter.

“Madame, I’ll get you our special of the day.” The waiter left.

“You don’t drink?” Sophie said.

Solaire shook his head. “I have a sensitive stomach.”

“So what do you drink?”

“You’ll laugh if I told you.”

“Try me.” She looked at him intently.

“Iced tea without the ice.”

Her eyebrows arched. “How interesting, but why no ice?”

“It dilutes the flavour.”

She nodded as if to say she had never thought of it.

“So, tell me a little bit about yourself,” Solaire said.

“What would you like to know?”

“Where were you born? How did you end up owning an art gallery?”

“I was born in Quebec City but raised in Montreal. I went to McGill University studying Art History. During that time I started working for a local gallery here. It was then that I realized how much I loved doing it. It enabled me to bring together both the art creator and the art consumer. I was the bridge between both worlds. So after getting my bachelor’s I went abroad to London.”

“I was just there.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up. “Isn’t it a wonderful place?”

“Yes, quite.” Solaire wasn’t about to tell her that he barely made it out alive.

The waiter returned with a bottle of wine and poured it in a wine glass for her. He placed a glass of water before Solaire. He handed them the menus. “I will be back to take your orders.” He left.

“Please continue,” Solaire said.

“In London I received my master’s in Art Business from Sotheby’s Institute of Art.”

“I didn’t know the auction house had a school.”

“Yes, and also one in New York.”

“Prior to London I was also in New York,” Solaire said.

“I’ve only been there once but would like to go regularly. It’s a great city, isn’t it?”

“It absolutely is.” Solaire took a sip of his water. He was reluctant to tell her that he barely made it out alive from there, too.

“When I returned to Montreal, I started getting requests from local artists to help them find buyers for their works. I realized I still had many connections from the time I worked here. At first I was selling the works from my apartment.”

“How was that?”

“Not glamorous, but it allowed me to be creative. I would take photos of the artworks and take them directly to the buyer. It meant going to places of residence, businesses, or even other galleries. Eventually I was able to take a loan from the bank and I started the Paradise Gallery.” She had a wide smile on her face.

The waiter returned. “Are you ready to order?”

For the appetizers Solaire ordered slices of grilled Angus beef on a bed of cannellini puree and tomatoes, while Sophie ordered grilled asparagus on a salad and potatoes with smoked cheese.

“So, what about you?” Sophie asked. “How did you end up in the art business?”

Solaire hated to not tell the truth, but he knew that was part of the job. Deception, secrecy, misinformation, that was what he had to do in order to not only protect himself but also those whom he was using as an ‘asset’.

He remembered once he had told someone what his assignment was—this was before CIL. The consequence of this mistake wasn’t as global as they would be now, but there were still repercussions, particularly for the asset. The asset was found beaten half to death by the very people Solaire was out to find information on. The asset gave up all that he knew. Solaire’s life and his mission were severely compromised. He made a vow then that he would err on the side of caution, even if it meant telling a little white lie.

“I got into the art business very recently,” Solaire started. “It was actually by accident. I met a man who wanted me to find something for him.”

“A piece of artwork?” she asked eagerly.

“Um, yes,” Solaire said. “You could say that.”

Their meals came and they dived right into them.

“Anyways,” Solaire continued. “I realized I could find what he was looking for and in return I was paid handsomely for it.” What Solaire was saying wasn’t entirely untrue. Travers had shown up unexpectedly at his basement apartment in Toronto with an assignment, and Solaire was given unlimited resources to complete this assignment. “Since then I’ve been travelling the globe searching for whatever my employer needs me to find.”

“Sounds exciting,” she said with a big smile.

“And dangerous.” He quickly regretted saying that.

“How so?” she said.

Solaire thought it over. “You could say that some people will do just about anything for you to not to find what you are looking for.”

“Ah, I get it.” There was a twinkle in her eyes. “There were others who wanted to purchase the artwork that you were interested in.”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So were you always successful, or did some work slip out of your hands?”

Their desserts came. Sophie had vanilla crème brulee, while Solaire had chocolate mousse served with nougat ice cream.

“So far I have been very fortunate,” Solaire said with a mouthful of ice cream. “And I hope to continue that success here in Montreal.”

“I’m glad you said that,” she said. From her bag she pulled out a catalogue. It was thick and heavy. “I hope I can entice you to not leave empty-handed from the Paradise Gallery.”

They went through each artwork in the catalogue. Sophie, like a true saleswoman, spoke about the artist, his/her inspiration, and how this or that piece could benefit someone’s collection. Solaire admired how passionate she was about her work. She truly believed in her artists and their artwork.

Toward the end of the catalogue he said, “What’s that?”

“I’m glad you asked,” she said, as if hiding the best for last. The painting was of a family having a meal at the dinner table. The family was drawn life-like while the background, however, was entirely made up in geometric shapes. This resulted in a stunning contrast between the art in the foreground and the art in the background. One was in exquisite detail while the other was sparse.

Solaire found himself drawn to it. “I’ve seen something similar... outside in Old Montreal.”

“Yes, you have. The artist goes by the name of Jenko,” she started. “His graffiti artwork is splattered through the city. What makes his story interesting is that no one knows who or what he looks like. This has put his art in high demand.” Sophie leaned in. “But I’ll tell you something. I’m the only one who has sold any of his artwork.”

“Is that right?”

She had a huge smile on her face. “Yes, and tomorrow night I’m selling this one.”

“What’s tomorrow night?” Solaire asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t tell you,” she said. “I’m having my spring auction and display. You’re welcome to come. In fact, you have to come.”

“I’d love to. Maybe I’ll bid on this piece by Jenko.”

“I doubt you’ll be able win.”

“Why is that?”

“I have a buyer who’s more than eager to acquire that piece.”

“Who?”

“Julian Barthez.”

Solaire’s eyebrows shot up. “How interesting.”

“Yes. He’s a huge fan of Jenko’s. I’ve sold him one piece already and I know he’s coming to purchase this one tomorrow night.”

“Why doesn’t he just purchase it privately from you?”

“I offered it to him as he’s been a great client of the gallery, but he insisted on bidding on it like everyone else. I think he feels it will show his support for the arts.”

“What if someone outbids him?” Solaire asked.

“Do you know he’s worth millions? I can’t see anyone matching his offer.”

Solaire paused. “I guess you’re right,” he finally said. He picked up his glass and raised it to her. “To great success tomorrow.”

She raised hers. “Great success.”

The waiter came with the bill.

She got up. “Thank you for the dinner.”

“You’re leaving?” he said.

“I have a lot of work to do for the auction.”

“Yes, but that’s not until tomorrow. We still have tonight.”

She looked at him. “What do you have planned, Mr. Solaire?”

“I can think of something.” He had a devilish smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

A man covered in silver paint, with dark sunglasses and a cowboy hat, was singing and playing his guitar.

The song was in French but Solaire was still able to pick up some of the lyrics.

Occasional passersby dropped coins and bills in the man’s guitar case.

Solaire watched him from a distance.

He was sitting at a patio of a bistro, sipping his black coffee.

It was mid-morning and the streets were slowly becoming occupied with people.

A man approached his table and then sat across from him.

“How was dinner last night?” Levack said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

“I thought with you people everything was on a need-to-know basis?” Solaire shot back.

