



A JACK ROGAN MYSTERY

THE EMPRESS
HOLDS
THE KEY

8241

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AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The Empress Holds The Key

A disturbing, edge-of-your-seat historical mystery thriller

Jack Rogan Mysteries Book 1

Gabriel Farago

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To all the seekers
who strive to understand the past,
to help them make sense of the present,
and allow them to shape the future.

To Dori and Tibor for instilling in me a great love of reading and a sense of curiosity and
adventure,
and for having taught me to always keep an open mind,
and strive for excellence.

A WRITER'S JOURNEY ...

Becoming a writer is a long, and often tortuous journey, especially for a non-native speaker like myself; English is my third language. A special thank you must go to my wife Joan who, sitting next to me at university many years ago, taught me the many intricacies and often baffling nuances of this wonderful language. Without her encouragement, unwavering support, perseverance and guiding hand, *The Empress Holds the Key* would not have seen the light of day. It is therefore as much her book as it is mine.

Gabriel Farago

AUTHOR'S NOTE

We carefully removed the last stone blocking the entry to the burial chamber, and held our breath. Peering inside, we saw a large sarcophagus partially covered with sand. No other treasures – tomb robbers had probably seen to that centuries ago. Silent, we entered and approached the stone chest, its exquisite hieroglyphs whispering to us from the distant past.

Our professor pointed to the inscriptions on top of the broken lid, his hand shaking with excitement. Barely able to speak, he said they told stories of great battles, conquered lands and glory. It appeared the tomb belonged to a general close to the pharaoh. Our spirits soared; a discovery like this only comes along once.

After the excitement had died down, the Professor cleared his throat, a smile on his face. 'This isn't bad, guys, but don't get too carried away,' he said, pulling us back down to earth. 'What do you think would be the ultimate find?' he asked, throwing us a challenge.

I'm sure he was only teasing, but a heated debate erupted at once, the ensuing discussion continuing well into the evening as we waited for the boat to take us back across the Nile to Cairo.

At first there were many suggestions, but then, quite unexpectedly, we all agreed that one particular artefact, which had mysteriously disappeared from the pages of history a long time ago, would qualify for that distinction.

This was remarkable, because scholars from different parts of the world rarely agree on matters like this. However, on this occasion, all of us – Christians, Muslims, and Jews – had somehow come to share the same view.

It was an unforgettable moment; it turned into a moment of destiny and became the inspiration for this book.

*Gabriel Farago
Leura, Blue Mountains, Australia*

If we don't believe in something greater than ourselves,
we are destined to remain forever small.

Benjamin Krakowski

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PART I

WAR CRIMES

SWISS-GERMAN BORDER; NOVEMBER 1944

The major looked affectionately at the sleeping Doberman curled up on the seat beside him. Slowly, he took off his gloves, stroked the dog's shiny coat and then ran his fingers playfully along the open violin case resting on his knees.

After a while, he looked out the window and, recognising where they were, tapped his driver on the back. 'Stop the car and wait for the others. We're almost there.'

The driver slowed and pulled the powerful Mercedes to the side of the road. After switching off the engine, he unfolded a large map and began to look for the inconspicuous track he remembered leading down to the lake.

Meanwhile, the major turned and watched the armoured personnel carrier slowly crawling up the pass behind them. He pulled out his silver cigarette case engraved with a small swastika that Himmler had given him. *If Heinrich only knew what we'd just done!* he thought, *all hell would break loose.* By driving through the night and using only back roads, they'd managed to avoid patrols and roadblocks. Himmler, of all people, would know that leaving Auschwitz with two prisoners without the necessary permits wasn't easy, even for a member of the SS. And then there was the precious cargo ...

Benjamin Krakowski tried to shield his brother from the icy wind rocking the open truck. He put his arm around his brother's bony shoulders and pulled him towards his chest.

'Where do you think they're taking us?' asked his brother, staring up at the snow-covered peaks ahead of them.

'Shut up, David! Do you want them to beat us again – or worse?' whispered Benjamin. He glanced anxiously at the guards sitting on wooden crates in the back and squeezed his brother's arm.

'No,' replied David, huddling closer.

Fear could no longer keep Benjamin awake. Almost delirious from hunger and the numbing cold, he closed his eyes and drifted into a restless sleep his exhausted body craved so much. Unable to relax, he again heard his father beseeching him: 'Benjamin, listen carefully ... There isn't much time! Promise me you'll do exactly as I tell you ... You must finish what I've begun ... *You are the one* ... Do you understand? And

remember, *the Empress holds the key ...*’

‘I promise, father,’ murmured Benjamin. ‘Yes; the *Empress* holds the key ...’

The personnel carrier followed the black Mercedes down to the lake and stopped in front of a jetty.

‘Wake up, you lazy scum!’ shouted one of the guards, kicking Benjamin in the back. ‘Unload the crates. Move!’

One by one, the two young prisoners lifted the heavy wooden boxes off the truck and carried them across to the jetty.

‘And when you’re finished, start digging a trench over here,’ the guard yelled.

‘We’re digging our own graves,’ hissed David, driving his pick into the hard clay. ‘We’ve seen it all before. We *have* to make a run for it – now! Into that forest before it’s too late!’ he continued, pointing towards the pines with his chin. ‘Come!’

‘Are you *mad*?’ said Benjamin. ‘They’ll shoot us before we make it to the first tree.’

David ignored his brother’s warning and slowly worked his way towards the guard standing closest to the trench. Then, lifting his pick, he slammed the pointed end into the back of the guard’s knee. Taken by surprise, the screaming soldier lost his balance, dropped his gun, and fell against the crates, splitting one open. Three shiny gold bars tumbled unnoticed into the mud.

Benjamin froze. Instead of running after his brother, he stared at the soldier thrashing in agony on the ground in front of him.

Startled by the scream, the major looked across to the jetty. He unleashed his dog, raised his arm, and pointed to the prisoner running towards the forest. ‘*Arco* – there. Catch!’ he shouted.

Before the other guards had realised what had happened, David was lying face down in the mud. Pinned to the ground by the major’s Doberman on his back – fangs bared and snarling – he was certain he was about to be torn apart.

The major pointed to a dead tree. ‘Take him over there,’ he ordered. ‘Strip him!’

The angry guards ripped the threadbare prison rags from the boy’s thin frame. Terrified and shaking, David looked like a cornered animal as he tried in vain to cover his genitals with bleeding hands.

‘Now, string him up from the tree over there,’ shouted the major. ‘The way we saw the Ukrainians reward deserters – remember? That’ll teach him a lesson.’

‘Why don’t we use this instead?’ suggested one of the guards, pointing to an iron cross wedged into the rock behind the tree.

‘A crucifixion?’ said the major, laughing. ‘That *would* be most appropriate; he’s a Jew after all. Look, it’s too small, even for a miserable wretch like this – see? Pity.’

Suddenly, a motor boat materialised out of the mist and approached the jetty. A tall young man in a fur coat waved his slouch hat, jumped ashore, and hurried towards the major.

‘Is it all here?’ he asked.

‘See for yourself, Anton,’ replied the major. He pointed to the crates and embraced his friend.

Anton began to examine the markings on the lids by tracing the familiar German eagle with the tip of his finger. Satisfied, he turned towards the major. ‘Congratulations!’ he said. ‘I don’t know how you did it. Let’s get them on board. Quickly!’

The major opened the door of the Mercedes and lifted the violin case off the back seat.

‘Taking music lessons?’ teased Anton, smiling.

‘No. This has nothing to do with music. This is an instrument of history,’ the major replied gravely, patting the case. ‘Come, let’s go; they’ve almost finished loading the crates.’

The two friends hurried down the embankment and stopped in front of the dead tree. Despite the horrific beating, David was still alive. The major reached for his holster.

‘Hold it right there,’ said Anton. He pulled a camera out of his pocket and took a photo. ‘One for the family album?’ he added sarcastically.

The major pointed his Luger at David’s head. ‘Can you hear me?’ he demanded.

David nodded without opening his eyes.

‘You cannot run away from destiny,’ the major whispered calmly, and shot David in the temple. The virgin snow, turned crimson by the hot droplets of David’s splattered blood, began to weep.

When he turned around, the major saw Benjamin staring at him from across the trench. Their eyes locked and contempt met fear. Then, slowly, the major lifted his gun, took aim, and pulled the trigger. ‘Neither can you, Jew boy,’ he snarled, calmly slipping the Luger back into its holster.

‘Bury them,’ barked the major. ‘Heil Hitler!’ He hurried across the gangplank and saluted his men standing to attention by the jetty.

As soon as the powerful diesel engines had roared to life, Anton gave an order. Two sailors armed with machine guns stepped out of the wheelhouse and opened fire on the major’s men. Torn apart by the unexpected hail of bullets, the hapless men collapsed, their arms still raised in silent salute.

Anton looked at the major. ‘No witnesses – remember?’ he said with a shrug and climbed below deck.

Benjamin opened his eyes. Darkness. He quickly closed them again. Silence. Licking his lips, he tasted blood. Barely able to breathe in the confined space, he tried to move his aching limbs but couldn’t; something heavy was pressing on his back and shoulders. It was the arm of a dead soldier lying on top of him. Slowly, the numbness drained away and his whole body began to throb with pain. Flashes of memory returned: *Benjamin realised he wasn’t dead!*

Fear gave him strength. Slowly, he began to claw through the loose clay towards the top. Breathless and retching, he pushed his head out into the open and gasped for air.

