The Vanishing Fortune

A Battle to Find it

Nicholas Jones

A BloedStone Crime Thriller

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Disclaimer: All characters, organisations (except brands) mentioned and events in this publication are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is purely coincidental. This story contains adult scenes of sex and violence, so please read a more 'cosy' novel if you are offended by such realities.

Dedicated to
Carys and James
Something for the future from Grampsie!

Special Dedication

To those who lost loved ones or are still suffering from the ravages of the Coronavirus disease 2019. So unexpected and devastating that no words can describe your losses.

Special Thanks to

- Chad Bond, a Prison Guard, my educator on the goings-on in prisons. I could have written so much more about them, explaining in detail what it's really like in crowded prisons and how it was different during Covid-19.
- The NBS group from The Faber Academy, who once again encouraged me to keep writing, even though there were so many distractions.
- My daughter, Angharad, aka Harrie, for the wonderful illustrations you see in this book.
- My wife Gillian, who provided the early editing as well as much love and support to keep me on track.
- Carl French and his publishing team: Morgana and Caroline.
- The enthusiasm of the Endless Bookcase Authors to get their projects done, inspired me to get on and finish mine.

About the Author

Nicholas Jones writes crime thrillers with a business twist, where the action takes place across many countries.

Nicholas, a trained business efficiency consultant, has spent 35 years advising clients on how to make their companies more profitable and continues to do so today. His transition to fiction writing came through training at the Faber Academy. He intends to spend more time writing and is currently working on two more projects.

This second book tells the story of the battle to recover a fortune in cash and drugs stolen from a Marseille Crime Family.

Praise for the Author

- "Compelling and intriguing, a gripping plot with romance, sex, violence and humour – with an unexpected final twist. The characters – love them or hate them – make it a great page-turner."

Also by the author

'Some Trouble Investing in Wine' A Crime Thriller

What readers think:

- "Full of intrigue and mystery, the plot twists and turns, introducing new characters full of danger and charisma throughout."
- "A gripping read by new star writer, Nick Jones, with a storyline that kept taking you in different directions, unsure where it would all end. Colourful and descriptive scenes added to the feeling you were actually in France, surrounded by the characters involved."

The Cast of Characters

AFRICAN – Former Martin Workers

Hakim		Undocumented worker
Mahamid		Undocumented worker
Sami		Undocumented worker
Makena		Wife of Hakim's Cousin

BULGARIAN Crime Syndicate – The ECS Corporation

Lyudmil Kolev	'Golden Sword'	Crime Syndicate Leader
Stoyan Kolev	'Mighty Avenger'	Junior Leader and brother
Ajax		Sovetnik (Consigliere)
Alexi		Gangster
Branimir		Gangster

FRENCH – Former Martin Family Members

Astrid Martin	Head of the Martin Family, Living in California
Chevy Merle	Former Head of Illicit Drugs
Harbin	Member
Lamarr	Member
Pascal Duval	Enforcer
Noell	Member
Thierry Martin	Dissident Son of the Martin Family Leader
Wafiy	Junior Member
Yves Calvin	Former Head of Wine and Astrid Martin's lover.

FRENCH Fugitives and AFRICAN Abductees in Corsica

Lena Peja	Allegedly Mariana Becerra	Assassin and a former Martin member
Baptiste Paoli	Sylvain, aka 'Un Gros'	Wanted Criminal
Kanina		Abductee
Aboni		Abductee
Efe		Abductee
Roman		Security Guard

FRENCH Government Ministers and Staff

Olivier		'Old Minister' of the Interior
Gabin		'New Minister' of the Interior
Hugo		Adjutant to the Interior Minister

FRENCH Law Enforcement

Thomas Babineaux	Captain	Former Gendarme
Jean Dumas	Colonel	Gendarmerie Bordeaux
Lucho Frossard		Superintendent in the Gendarmerie
Mathew		Assistant to Superintendent Frossard
Edgar Corbin		Gendarme Officer

Former BloedStone Associates hiding out

Claude	Clement Dubuc	Former BloedStone Associate
Maria	Maria Dubuc	Former BloedStone Associate

MEXICAN Cartel – Ángeles de Dios

Ángel	'El Amigo del Diablo'	Assassin/Executioner
Casel		Chief Enforcer
Ricardo		Cartel Leader
José		US based cartel member
Juan		US based cartel member
Luis		US based cartel member
Miguel		US based cartel member

USA-Based BloedStone Associates and Staff

Gendrie de Vries	'The General'	Chairman & CEO
John Davies	'JD'	US Commander and UK Director
Shamir Ruslana Terani	'Saloni'	US Military Contractor
Richard Newton	'Hockey' aka 'Lee'	US Associate
Sahba		'Runway Model' and Shamir's girlfriend
John Huston	'Texas' and 'Lonely Ranger'	US Associate
Maria Xenia Roderick	Princess/ Viscountess	Nicky's wife.

Nicky (Nicolas Roderick)	Viscount Hadfelt Manor	Deputy Chairman

US Government Agents

Harold Grimes	'Mr Grim'	FBI Special Agent
Michelle Blueboy		Homeland Supervising Agent
Robert Fraser		Homeland Special Agent
Large Agent		Homeland Special Agent
Smaller Agent		Homeland Special Agent

UK-Based BloedStone Associates and Staff

Andre Devries (UK Spelling)		Nephew of the Chairman
Avery King		Finance Director
Cassandra Ritchie	'Cass'	Author and wife to Jackson
Chiara Prinzi		UK Associate and Business Owner
Sir Robson Manley-James	'Robbie'	Chief Executive UK and Frances
Jackson Ritchie	'Jack'	Head of Investment & Director
Rosalba Babineaux	'Rosa'	Girlfriend of Thierry Martin
Tyndall Jones	'Tinny'	Investment Director UK
Elizabeth Manley-James	'Miss Elizabeth'	UK Associate and MI6 Agent
Terry Lamb		Independent (armed) Contractor
Yasmeen Maktoum		Manager of Le Beaux Hotel, Bandol.