“Okay, okay.” Levack put his hands up as if to indicate he surrendered. He waved a waiter over and ordered green tea.

“You are not going to order anything else?” Solaire asked.

“Nah, I gotta start watching my weight.”

“When did this happen?”

“Since I started working with you. These missions aren’t getting any simpler, you know. One day I feel that I won’t be able to outrun the bad guys because I’ll be out of shape.”

“I’m surprised you have managed to survive this long,” Solaire said, slowly sipping his tea.

“Funny, ha ha,” Levack said. “If I remember correctly, I’ve saved your behind many times now. So if I were you I’d be nice to me.”

“True. And I thank you.”

When Levack’s cup of tea arrived he said, “Ah, screw it. I’m hungry.” He ordered a lemon danish. “So why did you call me here?”

“I’ve been invited to an auction at an art gallery...”

“Oh, no.” Levack shook his head. “If you want me to tag along to one of your fancy *soirees*, as the French like to call them, then you’re out of luck, buddy. I don’t do parties.”

Solaire gave him a look. “I would never dare ask you on a treacherous mission like that.”

“Okay, good.” Levack seemed relieved. “I just wanted to make sure we are on the same page.” His pastry arrived and he dug right into it.

“At this party—which you will not be attending—I am told that Julian Barthez will also be there.”

“Really?” Levack’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yes, and before I go there I would like to get some information on him.”

“Why don’t you do an internet search?”

“I did; nothing relevant popped up.”

“Then what do have in mind?”

“So far we have not been able to locate CTS, right?” Solaire said.

Levack nodded with a full mouth.

“We don’t need to.”

Levack stopped chewing.

“Instead we need to go to Barthez’s place of residence.”

“His home?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Today.”

“Why didn’t you say we would be doing physical labour?” Levack quickly waved over the waiter and ordered another danish.

\* \* \* \* \*

The walls were eight feet high and they surrounded the entire house.

There was a gate in the front with CCTV cameras.

Solaire and Levack were sitting in a Toyota Corolla Hybrid.

“Now that’s what we call security,” Levack said. “Only things missing are guard dogs.”

Solaire didn’t reply. He was in deep thought.

Levack pulled out his weapon. “I know a way we could get in.”

“No guns.” Solaire shook his head.

“What’s with you and guns?” Levack said. “For a guy who does what he does you sure don’t take precautions.”

“Guns are dangerous,” Solaire replied back.

“What *we* do is dangerous.”

“I don’t like guns.” Solaire turned to him.

“Is it a preference?”

Solaire thought about it. “You could say that.”

“I guess we all have things that we don’t like.” Levack put the weapon away. “Personally, I don’t like chopsticks.”

Solaire looked at him.

“They’re dangerous.” Levack shrugged.

“And what you carry isn’t?”

Levack raised his finger. “Hey, listen. If I shoot someone, chances are they are going to die. But with chopsticks, you stick those things in someone, chances are you’ll only hurt them but not kill ‘em. I can deal with death but I can’t deal with pain. Plus, those things hurt like hell when someone stabs you.”

“I am assuming you are speaking from experience.”

“I won’t confirm or deny it.” Levack rubbed his right thigh. “So, what do we do next?”

“We’ll have to come back another time.”

Solaire put the car in gear when he spotted the front gates of the house beginning to open.

They waited but nothing came out.

The gates then retracted and were about to close shut when they abruptly stopped.

Both Solaire and Levack looked at each other.

From their vantage point they could see there was enough space between the gates for someone to pass through.

“I say we go for it,” Levack said, as if reading Solaire’s thoughts.

“It could be a trap,” Solaire said.

“Yes or it could be that the gates were faulty.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I’m not waiting to find out.” Levack got out.

Solaire reluctantly did so too.

They slowly approached the front, all the while keeping an eye out. They felt as if they would be ambushed any time.

When they were at the gates they heard a crackle.

Levack nearly leaped in the air.

A voice came over and they realized it was coming from the intercom.

“Welcome, gentlemen,” the voice said.

Solaire looked over at Levack.

“Don’t worry,” the voice continued. “No harm will come to you. Please proceed up to the house.”

Slowly, they entered.

They passed a circular water fountain and made their way up to the house.

The exterior was painted in white, with rectangular windows and columns going from the ground to the top.

From a distance the house resembled the White House in Washington, DC.

A man came out through the front doors.

He walked purposely toward them with his hands clasped behind his back.

He had a smile on his face.

“My name is Julian Barthez,” he said. “But I assume you already know that.”

Solaire was about to provide the name Jim Bind, which he often did when he was not certain of the situation, but Barthez held up his hand to stop him.

“I know who you are, Mr. Roman Solaire,” Barthez said. “And you must be Mr. Donald Levack.”

A look of horror spread across Levack’s face.

“I make it my business to know who is following me. Oh, how rude of me. It’s so uncivilized to have a decent conversation standing outside. Please come in.”

Solaire and Levack hesitated when a man came up behind them.

“Don’t worry,” Barthez said. “Marcel is harmless.”

Marcel said nothing. He merely stared at them.

The sheer size of the man unnerved Solaire.

“Please.” Barthez smiled, waving his arm as if to invite them.

They entered.

\* \* \* \* \*

The room they were taken to did, in fact, resemble the Oval Office.

It had circular walls with windows all around. One window in particular was larger than the others and it faced the back lawn.

A large desk was before this window.

In the middle were two sofas, facing one another, with a coffee table in between.

“Please have a seat,” Barthez offered.

They sat.

Solaire assumed Barthez would plant himself behind the large desk, but instead he sat behind a single chair, which Marcel had pulled up for him.

“Can I offer you gentlemen a drink?” Barthez said, crossing his legs.

“I’m fine,” Solaire said.

“No thanks,” Levack said.

“You’re wondering how I know about you,” Barthez said.

“It crossed our mind,” Solaire said.

“I’ll tell you.” Barthez smiled. “I have something that allows me access to certain information.”

“The application,” Solaire said matter-of-factly.

“Yes, and I am aware as to how you came to know about it.”

“Pierre Gauthier, your former employee.”

“It was unfortunate,” Barthez said. “What happened to him.”

“I suppose you had nothing to do with it?” Solaire said.

“How could I?” Barthez merely shrugged. “I was never near his home. In fact, I was miles away in a conference with Marcel. But I don’t need to tell you that. The police reports have it all in detail. I believe they also have that Mr. Gauthier died of natural causes. So I’m sure you are not here to accuse me of murder. Then why are you here?”



“How did you know we were following you?” Solaire asked.

“I saw how you gained access to CTS. Clever.”

“So it was CTS and not Digital Logistics Incorporated.”

Barthez looked surprised. “You didn’t know?”

“I wasn’t certain.”

“Ah, I see. This means our security measures have been effective.”

“Not quite. I did gain access to the premises.”

“True, but you found nothing.” Barthez was grinning. “You see, Mr. Solaire, most companies spend a fortune deterring people from entering a location. What they fail to realize is that even a *single* breach could jeopardize their entire operation. The key is not to worry about getting in, but worry about what they may or may not find once they do. Did you find anything of importance at CTS?”

Solaire said nothing.

