

Over Madrid, Thursday, November 19th, 1936

Three egg-sized holes punctured the aluminium fuselage a half metre from his head. Close – too close. A second later he heard a relieved cheer above the comforting throb of their three engines.

He stumbled, toes numbed with cold, falling against the airframe, and pressed his face against a port-side window. He caught sight of the Rata interceptor – pluming a muddy swirl – dropping from view.

‘Otto?’ He heard someone call. ‘Otto? Are you all right?’

His first combat op; aboard only because two of the five-man crew were grounded with chronic diarrhoea and they needed someone to test a prototype radio direction-finder.

Cold, giddy, and now his stomach rolling over and over, he called, ‘Ja! I’m all right!’

He could taste his own fear – a sudden eruption of rusty spit.

The aircraft tilted through thirty degrees. He fell away from the window, careering, arms flailing, and grabbed the wheel which turned the radio antenna to steady himself. He started shivering – shaking – as if balanced on a ball of jelly. Finally his knees gave way and he dropped onto his canvas seat.

They approached from the south, cruising at 235 kph at a height of 900 metres, on a course defined by the river Manzanares to the west and the Paseo del Prado to the east.

A pearlstring of half-lit trucks ferrying supplies into the beleaguered capital confirmed their bearing. Too easy he thought – no need for experimental navigation devices.

They thrumbled on through a high clear sky – baby fists of flak bursting below them.

Atocha rail station appeared in view and, as per briefing, they loosed a stick of high-explosive bombs and a clutch of thirty 1 kilo incendiaries.

Lavapiés got it.

Without cheer or remorse, wanting only to get through this intact, they continued on a 340° bearing – heading for their secondary target.

Even in the fading light the Palacio de Liria presented itself as an obvious target. Unmissable. Framed by the Calle de la Princesa and the Calle Santa Cruz, and ringed like a bull's-eye by its carriage drives and wide garden paths, it stood defiant, inviting attention from every marauder passing overhead.

They loosed a stick of five 50 kilo bombs and the Junkers Ju 52 twitched through five degrees north.

Otto smiled. He tugged the glove from his right hand, pushed his leather cap up over his scalp and wiped the sweat from his brow.

In twenty-five minutes – God willing – they would be back at their base at Escalona del Prado.

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FOUR MEN IN GREATCOATS, collars pulled up around their ears, armed only with clipboards and pencils, picked through the rubble and plaster of the ground floor.

Two photographers – one Russian, the other Spanish – looked on at the destruction, sharing a cigarette. The Russian, tired of assembling men and rescued artefacts into heroic tableaux, coughed up a gobbet of phlegm and spat it at an 18th century portrait of a monk propped against a doorframe. His Spanish colleague, weary of documenting each and every find, placed his bellows camera on a Louis XIVth style chair and began frisking himself for a flask of brandy.

A team of twelve art handlers from the Prado, augmented by six volunteers pulled from a reserve battalion, formed a human chain and began to fill four waiting trucks with what remained intact of three centuries' worth of assiduous collecting of art, craft, furnishings, fabrics, tapestries, glass and ceramics.

In the wooded grounds at the back of the palace six Russian military advisers, erect and serious, examined a crater formed by one of Otto Krafft's crew's strayed bombs.

The senior officer looked to his note-taking adjutant – who checked the time on his wristwatch – and signalled the meeting's close with a firm nod.

The four younger men stiffened themselves, but recalling orders, resisted the urge to salute.

The senior officer thrust his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat, turned on his heel, and walked through the trees to the large backyard gate and a waiting car. His adjutant followed after.

Leonid Kozlov, his pale features pinched with cold, turned to his fellow flier Pavel and shrugged. 'Is there anywhere we can get a coffee?'

'Look, forget the coffee. Come.' Pavel nudged his comrade's elbow, guiding him in the direction of the palace. 'There's something I must show you.'

The two men entered the house and mounted the rubble stairs to the first floor

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PART ONE

'Time also paints'

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Franc. de Goya" in a cursive script. The signature is written on a white background and is positioned centrally below the quote.