UK Government Agents

David Benderlicht	'Bendy'	MI6 Agent

Prologue

Marseille, France. September 2019 – One Friday Morning

Yves ignored her comments, opened the other door, and used both hands to summon the six Martin Crime Family members who had been briefed on the upcoming kidnapping. The men were instructed to wait in the corner of the canteen until a signal was given to seize, gag, tie, hood, and hold the visitors' prisoner until it was time to leave. Pascal watched, intrigued by what was about to happen. It had been a long time since he had seized civilians.

The receptionist was dispatched back to the front desk, where the two women were seated, waiting, and Andre was wandering around, looking at things stuck on the walls. When she arrived, the trio were beckoned to follow her to meet with Lucas. They glanced around, somewhat surprised as they were led into the foul-smelling, spartan canteen to be met by Yves. Pascal and Noell continued to watch. The guests saw no cause for alarm, all three men were smiling and looking relaxed. Yves stepped forward to greet them in English and introduced himself as Lucas, while politely pointing for them to sit on some rudimentary wooden canteen chairs. He did not introduce his watching colleagues.

A few hundred metres away, the police commander, now on the highest alert, yelled at his deputy through his comms unit, "I wish they would say something, it's all too quiet for me. Are you sure their wires are working?"

"Yes, yes, soon something will happen," replied the deputy, who was waiting close to the warehouse with his team. "Get ready," he said to his men. They looked like sprinters waiting for the gun to fire.

Yves began by asking Rosa, "How do you know Michel?" Rosa set off on a long explanation, turning around every so often to look

at her two colleagues. Andre almost immediately felt an acute stress reaction. He thought, *They are playing with us, they know there is no Michel, only Thierry*. He began to run through their potential exit options but struggled to even find a way out of the room without some help. The Englishman knew that with his fight or flight response triggered, he should engineer the discussion to a point where the gendarmes would feel able to carry out a forced entry. He looked at Avery, who was staring at Yves. He decided to act.

"Where is Thierry, or whatever you call him? Is he here or not?" asked Andre, interrupting the discussion and causing the Martin members to look at him and quickly lose any semblance of calm.

"Who?" replied Yves, looking angry while casually waving his right hand. The six Martin kidnappers exploded into action to the screams of the women and the shouts of Andre. A few seconds later, the gendarme commander gave the attack signal. Within a minute, the shocked trio were subdued and dragged into a corner. Almost simultaneously, the warehouse security alarm went off, and the gruesome male security guard ran into the canteen, screaming to Pascal as best he could that hundreds of armed police were pouring into the car park. Pascal jumped up and told his men to hold the trio until he returned. He sprinted out of the canteen, followed by Noell and Yves.

Inside the main warehouse, there was chaos; the noise was disorienting as the Martin men tried to fight off the heavily armed gendarmes and police with only handguns. They were losing fast, but many were veterans of the Marseille drug wars and would fight to the death. To their credit, the criminals managed to do enough to give Pascal and his two colleagues time to retreat to the back of the warehouse and disappear. On the way, the three men co-opted Hakim and Sami to drag the unpacked drugs into a secret cellar. Once sealed from the inside, the basement would be very hard to find from the outside.

Inside the cellar, about halfway along, there was a large pallet stacked with money and covered with a tarpaulin. At the far end, there was a cage full of packaged drugs ready to be picked, packed, and sent to customers. Pascal shouted at the co-opted Africans to

put the drugs in the cage, lock it, and give him the key, which they did before shrinking into a corner to hide.

While the battle continued upstairs, the angry Martin men argued about whose fault it was and questioned how the police knew when to attack.

"Merde, merde, those English must have had wires," hissed Pascal at the other two. "They arranged for the police to raid us, merde."

They continued to discuss what had happened, carefully avoiding the issue that none of them had thought to search the trio when they arrived. By the time they left the cellar later that night, the story became clearer. It was a deliberate attempt by an English-owned French company to destroy them and take over the Martin family business. That is what Madame Martin would be told. No one outside the cellar would be able to say differently. They would either be in custody, wounded, or dead, a fate the hiding Africans hoped to avoid.

While the three senior Martin members were hiding downstairs and their colleagues were fighting upstairs, Andre, Avery and Rosa were still being held hostage. Their six guards, who had anticipated no problem with kidnapping civilians, were left sharing three old S&W 9mm handguns and a total of nine bullets. When challenged by a police negotiator, the criminals did the usual thing: threatening to shoot the hostages unless they were allowed to leave. They selected a transit van as their preferred mode of escape. The police, buoyed by the success of stopping thirty gang members, split equally between arrested and dead, immediately agreed to the demands. It was thought best to finish the raid quickly before anything could go wrong.

The hostage-takers, trusting the police, shuffled out with one captive and one gun shared between two, the weapon being pointed somewhere around the face or neck. The unarmed members walked hunched at the waist in a futile attempt to hide themselves. As they struggled towards the van, the commander gave the "shoot order". Immediately, the armed kidnappers received headshots from the same police sharpshooters who had been so successful in the recent

gang battles. To the disappointment of the police commander, the three unarmed kidnappers immediately gave up and threw themselves on the floor, arms outstretched.

In the feverish and almost joyful post-raid activity, the released hostages were sitting in the back of an ambulance, still in shock. They were horrified at being in the line of fire and, worse, being splashed by blood and bits from the now-deceased Martin members. While the trio were being cleaned up and checked over by the police and ambulance services, Captain Thomas Babineaux arrived to thank them for their cooperation. Thomas told them he had not been allowed to take part because of his sister, but unlike most, he looked genuinely relieved rather than overjoyed at the results of the encounter. He offered to take them all back to Bandol if they wanted to leave their car for a day or two. The couple decided they would take the rental back to the hotel, while Rosa would stay with her brother and return later for dinner.