“I’ll take your silence as a no. This also explains why you are here at my premises. But I will say that your *invasion*—let’s call it that—into CTS told me that I was being targeted. I then made sure to heighten my security. When I noticed you outside my home I decided to let you make your approach.”

“Now that we are here,” Solaire started. “Are you going to hurt us?”

“Absolutely not.” Barthez laughed. “If I wanted to harm you, there are many other ways than inviting you inside my home. I merely wanted to see who or what I’m dealing with. Now I know I have nothing to worry about.”

“We know you are secretly storing data, which you have told your clients that you are not.”

“I am?” Barthez said innocently.

“Yes.”

“Then where is it?” Barthez waved his hands around the house. “Would you like to search it? Better yet, why don’t you get a search warrant? Oh wait, you’re not the police. So who are you really?”

“We’re your worst nightmare, buddy,” Levack said.

Solaire gave him a look.

Levack shrugged as if to say, *it just came out*.

Barthez said, “I have your names but nothing more than that.”

“So you don’t have access to *everything*,” Solaire said.

“Not yet, at least. But in due time I will.” Barthez glanced at his watch. “I’m sorry, gentlemen. I have another engagement later tonight.”

“The auction at the Paradise Gallery,” Solaire said.

“You are aware,” Barthez said, taken aback.

“Yes, I will be there as well.”

Barthez didn’t look amused by that.

“And I have my eye on a piece. I believe it’s by an artist named Jenko.”

Barthez’s face turned a slight red.

“I am also interested in that piece,” Barthez fumed.

“Then I guess may the highest bidder win.”

“Indeed,” Barthez finally said.

Solaire got up and so did Levack.

“May we leave?” Solaire said.

“You were never my prisoners,” Barthez said. “You were free to go anytime.”

“Thank you,” Solaire said.

They were at the door when Barthez said, “If I were you I wouldn’t poke my nose into something that doesn’t concern you. It can be deadly.”

Outside, as they were rushing to their car, Levack said, “You aren’t really going to bid on that painting, are you?”

“Why not?” Solaire said.

“How can you afford it?”

“I can’t, but our employers can.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire’s first visit was to a men’s boutique shop in Old Montreal.

He picked out an ultra slim fit, silver pencil strip, two-button suit. While he selected his accessories the tailor quickly made minor alterations to the suit.

Solaire left the boutique with the suit along with a light blue shirt, striped grey tie and black dress shoes.

Solaire’s next stop was to a car rental dealer.

He selected a black Mercedes, model SLK 360. The two-door compact roadster had a retractable roof and a Formula One-inspired front design.

Solaire returned to his suite and then showered and shaved.

As he was putting on his shirt there was a knock at the door.

Solaire answered it.

A man wearing the hotel’s uniform stood with a package in his hand.

“I wasn’t expecting anything,” Solaire said.

“It was addressed to you, monsieur,” the man said.

Solaire had a feeling he knew what it was. “Do you mind waiting one minute?” he said.

Solaire took the package to the bedroom and then opened it.

As expected, inside was a six-round silver pistol.

Solaire stuffed it back inside, sealed it and then returned to the front door.

“I need you to do something,” Solaire said, holding both the package and a fifty dollar note in front of the man.

“Anything, monsieur.” The man’s eyes were fixed on the bill.

“There are some very sensitive items in this package. I need you to destroy them. Is that possible?”

“Of course,” the man said, eager to please. “The hotel has *the* best disposal machine.”

“Then please make certain that it is disposed of.” Solaire handed both the package and money to the man.

“*Merci beaucoup, monsieur.*”

Solaire retreated back to the bedroom and then proceeded to put on his tie and suit jacket.

There was another knock at the door.

Solaire answered it. It was Levack.

“Can I come in?” he said.

Solaire held the door for him.

“Travers knew you wouldn’t accept the package,” Levack said. “So, instead, he sent me.”

“I’ll be fine,” Solaire said.

“Remember London?”

Solaire went silent.

“Travers doesn’t want that happening again.”

“It sounds like he actually cares.”

“It seems like it, or else I wouldn’t be here.”

Levack planted himself on the sofa.

Solaire went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water.

Solaire said, “The auction is by invite only. Are you sure you don’t want me to talk to Sophie to get you in?”

“Nah.” Levack shook his head. “Like I said, I’d only cramp your style. Plus, I’d stick out in these high-brow fancy parties. I’m more of a nitty-gritty kind of guy. I prefer to stay in the shadows.”

Solaire made a face. “I’ll assume that you’ll be hiding behind the curtains?”

Levack laughed. “Wow, another joke. You’re beginning to grow a sense of humour—a tiny one at that.” Levack got on his feet. “No, I’ll be outside, watching all the entrance and exits. Plus, I’ve got this.” Levack held out a pen. “It has a microphone on it. I picked it up from a spy shop. I’m excited to try it.”

Solaire reluctantly took it. “I feel like I’m in some movie.”

“One day you just might be.” Levack winked.

\* \* \* \* \*

The queue to the Paradise Gallery wasn’t long.

Solaire was in the Mercedes.

Up ahead he could see cars stopping at the entrance of the gallery. The occupants of the vehicles would depart and an attendant would park the car in a parking lot a block away.

For a small gallery exhibit it seemed like everyone in town had shown up.

As Solaire approached, reporters with cameras flashed in his direction, hoping to catch someone famous.

They stopped snapping when he got out of his vehicle.

None of them recognized him, which was exactly how he wanted it.

One reporter asked him who he was in French.

Solaire smiled and said, “Un visiteur.”

A man at the door asked for his name, checked him off a list and then held the doors for him.

Inside, soft classical music was playing on the speakers.

Solaire noticed that the gallery was already half-full.

He spotted a table and approached.

Wine glasses filled with different variety of wines were neatly lined on the table.

The woman behind the table said, “Le meilleur vin de Montreal.” Solaire understood that she said they were the best wines in Montreal.

“Do you have anything else?” Solaire said. “Perhaps something light.”

The woman smiled and replied in English, “We have ginger ale.”

“That would do. Thank you.”

The woman disappeared and returned with a wine glass filled with the carbonated drink.

“We have snacks over there.” She pointed to another table. “And our auction guide is on that table.”

Solaire thanked her and moved away.

The guide was the size of a small booklet. Inside there were photos of each piece of artwork along with a short bio of the artists. At the bottom were starting prices of the bids.

Solaire flipped and flipped until he found what he was looking for.

*Diner de Famille* by Jenko was the last piece to be auctioned. The bio was only one line, stating that Jenko was an up-and-coming artist whose works could be seen throughout Montreal. The starting bid price was \$5,000.

“Is that too high?” he heard a voice from behind.

It was Sophie and she looked radiant.

Solaire had to stop himself from dropping his mouth.

She wore a strapless white dress that went down to her knees. She had on pearl earrings with a matching pearl necklace around her neck.

“In your experience, do you think the asking price is too high?” she repeated, eager to get his input.

Solaire had to remind himself that he was representing Travers Private Art Collections. “Um... for an unknown I would say so.”

“I thought the same thing, but Mr. Barthez insisted I inflate the price.”

“Why would he want that?”

“He knows he can afford it, and by raising the price this will deter other bidders.”

“He *really* wants this piece, doesn’t he?”