FRANCISCO DE GOYA Y LUCIENTES
(1746-1828)

Perched on a balcony above a vacant harbourside shop unit, Juan watched the comings and goings along the *paseo*. A sluggard trail of SUVs and sports coupés pushed against the current of strollers and grazers spilling from sidewalks and café terraces. Football tops, Bermudas, wraps and flip-flops headed north as chinos and deck shoes, frocks and strappies headed south.

He caught the first waft of frying fish. The cries of gulls, and the constant buzz of outboards, finally gave way to the clinking of chilled glasses, polite laughter and muted muzak.

The illuminated sign overlooking the marina – its green dots brightened against the dusk – blinked with a lazy restlessness: BIENVENIDO A BENALMÁDENA - 01:05:10 - 24°C - 20:26 - BIENVENIDO A BENALMÁDENA - 01:05:10 - 24°C - 20:26.

Another long, solitary shift. Time for a beer, and his replacement already a half-hour late.

He couldn't understand the urgency. Since 10a.m. he'd noted only three movements: a man leaving the boat to visit the marina office, and a half-hour later return to the boat; and, three hours later, two unshaven heavies leaving the boat to sit on the terrace of a nearby ice-cream parlour to wait for a taxi.

He re-trained his eyes on the target – the yacht *Esperanza* – a fine looking ninety-footer moored amid minnows – and reached for his phone to call his girlfriend. He flicked up her number. A taxi pulled up. His thumb hovered over the keypad as he watched the fare emerge from the taxi. He looked back to the *Esperanza* and, sure enough, a head appeared from below deck. He let the phone fall from his grip, checked the focus on the camera, and pressed the cable-release. The camera's motor-wind whirred as the shutter clicked-clicked-clicked.

He watched the fare, dressed in a white linen suit and wearing a distinctive, blue, green and white striped tie, give a firm, though

discreet, wave toward a man on the foredeck of the *Esperanza*. He tracked his subject along the jetty to the foot of the gangplank. The man on the *Esperanza* – wearing an olive-green suit – waved the visitor aboard.

He adjusted the zoom, focussed on the greeter's tanned and pocked face and snapped a good dozen shots of the two men shaking hands. The two men, their body language betraying a stiff unfamiliarity, disappeared into the boat.

Standing back from the camera, he watched another taxi pull up. One of the two tall heavies he'd seen earlier squeezed himself out of the car.

– *Click* –

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ABOARD THE *Esperanza* the man in the green suit ushered the visitor onto the bridge.

'Thank you, señor Ruiz.' The visitor smiled. 'Thank you very much,' he said, and switched his attention to a heftier figure, attired in polo shirt, shorts and deck shoes, leaning against the chart table.

Ruiz gave a polite nod and retreated into the belly of the boat.

'And so, what do you think of my very fine ship? Do you like it?'

His host's voice, not so much nasal as lacking weight, sounded squeezed. 'It's...' He groped for an appropriate comment. 'It's, er, very pleasant.'

His host cracked a cheek splitting grin. 'Good, good, good.'

They shook hands, eyeing each other for the briefest second, weighing the other's value to achieving their needs.

'You seem surprised by my accent? Did Ruiz not tell you I was Russian?'

'No, he didn't.'

'Good man,' the Russian said, and signalled him to follow. 'Come, please, if you would?'

He moved through the boat, following its proud owner, feeling vindicated. The year invested re-acquainting himself with El Greco, Goya, Velázquez, Zurburán and four hundred years of Spanish painting, seemed now about to pay off. Twelve hours previously – before Ruiz’s call and his dash to the airport – he considered throwing it all in, throwing himself back into the job market. And now?

He ducked his head as they stepped into the main cabin. He flicked his gaze around the room. He noted a distinct lack of homeliness; everything arranged just-so, like a well-appointed hotel suite. Three small spotlit paintings punctuated the walls: two clichéd seascapes featuring tall ships, and a much smaller Cubist still-life: an apple, a knife, a newspaper.