The sleet hitting his face like icy needles revived him. He opened his mouth, a silent scream on his parched lips, then searched all around him, squinting through half-closed eyes into the blinding daylight, scanning the empty clearing. The soldiers were all gone, the crates had disappeared and there was no boat at the jetty. The burnt-out shells of the armoured truck and the Mercedes smouldered in the mist, filling the bracing cold air with an acrid stench of burnt rubber. Over the brooding lake the mountain fog hovered like a shroud. Benjamin cautiously turned his aching head, and began to look for his brother’s tree. It was just behind him, with part of a severed rope still tied to one of the branches.

‘David!’ Benjamin cried out. ‘Noooo.’ He covered his face with blood-stained hands, fell to his knees, and began to pray.

The thunderstorm blew in from the south, sending dark clouds racing across the night sky like a celestial pirate fleet raiding the stars. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning struck an old eucalypt; it split its trunk in half and set it on fire. The rugged sandstone cliffs trembled as the thunder roared across the dry valley. At first, the flames struggled to ignite the tough bark of the doomed tree. Soon however, nourished by a gust of wind, they formed a blazing ring around the base of the giant and began their deadly ascent towards its parched crown. Defeated, the burning trunk crashed to the forest floor, sending a cloud of lethal sparks dancing towards their next victim. The bushfire had begun.

Two Rural Fire Service volunteers, their eyes firmly fixed on the fire spreading through the gullies below, stood on an exposed escarpment high above the burning forest. They knew the real danger was always the wind, and the wind was picking up. The old timber cottage behind them stood directly in the path of the advancing blaze. Unless the wind changed direction, the fire would soon reach the cottage. A third volunteer – a young woman in sweaty yellow overalls – was kneeling on top of the roof. Frantically cleaning out the blocked gutters with her bare hands, she too was anxiously watching the fire.

The wind didn't change direction. The fire jumped across a waterfall and burst into a densely wooded gorge just below the cottage. Trapped in the narrow gorge, the wind intensified, funnelling the blaze upwards. As it reached the top of the escarpment, the firestorm roared out into the open and raced towards the cottage. Moments later, the cottage drowned in a sea of flames.

Jack Rogan raced along the motorway in his MG and was fast approaching the foothills of the Blue Mountains, a popular holiday retreat, 100 kilometres west of Sydney. He enjoyed driving fast, but not that morning. A familiar feeling began to claw at his empty stomach – danger. Chewing his bottom lip, Jack smiled; danger had a twin – excitement. Jack loved excitement. The bright morning in Sydney suddenly gave way to a gloomy twilight – yellow-red and foreboding of the bushfires that lay ahead. The sun had disappeared behind a giant mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke, and visibility was poor.

Large flakes of ash rained down from above, smudging the windscreen. Singed gum leaves carried along by the hot wind surged towards him like swarms of hungry locusts ready to attack. Jack switched on his headlights.

As he neared his destination, Jack carefully threaded his way through a convoy of fire engines and water tankers heading up the mountains and then suddenly stopped in front of a row of police cars blocking the road. Jack got out of the car, the smoke and intense heat making it difficult to breathe. The destruction ahead reminded him of a car bomb site he'd photographed in Kabul the year before. The smouldering tree trunks looked like the chimneys of a destroyed village buried under a carpet of powdery ash. *Accusing fingers pointing to angry gods who had forsaken the faithful*, thought Jack.

Jack walked up to a policeman and asked for the fire chief. The agitated policeman ordered him to get back into his car and leave the area. Jack's press ID didn't help. Neither did the baggy green shorts, crumpled t-shirt and thongs.

'It's all right, Officer, there's a way around the fire,' came a familiar voice from behind him. 'He can come with me.'

The policeman shrugged and turned away.

'Will!' Jack exclaimed, barely able to recognise his friend in his sooty yellow overalls and battered fire helmet. 'Sorry it took so long; I know you said it was urgent but the traffic was diabolical.'

'No worries. If we hurry, we might just get through,' said Will. He handed Jack a helmet and jacket, and pointed to a four-wheel drive with its engine running. 'Hop in. It'll get a little rough, I'm afraid. Shoes would have helped, mate,' he added, shaking his head. 'You'll never change.'

Will turned the car into a narrow fire trail leading into the bush. 'As long as the wind stays like this, we should make it,' he said, wiping his brow with a wet towel. 'One of our girls died in the firestorm this morning, just up the hill from here. Horrible; burnt beyond recognition. She was trying to save an old cottage. I've known her since she was a little nipper in kindergarten,' he added. 'Her father doesn't know yet. He's fighting the fire on the other side of the mountains and can't be reached. Poor bastard.'

'I'm sorry.'

'But that's not why I called you. It's what we found *under* her body you'll find

interesting,' said Will, barely missing a smouldering tree trunk.

'What is it?' asked Jack, frowning.

'Wait and see. We're almost there.'

A shiver raced down Jack's spine. Often the best stories found *him* in the most unlikely places. He was wondering if he was heading for just such a place.

What was left of the body of the young woman was covered with a wet tarpaulin. A group of dejected looking fire fighters stood next to it, staring into space – waiting.

'The police chopper's on its way,' said Will. He guided Jack through the smoking ruins of the cottage towards a brick chimney leaning precariously to one side – the only structure still standing. The corrugated iron roof had collapsed and all the walls had burnt to the ground.

'That's what we found when we moved the body,' said Will, pointing to a small green tin lying in the rubble next to the fireplace. 'I think it was hidden somewhere inside the chimney – that's why it hasn't buckled.' Will cleared away the ash next to the tin with the tip of his boot. 'We're supposed to leave everything just as we find it,' he continued, lowering his voice, 'but, well, you know how it is ... curiosity ...' he said, picking up the box and opening it. 'Here, have a look at this.'

Jack stared at a sepia photograph, slightly singed around the edges but otherwise undamaged.

'A bit brutal, wouldn't you say?' said Jack, holding up the picture. 'He's only a kid, for Christ's sake.'

Will pointed to the back of the photo. 'Look, there's a date here – November 1944.'

'Anything else in the box?' asked Jack.

'Yep. All this weird stuff here, look.'

'Interesting ...'

Jana Gonski peeled back the ivy, opened the iron gate, and walked up the moss-covered stone steps. Then she pressed the doorbell, and waited. She wasn't surprised when no-one answered. In one way, she was quite relieved. She hadn't seen the guy in years, and their parting had occurred under circumstances – she was sure – he'd prefer to forget. Taking a deep breath, Jana looked around: the terrace house appeared deserted. Crumpled envelopes – chewed around the edges by snails – bulged out of the letterbox. Several mouldy, rolled-up newspapers were rotting on the landing.

'I don't have to remind you how important this is,' she recalled her boss saying. 'The press is having a ball, the minister is screaming for answers and the Director of Public Prosecutions is breathing down my neck. Need I go on? As usual, the journalists seem to know a lot more than we do. We must get to the bottom of this – now. Do what you have to do, but do it fast – I need results!'

As the agent in charge of Special Projects Jana was used to pressure. She dealt almost exclusively with the sensitive and the unusual.

Jana was just about to leave when the door opened and a man in faded jeans, torn at the knees, and a striped pyjama top unbuttoned to the waist, squinted out at her.

'I can't stand getting up this early in the morning. What do you want?' he demanded, running his fingers through his unkempt hair.

'Still chasing that big story, Jack?'

'Jana?' asked Jack, shielding his eyes from the sun. 'Well, what a surprise! What have I done wrong this time?'

Jana laughed. 'You've done nothing wrong except not returning my calls,' she said. 'I've left several messages on your answering machine.'

'Is that a federal offence now?' he asked.

'Seriously, Jack, I want to talk to you about a dead fire fighter, a newspaper article, and a photograph.'

'You'd better come in,' he said. 'But I have to warn you, my cleaning lady took the week off ...'

'I can see ...' said Jana, smiling.

The tiny lounge room on the ground floor looked like it hadn't seen a cleaner for at least a year. A scratched coffee table was covered in empty beer cans, bottles and crushed milk cartons, and the sofa in front of the fireplace was barely visible under layers of old newspapers, magazines and various items of crumpled clothing. A lonely ironing board stood in the middle of the room with a basket full of limp washing nearby. Newspaper cuttings littered the floor.

'It's been, what, five years?' asked Jack, clearing a space on the sofa for Jana to sit down. 'I was just making coffee – would you like some?'

'Let me help you. Is this the way to the kitchen?' asked Jana, pointing to the back of the house.

'It is, but even I'm a little afraid to go in there just at the moment,' said Jack. 'You stay right here. And besides, I make excellent coffee ... remember?'

'Sure,' said Jana, crossing her legs and smiling at him.

'Poison,' said Jack, touching his nose with his finger.

'Beg your pardon?'

'Dior, you're wearing Dior's Poison. I hope it's not an omen.'

He's good, thought Jana, sitting down on the sofa.

She's obviously working out. She looks great for the wrong side of forty, thought Jack. Her simple black dress accentuated her trim, athletic body, and her short honey-blonde hair showed off her dark tan.

After a lot of clattering around and cursing, followed by a long silence, Jack swept into the room balancing a steaming coffee plunger and two mugs on a tray. He'd put on a fresh shirt and combed his hair, Jana noticed.