“He told me this personally. So I’m hoping the price will be high.” She almost squealed with joy. “The money will go a long way for the gallery. We mostly get local artists whose works don’t fetch much and I usually lower my commission if I know the artists could use the money. So to have this piece in our catalogue would do great things for us. Why do you think all these people are here? They only came for Jenko and Mr. Barthez.”

“Well, I can’t speak for them, but I came just for you.”

She blushed and then kissed him on the cheek. She moved to greet another guest.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a commotion. Solaire turned to see Julian Barthez walk through the front doors.

People rushed toward him.

Barthez smiled and shook everyone’s hands.

The media had once dubbed him the boy genius for his work in Silicon Valley. Now he was the saviour of the Montreal art world.

Solaire noticed that Barthez was alone, with Marcel nowhere to be found.

This either meant that Marcel didn't accompany Barthez or that he was outside somewhere.

Solaire felt his inside jacket pocket for the pen Levack had given him.

Levack was sitting in the Toyota Corolla a block away. At the first sign of danger he would rush in.

Solaire had never cared for such precautions, but with each mission for CIL the risks had become more and more serious.

Barthez made his way around the room toward him.

"And this is Mr. Roman Solaire," Sophie said, introducing him.

"We've met," Barthez replied with a smile.

"You have?" Sophie was surprised.

"Yes, just this morning." Barthez seemed pleased to see him.

This unnerved Solaire, but he controlled himself and said, "Yes, and I told Mr. Barthez here that I am a fan of Jenko as well."

"Indeed," Barthez said, sipping his wine.

Sophie clapped her hands in excitement. "This will be great."

Barthez leaned closer and almost in a whisper said, "I had plans for the painting, but now I may let you have it."

"That's very generous of you," Solaire said.

"But you *will* have to outbid me, Mr. Solaire."

"I intend to."

\* \* \* \* \*

There were chairs set up in a room adjacent to the gallery.

A lectern was placed at the front where now Sophie stood.

She beamed proudly and then spoke in French into a microphone.

She spent the next several minutes talking about herself, the gallery and then each and every one of the artists whose paintings were up for sale.

There was a round of applause when she asked all the artists in attendance to stand up.

She then introduced a man who was affiliated with a local auction house.

The man stood behind the lectern and began introducing each piece of artwork.

Assistants, wearing white gloves, held the pieces for the audience to see.

On several occasions bidders requested to see the artwork up close, which resulted in the assistants to walk down the aisles and display it closer for them.

Solaire glanced over the catalogue. There were many items to be sold and the piece he was interested in would be sold last.

An hour went by when finally one of the assistants brought out Jenko's *Diner de Famille*.

Sophie went over to the man behind the lectern and whispered something in his ear.

The man turned to the microphone and said, "I have been informed that we have guests who speak English, so I will conduct this bidding in English."

Solaire knew it was for him.

The man introduced the painting and then said, "Can I have five thousand?"

A hand shot up. It was Barthez.

“Five thousand five hundred?”

Solaire put his hand up.

“Six thousand?”

Barthez put his hand up.

“Six thousand five hundred.”

Solaire’s hand went up.

“Seven thousand?”

Barthez bid.

“Seven thousand five hundred?”

Solaire countered.

“Eight thousand?”

“I’ll pay ten thousand,” a voice boomed from the back.

Everyone turned.

An older man, wearing a tuxedo and glasses, sat with his hand up. Beside him was a tall, young blond. She smiled at him.

“Okay,” the man behind the lectern said. “Can I have ten thousand five hundred?”

“Eleven thousand,” Barthez said.

“Twelve thousand,” the older man said.

Solaire watched them go back and forth until the price hit seventeen thousand.

“Can I get seventeen thousand five hundred?” the man behind the lectern asked.

The blond nudged the older man, who shook his head tersely. The blond crossed her arms and pouted.

“The price is at seventeen thousand. Can I get seventeen thousand five hundred?” The man looked around, but no one raised their hands. The price had become too steep for their tastes.

Solaire looked over and Barthez was staring directly at him. He had a smile on his face.

“If there are no more bids then *Diner de Famille* is sold for...”

“Twenty thousand,” Solaire said.

Everyone in the room turned in his direction.

“I’m sorry, monsieur?” The man behind the lectern looked confused.

“I’ll buy it for twenty thousand dollars, but not a penny more,” Solaire said.

The man looked around the room. “I have to ask, will someone pay twenty thousand five hundred?”

The room was silent. The regular bidders kept both their heads and hands down.

“In that case, *Diner de Famille* is sold for twenty thousand dollars to the gentleman over there.” The man slammed the hammer down, thus ending the auction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire was shocked and amazed that he had just paid twenty thousand dollars for a painting.

People congratulated and shook his hand.

Sophie rushed over and hugged him.

“Merci and thank you,” she said.

“My pleasure.” He managed a smile.

Barthez came over.

“Well done, Mr. Solaire,” he started. “I never took you much for an art connoisseur, but bravo. The best man won.”

“Thank you,” Solaire said.

“Goodbye, and I hope after tonight we never meet again.”

With that, Julian Barthez was gone.

Solaire waited until the end. He wrote a cheque to the gallery when an assistant came over with the painting.

It was wrapped in bubble wrap.

Sophie handed him a small bottle.

“What is this?” Solaire said.

“The painting came with instructions. It said to spray this on the canvas after it was sold. I believe the liquid will coat the paint so that it doesn’t oxidise.”

“All right,” Solaire said, taking it.

“Thank you.” Sophie hugged him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire returned to his suite with the painting in his hands.

He placed it on the coffee table and then went to the bathroom. He pulled off his jacket and tie, and hung them on a hook.

He returned to the painting.

He unwrapped the bubble wrap and examined it carefully.

Solaire knew he had purchased it to push Barthez to the edge, to see what he would do when he couldn’t get what he wanted.

Instead, Barthez quit at the end. Why? Solaire was not sure.

He pulled out the small bottle Sophie had given him.

The liquid was clear and when Solaire sniffed, it was odourless.

He gently sprayed it on the canvas.

He then placed the painting on the sofa.

He went to the bathroom and pulled off his shirt.

He turned on the tap and let the water fill the tub.

He put his fingers underneath the tap to check on the temperature when he smelled something.

It was bitter and pungent.

He went out and sniffed.

It was now strong and overwhelming.

He sniffed some more until he realized it was coming from the painting.

He got closer and took a whiff.

Suddenly, his eyes started burning.

He jerked back in agony.

His throat constricted as if it was on fire.

He felt a sharp pain in his chest.

He had trouble breathing.

His right arm went numb.  
The room swirled around him. He was instantly dizzy and nauseous.  
Solaire tried searching for the phone but couldn't remember where it was.  
He fell into the bathroom.  
He pulled himself up to the sink. He was now choking.  
He put two fingers down his throat and vomited hard.  
He was sweating profusely.  
He felt as if a heavy object was placed on his chest. The pain was intense and blinding.  
He tried to scream, but only a weak moan came out.  
He fell into the tub, which was now filled with water.  
The coldness hit him hard and strong.  
Water went into his nose, mouth and ears.  
He tried lifting himself out but he no longer had any control over his limbs.  
He felt helpless as the tap filled the tub with water.  
The last thought Roman Solaire had was that he was going to drown.