‘And how is Yorkshire? Bilsdale I’m told. Good journey?’ his host asked.

He couldn’t see any evidence of children, or a wife, or a woman, or a partner, on board. He found himself questioning his host’s sexuality. Gay? Straight? Bi? Or indifferent? Did it matter? No, but he seemed to lack any definable sexual charisma.

‘It was a good trip, thank you,’ he said.

‘And your hotel?’ the Russian asked.

‘Good.’

‘Excellent. And my agent, Ruiz? You’ve talked, and an arrangement may be possible, yes?’

‘Possibly possible,’ he said.

His host laughed. ‘I enjoy your wit, your very English humour.’

‘Yes, quite. But, sorry, your name?’ he asked. ‘I didn’t quite catch...’

His host turned away and poured two glasses of *fino*.

‘Your name? I don’t think ...’

His Russian host passed him a glass of *fino* and a napkin. ‘Ruiz!’ he called.

And Ruiz stepped from the corner of the spacious lounge and spoke by heart a well-rehearsed introduction. ‘Without wishing to be discourteous my client considers until such time as a more formal arrangement is agreed it is of no advantage for you to know his true identity. While having respect for your powers of discretion, my client is of the view that, at this stage, to make his identity known, without first securing your services, could compromise his future ability to operate freely and pursue his legitimate business objectives.’ Ruiz’s poker backed demeanour, over-careful enunciation, and well-polished shoes, for all the world like a senior civil-servant, lent the scene a ridiculous air. ‘While not wishing to insult your intelligence by assuming an identity, but understanding your need for a form of address, my client asks that you address him simply as *Ivan*.’

He stood a good three inches taller than *Ivan*. From this vantage he noted his thinning, straight blond hair and narrow shoulders. Not corpulent, but rounded out in all the wrong places; he spoke with a boyish energy at odds with his well-fed, sedentary appearance. He guessed him to be in his mid to late-thirties.

‘So,’ Ivan asked. ‘What do you think?’

‘All I understand, Ivan, is you wish me to authenticate two late eighteenth century works prior to acquisition.’

‘Yes. Good.’ Ivan sipped at the sherry.

‘However, what I cannot quite understand, is why do you require *my* services? Surely, in Spain, it must be possible to secure the services of a competent specialist? Why then go to the bother, and expense, of recruiting an Englishman? Unless, of course, you don’t want people in Spain to know of your interest?’

‘Yes, yes. Precisely.’ His prospective client nodded with enthusiasm and turned to a side table and a bowl of olives.

‘Well? I can’t believe you’d go to all this trouble simply to avoid sales tax.’

‘It’s a good *fino*, no?’ Ivan placed an olive in his mouth.

‘Yes, but I need—’

‘Yes.’ Ivan cut him short with a chop of his hand. ‘Please, in time, yes?’ Ivan offered him the bowl of olives. ‘Please, be seated.’

He adjusted his tie, hitched the knees of his trousers, and settled into a leather Chesterfield armchair.

‘You speak German, yes?’

He nodded. ‘Correct.’

‘And I understand ... how should I say? Prior to *re-branding* yourself? You experienced some difficulties with a Poussin, yes?’

He winced, stung by the ominous emphasis on *re-branding*, but retained his outward composure.

‘Your client was a farmer, yes? A simple farmer facing bankruptcy, but who happened to own a painting by Poussin. He hoped, with your firm’s help, to sell the painting, clear his debts, and retire. Except you, a junior partner with a well-established London firm headed by your wife’s father, attributed the work to a lesser known Italian painter who had once been a student of Poussin.’ Ivan paused, allowing him an opportunity to confirm, deny, or at least elaborate.

He sat immobile, his face frozen.

‘Based on your attribution,’ Ivan continued. ‘The work was sent up for sale with a reserve of just £10,000. It was purchased at auction by a New York dealer, cleaned up, re-attributed to Poussin, and sold on to an American Jewish foundation for \$7.5million. The work, I believe, now hangs in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Correct, yes?’