Two hours after being taken hostage, Andre drove out of the car park with Avery sitting next to him. Other than for directions, little was said as she navigated him to the outskirts of the city. Andre felt stressed, but he had faced the 'eye of the tiger' before and survived. For Avery, this experience was so far outside her comfort zone that she would struggle to avoid PTSD symptoms.

Eventually, Andre spoke, "After all that, we still have no idea where Michel is or, indeed, what he's really called, or did I miss something?"

Avery let her head slump forward, taking the humour as medicine, breathing deeply and mumbling, "Unbelievable."

One week later, on Friday afternoon, back at the same warehouse

With the police gone, a fact confirmed by a search of the area, Richard Newton of BloedStone notified his commander, JD, that they would be in position in a few minutes. He was advised to proceed. He jogged over to the waiting Martin vehicles. Hockey, as he was known, jumped into one of the cars, to some celebration by the criminals, before they drove the short distance to the property

next door to the warehouse.

The BloedStone associate was at the front of the group of eight men, vying with Chevy to be first into the warehouse. Two of the smiling members whispered that the American seemed to be enjoying himself so much that he should join the Martin family. At the first door into the main warehouse, they came to a stop, the lock seemed to be jammed. Chevy put it down to operator error and nerves as it opened easily on the second attempt. The men proceeded through the second door into the gloomy warehouse and stopped to check for a trap. It was silent. They scanned the area with torches, halting every few seconds to look at the battle damage and patches of dried liquid. Chevy wondered how much it would cost to fix the place or whether they would bother once the money had been recovered. Seeing the place in the semi-darkness made them feel angry, but appreciative of the efforts made by their colleagues. They continued to creep along the inside wall, using it as a guide to the cellar. Nothing untoward was happening.

For one final check, while they still had a chance to turn back, Chevy sent Hockey into the open space with a bullet-less gun in his hand. Nothing happened, so he returned to tell them it was fine, there was no one around, and to stop being a bunch of wusses. The Martin men wondered what that was.

"Come on, man," he said, looking at Chevy.

"Let's go get some stuff so we can play," suggested Hockey, pressing a nostril and trying to be Californian. Although they struggled with his accent, they got the gist and laughed. Before they could move any further, one of the three outside sentries texted Chevy, whose phone bleeped.

"A*porc* is wandering around out here. What should we do about it?"

The leader turned to Hockey, threatening him with death if he failed them now. The BloedStone or Stones associate, as they were often referred to, cursed and asked for the number to call the sentries.

Chevy grabbed his arm and told him, "Get out there and get rid of the bastards." As the American left, the Frenchmen reluctantly

agreed amongst themselves to wait until the Stones man returned, just in case they had to leave and come back another time.

Outside the warehouse, Hockey approached the gendarme officer and spoke in his best American English, the response was an intimidating stance. The French sentry panicked and called Chevy to begin a whispered commentary of events. The conversation appeared to deteriorate, an argument ensued, and the officer drew his sidearm before relenting and allowing Hockey to make a call. The police car returned and the two 'friendly' officers got out to explain what was happening. The gendarme holstered his weapon, apologised, laughed, shook hands, and got into the car with the other two. None of the Martin sentries spotted the American's knowing wink. The Martin member who was commentating told Chevy, with a relieved snigger, that it was now all clear and Hockey was on his way back to them.

A relieved Chevy and his men continued deep into the eerie, echoing warehouse, leaving Hockey to catch up. They stopped at the wine bottling area, now strewn with broken tanks, bottles and wooden boxes. One of the men shone his light on the crates, now home to spiders weaving giant webs, grateful for the ongoing feast brought about by settling dust. The men eventually arrived at the hidden cellar door. They unfolded jumbo laundry bags and began forming a chain, ready to take away their loot. This was going to be hard work, as they had forsaken their team of Africans.

Chevy removed the cellar cover. He descended the stairs to the entrance. It was closed but opened when he turned the handle, it should have been locked. He remembered it usually took a shoulder to open when it was properly shut. *Must have been fixed and they forgot to lock it,*thought Chevy.

He switched on the lights and walked towards the middle of the cellar, where he knew the money had been stashed on pallets under a tarpaulin. Pascal had instructed them to remove the cash first and get it shipped to a secure location near the Martin villa. Lamarr and Harbin joined their leader and the three men surrounded the pallet, ready to slowly lift the covering to avoid spreading the money on the floor. Chevy first peeked before tearing back the tarp to stare,

along with the other men, at empty boxes stacked neatly on top of each other. Chevy looked around. *Maybe it was the wrong pallet,* he thought. But there were no others. "It's gone," he said. "Merde, the money has gone, it's been stolen. There has been a robbery."

Lamarr ran up to the drug cage, but it was empty. He fell to his knees and screamed; the others ran over to join him. They were struggling to process what they found, or rather, what they didn't find. There was a note on the cage door, "Tous partis, merci". Chevy shouted for the American to be brought to him. The men outside the cellar, unnerved by the noise, replied that he had not returned from seeing the gendarmes. The Frenchman rang his outside sentries, one after the other, there was no reply. At that moment, he realised they had been sucker-punched.

"What the fuu… do we do now?" asked Lamarr, beginning to panic about what lay ahead. "We've been robbed, we must run and get away quickly," he continued in a high-pitched voice. Then the Frenchman went berserk and ran out of the cellar shouting, "RUUUUNNNN!" leaving Chevy and Harbin behind. He sprinted across the warehouse floor, collecting startled members as he went. Once the first three appeared in the building next door, the gendarmes stepped out of the darkness and pointed assault rifles. They demanded the men stop, drop their weapons and get on the floor. The men were so startled they ignored the officers and continued to run to avoid capture. In a reflex action, one member tried to retrieve a weapon from his waistband but failed as several shots took him to the ground. The deafening sound reverberated around the building, causing the remaining runners to freeze before complying with the instructions.