\* \* \* \* \*

His eyes snapped open.  
It was dark.  
He blinked once and then twice.  
He was in a room.  
He searched and spotted a man standing near the windows.  
It was Travers.  
Before he could say something, he fell asleep.  
He woke up to find the light streaming through the windows.  
He looked around.  
He was in the same room but this time he recognized that he was in a hospital.  
Everything looked and smelled sterile.  
Solaire tried to get up but his entire body felt like lead.  
He tried swallowing but felt pinpricks down his throat.  
He was hooked up to wires that went into monitors and other devices.  
The door slowly opened and in came Levack.  
"Hey there, buddy," he said with a smile. "How you doing?"  
"Surviving," Solaire managed to say.  
"Yeah, we almost lost you there."  
"Where am I?"  
"Montreal General Hospital."  
"What happened?" Solaire asked.  
"You were poisoned."  
"Poisoned?"  
"Yep. Doctors said you're lucky to be alive."  
"How did I get here?"  
"You know the pen I gave you?"  
Solaire nodded.



“Lucky for you I forgot to turn it off. I heard you were in distress so I rushed in. I found you in the bathtub, nearly submerged. In fact, the doctors said had you not been in the water you would have surely died. The water cleared out most of the toxins before they got to you. Good thinking.”

“I wasn’t. I fell in.”

“Oh. Then good job falling in.”

“Thanks,” Solaire said.

“For what?”

“For saving my life *again*.”

“Nah, don’t mention it. You’re my meal ticket, buddy.”

Solaire looked at him.

“If you’re not around then I got no job.”

“I remember seeing Travers in the room.”

“He was here all night. He arranged for this private room.”

“I thought I was dispensable.”

“We all are, but I think he may have a soft spot for you.”

“Or maybe he needs me to keep doing his dirty work.”

“You gotta cut him some slack. In my years I’ve seen a lot of good agents left to dry. Travers may be secretive—he has to be in our line of work—but he takes care of those that work under him. Heck, he got me watching your back. And if I hadn’t shown up at your suite, who knows what could have happened.”

Solaire understood. “I’ll go thank Travers later. First, we need to find Sophie. She may be behind what happened to me.”

“Okay, you want me to go talk to her?”

“No, I want to do it myself.”

“Are you sure about that? Last I checked you nearly died.”

“I’m fine. I have to finish this now.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She was in the gallery examining one of the paintings when they walked in.

She smiled but it quickly faded when she saw the look on him.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“Can we talk,” Solaire said. “Privately.”

She looked at her assistant and then at Levack, who was standing near the doors. “Sure,” she said.

She took him to her office in the back.

“What’s wrong?” she asked once they were alone.

“How do you know Julian Barthez?” Solaire asked.

“He’s a customer,” she started. “He regularly comes to the gallery to buy paintings.”

“And nothing else?”

“No, nothing,” she said.

“Don’t lie to me.” Solaire’s voice was hard.

“Why would I?” She looked scared and confused. “Why are you asking me this?”

“Last night the painting I bought at the auction, it was covered with a toxic chemical. That chemical was activated by the spray you gave me to put on the painting. I nearly died, Sophie.”

She cupped her mouth. “Oh my God.” Tears formed in her eyes. “I swear, I did not know.”

“Who gave you that painting?” Solaire had to control himself from raising his voice.

“Guy Fournier. He works as a middle man between artists and galleries. He brought me Jenko’s works.”

“Where can I find him?”

She went behind her desk, searched and handed him a card.

It was Fournier’s business card with an address on it.

“I’m so sorry, Roman,” she said. “If I had known...”

“Did he give you instructions about the spray?” Solaire said.

“Yes, and I thought it was unusual but he said it came from Jenko. I never questioned it because Jenko is a private but remarkable artist. I was honoured to have one of his works displayed at my gallery. I now wish I had...”

Solaire went silent. The hardness faded from his face.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said. “But I needed to know.”

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.”

“I have to go.” Solaire turned to leave but stopped. “The previous piece of Jenko’s that you sold to Barthez, did it have the same instructions regarding the spray?”

“Yes, it did.”

“Thank you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire sat in one of the wooden benches at the back.

He was inside Notre-Dame Basilica in Old Montreal.

The 18th Century church was built in a Gothic architectural design. It was both grand and colorful. The stained glass windows depicted religious history of Montreal and not biblical scenes found in other churches. It also had a pipe organ, which dated back to 1891.

The church was open to the public at a nominal price.

Solaire wasn’t a religious man but he did appreciate the work that went into building this magnificent building.

A man came and sat on the bench in front of him.

Solaire leaned over and whispered, “I need answers.”

“About Pierre Gauthier?” Travers said.

“Yes. Why did he contact CIL?”

“He didn’t contact us, *we* contacted him. We knew Barthez was involved in something dangerous; we just didn’t know what. We needed someone on the side and Gauthier became our man.”

“I’m assuming he didn’t line up to be CIL’s informant?” Solaire said.

“No, he didn’t. Barthez is a smart businessman. He pays his employees well. This enables him to buy their silence. Why would you expose your employer when

he is compensating you quite handsomely? We tried, on many occasions, without raising any alarms to recruit CTS employees, but it was all futile.”

“What was different with Gauthier?”

Travers went silent.

“I need to know.”

Travers sighed. “Gauthier had a criminal conviction on his records. In college he had gotten into an argument with a student and viciously beat him up. It was during a frat party, though, and Gauthier was seriously drunk. But he was charged with aggravated assault and he did time in prison for it. Having that mark on his records didn’t help him find a job. CTS was the best job he had ever had.”

“But there is something else?”

“Yes, his wife. She wasn’t aware of his past. We...” Travers went quiet. “We approached him and threatened to tell his wife about his time in prison. He begged us not to and we agreed that if he helped us we would go away.”

“You blackmailed him?” Solaire’s tone was hard.

“I’m not proud of it, but yes.” Travers turned and faced him. “What we do is ensure that nothing happens to international stability. This means, sometimes, we have to do things that may go against our beliefs, but these are necessary for what we are trying to achieve.”

“So the end justifies the means?” Solaire said.

“Yes, it does.”

“What about his wife and his family? Had we not been involved he may still be alive.”

“I know, and this is something I’ll have to live with. But, Roman, if I don’t make those difficult decisions I don’t know if I could live with myself knowing what the other outcome would be. Barthez must not be allowed to provide vital and secure information to dangerous regimes. If that ever happened who knows what damage it could do.”

It was Solaire’s turn to go silent. He looked down at his hands. He was going through a lot of emotions, but deep down he knew Travers was right.

“I brought what you asked for.” Travers held a manila envelope.

Solaire took it.

Inside there were police photographs taken at Gauthier’s house at the time of his death.

“It took some persuading but I managed to get them.”

Solaire quickly flipped through them.

“You think Gauthier was poisoned just like you?” Travers said.

“I am certain of it.”

“How will the photographs prove that?”

“I don’t know, but I need to see how Gauthier died.”

Before Travers could say something more, Solaire got up and left Notre-Dame Basilica.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was medium height and slightly overweight. He wore a tight turtleneck sweater, which exposed his protruding belly.

Guy Fournier was inside his studio office, talking to a pretty girl.