He played daft laddie, smiling as Ivan scanned his face for telltale signs of complicity.

‘And I believe the farmer, realising the fortune you allowed slip through his fingers, blew his brains out in a barn. His widow, I recall reading in *The Telegraph*, laid claim against the auctioneers and, even now, what? Two years later? is still pushing the suit.’ Ivan reached for an olive. ‘Was it worth it?’

‘Sorry?’

Ivan made him wait as he removed the olive stone from between pursed lips. 'You must surely have had an arrangement with the New York buyer? Your erroneous attribution – your enthusiastic championing of a lesser artist – cost your firm its reputation, cost you your job, and it cost you your marriage. There must have been some compensation involved?'

He uncrossed his legs, tugged at his jacket lapels, and sat upright. 'I'm not a crook, Ivan.'

Ivan smiled. 'You really didn't take any money for your troubles?'

'No, I did not take any money. There wasn't any trouble involved, it was a mistake. An honest mistake.' He shuffled in his seat as if preparing to stand up. 'Ivan, I fail to see where all this is going. I would rather you brought yourself to the point of my being here.'

Ivan fell into an armchair and grinned. 'Please,' he said, waving a hand to motion him to remain seated. 'I meant no offence. You don't seriously think I would consider hiring your services without checking your background?'

He hesitated, conceding it made sense.

'You must feel like a leper; your career, your marriage, hopes of a family, all finished. All because of Poussin.'

'I survive,' he said.

'A good many men in your circumstances would have given up, gone under, like your farmer. But you? From somewhere you seemed to have found the strength to re-invent yourself, become your own man. I admire that. Shows me courage. Shows me initiative. Shows me adaptability. Essential qualities for the job I have in mind.' Ivan stood up and readied himself to propose a toast. 'I applaud your tenacity in the face of such adversity, James. I may call you James, yes?' He raised his glass above his head, gave an exaggerated smile, and nodded acknowledgement.

Even as they clashed glasses he eyed his prospective client with a mix of disdain, curiosity and caution.

‘And the tie – Rugby, yes?’

He gave an almost imperceptible, unconvincing nod.

‘But you were never at Rugby were you, Mr Timpkins?’

The sound of his own name surprised him – he hadn’t heard it spoken for over a year, not since meeting with his late aunt’s solicitors to discuss her gift of Toppide Cottage and her unrivalled collection of English watercolour landscapes: Cotman, Cozens and Girtin.

So, his prospective client knew he wasn’t who he claimed to be, knew he’d messed up big style in the past, but what did it matter? He repressed an urge to shrug. Instead he gave a wry smile, acknowledging Ivan’s astute negotiation skills.

‘Yes, you have me, but do you think we could possibly discuss what you have in mind?’

‘Yes, of course. To business.’ Ivan set down his glass.

‘So, the paintings you wish me to evaluate, when can I take a look at them? Are they here?’ He looked around the room, expecting Ruiz to step forward and unveil two Old Masters with a dramatic flourish.

Ivan’s grin evaporated. ‘It’s not so straightforward. A young German woman is, at this moment, on her way to Madrid to collect the two paintings. She has no idea of their value, nor their importance.’

‘Importance to whom?’

‘Believe me, James, these are important works. They will be of intense interest to scholars and collectors across the world. If you find the works are what I believe them to be, then I would very much like to acquire them.’

‘So, tell me, Ivan, whom do you believe to be the artist of these works?’

Ivan let the question hang as he lifted his glass to take a cat’s sip of *fino*. ‘Goya,’ he declared with as much resonance as he seemed able to muster.

‘Goya?’ he echoed. ‘Francisco de Goya y Lucientes?’

Ivan nodded.

‘Well, that would be an important find. How ... how?’

Ivan raised his left hand to still his eagerness. ‘In 1793, you must be patient with me, James, my art history is not so good. But I believe in 1793 Goya created a series of miniature works on tinsplate, yes?’

He gave a cautious nod.