'When I take on an assignment, I often work through the night nowadays,' he said, pouring the coffee and searching the room in vain for a cigarette. 'I hate distractions. I haven't listened to my answering machine since my divorce last year. My ex and her lawyers used to call all the time and leave messages. Every time I called back, it cost me money. Then I just stopped listening,' he rambled on. 'It worked, you see. They don't bother me anymore.' Jack drained his mug of black coffee and sat down next to Jana.

'Single again?'

‘Sure am. So, what would you like to know?’ asked Jack.

‘Your article in last Sunday’s *Herald* ruffled a few feathers in Parliament ...’

‘That’s gratifying; I like my readers to show interest.’

‘Your pictures were rather provocative.’

‘Quite deliberately so; it was a shocking death.’

‘Surely your point wasn’t the death of the unfortunate woman, but where and how she died. “Whose property was this brave young volunteer trying to save? What is the meaning of the Nazi memorabilia found in the ruins of the house? Who is the SS officer in the photograph?”’ said Jana, quoting from the article.

‘Not bad. A little selective and out of context perhaps, but still impressive,’ Jack replied. ‘It’s just an interesting story to be read on a Sunday morning on the terrace with your latté and croissants, that’s all. In a week or so it’ll be forgotten. It’s always the way.’

‘Really? Then why are you working on a follow-up article?’

‘We are well informed.’

‘Your editor talked ...’

‘I should have known. The old fart could never resist a pretty face and a short skirt.’

‘Spoken like the true blue chauvinist you are. Honestly, you haven’t changed at all, Jack. In actual fact, my tools of trade are a little more sophisticated than that.’

‘You’re the one leaning on me,’ Jack replied, pointing to the door.

‘All right, all right. Truce please?’ said Jana, holding up her hands.

‘It’s your call.’

‘You seem convinced that there’s a connection between the officer in the photo and the owner of the cottage,’ said Jana, coming straight to the point. ‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Instinct.’

‘Instinct alone isn’t enough, you need proof.’

‘I’m aware of that, but in my line of work instinct is important.’

‘Let me think ... what was it last time? Accusing the Archbishop of paedophilia without sufficient evidence? I stopped you just in time, remember?’

Jack frowned, annoyed. ‘Thanks for reminding me; I was just wondering when you’d get around to that.’

Taking chances – often big ones – was part of Jack’s makeup. If it wasn’t risky, it

wasn't fun. If it wasn't fun, he lost interest. Jack was used to being in trouble.

Jana put her hand on his arm and smiled at him. 'It's okay. I think your instincts are right, by the way, this time.'

'And what makes you so sure?' Jack asked.

'Instinct,' she replied, and they both burst out laughing.

'Okay, we both agree instinct is important,' Jana continued, 'but we do need more. So what have you found out so far?'

'Why should I tell you?' asked Jack. 'If I remember correctly, last time I took you into my confidence, I almost got my balls cut off.'

'Oh yeah? I'd have thought a few little bruises to that tiny little ego of yours was preferable to a couple of years in the clink. Get over it, Jack!'

'Shit, here we go again ...' said Jack, shaking his head.

'You don't have to, but I think you will,' said Jana, changing tack.

'Am I that predictable?'

Jana shrugged. 'No. I think you will because of what I'm about to propose.'

'You certainly don't waste time do you?' countered Jack.

'I suggest we share information,' said Jana. 'If I come up with something worthwhile, you get more material for your article.'

'And you, what's in it for you?' asked Jack.

'I move a little closer to ... let's call it, my subject, so we both get what we want,' said Jana.

'What exactly are you investigating? The fiery death of a young volunteer? Come on ...' said Jack.

'That's a matter for the coroner.'

'My point exactly. What then?' asked Jack.

'My brief is wider than that,' said Jana.

'What are these Special Projects you're in charge of anyway?'

'I investigate ... sensitive matters ... usually involving politicians, judges, high-profile individuals, even police officers ...'

'Or possible war criminals?'

'Yes,' Jana conceded.

‘What, like Special Branch or Internal Affairs ...?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Sounds a bit cloak and dagger to me,’ said Jack, raising an eyebrow.

‘Of course there would have to be certain conditions about how you use the information I give you – understand?’

‘Bossy as usual,’ mumbled Jack.

‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing. I think you forgot something rather important.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Trust. It won’t work without trust ...’

‘You’re right,’ she agreed. ‘And trust has to be earned.’

‘Quite.’

‘About earning trust ...’ said Jana, reaching for her briefcase and taking out a silver ring, which she passed to Jack. ‘We found this near the fireplace in the cottage. I’m surprised you missed it. You’d been through everything else before the police arrived, right? What do you make of it?’

Jack took the ring and walked towards the window. Just as he reached it, the window exploded, splinters of glass whistling through the air like jagged missiles, one of them imbedding itself in Jack’s cheek, barely missing his eye. A house brick landed on the floor in front of him.

‘What on earth was that?’ cried Jana, jumping up and running towards Jack. Glancing out of the broken window she caught a glimpse of a boy pedalling away on a pushbike.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, I’m okay,’ said Jack, pulling the splinter out of his cheek and trying to stem the flow of blood with a handkerchief.

‘Let me have a look.’

‘It’s nothing, just a scratch.’

‘Jesus, Jack. You could have lost an eye. Still treading on the wrong toes?’

He shook his head. ‘Just street kids, leave it alone. I had a problem here the other night ...’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone vandalised my car. You know, scratches, smashed brake lights, slashed tyres, stuff like that. I asked around ...’

‘And?’

‘Nothing; forget it.’

‘Let me get this straight: someone throws a brick through your window in the middle of the day, barely missing your head, and you just want to forget it?’

‘Exactly.’

‘As you wish,’ said Jana, shaking her head.

Jack bent down, picked up the ring, and held it up to the light as if nothing had happened. ‘Well, well,’ he said after studying it for a while, ‘how extraordinary. This is a *Totenkopf* ring, the honour ring of the SS. Usually awarded personally by Himmler for special services for Reich and Fuehrer. It was extremely rare and highly prized.’

Jack proffered the ring to Jana. ‘It’s made of silver. Look, you can see the skull and crossbones and there are some runic symbols engraved on the band. It was manufactured by a firm in Munich – Otto Gars.’

‘I’m impressed,’ said Jana. ‘You’ve certainly done your homework on the SS.’

‘Sure have. My first assignment as a rookie journalist was tracking down an SS thug living in Queensland. You never forget your first assignment, especially one that went spectacularly wrong,’ replied Jack, laughing. ‘Have you checked the inside of the band? The inscriptions?’

‘Of course.’

‘The band should be engraved with the letters “S.lb”, which stands for *Seinen Lieben*, the date of presentation, a facsimile of Himmler’s signature, and most importantly ...’

‘The recipient’s name,’ interrupted Jana.

‘Well?’

‘See for yourself.’

‘Bummer! The name’s been chiselled out.’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘That would have been too easy, I suppose. In any case, this ring shouldn’t be here.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, it should either be on the left ring finger of the recipient, if he’s still alive that is,

or ...’

‘Or what?’

‘In the event of death, the ring should have been removed for preservation at Himmler’s castle at Wewelsburg in memory of the ring holder.’

‘Fascinating.’

‘You know, the rings of SS officers fallen in battle were kept at a special shrine at the castle. In 1944, Himmler ordered the rings to be sealed inside a mountain near Wewelsburg to prevent their capture by the advancing Allies. The rings have never been found.’

‘What a story.’

‘I think it’s my turn now,’ said Jack, handing back the ring. ‘Let’s go upstairs to my study. I want to show you something.’

‘How exciting, not etchings I hope,’ Jana joked, following Jack up the narrow stairs leading to the attic.

‘No. I only show my etchings to young chicks.’

‘Thanks, Jack.’

The study was tidy and well designed, with lots of light flooding in through a large dormer window facing the courtyard. ‘Welcome to the engine room,’ said Jack, pointing to a long work-bench crammed with computer screens, laser printers, a fax machine and an array of photographic equipment. Several large photographs were pinned to a whiteboard next to the window.

‘How come your study’s so tidy and the rest of the place is such a mess?’ said Jana, looking around.

‘Priorities. It still amazes me what you can do with computers these days,’ said Jack, ignoring her. ‘Let me show you what I’ve found out so far,’ he added, reaching for a laser torch and pointing it at one of the photographs on the whiteboard.

‘As you can see, this is an enlargement of the photo from the cottage. I took a close-up of it with my digital camera and enhanced it. This is it here. Let’s begin with the man in the uniform. Tell me what you see,’ Jack suggested.

‘I see a German officer wearing the uniform of the SS. Highly decorated, with a *Ritterkreuz* – a Knight’s Cross – right here.’ Jana pointed to the throat of the officer in the picture.

‘Rank?’

‘*Sturmbannfuehrer* – Major.’

‘Age?’

‘Young. Early thirties I’d say.’

‘Go on, how tall?’

‘Quite tall, but I’d have to guess of course ...’

‘I can tell you he’s at least five foot eleven inches,’ Jack explained.

‘How can you be so precise?’

‘Do you see this arm band?’ he asked, holding up another enlargement showing only the upper body of the officer. ‘This is the Adolf Hitler arm band on his cuff. It was worn only by members of the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler – Hitler’s bodyguard, the pride of the Waffen SS, the cream of the Aryan super race. They had to be at least five foot eleven to be eligible to join. Tall lads, as you would expect. Goose-stepping shorties just

wouldn't have been quite the same – right?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘This is interesting. Come, look at the hand holding the gun.’