The captured Martin members were cuffed before being thrown into the back of a police wagon to join their two colleagues who had been acting as sentries. The third sentry, the commentator, also too slow on the draw, was on the ground awaiting an ambulance to deal with his gunshot wounds. Chevy and Harbin wished terrible retribution on Hockey, before debating what to do. Their choices seemed to be like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, charge out guns blazing, shooting the police on their way to

the van, or give up. Chevy suggested an alternative. Go through the warehouse office and sneak out the front gate. The plan might have worked, but for the gendarmes who were having a quiet smoke. The two men surrendered. They ended up in an empty transit van, reportedly destined for the local Commissariat with the rest of the Martin members.

But these men, known to be leaders, were being taken to a different location, purportedly for questioning about which people and vineyards were involved in the Martin wine scam. Neither of them was aware of the impending special treatment nor that they would be held as terrorists to avoid leaks. They spent most of the journey moaning about the American traitor, taking comfort in what Pascal would do to him and his "bitch" girlfriend when he got back from wherever he was.

Someone changed the plan, they were not going to be asked about wine, but something far more important to the law enforcement officers. The meticulously planned operation to destroy the Martin family was now considered a failure. The drugs and money were missing. Someone would have to explain what happened to their boss, the Minister.

Once they arrived, the two Martin members were hustled from the car to the interrogation rooms and made 'comfortable' before the inquisition began. The gendarmes practised their questions; they would focus on the 'small picture' as BloedStone had suspected they would.

Questions like:

- Why had the Martin men gone through the farce of pretending to recover drugs and money from an empty warehouse? Who told them to do it?
- Where were the drugs and money now? Who was concealing them, or who would know where they were?
- What did they know about the location of gang leader Matisse Martin and his son, Thierry, both of whom had not been seen for some time?

- Why was Matisse's wife spending so much time with the associates from BloedStone?
- Did she do a deal with BloedStone, so they have the money? If so, where is it?
- Who else knows anything about the drugs and money – name them and give contact details.

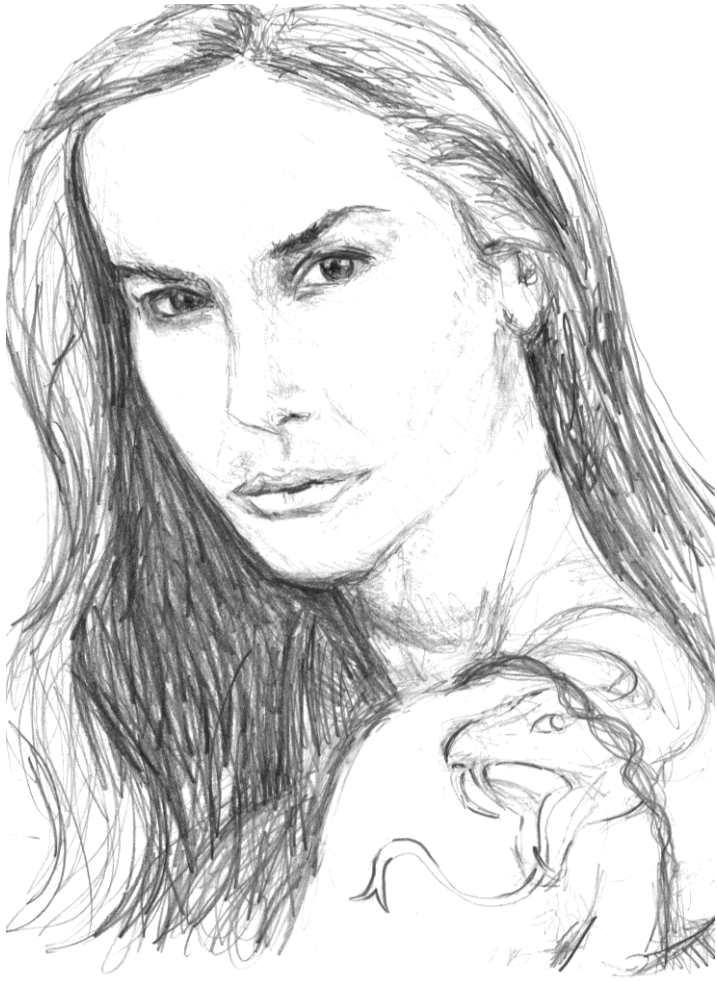
Unfortunately for the police, Chevy feared Pascal more than them, and Harbin knew nothing.

After the excitement died down, Hockey was entrusted with the job of making sure the French authorities did not connect the warehouse incident with the BloedStone deal in Bandol or any pending activities. They were to believe that the Stones' associates were only there to organise a deception to allow the gendarmerie to capture both loot and criminals. It was a favour to the French government.

Hockey did nothing, he shouted that he had no idea what had happened to the drugs and money, nor did he care. He was in tears, gesticulating wildly and stumbling along the street.

It was 5.30 pm on a Friday in September 2019.

Part 1



The Hunters

The Winter of 2019 - 2020

Chapter 1

Ruse, Bulgaria. The Crime Syndicate

"It's not good for us," shouted Lyudmil Kolev, the 'Golden Sword' and older of the two brothers who controlled the Eastern Europe Crime Syndicate, the ECS corporation, as they liked it to be called. The Bulgarian gang leader was now in his sixties but looked older and frailer. The result of years of too much of everything, from causing death to eating spicy food and drinking 50% proof Rakia. He was of medium height and nothing special to look at. But he was in charge of a huge criminal organisation and drew strength from that.

The ECS corporation had many vassals under its protection, including Matisse Martin until his death, in the Marseille gang wars in the summer of 2019. "Our team of co-workers, families, partners and bad boys", as Lyudmil called them, supported a comprehensive range of criminal activities including trafficking people and arms, illicit drugs, contract killing, extortion and fraud. Between them, the syndicate members, through a supply chain of people and products, were able to provide the global reach that modern criminals need to scale their businesses.

"We must continue to have control over Marseille. It's where we have a seaport from Africa and I WANT the money the Martins owe me shipped out through there to our Turkish friends," he shouted slowly for added effect.