Solaire and Levack were sitting in the Corolla, watching him from across the street.

They got out and approached the studio.

Fournier was talking excitedly and it looked as if the girl was interested in what he was saying.

“*Ooh, un client,*” Fournier said, turning to them. “*Bienvenu.*”

“Are you Guy Fournier?” Solaire asked just to make sure.

“*Oui, yes.*”

“Can we talk alone?” Solaire glanced over at the girl.

“*Nous allons discuter plus tard, Isabel,*” Fournier said to the girl.

She smiled and then left the studio.

“How can I help?” Fournier said in his French accent.

“We are here about Jenko,” Solaire said.

“Sorry, but I don’t have any works by him,” Fournier said.

“We are not here for another one of his paintings,” Solaire said. “We want to meet him.”

“Meet him?” Fournier looked incredulous. “I have not even met him.”

Levack said, “Then how are you selling his work?”

“Are you the police?” Fournier eyed them suspiciously.

“No, we’re not,” Solaire said.

“Then I don’t have to tell you anything,” Fournier replied.

“Yes, you do.” Levack cracked his knuckles.

“You are threatening me?” The color on Fournier’s face drained.

“We just want some information,” Solaire said. “How did you get Jenko’s paintings?”

Fournier looked at Levack and then said, “A man gives me the paintings.”

“Jenko?” Solaire said.

“I don’t think so. He doesn’t say much but gives me the paintings with a note.”

“Do the notes have instructions?” Solaire said.

Fournier shrugged. “*Oui.*”

“What kind of instructions?”

“Silly stuff. Like *spray painting with bottle*. Who puts water on work of art? *Ridicule*. It is stupid. Water will ruin the painting. Everyone know that. I don’t agree with it but I have no choice.”

“The man who gave you the paintings, what does he look like?” Solaire asked.

Fournier shrugged as if embarrassed. “I don’t see him too good. He meets me at night.”

“Where?”

“Behind a building in a... how do you say? *Ruelle.*”

“Alley.”

“Yes.”

Solaire pulled out a photo of Barthez. “Could it be this man?”

Fournier examined it and then shook his head. “*Non*. The man is bigger. This man is small.”

Solaire pulled out a photo of Marcel. "How about him?"

Fournier's eyes widened after examining it. "*Oui*, I think so."

"Tell us everything," Solaire said.

Fournier looked at them both and then sighed. "Okay, okay. One day I get a call from someone—I don't know if it is this man, but he tells me to meet him about Jenko. I was very excited. Jenko is genius. I know if I sell Jenko's painting I can make good money. So I go. I wait in the... alley and a car comes up. A man get out of the car and give me the painting with the note. I ask about money but he goes back in car and leaves. I come back to my studio and check and it is original Jenko painting. You see his painting on the walls of buildings?"

"Yes," Solaire said. "I've seen his work around Montreal."

"I check with that to make sure. I am hundred-percent sure it is Jenko who paint it. The note also says to only sell to the Paradise Gallery."

"Why them?" Solaire asked.

"I don't know. They are a boutique gallery, but the owner, Sophie Paradis, is good for local artists. Maybe this man thinks Jenko is local artist so the Paradise Gallery will be good for him too."

"Do you think Sophie is somehow involved in this arrangement?" Solaire had to ask.

Fournier shook his head. "I don't think so. She looked very surprised when I bring her the paintings. She ask why I choose her and I tell her it was Jenko's choice. I only follow instructions."

"How do you pay Jenko?" Solaire said.

Fournier shrugged. "I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"Okay, I tell you how it works. I give painting to Sophie to sell. When the painting sells she gives me the money less her percentage for her gallery. I take my share and try to give this man. But when I do he doesn't take the money. I still have the money. You want it? I write you a cheque."

"We don't care about the money," Solaire said. "It doesn't belong to us. Can you give us this man's telephone number?"

"I can't," Fournier said. "The telephone number is blocked. I answer it and he gives me instructions to when I meet him and where."

"And you have no other way of contacting him?" Solaire said.

"*Non*, I don't. I wish I could. If this man works for Jenko then I want to give Jenko his money and meet him and thank him. Jenko is a true artist and a fellow *Quebecois*. He is an inspiration for every artist."

Solaire knew whatever Fournier knew, he had already told them. There was no point in trying to get anything more out of him.

"Thank you for your time," Solaire finally said.

\* \* \* \* \*

Solaire went back to his suite feeling tired and dejected.

So far he had failed to find anything that would lead him to Barthez and his storage facility.

Even tracking Jenko was becoming a dead end.

How Jenko was involved with Barthez, he didn't know either.

Solaire went into the bathroom and returned after splashing himself with cold water.

He had thought about changing suites or even another hotel, but the thought of getting Barthez was now occupying him.

Barthez had let him outbid him at the auction. Now he knew why.

But what if Solaire hadn't shown up at Barthez's house? Was there another target?

Barthez had purchased a painting legitimately through the Paradise Gallery and then had given it to one of his employees, Pierre Gauthier, who didn't live long enough to appreciate it.

Who was he going to purchase the second painting for?

Solaire was now never going to know. He felt he had gone through all avenues and had come up empty.

Who else could he talk to? Who else could he follow that would lead him to Barthez?

Solaire shook his head and sat on the sofa.

If he were a drinking man he would drown himself in his sorrows.

He had escaped death only to find that he was no closer to catching the man who had threatened his life.

Across him he spotted Jenko's *Diner de Famille*.

He couldn't believe he had paid twenty thousand dollars for something that was meant to kill him.

He had, in fact, paid handsomely for his own death.

Solaire shook his head.

Solaire leaned over and grabbed the canvas.

He held the painting and examined it.

He couldn't believe that just the night before this very painting could have been the end of him.

The top layer of the canvas now had tiny bubbles, and in some areas even had what looked like corrosion.

The toxic material reacted when it made contact with the liquid in the spray bottle and released a lethal toxin.

The canvas now had remnants of the reaction.

Solaire closely looked at each detail on the painting, going from top to bottom. He stopped when he spotted something.

Underneath Jenko's signature were tiny numbers. The numbers were followed by a *W*.

A thought raced through his head.

He went to the bedroom and returned with the envelope Travers had given him.

He quickly flipped through the photos taken at Gauthier's house.

He stopped at one and looked at it closely.

The photo was of a room. A painting hung on the wall and below it, on the floor, was a chalk mark of where Gauthier's body was found.

Solaire went to the mini fridge. He pulled out a small bottle of liquor, poured out its contents and returned.

He placed his eye on the mouth of the bottle and used it as a magnifying glass.

It wasn't crystal clear, but Solaire could make out numbers on the painting at Gauthier's house.

The numbers were followed by a 'N'.

Solaire's brow furrowed.

He looked at the photograph again and then at Jenko's painting in his suite.

Then it hit him like a thunderbolt.

*They were coordinates.*

*N* was for North and *W* for West.

Solaire quickly reached for the phone and called Levack.

\*\*\*

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Solaire asked.

Levack looked at his GPS. "It is according to the coordinates you gave me."

"I've been here before," Solaire said.

They were in Saint-Henri, at the address Travers had given Solaire at the beginning.

"It's just an abandoned building," Solaire said, looking around. "I checked it myself."

"Then I guess we are SOL, again," Levack replied back.