‘He’s wearing a ring. This one you think?’ Jana asked, holding up the Totenkopf ring.

‘Looks like it. I didn’t notice it before. This ties in with the other contents of the box. I took photos of everything.’ Jack pointed to a group of smaller pictures on the board in front of them. ‘The most impressive item is the medal – the Ritterkreuz. See, the officer in the photo is wearing one just like it – here.’

Jana nodded.

‘It was awarded for acts of great courage,’ said Jack. ‘Now, what about the unfortunate boy. What do you see?’

‘I see a naked youth – about fifteen I’d say – hanging upside down from a tree branch with the rope or wire wound around his testicles. It’s the only thing holding him up. It’s horrific. Also, his hands are tied behind his back and his head is shaved. He’s frightfully thin. Look at his ribs,’ she said, and shuddered. ‘You can count them!’

‘What else?’

‘Well, there’s a gun pointed at his head, and a nasty Doberman,’ said Jana, tracing the outline of the large dog crouching on the ground next to the boy.

‘What about the geography?’

‘Alpine, I’d say. Stunning. Those mountains are massive and that’s heavy snow cover on top and pine forests down to the edge of a lake ... Austrian or Swiss perhaps? Rather large, judging by the size of the boat over here.’

‘Not bad,’ said Jack, clapping his hands in mock applause. ‘It’s a Swiss lake actually.’

‘Oh? How do you know that?’

‘The boat. Here, look. I’ve prepared several enlargements. Unfortunately I couldn’t disperse the fog to get a better image. Computers are good, but not that good – yet. That’s a powerful motor cruiser tied up at the jetty; fast, sleek, expensive. The sort of thing you’d expect to find moored in front of one of those exclusive hotels on a Swiss lake. And here’s the proof,’ he said, pointing to the stern of the boat.

‘A flag. But I can’t make out any pattern or design, it’s too blurred.’

‘Try this.’ Jack handed her another enlargement.

‘It’s a cross; the Swiss flag!’ Jana exclaimed, getting excited. ‘This is really quite something. I’ve told you before, you’re in the wrong business. You should be a sleuth.’

‘There’s more,’ said Jack. ‘The officer has something tucked under his arm. See?’ he said, pointing. ‘It’s an unusual shape. That’s what intrigued me.’

‘It’s too small and most of it is hidden. I can’t see what it is.’

‘Then try this, Inspector, it’s one of my more sophisticated tools of trade,’ said Jack, handing her a magnifying glass.

‘Amazing. It looks like a violin case.’

‘Precisely. Not exactly what you’d expect to find, is it? A gun in one hand and a violin case in the other. Quite a guy.’

‘You said it. Surely, there can’t be any more, I’m exhausted.’

‘Just one more item, and a fascinating one at that,’ Jack promised. ‘Here, look at the dog. Look at his collar. It’s wide and shiny, possibly made of some metal, and there are pointed studs and a leather band underneath.’

‘You’re right, it must be metal,’ Jana agreed, looking through the magnifying glass.

Jack was tempted to stroke her hair, but pulled back his hand. Standing so close to Jana, seeing the gentle curve of her neck, the tiny shell of her ear, smelling her familiar scent – musky and exciting – brought back memories of lazy Sunday mornings wickedly spent in bed a long time ago. But that was in another life, he reminded himself.

‘How unusual,’ said Jana. It’s engraved on the top here. You can just see the letters R–E–I. I wonder what it means.’

‘It could be initials, or the end of an inscription. A name perhaps, with the rest of the writing continuing on the other side of the dog’s neck,’ Jack suggested.

Jana walked to the window and looked down into the overgrown courtyard below. ‘Jack, have you been able to find out who owns the cottage, or rather what’s left of it?’ she asked.

‘That wasn’t hard; my title search is right here. The property is registered in the name of Wotan Holdings Pty Limited. The shareholders and directors are Eric and Heinrich Newman.’

‘Apparently, father and son. Sir Eric has agreed to see me; I have an appointment with him tomorrow at his home.’

‘It’s *Sir* Eric, is it?’ It was Jack’s turn to look impressed. ‘I don’t suppose I could come along?’ he asked hopefully.

‘That wouldn’t be such a good idea. It’ll be a formal police visit.’

Jack’s face sank.

‘Come on, Jack, don’t look so disappointed.’

‘Easy for you. Just flash a badge and walk straight in.’

‘I’ll tell you all about it after. We have a deal, remember?’

‘We do?’ Jack asked. ‘I didn’t know we’d agreed.’

‘Let me put it this way, if we have, you can come with me to visit Miss Abramowitz if you like. I’m going to see her now.’

‘And who might that be?’

‘She’s the lady who wrote to your editor claiming to have recognised the officer in the photograph,’ Jana replied casually. ‘The paper notified the police straight away. That’s really why I came to see you,’ she explained.

Jack looked thunderstruck. ‘The bastard didn’t tell me. You’re joking, surely?’

Jana opened her handbag and gave Jack a copy of the Abramowitz letter. He read it and hurried to the door.

‘Bloody hell, what are you waiting for?’ he reprimanded her, looking for his car keys.

‘What about the window?’

‘I’ll fix it later, let’s go!’

Jana enjoyed sitting next to Jack in his MG with the top down. It reminded her of carefree student days at the Police Academy. Looking relaxed, she let the wind play with her hair. Not even the heavy morning traffic crossing the Harbour Bridge seemed to bother her.

‘Great car, don’t you think?’ asked Jack, lovingly patting the dashboard like a proud first-wheels-teenager. ‘I guess I was lucky.’

‘How come?’

‘Dreadful marriage, great divorce. I ended up with this old thing and the boat, and my dear wife got the town house and the mortgage. She’s a stockbroker, you see, obsessed with real estate. Negative gearing, capital gain, all that stuff. That’s just not me, I’m afraid,’ he explained, enjoying the sun on his face and the closeness of the exciting woman sitting next to him.

‘Any children?’ Jana asked casually, looking down at the Opera House.

‘No, only careers. Oh yeah, and a cat. She took the cat, thank God! Travelling journalists and cats don’t mix. Nine lives just wouldn’t be enough.’ Jana began to laugh. ‘What about you?’ he asked.

‘I seem to have been spared domestic bliss. The Police Force isn’t exactly a good place for such things ...’

‘Single?’ Jana nodded. ‘Career girl, eh?’ said Jack, looking sideways at her.

‘Did you say girl?’

‘Beg your pardon, Ma’am. I bet you’re a good shot as well.’

‘The best. Now try to keep your eyes on the road.’

‘What’s that bastard doing?’ asked Jack, looking in the rear view mirror.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The car behind us ...’ Suddenly, a black four-wheel drive with tinted windows veered to the right and began to overtake. ‘Here he comes.’

‘Look out!’ shouted Jana. Jack could feel the heavy car on his right bump against the driver’s door and begin to push him off the road. ‘Jesus!’ Jack cried out and hit the brakes, almost smashing into the guardrail to his left. The black car, its number plate covered in mud, accelerated, changed lanes and disappeared into the traffic.

‘That was close,’ said Jack, turning to Jana. ‘Are you okay?’

‘This was no accident, Jack! Are you going to tell me what’s going on here?’ asked Jana, taking a deep breath.

‘I really don’t know.’

‘Sure. You must have pissed someone off big time, that’s all I can say. The vandalised car, the brick and now this? Come on, Jack, we both know this fits a pattern.’

‘I think it’s some kind of a warning ...’

‘Warning about what?’

Frowning, Jack bit his lip. ‘I’m not sure – honest.’

Jana didn’t believe him. ‘You keep ignoring this, you could end up in deep trouble and you know it.’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’

‘You haven’t learnt a thing, have you, Jack?’

‘The car has to go to the panel beater anyway, for the scratches – right? They can fix the door at the same time,’ Jack replied, grinning. Somehow, danger always seemed to follow Jack, Jana remembered. Yet somehow, he always got out of it – just. Lucky guy.

Bloody larrikin, thought Jana. ‘Have it your way. But remember, I did warn you,’ she said gravely.

‘Yes, Ma’am.’

‘And you can cut out the “Yes, Ma’am” crap.’

‘Yes ...’

Lena Abramowitz lived in a tiny flat in a neglected block of units in Rose Bay, a Sydney suburb popular with European immigrants of her background and generation. She spoke broken English with the heavy guttural accent of the Eastern European, and was difficult to understand.

‘Sit here, I bring cake,’ she said gruffly, after Jana had explained the purpose of their visit. The musty room was cluttered with all kinds of furniture that once must have graced a much larger home.

Display cabinets filled with heavy Bohemian crystal and porcelain figurines lined the walls. Dashing hussars on horseback and girls in rococo dresses smiled through the

smudged glass. An assortment of threadbare Persian rugs piled on top of each other covered the floor. A large old radio stood prominently in the middle of a badly scratched dining table covered in dust.

‘You say in your letter, Miss Abramowitz, that you recognised the man in the uniform,’ began Jana, handing the old lady a copy of the photograph. ‘What can you tell us about him?’

‘He came to *lager*, how you say? – camp, often, with his *hund*, dog – a big dog. He always came with *Kommandant*; he was important man, you know.’ Her face lit up. ‘I see him now. He like music. We had orchestra in *lager*, you know. They played when the trains arrived. So many people, so many *zuege* – trains – so many dead. *Schrecklich!*’ She paused and stared at the photograph in her lap. ‘*Wiener musik*, you know,’ she continued softly, her voice barely audible. ‘*Waltzer, polkas, Strauss*. He always spoke to musicians and asked for special *musik*.’ She paused again. ‘I work in *Canada* section sorting clothing of people from trains. Mountains of shoes, mountains of scarfs, gloves, *brillen*, ah, spectacles, you know.’ Her voice trailed off and the photograph fell to the floor.