"I understand, I agree," replied a frustrated Stoyan Kolev, the 'Mighty Avenger' younger brother and junior leader. He was in his forties but looked younger, sort of tall and handsome in an Eastern European way. He was altogether in better shape and fancied being the sole leader once his brother could no longer continue. "But we were told by both the Martin guys and our cop informers that the Martins' money and the coke's been stolen. But who would steal

from us? WHO?" he continued, raising his voice. He was intent on making sure his older brother thought he was focused on their problems, although he didn't actually care about Marseille or the Martin money, he had more important things to worry about; one of his 'girlfriends' might be pregnant. Stoyan was said to be generous, kind and a 'ladies' man' by his friends. In reality, he was simply a womaniser who used money to obtain female favours.

"Calm yourself Stoysie," replied the elder brother. "We have a lead," he said, sounding happier. "Ajax has found our fat friend from London, the one they called Un Gros. I can't remember his name, but he's calling himself Baptiste Paoli now. He's staying on that little French island, the one next to Sardinia, where those Ities hid their shit that time. The pervert is living there with some trafficked girls he took there after he ran away from London last year. Oh, and he's with that psychopath you like, the one with the snake on her body. I don't know what you see in her; she must have put a spell on you, or she's a great lay or something. You usually like them big and blonde," the older brother laughed at his own jokes. The mention of Lena Peja brought a grimace to Stoyan's face. He instantly remembered the rough sex on the night they were introduced by her mentor, the now-deceased Martin member Patrice Barre. He recalled the damage she inflicted on his genitals. It left him unable to 'entertain' his girlfriends for the best part of a month. Of course, he would never tell anyone what she did to him – a motorbike accident was the convenient excuse to explain the slow walk.

"She was, I think, very tough," the younger brother replied, recalling stories of how she executed the Frenchman's enemies with little or no concern. A brief smile of admiration came and went.

"Can we focus on our problem?" continued Lyudmil, changing the subject, fearing his brother would lose concentration and start planning adventures with his many girlfriends. "Don't be in such a hurry, we have plenty of time to talk to your friend," Stoyan replied. "I can visit him tomorrow if you want, that's not a problem."

"I'm glad you can spare time away from your friends. I will have Ajax here," he said, turning towards the man sitting in the corner,

"arrange for you to meet with Paoli and prepare some questions for you to ask him." Ajax was the advisor and problem solver, the Syndicate Consigliere or Sovetnik in Bulgaria. He was responsible for preventing anything bad from happening to the business and for making sure enforcers were employed to protect the brothers. He looked scary: not very tall, thin and muscular, with a smile that was more like a snarl, due to a misshapen upper lip.

"I don't need a list," replied Stoyan. "What do you take me for? I have done this hundreds of times before. I will make him sing to me." He stopped short of boasting about what he would do to Lena, but her face appeared and he felt something like hate mixed with a twinge of fear.

"I hope so, but you must be careful with this Frenchman, he has spent too much time in England avoiding the MI5 or 6 or whatever the number is. He is devious; you must be nice to him until you have what we want. After that, I will leave you to do what you wish to him and that woman. But make sure you do not bring anything back HERE."

"Of course, no problemo," replied Stoyan, looking at his elder brother leaving the room, followed by Ajax.

"HERE" was an eleven-bedroom mansion in the city of Ruse, located on the eastern side of Bulgaria, a mere two to three hours by road from the Black Sea. The property was located next to the Danube, within easy reach of his friends and clients in Eastern Europe. "So much less fuss than being in Sofia with all that traffic," he would tell anyone who asked. The three-storey building, reminiscent of a French Château, was hidden on a plot surrounded by trees and men with semi-automatic shotguns. Inside, it was decorated with ostentatious furniture and marble floors, as befitted its rich criminal owners. It also boasted a full-sized games room, capable of supporting a busy orgy. The previous year, the cellar had been repurposed for use as a wine storage and tasting suite. Hence, Ajax's bloody interrogations were moved to a nondescript property in the woods near Tsenovo. Outside, there was a swimming pool, a tennis court and a jetty capable of taking two forty-footers.

As Lyudmil left his brother in the so-called library, a room full

of looted French and Italian books, he worried about sending him on such a mission. His younger brother had a habit of messing up, having to be extracted or saved by some form of bribery. *No doubt he will take a couple of his fools with him,* thought Lyudmil. *Perhaps he won't screw up, as we know there is only one guard at Paoli's villa, so it should be easy to get in and get what we want.*

A week later, Stoyan told his companions that the journey to Corsica was a great opportunity for a road trip. "Like a Route 66 thing from Ruse to northern Italy, before crossing over to Corsica." They planned to use the northern route via Croatia to go out, then return by the southern route so they could meet up with friends in Kosovo. He ignored his elder brother's protests that there were quicker routes. "After all," Stoyan told him, "the money trail was already cold. It was four months since the stuff went missing." The syndicate leader indulged his brother on most occasions but disliked him.

If he hadn't been 'blood', Stoyan wouldn't exist, the older brother often thought.

It took two and a half days for them to arrive at the Livorno ferry terminal in northern Italy, ready to cross over to Corsica. The Bulgarian Sovetnik had arranged for the three men to be met at the port by one of the syndicate's Italian friends. He gave instructions that they be provided with whatever weapons they requested, no questions asked. Once the job was done, the weapons were to be given to the sea creatures to play with. The Italians would not fail Ajax; they knew that would mean a visit. No one wanted an unfriendly visit from such a man.

Ajax had already persuaded Baptiste Paoli that it would be best for the meeting to take place at his villa outside Saint Florent, in the north of Corsica near Bastia. That way, there would be "no prying eyes or wagging ears." The Frenchman had smiled at the English metaphor.