"I'm not going back empty-handed." Solaire pulled out a flashlight. He snapped it on and then moved toward the building.

"You sure we should be going in?" Levack said.

"Why not?" Solaire said.

"It's getting kinda dark."

"I never took you for someone who was afraid of the dark."

"I'm not, but my mom told me never to go into deserted buildings at night."

Solaire ignored his comment and proceeded further. He pulled back the same wooden board he had gone past before and entered the building.

He probed his flashlight around and could see the dirt and debris scattered everywhere.

He felt Levack behind him.

"Nice place," Levack said. "A real fixer-upper."

Instead of staying on the ground floor, Solaire moved to the stairs.

On the second floor he searched each room but came up empty.

"Told you there wouldn't be anything here," Levack said. "We should go."

"No!" Solaire said, a little loudly.

Levack stared at him.

Solaire composed himself. "I'm sorry, you are right. I was hoping that..."

"Come on, buddy," Levack said, slapping him in the back. "I'll buy you ice tea with no ice."

They went down the stairs when Solaire suddenly stopped.

"Did you hear it?" he said.

"Hear what?"

"A noise."

Levack listened. "I didn't hear anything."

"I know I heard it."

Levack was about to protest when he heard a cry. It was loud but muffled.

Solaire looked at him.

"No kidding." Levack's eyes were wide. "You were right."

Solaire moved around the stairs. Behind it, hidden away, was a door.

A bolt was locking it.

Levack quickly looked around and returned with a fire extinguisher. "I don't know why people leave these things behind."

He hammered the bolt, thus breaking the lock.

They were confronted with another set of stairs, these ones leading down.

Levack pulled out his gun.

Solaire aimed the flashlight and together they went down.

They were in a small but spacious room. The walls were lined with canvases of all shapes and sizes. They spotted painting materials and even various buckets of paint.

"*Vous etes ici pour m'aider?*" a voice said.

They instantly turned.

A man sat on a chair with his arms and legs tied to it. Partially loose duct tape hung from his lips.

The man repeated the same words in French again. Solaire was able to decipher some of it.

"Yes, we are here to help you," Solaire said. "Who are you?"

"I am Jenko," the man replied in English. "Can you free me?"

Solaire removed the tape from his mouth while Levack loosened the restraints.

"Thank you," Jenko said.

Jenko was tall but slim. He had sharp features with a thin moustache and a goatee.

"Are you the police?" he asked.

"Not really," Levack answered. "But we are international."

"What were you doing here?" Solaire asked.

"Painting," Jenko said, as if it were obvious.

"For who?"

"Monsieur Barthez."

"But why?"

"I don't know. One night I am painting on the side of a building and then this big man comes and instructs me to get in the car. I say no, but this man looks mean so I do. Next thing I know I am here, forced to paint these." He pointed to several completed canvases. "I am an *artiste!*" He pounded his chest. "I am not an assembly line. I cannot create masterpieces if I am not inspired. These are rubbish."

"I paid twenty thousand dollars for your rubbish," Solaire said.

"You did?"

"At an auction."

"I don't do this for the money. This is an insult to my work."

Solaire said, "I don't want to put insult to injury, but your art is being used to kill people."

A look of horror spread across Jenko's face.



"I am afraid it is true," Solaire said. "Did you put those coordinates on the paintings?"

"Yes. I had to do something. I was lucky Monsieur Barthez didn't realize what I was doing."

"It led us to you."

"Can we leave?" Jenko said, rubbing his wrists. "I don't want to be here another minute."

On the way up the stairs Levack asked, "What's your real name?"

"An artist never reveals his identity," Jenko replied back.

\* \* \* \* \*

When they reached the top they froze.

Standing before them was the menacing figure of Marcel.

Just behind him, to the side, was Barthez with his arms behind his back.

"We meet again, Mr. Solaire," Barthez hissed. "I see that you have met this city's renowned artist, Jenko."

Levack slowly reached for the gun in his pocket.

"I wouldn't do that, Mr. Levack," Barthez said. "The outcome may not be very pleasant."

"I was just going to scratch my leg."

"I'm sure you were." He nodded to Marcel, who relieved Levack of his weapon. "Now, if you follow my instructions things will go very smoothly. If you don't, then I won't promise that no harm will come to you."

They were escorted out of the building and taken to the one next to it.

This building was in similar disarray as the one they had just come from.

They went down a flight of stairs and were confronted with a large steel door.

"Mr. Solaire, I believe this is what you've been searching for," Barthez said.

Marcel swung the door wide and inside they could see rows upon rows of computer servers.

Several technicians in white lab coats turned in their direction.

"Please, get in." Barthez waved his hand.

The room was hot and there was a whirring sound of machines running at full capacity.

"So this is where you store the data," Solaire said.

"Very observant."

They were led down a narrow hall and then to another door.

The room wasn't large, but it was open with high ceilings.

In the corner a figure was on the floor with their hands and feet restrained. The figure looked up at them.

It was Sophie.

Solaire instinctively moved toward her.

Marcel put his hand out, stopping him.

Sophie's mouth was shut with duct tape.

"I'm sure you remember each other," Barthez said.

One by one their hands and feet were tied together. They were made to sit on the floor.

“Let her go,” Solaire said. “Your quarrel is with me.”

“Ms. Paradis was never supposed to survive this long,” Barthez said.

Solaire started, “The second painting that you were going to purchase. It was for her.”

“Good deduction, Mr. Solaire.” Barthez smiled. “I was going to give it to her as a gift for being such a strong supporter of local artists. Unfortunately, you came along and ruined it.”

“But why her?” Solaire asked.

“Loose ends. After I was done with Gauthier I would eliminate Ms. Paradis.”

“What about Guy Fournier?” Solaire said.

“Mr. Fournier would meet a different end—in a dark alley.”

Jenko quickly interjected. “But you promised to let me go after I did what you asked.”

“You’re foolish to believe your captor after you’ve seen his face.”

Jenko’s face turned pale.

“While I admire your work and talent, I’m afraid your services are no longer required.”

“You’re sick,” Solaire said.

“No, I’m a businessman, Mr. Solaire. My business is providing information to the highest bidder.”

“But why?”

“You, Mr. Solaire, wouldn’t understand what I’ve been through.”

“Try me.”

Barthez looked at him and then smirked. “All right, I’ll tell you. After the dot com crash I was cast aside like an outsider. What was my crime? I had only held on to *my* company so that I could see it grow and prosper. I wasn’t the only one who had lost money. Hundreds of other companies lost millions, but I was treated worse than a murderer. I lost everything: money, status, my reputation. I knocked on every door only to have it shut on my face. So yes, I made deals with the devil, but at the end of the day the devil was willing to pay more. That’s capitalism for you.”

“No, it’s selling your country to people who have ulterior agendas,” Solaire said.

“Call it what you will, but it’s straightforward business. If my government had been willing to invest in my company then maybe I wouldn’t have had to look elsewhere.”

“We can still work something out,” Solaire said.

“It’s too late now. I have agreements in place, which I have to follow. My business partners wouldn’t take it so kindly if I walked away. I hope you understand.”

“I do understand. You are a traitor.”

“Call me what you will. After tonight your opinion will not mean anything.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Are you planning on killing us?” Solaire said.