‘He just stand there with his *hund* as the trains came into *lager* and listened to music; always *Wiener musik*. “Juden raus, schnell, schnell! Links, rechts!” I can hear it now; Jews get out! Women and children, right; men, left.’ She waved her thin bony arm about. When she let her arm fall back into her lap, Jana noticed a set of small, faded numbers tattooed into her forearm. For a while, the old lady just sat there with her eyes closed.

‘Where was this, Miss Abramowitz?’ Jack asked.

‘Auschwitz.’

‘Can you remember his name?’ asked Jack, holding his breath.

‘The *Kommandant* called him, Herr *Sturmbannfuehrer*, you know. I had a *zwilling*, a twin sister, Miriam, but she was not any longer with me then,’ continued the old lady, drifting away from the question. ‘She died after medical experiment. *Doktor Mengele, der teufel*, monster! She was only fifteen. We have many twins in Auschwitz, the doctors very interested in twins, you know. All that pain, all that pain.’ She paused again and her head sank slowly against the back of the chair.

‘Is there anything else about Herr *Sturmbannfuehrer* you can remember?’ Jana asked, bending over the old woman in the chair. There was no reply.

‘I think she’s fallen asleep, we better go,’ Jack suggested, standing up to leave.

‘The *hund*,’ replied the old woman softly, barely moving her lips. ‘He has shiny silver collar with writing on it. I can see it now.’ Jana looked at Jack staring at the woman in the chair.

‘Can you see the writing?’ Jana asked quietly. The old lady had slipped into a trance-like state, suspended, not quite awake, yet not quite asleep.

‘*Ja*, Miriam. Remember, we often joked about it, *Arbeit macht frei*.’

‘What did she say?’ Jack asked impatiently. ‘I couldn’t hear.’

‘She’s talking to her dead sister. *Arbeit macht frei*,’ Jana answered, her voice sounding hoarse. ‘The motto of Auschwitz – *work sets you free*, written on a dog’s collar, would you believe.’

‘Now, that’s what I call cynical.’

They left the flat without disturbing the sleeping old lady. Folding his lanky frame into the driver’s seat, Jack reached across to the glove box and took out a small notebook. ‘Old habit,’ he explained, jotting down a summary of their conversation with Miss Abramowitz. ‘Write it down straight away before your memory plays tricks on you, as my first editor used to say.’

Jack suggested lunch at a small seafood restaurant. ‘Everything she told us about Auschwitz was accurate, you know,’ he observed. ‘She may not have given us a name,’ continued Jack, ‘but she did provide a credible link between the man in the photo and Auschwitz. Assuming she didn’t really recognise the officer, she certainly recognised his dog, or rather that collar. She couldn’t possibly have noticed the engraving; we could barely see it with our magnifying glass in the enlargement.’ He took another sip of wine and reached for his notebook.

Jana looked dreamily across the sparkling harbour, enjoying the warm sunshine caressing her face. ‘Something puzzles me, Jack.’

‘Oh?’

‘Why are you so interested in all this ...? Aren’t wartime stories rather passé? This isn’t really your kind of stuff, is it?’

‘What makes you say that?’ Jack was watching her carefully from behind his dark sunglasses.

‘Well, you have quite a reputation for investigative journalism of a rather different kind.’

‘And what kind might that be?’

‘You know exactly what I mean. Religion, the Church, faith, history, and always with your particular twist. You like to provoke, isn’t that so? You’re the challenger, right?’ Jack did not reply. Instead, he topped up their glasses.

‘*A Day In The Life Of The Pope – The Da Vinci Code Phenomenon – The Mary Magdalene Conspiracy,*’ Jana rattled off the titles of some of his recent articles.

‘Not bad. More inside information from the short-skirt-loving editor of mine trying to keep you by his side a little bit longer, I bet,’ quipped Jack.

‘No, just a little research on an old rascal I used to know. Seriously, Jack, why this story – to be read on a Sunday morning with a latte and croissants, and then to be forgotten? You aren’t usually that flippant with your work, are you?’

‘Even journalists have to eat. Most purists are starving.’

‘Is it really that simple? Something tells me there has to be more ...’

Jack looked at her. He’d only told Jana enough about his own investigation to keep her involved. He hadn’t told her about one of life’s unexpected little coincidences. He hadn’t told her about what else he had found in the ashes of the cottage ...

‘It’s a good story, that’s all,’ Jack repeated casually, reaching for the bottle.

Jana wasn’t convinced. ‘Really? I wonder ...’ she mused, shaking her head. Despite the warmth of the sun, she suddenly felt quite cold.

Back in his attic study, Jack called one of his mates at the BBC in London. His friend had contacts in the Vatican Radio and had helped before. As he waited for his mate to come to the phone, Jack wrote three names on his notepad – Berenger Diderot, Marie Colbert and Francine Bijoux.

The Newman family residence stood concealed from the road by a green umbrella of tall Moreton Bay figs. The familiar summer-hum of cicadas near the fountain appeared particularly shrill and hypnotic in the stillness of the hot afternoon. Apart from a young man polishing a vintage Bentley parked under the trees, the expansive grounds were deserted. Aware of the searching eye of the CCTV camera trained on her from above, Jana took a deep breath before pressing the doorbell.

Inside the house it was pleasantly cool. As she followed the quietly spoken housekeeper down a long corridor, Jana recognised several of the paintings hanging on the walls. *Brett Whiteley, Norman Lindsay, Sidney Nolan*, she thought. *Not bad.*

The housekeeper stopped in front of a wood-panelled door and opened it. ‘Inspector Gonski, Sir Eric,’ she announced and stood aside. When Jana entered the room, three men seated on leather chesterfields by the fireplace stood up.

‘I’m Henry Voss, the family solicitor,’ said one of the men, politely extending his hand. ‘We spoke earlier. Let me introduce you, Inspector. Horst and Heinrich Newman,’ he continued, pointing to the two younger men standing next to him. An awkward silence followed.

‘And I am Eric Newman,’ Jana heard someone call out from behind. A tall, lean man with a striking head of white hair – neatly parted in the middle – walked slowly towards her. ‘You are obviously interested in art, Inspector. I noticed your eyes went straight to my friend over here. Right?’ he asked, running his hand playfully over the top of a large stone bust on a pedestal. ‘A little frightening, isn’t he?’ he continued without waiting for an answer. ‘And so he should be. He is a demon after all; the Hebrew demon, *Asmodeus.*’

‘How fascinating.’

‘Do you know who he is?’

‘No,’ replied Jana, shaking her head.

‘Protector of secrets and minder of hidden treasure.’ Newman motioned casually towards a mahogany sideboard. ‘Please, do sit down. A cool drink perhaps?’

How extraordinary, thought Jana. *He’s totally at ease and in complete control. And he’s trying to put me off balance.* Within moments, Newman had taken over. As he came

closer, Jana noticed that his eyes, behind a pair of small, gold-rimmed glasses, were still clear and ice blue. *Quite remarkable for a man of eighty-seven*, she thought. He shook her hand with a grip that was both firm and gentle. His hand was cold and dry and she found his touch unnerving. He spoke perfect English, with only the slightest hint of an accent occasionally betraying his foreign origin. Jana tried to resist his obvious charm. She did not want to be distracted by the easy, polished manner of this urbane man, or to be sidetracked by pleasantries or trivia.

‘You are mistaken, Sir Eric. I was actually looking at the photographs over here,’ Jana said, pointing to a group of photographs on top of the mantelpiece. ‘Photos can tell so much, don’t you think?’ She gave him her best smile. *So much for charm*, she thought. Jana opened her briefcase, took out an enhanced copy of the photograph showing the naked boy and the SS officer, and pushed it across the coffee table towards Newman. *And so much for pleasantries*, she thought, carefully observing the expression on his face.

‘You know of course why I’m here, Sir Eric,’ Jana said casually, coming straight to the point. ‘Have you seen this photo before?’

‘Only in last Sunday’s newspaper,’ Newman replied, without actually looking at the photograph. The expression on his face had changed; he appeared suddenly tense. The affable, debonair manner had vanished.

‘But it was found in your house. How do you suggest it got there?’

‘As I have just told you, Inspector, I saw it for the first time in the paper.’

‘I understand that you built the house back in the sixties as a holiday home for the family,’ Jana pressed on.

‘Yes, it was mainly for the children. You are obviously well informed. You will therefore be aware that it was rented out for many years after my children grew up. We had numerous tenants. You can check with my agent if you like.’

‘I see.’ Jana continued undeterred, reaching for her briefcase. ‘What about this, Sir Eric, do you recognise any of these items? This box was found under the body of the young woman who lost her life fighting the fire.’ Jana was tempted to say, *protecting your property*, but checked herself. She opened the box and emptied the contents onto the wooden tabletop in front of her. ‘A Ritterkreuz, a Totenkopf ring, insignia and buttons belonging to the uniform of a Sturmbannfuehrer – just like the one in the photo here –

and a cigarette case with an engraved swastika.'

