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# **Dead Line**

Written by Chris Ewan

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# Dead Line

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For Jo, as always, and for Jessica,  
born during the writing of this book.

## Prologue

You're a specialist. This is the most important thing to remember. You have a unique set of skills and abilities. You have exactly the right experience for the task ahead of you. How many people in the world are capable of doing what you do? One hundred? Fifty? And how many of those people are as good as you? None. That's how many. Because you're more than just a specialist. You're *the* specialist. And that's how you're going to succeed.

You're going to begin by compiling a list of everything you'll need. The list will be comprehensive. Some might call it exhaustive but they're the types who'd make mistakes. You know, because their mistakes are what you feed off. They're what you've trained yourself to exploit over the years. You watch their moves and you identify their errors and you turn them to your advantage.

Plus, you're an analytical thinker. It's probably your greatest strength. Other people might buckle under the pressure of the situation. But not you. You always maintain your composure. It's something you pride yourself on, and why shouldn't you? Detachment isn't something that can easily be taught. People either have it or they don't. You have it. There's never been any doubt about that. And right now you need it like never before.

The list.

First, you'll need a vehicle. Not your personal vehicle. You can't afford to be traced, so you'll need something else entirely. An amateur might be tempted to steal something but auto theft poses certain risks you can't possibly indulge. So what you'll do is you'll travel some distance away from Marseilles and you'll buy a vehicle for cash. Crossing

a border would be best, but it adds complications you don't need, so you'll head north by bus for several hours. You'll walk to a scruffy dealership on the outskirts of Lyon or St Etienne. An independent place. The kind of outfit where the focus will be on your money and not on your face or your fake ID.

The exact vehicle you buy isn't important but it should be as unremarkable as possible. Instantly forgettable is the effect you're aiming for. The manufacturer will be French, naturally. No bright colours. No memorable decals or custom bodywork. Most crucial of all, it has to be reliable. You can't tolerate a breakdown of any description. So check the tyres. Lift the bonnet. Take it for a spin. Then hand over the necessary cash and drive to Vienne or Valence or Montélimar and find somewhere secluded to switch the plates for a set you've picked up from a supply outlet someplace else.

Next are firearms. You're going to need some. Your handgun is fine. It's untraceable. But you'll need something more. A shotgun is ideal. It packs the necessary visual impact. You have a friend who can help you with that. The fee is one you can easily cover. And really, what does money mean to you right now? It's no more or less irrelevant than everything else. The only thing that matters to you, the only thing worth concerning yourself with, is your assignment.

What else? A ski mask and gloves. Those are for certain. A torch. Pliers and a knife and maybe a hammer. They're distasteful but unavoidable. And plenty of restraints. Nothing complicated. Simple is best. Cuffs and ropes, for sure.

A remote location. That's item number four on your list. Somewhere you won't be disturbed or overheard. Somewhere your vehicle can be concealed. You'll need to scout around but you can't risk drawing attention to yourself. So get a detailed map and study it. Identify possible locations. But remember, you don't want to drive for too long once you have your target inside your vehicle. If something goes wrong – and you're not so arrogant as to think that it can't – then you need to minimise the amount of time you'll spend on the road.

Surveillance. This is the most vital consideration. You'll need some assistance. You can't risk being spotted or remembered, and the more you watch, the more you risk. Your friend can help you with this, too. He's already covered the basics but you need to drill down to the finer details. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your target's security? Where and when are they vulnerable? How can an opportunity best be exploited?

The list is growing. There's more still to come. You're building something dark and mean and intricate here. It needs to be completely squared away. You have to be able to lift it up and inspect every angle of it, every join, without the tiniest sliver of light sneaking through.

And just as your plan is developing, so you're evolving, too. You're changing in ways you never would have thought possible before. But that's acceptable to you. You're prepared to do whatever it takes. Anyone who found themselves in your situation would do what you have in mind if only they could. The sole difference is that you're capable of carrying it through.

Why?

Because you're the specialist. And that's how you're going to succeed.

I

## The Abduction



## Chapter One

Daniel Trent sensed a tremor in his finger. He was a patient man. It was an attribute he prided himself on. But even he had his limits. His denim shirt was wet at the collar, adhering to his back. His shirtsleeves were rolled past his elbows, exposing forearms slick with sweat. A tendon pulsed beneath his skin. There it was again – the temptation to drum his fingers.

Where were they?