Chapter 2

Corsica, France. Preparing for Visitors

"So my dear, what are we going to do about this visit from our Bulgarian friends?" asked Baptiste Paoli, *aka* Sylvain, *aka* Un Gros, speaking in English. "I don't think they are coming here for a holiday, do you? They're looking for the money the Martins seem to have lost." The Frenchman was around 1.80 metres in height and nearly two-thirds of that number around his waist. His face was constantly red from alcohol, mostly wine and brandy. He suffered from chronic heartburn, which he kept in check with generous swigs from the bottle of his favourite antacid. Like so many, he had been living beyond his body's means for far too long. His exercise consisted of walking to and from his car during the day before climbing the stairs each night to his palatial bedroom. It was there that he was reputed, by bribed officials, to be performing unlawful activities with the kidnapped girls he brought from London. But the reality was much different.

"Who knows, Sylvain?" replied a wary Lena Peja, while facing away from him. Her mind was flooding with pictures of what happened to Stoyan during their short affair. It had ended badly with the Bulgarian promising retribution for her overzealous lovemaking. *I got carried away. I was so,* she thought about what she was like when aroused by men and smirked. *He got me in a state, it was his own fault. The bitch nearly died when I came*, this time she sniggered. *I think he broke something, he couldn't get it up after that…*

"Are you with me, Lena?" Sylvain interrupted, noticing she was quiet, almost smiling while looking at nothing. "I think they are coming here to do something we won't like," he continued. "Junior Kolev is a psycho and will not come on his own, don't you know? He will have some nasty people with him." *Like you*, he thought. "We need a plan. Unless, of course, you know he is just visiting for

a nice chat, 'cause, you know, stuff, or maybe he just wants to see you again. But I doubt it, I smell trouble given it's young Stoyan coming to see us and not my friend Ajax." Lena mumbled something. "Perhaps you should call him, what do you think?" asked Sylvain, getting anxious. Lena was still deep in thought and worried about a conflict. The only support she would have was the dull security guard outside.

"Just thinking," she said, but nothing much was coming to mind about what they should do. So the Frenchman carried on.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we had my *malfamé ami*," he said, switching to French for a moment. "The English football follower, Monsieur Terry Lamb, to help you? The last time I heard of him, he was being taken to the hospital after being shot by one of those bloodthirsty BloedStone marauders. That was a very long time ago."

"I told you that," replied Lena tersely. "I will find out where he is now, but I can't believe he can get here before Stoyan. *Maybe he could fly over rather than drive, though*, she thought. "Are you sure he is still okay with you?" she asked. "After all, you didn't try to help him after you rented him out to that Martin guy, Pascal." The Frenchman looked blank for a moment, which surprised Lena. "He worked for you, right?" she asked, seeking confirmation.

"Of course, I kept paying him until last month and sent the money to his bank as usual," replied Sylvain. "But Lena, you know that times are getting hard for us here."

"Okay, let's hope he still loves you," she replied with relief. "I will check to see if he can come and help us. He would be very useful with that long gun of his."

Just as Lena got up to leave, Sylvain started talking again. "To be impartial, why don't you get the same message to Pascal and his mates, with extra love? Perhaps he's not doing anything and would like a little holiday. I think he fancied you, didn't he, or was it the other one, Patrice?" he laughed. Lena nodded in agreement and thought*, It sounds like a good idea. Pascal had benefited from Sylvain loaning him his men.* But she didn't respond to the barbed comment, instead feeling a momentary pang for her dead friend Patrice. They had

flirted but never consummated their relationship. He had been far too polite for the sort of sex she liked. Pascal would fit the bill, but she didn't fancy him. She thought he was brutish towards women and most likely they would end up physically fighting, an event she would probably lose.

Lena left the room and called a few of the Martin members who weren't in prison. They claimed to know nothing about Terry. Instead, they gave her the phone numbers of their colleagues who were in prison; they wanted to stay friends with Lena. She called the numbers and the men promised to find out where he was and report back. They liked Lena and wanted to stay on her good side. The Martins were still a tight group, so she knew the search would only take a matter of hours. If necessary, she would then call their law enforcement friends to find out what they knew. Lena also decided that if there was no joy in France, she would contact her criminal friends in London. She was certain that if nowhere else, Terry would be found in a pub near the Blues ground.

Within the hour, she heard a strange story that Terry was still in the hospital of the main Marseille prison, being kept under guard because Pascal and his friends were trying to kill him. This action was intended to ensure he never spoke to the police about the killings he carried out while on loan to the Martin family. *Not surprising news*, she thought. *Poor old Terry, it doesn't sound like he's going to make it back to England. Anyway, that means no help for us.* She liked Terry; he was fun in a bipolar sort of way.

Lena returned to Sylvain to give him the news. He was sitting at the long dining table, eating his late afternoon tea of various cheeses washed down by wine. It was being served by the oldest of his captive women. Lena studied the scene for a moment; it reminded her of his restaurant in Kensington without the lewd insults. She dismissed the African woman, who scurried off. Lena sat down opposite the Frenchman, who had seen her face and slumped back into his seat in anticipation of bad news.

"Terry is still in the prison hospital. Pascal thinks he is a risk and might tell the police about what we all did. So he is trying to

kill him. Or rather, he's trying to get some of the old Martin guys to do it. What do you think?"

"Ummmm," replied Sylvain and paused. Lena said nothing and waited. "Terry would only tell stories if he thought Pascal could get to him or if someone made him an offer he liked. Probably best to leave him for now and see what happens. On second thoughts, why don't you get a message to him saying that we still love him, hope he gets better soon and his wages are waiting for him when he gets out? No sense in upsetting him," Sylvain chuckled. Lena looked surprised. "I know he can't help us with Stoyan tomorrow or whenever that fool gets here. But who knows about the future, if he gets out? I doubt if either of us will feel safe having him stalk us. You may be wonderful close-up, but he is magnificent from far away. We would never see him coming. No, we must make a plan that keeps us and the girls safe without any help," concluded the Frenchman.

Lena cringed at his reference to the girls but knew he was right. "I think this is what we must do," a plan had arrived in her brain. "We will trick Stoyan, make him or them think we are weak. Then strike first, quickly disarm them and make them unable to respond. I have done such a thing in the past," Lena said, warming to the job at hand.