'Fascinating. And you say all of this was found in our cottage? How odd.' Sir Eric picked up the silver cigarette case and turned to his sons. 'Have you seen this before?' he asked, tracing the small swastika with the tip of his finger. They glanced at it briefly and shook their heads. 'There, you have your answer, Inspector. As you can see, we cannot help you.' Newman put the cigarette case back on the coffee table and looked calmly at Jana. 'Is there anything else?'

'You have a beautiful home, Sir Eric,' Jana replied, changing the subject. She realised that somehow she had to get under the old man's guard. As time was running out, she decided to gamble. She was going to bait him. 'And such a lovely family,' she continued, pointing to the photographs on the mantelpiece. 'You said earlier that you built the cottage for your children. I presume that includes your daughter?' Jana asked, watching Newman carefully. The rift between Sir Eric and his high profile daughter was public knowledge; it had been dragged through the social gossip magazines only the year before. Newman sat up abruptly, as if prodded from behind, and turned towards Jana. A shadow of anger flashed across his face. It only lasted an instant, but Jana noticed and decided to press on.

'She doesn't appear to feature in any of the family snapshots over here, yet you have every reason to be proud of her. Wasn't it only last year that she received the Order of Australia for her work?'

'You appear to know a lot about my family as well, Inspector Gonski, I am flattered. But please tell me, what has all this to do with your inquiry?' Newman asked.

'Perhaps nothing at all,' Jana replied. *Two can play this game*, she thought. It was obvious that the interview could not progress much further. She put one of her business cards on the table next to the photograph and stood up. 'In case you do remember something, Sir Eric, please give me a call,' said Jana, with more than a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Newman frowned. 'Please do sit down, Inspector; I think it is time we stopped beating around the bush and put the *real* cards on the table,' he said frostily. It sounded more like a command than a request. His solicitor began to squirm uncomfortably in his seat and was about to say something, but Newman held up his hand. It was obvious who was in

control. His solicitor sat back and said nothing.

‘As you wish,’ Jana replied and sat down.

‘What you are really here to find out, Inspector, is whether the man in the photo next to the Jewish boy is me. Right?’ Jana did not reply. ‘You are really asking whether this Nazi honour ring – as you call it – and all these other curios allegedly found in our cottage, belong to me.’ Newman took off his glasses and began to polish the lenses with a white handkerchief. Jana was fascinated by the old man’s calculated performance. Newman put his glasses back on, leant slightly forward and looked directly at Jana.

‘The answer to both of your questions, Inspector Gonski, is no. No, I am not the man in the photo, and no, these things are not mine,’ he said in a quiet, yet almost threatening tone of voice. The air in the room felt suddenly hot and oppressive. Jana’s hands and neck began to perspire. She realised that this impeccably dressed old man sitting opposite her was both unpredictable and dangerous; a man who, if challenged or threatened, would instantly turn into a resourceful and vicious adversary. She also sensed she had been told a lie. Despite her discomfort, Jana held his gaze.

‘How do you know the boy in the photograph was Jewish? There was nothing in the article to suggest that,’ Jana said, looking directly into the old man’s ice-blue eyes. For a while Newman did not respond.

‘If you look carefully, Inspector, you will see that the boy has been circumcised. In Germany at the time, only Jews were circumcised.’

‘I must congratulate you, Sir Eric. You have remarkable powers of observation. You barely looked at the photograph here and the unfortunate boy’s private parts were masked in the paper.’ Newman just looked at her without saying another word. The meeting had obviously come to an end.

Jana walked towards the door and stopped in front of the bust of the demon Asmodeus. ‘One can only hope, Sir Eric, that the demon hasn’t lost his powers,’ Jana said, without turning around. ‘To guard secrets and protect hidden treasure, that is,’ she added quietly and left the room.

Arrogant bitch, thought Newman, a flash of anger clouding his eyes.

Jana reached for her mobile and dialled Jack's number. 'Where are you?' she asked. 'I can hear water.'

'Sailing. Hold on, I have to tack.' Jana could hear the tinkling of the sheet running through the steel block as the boat came about. 'That's better. The ferry came a little too close. How did it go?'

'Buy me a drink and I'll tell you.'

'That bad, eh? You're on. Hop in a cab and come to Watsons Bay. I'll pick you up at the wharf in half an hour. Have to go.' Jack's words almost drowned in a clatter of flapping sails and gurgling water.

Watsons Bay, a popular suburb located at the entry to Sydney Harbour, was teeming with tourists. Jana got out of the taxi and looked around: seeing Jack's familiar boat tied up at the end of the wharf conjured up memories of long balmy nights spent on the harbour.

'Permission to come on board,' she shouted, waving. Jana kicked off her shoes and jumped on board. Jack pointed to the tiller. 'Hold this,' he said, lowering the jib. 'Let's head back. There, thunder; could be a storm.' Jack looked up at the dark clouds rolling in from the south. The wind freshened and the temperature dropped rapidly. Draping his favourite old sailing jumper over Jana's shoulders, Jack took back the tiller and looked at her.

'Well, Sir Eric is an impressive man. It's hard to believe he's almost eighty-seven. Sharp, quick-witted, no Alzheimer's there, I can tell you! He was courteous, yet his politeness didn't feel genuine – quite the opposite, if you know what I mean.'

Jack nodded. 'What about his appearance? Any resemblance to the man in the photo?' he asked.

'He's certainly the right height and the correct age, but that's about all. The picture *is* more than fifty years old; appearances change. But there was something about his eyes ...' Jana stopped mid-sentence. 'It's difficult to articulate – something mocking, something cruel,' she explained. 'I can't be more specific I'm afraid; it's only a feeling. Yet, when I look at the man in the photo, I have the same feeling. Not very helpful, is it?'

‘On the contrary, first impressions are most valuable and often surprisingly accurate. Go on.’

‘Of course he denied all knowledge of the photo and the Nazi stuff, just as we expected. But the way he did it was quite extraordinary.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I think he was really telling me that of course he was the man in the picture, but that I would never know for sure and would never be able to prove it. It appeared quite deliberate, like a game. No, not a game; more like a challenge.’

When they tied the boat to the mooring, the first heavy raindrops began drumming against the deck. Soon, the raindrops turned to hail, making it difficult to row ashore in the small dinghy. By the time they reached the jetty, they were covered in ice-balls the size of marbles, and shivering.

‘Not a bad kitchen for a bachelor. How’s your cooking, nowadays?’ asked Jana, looking for a place to put down the wet paper bags filled with groceries.

‘Patience, and you’ll find out. How about something quick, spicy and Asian. A stir fry perhaps?’ Jack opened a bottle of wine and handed her a glass.

‘Promises, promises,’ Jana joked.

‘If you’re prepared to help, we could be eating in half an hour.’ Jack placed the wok on the gas stove and began to arrange his ingredients next to the chopping board. ‘I forgot, career women don’t cook, do they?’

‘Just give me a moment and I’ll surprise you. But I have to get out of these wet things first. May I borrow something of yours? And a quick shower perhaps?’

‘Be my guest. My entire wardrobe is at your disposal,’ Jack replied, pointing to the stairs with his glass.

‘Did you say wardrobe? Come on, Jack, you never had a wardrobe. Checked shirts and jeans and a couple of old jumpers – threadbare at the elbows – if I remember correctly, that’s about it. And of course, I almost forgot, that leather bomber jacket – right? You’ve still got it, I bet.’

‘You know me too well; piss off.’ Jack took another sip of wine and began to chop the

chillies.

When Jana returned wearing one of Jack's checked flannel shirts, thin strips of chicken were sizzling furiously in the wok, and the kitchen was filling with the aroma of frying onions and ginger. Jana noticed that Jack had almost finished the bottle. 'I was right,' she said. 'Your stuff belongs in a charity bin.'

'Stop whingeing. You obviously don't mind wearing it – see? First my favourite sailing jumper and now my shirt. What's next?' Jack asked, grinning.

'Do you mind?'

'Of course not. Wearing anything underneath?'

'I won't tell you.'

'Teaser!'

'Look who's talking.'

'Enough! Make yourself useful and chop something. There's lemongrass, then you can get to the coriander and a little more chilli.' Jack opened another bottle and watched Jana fumble with the chillies. He noticed that his shirt was a little too short to be entirely decent, yet long enough to tease his imagination. Her wet hair, combed straight back, accentuated her prominent cheekbones and the graceful arch of her neck. Her long legs, still flushed from the hot shower, had a soft, pinkish glow.

'Not like that! I thought I told you to chop the chillies, not destroy them,' Jack complained, shaking his head. 'What am I going to do with you?' Jana looked up, raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Jack walked over to her, took the knife out of her hand and kissed her on the back of the neck. Jana did not pull away; instead, she turned slowly around, opened her mouth just a little and began to lick her lips with the tip of her tongue. Putting her arms around his neck she lifted herself onto the kitchen table directly behind her.

'Any ideas?' she purred, her voice sounding seductively husky.

Jana switched on the bedside lamp and answered the phone. She recognised the tone of voice instantly; desk sergeants on night duty sound the same anywhere, especially at four o'clock in the morning.

'Inspector Gonski?'

'Yes.'

'You know Jack Rogan, the journalist – right?'

'Yes.' An eternity seemed to pass before the voice continued.

'There's been a burglary ...'

'Jack?' was all she could say. Her mouth went dry.

'He's been injured.'

'How bad ...?'

'He's on his way to hospital.'

'But I only left him a few hours ago.' Jana's voice sounded shrill.

'I'm sorry.'