‘And, I believe it is thought Goya gave all the works to his friend and patron, Sebastián Martínez. Originally, I think, it’s said he created a series of fourteen works. I believe, however, he created a series of eighteen works, four of which he gave to his lover and muse the Duchess of Alba. These works are, I believe, two of those missing four.’

He folded his arms across his chest, tilted his head back and looked along his nose. ‘The Duquesa: muse, yes; lover, no. Just cheap court gossip. But, as for the rest, it’s possibly plausible’, he said.

Ignoring his expert opinion Ivan continued his briefing. ‘The works are small enough to be concealed efficiently. The looter carried them with him through several campaigns during the Spanish Civil War. However, our looter was shot down and captured. He bartered the works for his life. It was customary for all captured Soviet airmen to be shot. Somehow he managed to buy his freedom with the works—’

‘Why didn’t they simply shoot him and take the paintings?’

‘I cannot say. I do not know.’ Ivan shrugged. ‘Maybe he found a gentleman officer among his captors. Maybe some humanity, some compassion, some empathy between foreigners on strange soil. Such things happen in war.’

Ivan nodded across the room to Ruiz, still standing in the shadowed corner of the lounge. ‘We must eat.’

He remained rooted in his seat. ‘But how do you know all this? You say Goya produced eighteen tinsplates, not fourteen—’

‘It is, you would say, a well-educated guess. I have seen letters from the Duchess describing the works and—’ Ivan checked himself.

‘Yes?’

‘Not now. What is important now is that we eat, and you agree to work for me.’

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TWO

Cotelo sat hunched over his *carajillo*, staring as he stirred. Another day, another breakfast, alone. Someone, or something, hit his pause-still button and a freeze-frame image of his six-year old daughter jiggered in front of him. She bounced in the frame a half-second before impact.

He scanned and re-scanned the image. Her saint's day. She wore the blue dress with the white lace collar sewn by her grandmother; her blonde ringlets danced on her shoulders. He could see the shadow of the approaching car creeping into the bottom right-hand corner of the frame.

He held two images in mind of the moment of impact. One, a super-realist rendering of the scene in which he could see every detail down to hairline scratches in the car's paintwork; oil spills on the road surface; cigarette butts in the gutter; and individual threads of his daughter's hair glistening in the sunlight. In this view his daughter's body obscured the car's registration number.

The second, equally powerful, image appeared as an abstracted arrangement of blocks of colour, somewhere between the geometry of a Constructivist work and the blurred fury of a Futurist work. In this view a jumbled sequence of numbers and letters appeared at the extreme left-hand edge of the image.

'Sir?'

He creased his brow as he tried, for the hundred-thousandth time, to unpuzzle the numbers and letters. Then someone hit play and—

'Jordi?'

A firm hand shook his left shoulder.

'Jordi?'

He turned to see his colleague Ramón stood over him.

'The Boss needs you for a briefing,' Ramón said.

'He doesn't need me. He needs a poodle.'

‘No, Jordi. Something’s on. He wants you ... now.’

He turned back to his coffee, stirred it a last time, lifted the cup and sank it.

‘He’s in a foul mood.’

‘We’d better get back there then.’ He rose from his seat, brushing crumbs from his lapels. ‘We’d better go hear what he wants.’

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‘OVSPENSKY!’ THE CAPTAIN threw a set of photos across the desk. ‘Anatoly Ovspensky! Russian citizen, though born in the Ukraine. Ex-foreign ministry official. Gangster. Usual shit: pimping, protection, drugs, currency dabbling. Interestingly his grandfather worked for Republican Military Intelligence during the Civil War.’

He picked his way through the photographs as his Captain paced around the desk, spitting out the brief.

‘Here.’ The Captain threw another, smaller set of prints onto the desk. ‘Last night. Benalmádena. He’s here, on our patch. Skipped out of Moscow two nights ago. Our colleagues in customs tipped us off—’

‘Customs?’