Trent snatched up the tiny china cup in front of him. The residue of his second espresso was tepid and grainy. He swallowed. Grimaced. Set it aside.

The pavement café was jammed with customers. Tourists mostly. The German couple beside him were feasting on cheap bouillabaisse. The husband had spilled tomato and saffron broth on his beard. His wife, lips greasy with shellfish juices, slathered a rouille paste onto meagre croutons.

The waiter hadn't been back to check on Trent in a while but he wasn't offended. Could even understand the guy's reasoning. Not a lot of profit in a man drinking single espressos at this time of night. And Trent was giving off a restless, keyed-up vibe. His self-control was slipping. Patience running low.

Engine noise from the left.

Trent turned his head. Just like he'd turned it every time he'd heard a vehicle approach for the past half-hour. But this time was different. This time he saw exactly what he'd been waiting to see.

A black Mercedes saloon trundled along the street. The windows were tinted, the paint buffed to a liquid sheen. Most vehicles in

Marseilles were covered in a film of sand and dirt and dried salt water, but the Mercedes looked as if it had been cleaned late that afternoon. Probably got cleaned every afternoon, Trent guessed.

The Mercedes slowed until it was idling by the kerb, blocking the single-lane road as if it was parked in its own private driveway.

Sweat trickled down Trent's neck. His throat had closed up, as though unseen hands were choking him. He gulped moist air. Felt it bulge back there, then slide and scrape downwards.

He wedged a crumpled five-euro note beneath the sugar dispenser. Came close to upsetting it. He steadied the tableware, then pushed back his chair. He was tall and long-limbed. Had been gawky as a kid and still could be on occasion. His foot was hooked around the chair leg. The metal scraped and squealed on the concrete and he drew scowls from the German couple as he stumbled sideways and ducked out from beneath the burgundy canopy that overhung the café.

The paved square in front of the Opéra was bathed in a hazy yellow light from a set of ornate streetlamps. Floodlights bounced off the masonry of the theatre house and the red fabric banners promoting tonight's show – a performance by the Ballet National de Marseille.

The production was over and members of the audience were lingering outside. Men in dinner jackets smoked cigarettes and shook hands, speaking in low sardonic voices from the sides of their mouths. Women perspired in gauzy summer dresses, smiling tightly and clutching handbags to their waists as if they feared a violent mugging.

Trent loitered beside an abandoned scooter. Sweat pooled beneath his armpits and swamped his back. His breathing was shallow, the air warm and vaporous. It smelled of dust and heat and cooked seafood laced with boat diesel and brine from the Vieux Port.

The Mercedes didn't move.

Trent blinked wetly and tried to see how many men were inside. Sometimes it was two – a young chauffeur plus a bodyguard. Sometimes the bodyguard worked alone.

Amber hazards blinked on. The driver's door opened and a thickset

man in a charcoal suit and crisp white shirt stepped out. The bodyguard. A lucky break. No chauffeur tonight.

The bodyguard scanned his surroundings, a full 360, his attention snagging on Trent for just an instant before moving on. He took in the seedy bars, the fast food outlets, the rusting dumpsters overflowing with noxious waste, the unlit *epiceries* and *boulangeries* and *tabacs*, the scruffy apartment buildings with faded, crusty render and paint-flaked wooden shutters flung wide.

He was a squat, powerfully built guy. Early-to-mid-thirties with dark hair buzzed close to the scalp. Low forehead. Light stubble. His back was broad, his arms muscular. He had large, square hands, the fingers hooked and curled as if he were wearing boxing gloves.

Trent guessed the guy's suit had been tailored to emphasise his physique. The jacket sleeves were tight around his upper arms, the material bunched as if catching on his biceps.

He had an attentive, serious demeanour. He looked like a guy who lived and breathed his job. He shot his cuff and consulted his watch. Then he paced away through the crowds towards the lighted entrance of the Opéra, his square head swinging from left to right, probing for threats.

And then there they were. The pair of them. Exposed.

They'd stepped out through the glass doors between the stone colonnades before the bodyguard was close. A basic error. The type a guy with hostile intentions might exploit, if he felt so inclined.

Trent pressed his arm against his Beretta. It would be easy to reach under his shirt right now. He could march across the square and barge through the crowds. Fire in a controlled burst. Fifteen rounds, 9 mm calibre. More than ample to kill a man. Enough, probably, to get away from the scene.

He reached out to steady himself. The scooter rocked on its stand.