I bet you have, he thought. Sylvain smiled at her enthusiasm. *Poor old Stoyan, he has no idea what's coming to him.*

Chapter 3

Marseille, France. A Guest House?

"For Christ's sake, get him down from there!" the man shouted. "I told you we shouldn't have…"

"We had to, it was… *merde*," came the panicked response.

The noise roused Pascal Duval from a deep sleep on a sunny but cold morning. His eyes opened. They followed a beam of light crossing the floor to the far wall of his room. It was 10 am. He slept well these days, particularly in this room, blessed with a new, firm mattress, giving him "all that extra back support". The former Martin family Enforcer was much fitter and more muscular now that he regularly exercised and used weights. He could almost pass for an ageing cruiserweight boxer. The Frenchman was staying on the second floor of a red-brick, three-storey, L-shaped building. There were 250 rooms. He was lodging in one of the much sought-after, south-facing corner rooms. The ones with larger windows providing more light during the cold winter months. Like all modern rooms, it had en-suite facilities with some extra space to exercise before breakfast. The premises included a restaurant, a gym, and a games room, which featured both table tennis and pool tables. All for the exclusive use of the guests.

He could hear the sounds of men shouting and people running backwards and forwards past his room. He was tempted to get up and find out what was causing the commotion. But why bother? He could just relax; it wasn't time for his breakfast. Besides, he hadn't even decided whether to take it in his room or go down to the restaurant for some social intercourse with his fellow guests.

Pascal had arrived more than three months earlier with some of his work colleagues, who were also staying on the second floor. The only exception was the Englishman, Terry Lamb, who was staying in a suite. The Frenchman strenuously objected to this special

treatment. He continued to make representations to the lady Governor, demanding that Terry should be moved to a standard room. They were ignored.

Pascal lay on his back, contemplating life in a high-security Category B prison, even though he was technically only on remand. He had been placed there because no one trusted him not to try to escape. After a while, his thoughts returned to the meeting with his solicitor, set for early afternoon. Pascal was fighting extradition to Algeria for the gun battles and deaths that had occurred at the Martin compound in Algiers the previous October. A public defender had been appointed to plead for him because he preferred not to use his own money. The Frenchman believed the police had no real evidence against him, so he wasn't overly concerned. Besides, he didn't think much of the woman lawyer, other than she was reasonably attractive. *Maybe she would be great to*… he stopped himself. Thinking about sex or the lack of it was causing him significant stress. The former Martin Enforcer had promised himself he would stop thinking about women, as it only led him to masturbate and make a mess. But he was struggling. No, he had to keep forcing himself to think about more productive activities, like how to get out of prison.

But lying there, his daymares returned, starting with the Martins' warehouse in Marseille. Memories of that cellar haunted him, the vast quantity of money piled up on a wooden pallet and a cage full of packaged cocaine waiting to be sold. He, together with Noell and Yves, were the only Martin members to seek refuge in the secret cellar during the police raid and so became the last men to see the treasure. Later that night, they left the cellar to regroup the surviving members and arrange for the drugs and money to be removed to a safe house. It had been difficult to avoid the law enforcement officers who were prowling the nearby streets, still celebrating their victorious gun battle. Initially, he felt a little guilty that the raid had left many of his team dead or locked up in prison. But later, having decided it was not his fault, he forgave himself.

Then he recalled the beautiful Saloni and her boyfriend, Lee, who'd led his men into a police trap when they tried to move the

money a week later. But what caused him the most angst, other than finding out the two were BloedStone agents, was that the cellar was empty and his remaining men had been captured for nothing. He heard the sorry story from them nearly every day during mealtimes. Pascal was being driven mad by the gossip suggesting that someone from the Martin family had stolen the drugs and money. Most of the inmates agreed it must have been the former leader, Astrid Martin. This was the woman whom he hated most. She, rather than he, took over from her husband, Matisse, after he died in a gunfight with a drug gang. Pascal had wanted that job badly and he believed, as the Enforcer, it should have been his. He wondered about the disappearance of Noell and Yves; they were not in prison. He struggled to shake off the fear that one or both of them had stolen the money and neither would ever be found. The daily rumour mill suggested Yves had run off somewhere with Astrid Martin. Pascal worried that if the gossip were true, he must have taken the money before going with her. *Perhaps Noell went with them, Astrid always liked him too*, he thought. He slapped his bed in frustration.

Then there was Astrid Martin's son, Thierry, whom he'd kidnapped and wanted to use, even kill, as leverage to become the leader. For a moment, he was distracted. *I wonder what happened to Thierry's girlfriend. I think she was Rose or maybe Rosalyn. Where is that English couple who were searching for the boy? What happened to them?* He smiled when he remembered how Yves had pretended to be someone else to lure the three of them into the warehouse to use them as hostages. It didn't work. He frowned as he returned to the police raid, hating them for interfering in his life and landing him in prison. *I promise I will find and disembowel anyone who steals my money from the warehouse and that includes that Martin whore. Such a disgrace to the name Matisse.*

There was still no call for breakfast, so he returned to his next problem: how to get rid of Terry Lamb in the prison medical suite. *He certainly can't run far with that bullet wound in the leg. Well done to the BloedStone guy for shooting him. Shame he didn't kill* him. *Sylvain's English assassin is the only person who can tie me to the murder of that BloedStone woman in Bordeaux*, he thought for the umpteenth time. "I still have

so many problems to deal with," he said out loud. *I just need to get out of this place, and soon.* He calmed himself and waited for his door to be opened for breakfast.

For everyone in a prison, the clock seemed to tick slowly, but at least it was now approaching 11 am for breakfast. For people on the outside, that would seem more like brunch. However, it was the first of the two meal breaks the inmates had each day.

As he did most mornings, Pascal swung his legs out of bed and stretched, readying himself for another day of staying alive and keeping healthy. He was getting hungry. His thoughts were disturbed by someone banging loudly on his cell door. He walked over as the guard slid open the head-level hatch.