‘Yes, customs, and our friends in Madrid. Does it matter? He’s dangerous. He’s messy. He’s a potential embarrassment. We need to know what he’s up to.’

‘Eta remnants? Any connection? Guns?’

The Captain shrugged. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Drugs?’

The Captain shook his head. ‘The Drugs and Organised Crime Unit doesn’t think so. He’s not sufficiently tooled up to deflect interest from our Colombian cousins. Our colleagues in the Aliens Brigade would like a word, if they could get their hands on him. They’ve been working closely with the Illegal Immigration and Forgery Unit to bust the sex clubs. But I think they’re chasing shad-

ows. He hasn't got the contacts and the muscle to squeeze his way into the sex rackets. But, I could be wrong.'

'Is he running a deal with someone in the Town Hall?'

'Could be. Or maybe he's just checking out the local property market. Whatever it is, he's up to something.'

'What about this character?' He pointed at Juan's telescopic shot of the man in the green suit greeting the visitor.

'Ruiz. Local solicitor. We've known for a while he's been a Russian go-between.'

'But?'

'There's no buts with this, Coteló. Somebody, somewhere, up in Madrid, wants him. We have to go with that. Now look, we've got him tagged. *He's* no problem right now. What we need – what I need – to know is who this guy is.' The Captain jabbed a finger at a photo of a well-dressed man shaking hands with Ruiz.

'Looks English,' he said.

'Could be. That's for you to find out. I want to know who he is, where he's going, who he's meeting, everything etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Simple.'

He looked again at one of the shots of the man boarding the *Esperanza*. So obviously English he thought. He could tell by the cut of his suit. And he looked again at a photo of the two heavies, straight-away casting them as former special services. And already he caught a scent, fitting the pattern of recent busts. Well-connected ex-Party apparatchik reaps a bundle on one, maybe two, big deals, converts cash into Colombian commodities, counts his stash in Italy, deposits protection bonds in Geneva via a Libyan bagman, flits to the costa, kits himself up with a boat and retinue and cocktails his way into the local charmed circle. Simple. But, this Englishman? It didn't fit. And, well ... He looked again at the photograph. No simple mule, and possibly ex-military by his bearing, but a gun runner?

'Coteló?'

‘Sir?’ He pulled himself from his reverie like a man snatching breath on surfacing.

‘Have you heard me?’

‘Yes, sir. Tail the Englishman. Report in every four hours. Keep Ramón up to speed. Discretion. Liaise as necessary with colleagues. Operation, er, operation—’

‘Torch!’

He hated the Captain’s habit of labelling every operation military style. Drama, just drama.

‘Operation Torch,’ he repeated, his tone devoid of enthusiasm.

‘Good.’ The Captain slapped his hands together and settled into his chair.

‘Boss?’

‘Yes, Coteló?’

‘Why me?’

‘Because you’re a good officer. I can rely on you. You know your way round the force so you know where to get help when you need it. Therefore you won’t be pestering me every five minutes. Okay?’

Reliable? Bullshit. ‘So, it’s not because I speak English?’

‘Well ...’ His boss looked discomfited. ‘It could help, obviously. You’re married to an English woman, yes?’

‘No, sir. We separated. She’s back in England now.’

‘Oh yes, of course, I remember.’ The Captain shrugged. ‘Look, no matter, just get on with the job, okay, Coteló?’

As he pulled the door open to leave the phone rang.

The Captain snatched up the phone and barked, ‘Yes? Yes. Okay. Good.’ He placed a hand over the receiver and called, ‘He’s heading for the station.’

He turned to face his boss. ‘The Englishman?’

‘Yes! Your Englishman. Get a driver and get there—now!’

Thankfully, the drive from HQ to María Zambrano railway station, via the Puente del Carmen across the trickle-dry Guadalmedina, lasted a brief, tyre squealing, seven minutes.

Drama, only drama.

He mazed through the station concourse cum shopping mall looking for a tall, obviously English, Englishman.

He scanned the destination board. The schedule listed only one train due to depart within the next twenty minutes: the 9am 02093 AVE to Madrid, via Córdoba.