Jack was in the operating theatre. The night nurse was tight-lipped and uncooperative. Even Jana's police ID was no help. She found waiting difficult at the best of times, but sitting in casualty early in the morning, next to bleeding drunks and incoherent druggies was almost unbearable. But worst of all was the uncertainty.

To calm herself, Jana began to read the fax she'd received from her research assistant the night before. It contained background information on Newman and his family.

Dr Erich Neumueller, (he changed his name by deed poll to Eric Newman in 1947), arrived in South Australia in December 1946 by boat from Genoa. There is a letter of introduction from a certain Monsignor Brandauer addressed to Bishop Honegger in Adelaide. His immigration to Australia was apparently arranged and sponsored by the Vatican. However, when I requisitioned his immigration papers to find out more about this, I came across something odd – classified information. I was denied access. I will try the Freedom of Information Act to get around this, but as you know, this will take some

time. In the interim, I have asked for his divorce file, which should tell us a little more. Until I receive that, I'm afraid this is all I have been able to come up with. Strange, isn't it ...?

'Inspector Gonski?' Jana looked up. 'The doctor will see you now,' the nurse said. A very tired looking young intern in a dark green operating gown was examining X-rays in the far corner of the brightly lit room.

'You're the investigating officer, I take it? I think we've saved his eye,' the doctor said casually before Jana could contradict him. 'He has some rather nasty injuries though,' he continued, 'there will be permanent scarring, here and here.' He pointed to the X-rays in front of him. 'He received a terrible beating; it's one of the worst I've seen for a long time. He had a bad fall as well and lost a lot of blood. There was considerable internal bleeding, several broken ribs, extensive bruising, abrasions; his face is a mess.' The doctor looked at his notes and rattled off the injuries like items on a shopping list. 'He's lucky to be alive. He could easily have broken his neck or his back during the fall. The alcohol didn't help either. You'll have my full report in the morning.'

'When can I see him?'

'Not for quite a while, I'm afraid, perhaps in a few hours when he comes out of the anaesthetic. Now, if you'll excuse me ...' The doctor reached for the pager in the top pocket of his gown and hurried out of the room.

Jana returned to the hospital just before noon and was shown to Jack's room. She had made many a hospital bedside visit during her career and thought she'd be well prepared for what was to come. She wasn't.

At first, she couldn't recognise him at all. The top of his head, the left eye and part of his face were completely covered in bandages. A ring of dark bruises circled his other eye, which was bloodshot and almost closed. Through a small gap between the bandages, Jana could see that his head had been shaved. Several plastic tubes protruded from his nose and various monitoring devices were connected to his right arm. A fine line of small, neat, zipper-like stitches ran from the corner of his mouth along the jaw to his ear.

When Jana walked towards the bed, Jack winked at her with his good eye, a hint of a

smile creasing his mouth.

‘Can he talk?’ Jana asked the nurse.

‘Yes, he’s actually quite alert; aren’t you, handsome?’ the nurse said, giving Jack’s good hand a gentle squeeze before leaving the room.

‘That was some dessert last night,’ Jack whispered, moving his lips slowly and carefully. ‘Look at me.’ He managed to raise his hands a little. ‘Next time, I want a smaller helping.’ Jana laughed and wiped a few tears from her cheeks. Jack’s unexpected humour had broken the dark spell of the awkward moment.

‘What on earth happened?’ Jana asked, regaining her composure.

‘I really don’t remember too much, I’m afraid. I fell asleep in the chair. Something woke me. I think it was a noise coming from upstairs. At first I thought it was you, but you’d already gone. Apart from the light in the kitchen, the house was in total darkness. That should have alerted me, I guess, but then I was still half asleep and not thinking straight. I wasn’t entirely sober either ...’

‘Five more minutes,’ said the nurse on her way past. ‘I have to change the dressing.’

‘The rest happened very fast,’ Jack continued. ‘He was waiting for me at the top of the stairs.’

‘Who?’

‘My mystery sparring partner.’ Jack closed his eye. ‘He came at me fast, like a cat, and hit me several times in the stomach. I think I fell against the handrail. Then he hit me again, hard. My knees gave way and I went down. I remember this tremendous blow to the side of my face here.’ Jack pointed to his jaw and traced the stiches. ‘The last thing I remember is falling backwards down the stairs. He must have kicked me in the head, I suppose.’

‘Is that all?’ As soon as she said it, Jana realised just how foolish this sounded.

‘I’ll try to do better next time, promise.’

‘Sorry. But why? Did he say anything?’

For a while, Jack did not respond. ‘Yeah, I think he did say something ...’

‘Can you remember what? Come on Jack, this is important.’

‘Something to do with the past. Digging up the past, or something. Digging up the past

can ...' As the medication wore off, the pain returned and Jack's whole body began to throb. Exhausted, he closed his eye. Ignoring the pain, he tried to recall the man at the top of the stairs. '*... can make the present ... very ... dangerous.* Yeah, that's it.' The nurse returned with fresh bandages and began to adjust Jack's drip.

'What would he have meant by that?' Jana asked.

'I think he was warning me.'

'Warning you? About what?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Newman? The article perhaps?'

'Possibly.'

'It's all related, isn't it? The car, the brick, now this.'

'Yep ...'

'What was he doing upstairs?'

'Looking for something. He came out of my study. This was no ordinary burglar, that's for sure. This guy was a pro. He knew exactly what he was doing.'

'What do you think he was looking for?'

'Something to do with my work, I'd say. But the strange thing is ...'

'What?'

'I didn't call the ambulance. I was unconscious.'

'You think he did?'

'Who else?' Gasping for air, Jack fell back against the pillow.

'You never learn, do you?' Jana said, clenching her fist in frustration. 'You ignored the signs, now look at yourself!'

'That's enough!' the nurse said curtly. 'I think it's best if you go.' She pushed Jana aside, pulled the curtain around Jack's bed and began to change his dressing.

‘Mr Farim is in reception, shall I show him in?’ asked Horst’s secretary.

‘Has my father arrived?’

‘Yes, he’s waiting in the boardroom with your brother.’

Newman only came into the office on special occasions and left the day-to-day running of the family business to his sons. However, he still insisted on being consulted regarding all major decisions affecting Newmans Colonial Bank. After all, he was the founder. On matters of real importance, he had the final say.

For the past two weeks, Horst had been working on a business venture with great potential. The unique proposal had been put to him recently in London by one of his father’s art dealers.

‘Thank you for coming all this way just to see me, Mr Farim,’ Newman said affably, extending his hand. ‘My son would have told you, I rarely travel these days.’ Abdullah Farim bowed politely and shook hands. He was a stocky, broad-shouldered man of middle years with thick, oily, blue-black hair combed straight back.

‘It’s been a pleasure to come to your beautiful city. I can see why you are reluctant to leave it,’ Farim replied in perfect English. He spoke softly, with the melodious accent of the well-educated Arab.

‘I have heard a great deal about you, Mr Farim,’ continued Newman, well aware of the polite, circuitous exchanges that were expected before it was considered proper to turn to the subject of real interest. Newman had dealt with Arabs before and was familiar with their customs. Farim recognised this immediately and relaxed a bit. However, his dark eyes, always restless and alert, never smiled.

‘I understand that you wish to put a business proposal to us, Mr Farim,’ began Newman after his guest had finished his second tiny cup of strong, Turkish coffee.

‘Quite so. May I speak frankly?’ asked Farim, slowly stroking the pointed beard framing his narrow face.

‘Please do,’ replied Newman, ‘it is the best way.’ He watched Farim carefully.

‘I represent a small group of Egyptian patriots who believe that their country is heading

in the wrong direction and wish to rectify this lamentable situation.’ Smiling, Farim paused. He wanted to give his words time to have the desired effect. ‘In order to achieve this,’ he continued, ‘my principals wish to purchase certain merchandise ...’

Newman understood exactly what Farim was telling him. Farim was really saying that he was the agent for a group of Islamic fanatics who were about to embark on a campaign of terror to force the government of their country to alter its politics.

‘We are financiers, not merchants, Mr Farim,’ Newman pointed out quietly. ‘I cannot see how we can possibly be of assistance to you.’

‘Quite so, but it is a financier we seek. A financier with certain – shall I say – inclinations and connections. In short, a financier just like you.’ The calm, almost infuriating smile did not leave Farim’s face. However, the tiny beads of perspiration on his brow and the eyes darting nervously around the room divulged his anxiety.

‘You speak in riddles, Mr Farim. What is it you want from us?’

‘We have heard that you have participated in similar transactions before, Sir Eric.’ Farim paused and reached for a glass of water on the table in front of him. ‘In Kampuchea and Sri Lanka, for instance, and more recently in Ethiopia ... financing the purchase of certain sensitive goods in ... rather creative ways,’ he continued, haltingly feeling his way. ‘And that you are well connected with the Russians,’ he added, lowering his voice.

‘I think what Mr Farim is trying to say,’ Horst cut in, coming to Farim’s assistance, ‘is that we may be able to arrange the purchase of certain merchandise of a military nature.’

‘Precisely,’ Farim agreed, nodding gratefully.

‘I am intrigued, Mr Farim. There are many financiers much closer to home and much more experienced in matters of this kind than our small bank, yet you have travelled halfway around the world to talk to us. Why?’