Jérôme Moreau crossed the square like he owned it. The guy oozed confidence. He radiated ego. Take an average person and show them footage of Moreau right now and what would they think? A movie star

emerging from the premiere of his latest film? A city politician on the rise?

He was sharply dressed. Velvet dinner jacket, pressed white shirt, silk bow tie and shoes as dark and lustrous as his waiting Mercedes. His grey hair was oiled and set in waves, his chin clean-shaven. He shielded his eyes with a raised hand, as if rearing back from the blaze of paparazzi bulbs.

Trent clenched his hands into fists and stared at Moreau hard. So hard he felt sure that he would sense it. But Moreau showed no awareness. Maybe he was too wrapped up in himself. Or maybe Trent appeared more composed than he felt. Perhaps he was the only one who could sense the fury coming off him, pulsing outwards, like sound waves from a tuning fork.

He swallowed thickly, then risked a glance at Moreau's wife. Not for the first time, the sight of her punched the air from his lungs.

This was the toughest part. Even thinking about it made his mouth dry as ash.

Stephanie Moreau was young, lithe and beautiful. She was short for a former ballet dancer, coming in somewhere around five foot five even in heels, but she had poise and balance and grace.

Tonight, she wore a silver dress that shimmered as it moved across the slim contours of her body. Her dark hair was swept to one side and loosely curled, exposing her delicate neck and shoulders. Her pale skin appeared almost translucent in the diffuse yellow light. Trent could see the outline of the collarbones beneath her skin, fragile as a bird's.

The bodyguard was alongside them now, ushering them through the parting crowds towards the Mercedes. He guided them into the back of the car, then opened the driver's door and shaped as if to slide in under the wheel.

He froze mid-way. Glanced towards the scooter once more.

But Trent was already gone.

\*

A network of one-way streets surrounded the Opéra. Parking was at a premium. Trent returned to his car, a brown Peugeot estate that was wedged into a tight space beneath the green neon glow of a *pharmacie* cross. He fumbled with his key in the ignition. Fired the gurgling engine and swung out into the road.

The interior of the Peugeot was hot and airless. He wound his window low and angled his head into the thermal breeze. A series of turns delivered him to the Quai Rive Neuve. Countless yachts and passenger ferries and fishing vessels were packed into the marina, forming a vast and shifting tangle of masts and rigging. The odour of seawater was strong.

The sleek Mercedes was up ahead, beyond a cream taxi, a motorbike and a grimy delivery truck. Trent pinched the sting of sweat from his eyes and squeezed the accelerator. The dark, shifting waters of the marina flickered by, alive with quivering reflections from streetlamps and headlamps and bar signs and apartment windows.

Half a kilometre more and Trent peeled off to the right, following the Mercedes round a sweeping bend into a tunnel. The swirling yammer of engines and tyres and trapped air was loud and urgent in his ears. He sealed his window and set the fans to MAX. No air conditioning. Detritus blitzed his face. The Peugeot had been parked beneath a sycamore tree for close to a week and fallen seedpods had worked their way inside the vents.

Fluorescent lights zipped by above Trent's head. Industrial fans twirled in hypnotic circles. His mind started to drift, lured by memories of driving through this tunnel before. Memories where he was not alone. Memories where he was laughing, even.

He thought of Aimée. How she'd insisted on playing a dumb game whenever they'd entered the tunnel together. The aim was to hold your breath until you emerged on the other side. It was impossible to do. Physically beyond them. Maybe a free diver would be capable of it. But not Trent. And not Aimée. The tunnel was too long, running under the quay, coming up far into Joliette.

Aimée had liked to pretend otherwise. She'd loved making out that she was still holding her breath long after Trent had quit. He'd tell her she was cheating and she'd shake her head and point to her swollen cheeks, her pursed lips. Her big brown eyes would implore him to believe her.

Then he'd reach across and pinch her nostrils and she'd spit air and bat his hand away and laugh her childish, breathless laugh. She'd pretend to be offended. Protest her innocence. Promise him she could really do it.

Until the next time. When she'd cheat all over again.

Except now he found it hard to believe there could be a next time.

Might never be.

His chin jerked upright and he cursed himself, wrenching the jagged visions from his mind. He crouched forwards over the steering wheel. He squinted hard at the back of the Mercedes. He locked onto its red and amber light cluster like a gambler staring at the gaudy drums of a dive-bar slot machine, willing his last desperate chance to come in.