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THREE

Though freshly washed the square remained imbued with a sense of the sweat and tears of the night before. A green and yellow cuddle of Barcelona's heroic street cleaners joshed and joked as they snacked on pastries and Coke. A young boy danced on a discarded sheet of bubblewrap, delighting in its popping, as his younger sister ran around in circles laughing and clapping. Their grandmother, seated on a stool in the doorway of an apartment building, watched over them as she shelled peas.

A copy of *La Vanguardia*, its front page splashed with colour photos of another supposed Eta-R bombing, lay unread on the café terrace table, next to a half-pecked *ensaimada*. Sabine Hassell enjoyed a lingering breakfast. She smiled, surprised by the warmth of the morning air and the rush, beep and canker of the city's traffic.

She'd spent two days and a long night on trains since leaving Dortmund. Her maternal grandfather, Otto, bequeathed her the opportunity to visit Spain. His will set her the task of locating and retrieving two small paintings he acquired while on 'volunteer' duty with the Condor Legion. Intrigued, she felt proud, that she, the youngest grandchild, and not her brother, nor any of her five cousins, had been entrusted with this special task.

She loved her grandfather. He loved her. They were the two book-ends of the family.

'I've never even told your mother this ...' he'd often say, as they knelt side by side to gather mushrooms, before revealing some harmless snippet of a tale from his boyhood.

On reaching her teens his confidences became more intimate, more serious; tinged with bitterness. 'Your mother doesn't know,' he'd say. 'But your father's brother was a thief.'

Nonetheless, during all their cozy Sunday afternoon chats, their woodland walks, he never once mentioned Spain, and never once mentioned any paintings. And now here, in Spain, the sharp morn-

ing sunlight filling the small square, she could more easily imagine the paintings. One of the paintings, she convinced herself, would be a portrait: a lover left behind. The other a townscape: a square, a fountain, a café terrace. She gave no thought to their monetary value; she sensed them only as being estranged pieces of sentimental chattel which needed to be reconnected to the family.

She allowed herself plenty of time. Her train for Madrid was not due to depart until the evening. Deciding to avoid the crowds and queues of the Sagrada Familia and La Pedrera, she instead planned a visit to the Museu Frederic Marès – with its Museu Sentimental – one of the most curious museums in Europe.

She rose from the table, stretched her taut, boyish frame and ran her hands through her dulled blonde hair, tossed three euros onto the plate, grabbed at her rucksack, bent her knees, and swung it up onto her shoulders. She smiled, glad to be free of the family, glad to be well into her travels.

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AS THE TRAIN PICKED up speed Coteló made his way to the conductor's cabin. He'd left his mobile-phone on his desk and he needed to call Ramón.

'Hola. Buenos días, señor. Qué tal?' He flashed his police ID. 'Need your help if you would, señor.'

The Conductor, short and rotund, nodded with a warm eagerness.

'Do you have a phone?' he asked. 'I need to call my station.'

'No problem,' the Conductor said.

'Speak English?'

'A little.'

'Good. I also need you to help me identify this man.' He passed the Conductor a photocopy of a photograph of his supposed Englishman. 'I need to know his name, and I need to know his destina-

tion. And, I need to know whether he has a return ticket and, if possible, the date and time of his return journey.'

'Yes, yes, no problem. In five minutes the crew will be handing out newspapers, headphones and sweets to the travellers. All part of the service. I could ask one of them to engage him in conversation and politely enquire as to whether he is a holidaymaker or businessman. They could perhaps find his name. Meanwhile, I'll check his ticket. If he bought a return he will have given his return details to the station staff. It will be on computer.'

'So,' he cut in. 'If he changes dates we can trace it?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent.'

'I will go now and brief my assistants and see what we can do.'

'Good. You'll find me in the café car.'

He walked through the train. In the next carriage he noted one of the two heavies he'd studied in the batch of surveillance photos in the seat nearest the door. He cast his eyes up and down and saw his Englishman, seated in the middle of the carriage, reading a copy of *El País*. He passed through the carriage and, no surprise, spotted the other heavy sat at the opposite end.