"Did you hear anything?" the guard asked. Pascal hesitated. "Did you hear anything last night?" he repeated. "The bitch," as they called him, "managed to kill himself last night, the silly bastard. Did you hear anything?" he said for the third time.

"Nothing, I was fast asleep," replied prisoner 22357000 Pascal. "How did he do it?" he continued.

"The twat hanged himself," the guard replied. "He must have spent ages doing it because he managed to tie his hands to his legs, so he couldn't undo the string, or he was playing and screwed up. You know he was a simpleton. There's going to be a lot of trouble over this." He changed the subject and said, "Get yourself sorted so we can open up the floor for breakfast. You've got ten minutes."

Pascal had been in prison since October 2019 after being abducted from Algiers by the American Military Contractor, BloedStone, who was working for the French government. During his capture, he had been dealt some harsh physical treatment by Commander Shamir Tehrani before being flown back to Marseille for interrogation. On the flight back, he told the BloedStone associate that he would have his revenge on her. A promise which helped motivate him to develop his current physical condition and protect himself against competitor gangs who had a grudge against the Martins. Ironically, he was lucky to be in prison at all. It was only because there was a falling out between the Americans, who wanted to keep him and the local French police that he was saved

from further punishment. The French insisted he be handed over to them rather than retained by BloedStone, who wanted to question him in some dark place about the death of one of their associates, Lavender Newton. No one in France wanted him extradited to Algiers and that included the Americans.

Upon landing, the cell doors opened at 11:30 am to allow him and his fellow inmates to have breakfast. They had about two hours before they had to be back in their cells. Then they would be locked up until dinner at around 4.30 pm, where they would have another couple of hours before bedtime and lights out. Darkness arrived early in the winter unless a prisoner was rich enough to purchase a prison torch and feed it with batteries.

On the way downstairs, they all ignored the guarded cell of the deceased prisoner, no one was surprised or even cared. He had only been there for ten days of a four-year sentence. He seemed unsettled, even though his father was on the top floor. The gruesome details, involving bedding being used as a ligature, would be given later by chatty guards.

For either meal, Pascal could go to the 'Tuckshop' and buy a limited range of food, similar to a local convenience store. Such purchases could be cooked in one of the many microwave ovens strategically located on all floors. Alternatively, he could join the poorer prisoners and queue up for the everyday meals, some of which were of questionable quality. Pascal usually bought food, he didn't have the money worries of many of his fellow inmates. Cash was supplied to him courtesy of his Marseille apartment caretaker, who drew it from a box of cash left in his keeping for such emergencies.

Without such a revenue stream, a convict would have to earn money. A cleaner would get a mere 2 euros a day. A cook could earn a whopping 30 euros a week. Pascal had plenty of money, but it was restricted to a usable pot of 1,000 euros. Such riches were enough to provide for every luxury, including hiring friends to do those little jobs that were needed from time to time. Apart from food, the main non-contraband purchase tended to be buying minutes for mobile phones. In theory, all the numbers had to be

rigorously checked and approved before use. However, in practice, most of the men spoke to whoever they wanted, including their business colleagues, many of whom were drug dealers.

Pascal had few external contacts, most of whom had disappeared one way or another. He used his telephone minutes as a form of cash alternative when needed. For other convicts, betting, fighting or doing favours were ways in which they could earn more telephone time. That or by using their bodies to satisfy others. A practice frowned upon by prison management but sometimes exploited by 'real' homosexuals in exchange for protection. Pascal had many friends inside, not only because he was a respected member of the Martin family but also because he had a seemingly endless supply of phone minutes. In the old days, cigarettes were currency, but that ended with the introduction of a complete ban on smoking and vaping, which caused many new prisoners weeks of 'cold turkey' pain. For the Martin Enforcer, the pain came in another form. He missed brewing quality coffee. For him, it was one of life's greatest pleasures. He craved it so much that he sometimes dreamed about making some.

After breakfast, Pascal took a stroll around the yard, speaking with his former colleagues and picking up information that might help him. After that, he had to return to his cell and wait to hear about the next planned attack on the medical suite. It cost him 100 euros, which he considered a bargain for ridding him of one Englishman. His only reservation, if he failed and Terry got loose, the English assassin would most likely hunt him down and shoot him when he least expected it. *But this attack can't fail,* he thought. *They must have learned what to do from their previous endeavours, surely!*

Chapter 4

Corsica, France. Visitors from the East

Stoyan and his men collected their weapons as scheduled. They hid them before heading into Bastia to try their luck at the nightclubs around Au Bout du Port, Saint-Florent. They had a good, if rowdy, time at the expense of the locals and holidaymakers. The next morning, feeling a little fragile, the Bulgarians struggled to get going and had to take an early pit stop for an espresso-powered breakfast. Once fuelled, they set off late on the D81 for their meeting. As the joint syndicate leader, the man believed he should be indulged for being late. Stoyan was sure that Ajax would have told Sylvain what the meeting was for and that the Frenchman was supposed to tell him the answers. That just left him deciding on the method for punishing the Frenchman and Lena, the woman who "screwed him up for months". Normally, he would have planned his maltreatment well in advance so he could tell his two companions in graphic detail what to expect. At that moment, his agenda was limited to the mode of questioning to discover what the two knew about, or perhaps did with, the Martins' coke and money. But Stoyan remained confident that the necessary manner of vengeance would come to him once he heard what they had to say. After all, he had dealt with dozens of criminals who had defied him and his brother.

More of a problem was what to do with the kidnapped females supposedly being held by the Frenchman. He wasn't sure how old they were. He usually preferred sexually experienced women of any race. He had no experience of intentionally raping or murdering under-eighteens. "After all, I'm not a paedo," he told his men when they asked him. *But in this case, if Baptiste had worn them in,* he thought. *I might make an exception. But that's for later. Now I must concentrate on the main event with Baptiste and Lena.*