“You’ve left me no choice, Mr. Solaire.” Barthez nodded to Marcel.

Marcel moved toward him and in one smooth motion released Solaire from his restraints.

Solaire looked confused.

“There is a misunderstanding out there that Marcel is the one to be feared,” Barthez said. “In actuality, it is *me* who you should be scared of.”

Barthez rolled up his sleeves and moved around the room.

“You can still let us go,” Solaire said, rubbing his wrists.

“Not quite. Your friend’s end will be swift and painless; yours, on the other hand, will be anything but that.”

Barthez spread his feet and lifted his fists up. “I picked up a few things while I was living in Asia.”

“Do you expect me to fight you?” Solaire said.

“Yes, Mr. Solaire, I do. If you don’t, then...” A smile crossed his face. “You know the outcome.”

In lightning speed Barthez took three steps and hit Solaire squarely in the chest.

The impact was so powerful that Solaire flew two feet in the air and landed hard on the concrete floor.

He clutched his chest as the pain was intense.

“Get up.” Barthez circled him like a predator toying with his prey.

Levack tried to get on his feet but Marcel pushed him down by his shoulder.

Marcel grunted his disapproval.

Solaire slowly got on his feet.

“Defend yourself,” Barthez commanded.

Solaire put his fists up, but he was no match. In quick successions Barthez hit him six times: in the stomach, chest, arm, ribs, head, and finally his face.

Blood spurted out of his mouth as Solaire fell to the ground.

His entire body was on fire.

He had never felt this much pain in his entire life.

“Vital points,” Barthez said, caressing his knuckles. “The human body has many sensitive spots that when pressed can cause unimaginable pain.”

“Why don’t you just get it over with?” Solaire spat.

“Over? I’ve only just begun.”

Barthez reached over to lift Solaire up when Solaire swung his right hand at him. Barthez reacted quickly and countered with a shot at Solaire’s kidneys.

Solaire’s legs buckled and he fell once again to the ground.

Tears now flowed down his face.

“Stop it!” Levack yelled. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

“How heroic of you to offer yourself, Mr. Levack,” Barthez said. “But I must decline. Your punishment will be to see your friend suffer—and suffer he most surely will.”

Solaire tried to stand up, to get on his feet. He wanted to put up a fight. If this was how he was going to die then he wasn’t going to give Barthez any satisfaction from it.

He put up his fists again.

A smile curled across Barthez’s face.

Barthez moved forward and swung his open hand at Solaire.

Solaire blocked it, but before he could attack Barthez shot his elbow hard across Solaire's chin.

Solaire's head jerked back.

He tried to control his balance but fell to the ground.

Solaire's chin felt hot and wet.

He knew he was bleeding, and badly.

Solaire made another attempt to get on his feet but this time Barthez was on him, pinning his arms with his knees.

Barthez lifted his fist in the air.

"Goodbye, Mr. Solaire."

Solaire readied himself for the impact.

Before Barthez could bring the fist down there was a loud commotion. Barthez looked up.

"*Police!*" a voice yelled.

Barthez slowly put his hands up.

Through his vantage point Solaire saw men in black riot gear storm the room.

One came over and pulled Barthez off Solaire.

Solaire wanted to say something, but before he could he passed out.

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The water was clear and blue.

From high up on the balcony, Solaire could see the Saint Lawrence River in the distance.

The sun had come up not too long ago.

Solaire sat in the wheelchair, staring silently at the magnificent scenery before him.

His body was healing much quicker than expected, but the wheelchair was a precaution. His body had endured a lot of punishment and doctors had ordered him to rest it, which meant staying still.

Solaire looked around his surroundings. Travers had put him up in condo not far from the river. Travers felt the fresh air would do him some good.

He heard a noise at the door.

He twisted.

Sophie entered the condo. "*Bonjour!*" she said with a smile.

"*Bonjour,*" he replied back.

She came out on to the balcony and kissed him on the cheek.

"I brought breakfast," she said. "Strawberry crepes, Belgian waffles, assorted baguettes, eggs with black truffles, and the best coffee in the city."

"I can't eat all that," Solaire said.

"You're lucky." She smiled. "I'll help you."

She went back inside when there was a knock at the door.

Travers came in and made his way to the balcony.

He took a seat across from Solaire.

"How are you feeling, Roman?" he said.

"Better, much better."

“It seems that whenever we meet either you are searching for information or you are in some sort of trouble.”

“I guess that’s one way to define our relationship. What happened to Barthez?” Solaire asked.

“Julian Barthez is in our custody and will be charged for selling information to countries that do not have our best interests in mind.”

“How did you find us? I mean in Saint-Henri?”

“After what happened to you with the painting, I wasn’t going to take any risks,” Travers said. “I tracked the GPS on Levack’s Corolla. When I saw that it had stayed in one location for too long I knew something was wrong. I contacted my friends at the Montreal Police Services and we raided the location. It took some time finding where you were in those buildings, but I am glad to say we made it just in time.”

Solaire looked away.

“Thank you,” Solaire finally said.

“For what?” Travers replied back.

“For saving my life *twice*. Once with the painting and then with Barthez.”

“Don’t thank me. If it weren’t for you we wouldn’t have been able to locate Barthez’s data storage facility. You led us there.”

“Thank you, anyways.”

Travers leaned closer. “If you think I only care about the mission then you would be very wrong for thinking that. Roman, you are more vital to the Court of International Law than you would believe. Even if they don’t know what you have done for them, I do. So I should be the one thanking you.”

Solaire stared at him.

Travers got up and extended his hand.

Solaire shook it.

“Get some rest,” Travers said. “Our international fight with criminals is just beginning.”

With that he left.

Sophie came over with a tray filled with their breakfast.

They spent the next half-hour devouring everything before them.

They laughed and joked and teased one another.

There was another knock at the door.

Sophie answered it.

Levack came over and gave Solaire a big hug.

Pain shot through him, but he still managed a smile.

“How is my favourite spy today?” Levack said.

“I don’t know if I would call myself a spy,” Solaire said.

“If you don’t then I will. What I’ve seen you do in New York, London and now here in Montreal—that, my friend, is what I call spy work.”

Solaire said, “What are you going to do now?”

“Go home to Cleveland,” Levack said.

Solaire waited, knowing full well that Levack wouldn’t say much more than that. But this time he was wrong.

“I’ve got a wife and two children waiting for me. My son is in high school while my daughter will be starting high school soon. I’ve been happily married to the same woman for almost fifteen years now,” Levack said with pride.

“Congratulations,” Solaire said.

“Thank you. I can’t say it’s all due to me. I don’t know what she sees in me, considering I’m mostly away, but I love her with all my heart.”

“She’s a lucky woman to have you as her husband. I’m lucky to have you as my friend.” Solaire put his hand out.

“Aw, don’t make me cry now. I’m a big softy inside. Ah, the hell with it.” He leaned over and gave Solaire another hug. “I hope your lady friend didn’t see that.” Levack winked. “She may begin to wonder the peculiarities of our complex and covert relationship.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand.” Solaire smiled back.

Levack got up. “You know I have to ask. Will I see you in another city?”

“You bet your life you will,” Solaire said. “But first I’m going home to Toronto and taking a very long vacation.”