He settled himself onto a stool at the bar and ordered a *cortado* and a miniature of brandy. He reached for a toothpick. Young Ramón could wait a while, he'd phone when ready.

His experience taught him the importance of ordinary people to every investigation. He prided himself on his ability to enlist the help of what he termed his sidewalk sergeants: bar staff, shop-assistants, market-stall traders, taxi-drivers, and street-cleaners. He found only barbers and bouncers to be resistant to his flattering approaches.

In the barrios, and edge of town housing schemes, he knew, and understood well, the working-class Spaniard's distrust and contempt for authority. He couldn't blame them; years of police corruption, harassment, and collusion with employers, ensured each generation

adopted the code of looking to their own for protection and security. There were neighbourhoods where Coteló and his colleagues would never be welcomed. But here, on the train, he would get all the co-operation he needed. He smiled and sipped at the *coñac*.

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SABINE HASSELL TURNED into the courtyard of the Marès Museum. After paying for her ticket she turned from the desk to put her backpack into a locker. She caught sight of a man silhouetted in the arched entrance. Late twenties, medium build – she vaguely recognised him as a fellow train passenger. Their gaze connected. He dithered and opened up a streetmap, and stepped backwards into the busy alley. She turned away and entered the museum.

The Museu Sentimental, situated upstairs above a collection of crucifixes and Madonnas, is a whole life's collecting of everyday ephemera arranged under glass. Marès, she learned, was a sculptor who designed Franco's victory monument on Cinco de Oros, and an avid collector of useless things: tram tickets; fans; dolls; toy theatres; tooth-picks; printers' handbills; menus; napkins; cigarette papers; cigar bands; books of matches; walking-sticks ... and it goes on and on and on.

She could appreciate, but not understand, this urge to collect, to gather and classify. Why celebrate the thing and not the experience? Like keeping condoms after every act of love; a project, she thought, yet to be realised by her sensation seeking artist friend Monika.

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COTELO SNAPPED THE seal on his second brandy.

The Conductor arrived smiling, flush with excitement. 'His name,' he announced, a little breathless, his chest swelling with pride. 'Is James Howard-Graham. He's travelling to Madrid on business.'

He does not have a return ticket. From Madrid, he says, he may fly back to London.'

So he *was* English. He signalled the bar steward to serve the Conductor a coffee. 'Very good, señor, very good.'

'I talked with him and offered to bump him into business class. Told him if he gave me his details I could issue a new ticket. Easy.'

'So, he's in business-class now?'

'Sí.'

'And, tell me, when he moved to business-class did anyone else in the carriage, move, or do anything?'

'Yes, a tall man at the front of the carriage stood up and stretched. And I think,' he added in a harsh whisper. 'I think he was listening. And, when we left the carriage, he began to follow us. He followed us to the end of the next carriage and then turned around.'

'This man, was he wearing a brown leather jacket? Unshaven?'

'Yes, that's him!'

'Excellent. You've done very well. Many thanks, señor.'

'It's nothing,' the Conductor said, an obvious pride prompted a beaming smile. 'It's what we do.'

'Okay, now I want you to remember very carefully. Did the Englishman give any sign, a nod, or some kind of signal, before the other man stood up?'

'No.'

'You're sure?'

'Certain.'

'Did he have any luggage?'

'Yes, a holdall and a briefcase with a shoulder strap.'

He dismissed the Conductor with an encouraging pat on the shoulder and plucked another toothpick from the dispenser on the bar and settled back to think.

This Englishman – James Howard-Graham – no simple mule, but valuable to someone. Was he being followed, or being minded?

Was he carrying? Or, on his way to collect? Was he an envoy, or hitman? He enjoyed the speculation; it crowded out the haunting thoughts of his daughter's last breath.

'Señor?' The Conductor returned. 'Will you be paying for the Englishman's upgrade?'

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