‘The answer, Sir Eric, lies in the unique nature of the proposal I have been instructed to put to you,’ Farim replied, gaining confidence. ‘Let me come straight to the point: My principals are simple people of the desert with no access to the amount of Western currency that would normally be required to finance a purchase like this. However, they have the means to pay *in kind* – and rather handsomely too, I might add – just like the Khmer Rouge.’ Farim was, Sir Eric thought, clearly well informed about the family’s

past dealings and it appeared the latest proposal was similar.

‘How?’

Farim sensed Newman’s interest and took his time. ‘With antiquities,’ he said at last. The expression on Newman’s face told him he had chosen the correct approach. Encouraged, he pressed on. ‘As you know, the ancient sands of Egypt still hold many treasures and my principals have – shall we say – ready access to their heritage.’

‘Are you suggesting that we provide you with arms in return for antiquities?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Where’s the profit?’

‘I admire your candour, Sir Eric,’ Farim said, stroking his beard. ‘We propose to sell the antiquities to you for a quarter of their market value. My agents tell me you are very well connected in the art world and would have little difficulty finding willing buyers. Needless to say, how, and for how much you sell the items, is of course entirely a matter for you.’ Farim made an expansive gesture with his right hand. ‘And besides, I understand you are quite a connoisseur yourself,’ he added cunningly, ‘who likes to keep some of the best pieces for his own collection.’

‘What about the arms? How do you suggest we agree on price there?’

‘We will pay market price. That shouldn’t be too difficult to establish,’ Farim replied without hesitation. ‘I understand there is some sort of black market price list for such things.’ Farim had done his homework.

The proposal was both ingenious and simple. It had its risks, but that was to be expected. No risk, no profit; Newman understood that. A few years earlier he would have embraced the deal without hesitation, but times had changed.

‘I have to disappoint you, Mr Farim, you have knocked on the wrong door I am afraid. Our bank is not in a position to assist you,’ Newman said sternly.

Horst began to fidget in his chair. ‘But shouldn’t we at least ...’ he interjected. Newman silenced his son by raising his hand without looking at him and stood up. The meeting was over.

‘As you wish,’ Farim said, bowing politely towards his host. It was the reply he had expected. It was time to bait the hook. ‘But before I leave, there is one more matter ... I almost forgot, how foolish of me,’ Farim added smoothly. ‘Something I’m sure you will

find most interesting ...’

‘And what might that be?’ Newman asked.

‘I don’t quite know how to put this. I hope you will not misunderstand ... I have strict instructions from my principals ...’

‘Please, Mr Farim, try to get to the point,’ Newman interrupted impatiently.

‘To tell you ... but only you ... privately that is ...’ Farim continued haltingly.

‘Really! Come now, let us not play games. Whatever it is you want to tell me you can tell me in front of my sons. We don’t have any secrets here.’

‘I do apologise. I didn’t mean to offend you, but as I said before, my instructions ... I cannot ... Please understand this is not my decision.’ Farim stroked his beard one more time and a troubled look clouded his face.

‘In that case, Mr Farim, I would rather not know. Horst, would you please show Mr Farim out,’ Newman said curtly, annoyed by Farim’s persistence.

‘This is most regrettable,’ Farim said casually, following Horst to the door. ‘I believe you have been looking for information about *Armand de Blanquefort* for a long time.’

Newman tried to get up and almost knocked over the glass of water in front of him. ‘What did you say?’ he demanded. Farim stopped at the door and slowly turned around. He was smiling again.

‘Armand de Blanquefort – the Templar – in Egypt,’ Farim answered calmly.

‘Sit down, Mr Farim. Horst, Heinrich, please leave us.’

‘Good evening, Horst,’ said the housekeeper, ‘your father’s waiting in the study.’

‘I am curious,’ Newman said, adjusting his dressing gown. ‘You told me it was urgent.’

‘It is ...’

‘Well?’

‘I don’t quite know how to tell you this ...’ Horst began. ‘I did something foolish the other day, something I know you won’t approve of.’ Newman walked to the sideboard and poured two whiskies. ‘I arranged a ... um, well ... a search, yes a search of ...’

‘You sound just like our Mr Farim this morning. Do try to get to the point. Here, have this, it might help.’ Newman handed Horst a scotch.

‘That journalist’s house – you know that chap Rogan ...’ Horst gulped down his drink. Newman looked at him without touching his glass. ‘There’s more, I’m afraid. Can I have another one?’

‘Help yourself.’

‘I just wanted to find out what he knew ... with the float coming up, you see, and teach him a lesson.’

‘What kind of lesson?’

‘You know, persuade him to drop the story, make him see sense ...’

‘Sense? Let me get this straight. Are you telling me that you hired someone to break into the journalist’s home, search the house, and rough him up a little to make him see sense?’ Horst nodded sheepishly, and gulped down his second scotch.

‘I know it sounds bad.’

‘You cannot be serious. Who did you use?’

‘Cramer.’ *At least that was good news*, thought Newman. Cramer was a Vietnam veteran turned private investigator who could be trusted.

‘You must have been out of your mind. Do you realise what this could mean? Do you? If this is in some way linked to us, and that inspector, that crazy policewoman, gets wind of it ...’ hissed Newman.

‘Not a chance!’ protested Horst. ‘You know Cramer, we can rely on him.’ Horst did not mention Rogan’s injuries and hospitalisation.

‘Up to a point. You know what really puzzles me?’

‘What?’

‘Why you’re telling me all this now? I know you Horst, this is not like you. Why tell me at all?’

‘Why? Because of this,’ Horst replied, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out an envelope. ‘Cramer found this in the journalist’s study next to the photo the policewoman showed us here yesterday.’ Horst opened the envelope and handed a badly damaged black and white photograph to his father.

Newman put down his glass and held the photo under the light of the desk lamp. He examined it for a long time without saying anything, turned it over and read what was left of the singed inscription on the back, ‘Montse ...’

‘And this was apparently pinned to the photo,’ Horst explained, handing his father a piece of paper. Three names were written on it – Berenger Diderot, Marie Colbert and Francine Bijoux – and a notation underlined in red: Newman in Montsegur?

Newman paled.

‘Obviously the journalist thinks this is you,’ said Horst, pointing to the officer in the photograph. ‘I thought you should know ...’

‘Can I keep this?’

‘Certainly.’

Looking at the photo on his desk with his back to his son, Newman said, ‘Now, listen carefully. This whole woeful episode must go no further, is that clear? You will not discuss this with anyone, and you will promise me not to do anything without consulting me first, understood?’

‘Absolutely. Whatever you say. I was only trying to help,’ Horst said lamely, relieved to be getting off so lightly. ‘There’s something else you should know.’

‘You have more?’

‘Cramer saw that policewoman and the journalist – together – at his home last night. Apparently they were rather intimate ... you know ... on the kitchen table ... Cramer took some photos. I haven’t seen them yet, but ...’

‘For heaven’s sake Horst, this is not a divorce case,’ Newman interrupted impatiently.

‘I suppose Cramer just couldn’t help himself. He’s used to investigating infidelities.’

You never know, the pictures could come in useful one day ...’

‘Perhaps. But not now. Have you spoken to Farim?’ Newman asked, changing the subject.

‘Yes, he was obviously pleased with your decision. He’s making arrangements for the first delivery straight away. It should only be a matter of a week or so.’

‘Good. The sooner we know where we stand, the better. Now, let’s get some sleep, shall we? It has been a long day.’ Newman walked to the front door with Horst.

‘Why did you change your mind?’ Horst asked, stepping outside into the cool night. ‘What did Farim tell you? If I’m going to be dealing with him, I think I should know.’ Newman looked at his son. Horst was right; sooner or later he had to know. This was as good a time as any.

‘What I am about to tell you will remain strictly between us, is that clear? That means not even telling your brother.’

‘Absolutely, you can rely on me.’ Horst would have gladly crawled over broken glass for an opportunity to be taken into his father’s confidence.

‘Farim offered me something I’ve been searching for ... for a long time.’

‘What?’

‘Information about a warrior-monk, one of the Knights Templar,’ Newman explained.

‘What information?’

‘Proof that the Templars travelled through Egypt in the fourteenth century.’

‘Are you serious? What kind of proof?’

‘A dagger found in Egypt, which once belonged to the knight ... and something else ...’

‘You changed your mind because of an old dagger?’ interrupted Horst, shaking his head. ‘Why?’

‘Because ... of a quest begun a long time ago ... and a pact made between friends. There is more, a lot more ...’ Newman started to explain but quickly checked himself. ‘I’ll tell you about it another time. Good night, Horst,’ Newman replied curtly and closed the door.

Newman returned to his study and looked at the photograph of the young officer standing in front of the castle tower. Why had Horst arranged that clumsy burglary and turned up

this old snapshot in the process? Newman began to smile. Another sign? A pointer perhaps, or something more?

He opened the top drawer of his desk, took out a magnifying glass and the small sheet of paper Farim had given him that afternoon. It was a photocopy of a single page written in French. The writing had faded but was still legible.

'These are, I believe, the last words I will be able to record before our enemies overwhelm us. We are surrounded, escape is impossible,' he began to read, running his finger slowly along the two lines. The rest of the text, except for the signature, had been masked.

But the name and date at the bottom of the page – Armand de Blanquefort – was the item of real interest. Newman examined the signature through the magnifying glass and carefully traced each letter. Forgery seemed unlikely.

How extraordinary, he thought, that after almost half a century of futile, painstaking search, Blanquefort should find him, virtually on the same day the Abbé Diderot had reappeared out of the past. Newman did not believe in coincidences, only destiny.

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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