

Chapter 1

THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER

Pablo de Silva, ex-CIA agent, awoke from the restless sleep of a man on the run. Had he heard a noise somewhere outside his farmhouse? Intel operatives had found his hideaway to kidnap him back to his former boss? Terrorists, avenging the killing of their leader, had tracked him down? Or a jealous husband set on murdering his wife who had fled his beatings and who lay just as uneasily beside him.

"Qu'est-ce que c'est?" she asked in a whisper. What is it?

He whispered back, *"Je ne sais pas."* I don't know, and he put a finger to her lips. He listened a moment longer in the absolute stillness of the country night, trying to place the sound. After a moment longer, sure now he had heard something, he patted her warm naked thigh; stay here, his intimate gesture implied.

He leaped from their bed and tiptoed to the room's threshold. A dash across the darkened living room, and he stood at one of the two windows that overlooked the dirt drive. He knelt, feeling the cold wooden floor on his knees, and, nudging apart the curtains, peered out.

Squinting past the crack in the partly opened wooden shutters, he saw nothing except the thick blackness of night. He heard only the same sound that kept him tense, a mechanical rattle. It came from a car, he saw at last, headlights out, its menacing silhouette looming closer to the end of his farmhouse's drive. He realized they didn't have time to flee or for him to search for his 32 cal revolver.

"It's Robert, I know it is. He'll kill us both, Pablo."

Pablo glanced over his shoulder. "Stay in our bedroom, Gabriella."

"He's that kind of husband. He's crazy with jealousy."

"Just do as I say, dammit, and lock the door." Pablo peeked out through the curtains again, ending further discussion. Only one car, not several. Parked about ten feet from the stone steps leading to his front door. Three men in silhouette in the car; a fourth in darkened outline, above average in height, stepping out. Four men in one vehicle, not a convoy bringing a snatch or kill team. More than likely Gabriella's husband with his armed investigators had somehow found them out.

The man passed in front of several cypress trees bordering the drive, and Pablo silently cursed losing sight of him. He pressed his ear against the paneled oak wall, straining to hear through the thick wood. "I'll do the front," the man called out to his companions. "You guys

check around back. The barn especially. Search everywhere." Or did he say, "Search for that pair?" Pablo pressed his ear hard against the wall.

"You sure we got the right farmhouse?" an accomplice, younger sounding, asked. "With all these weeds, the place looks pretty abandoned."

"It's not abandoned, trust me. It's exactly where someone wily would hide out." He paused, muttering about the damn cold and the damn mud. In that moment Pablo believed he had heard that soft voice before. Then saw he had forgotten to turn the locks, and his thoughts were on the impending attack.

A heavy tread, heel, toe, heel, toe, now inches from the front door. A man not afraid to make his presence known especially with backup. The intruder nudged the front door open, waited a moment as though appraising the darkened inside for any unpleasant surprises before chancing a foot in. In the near darkness Pablo heard something uttered, but the intruder was now fully inside the living room. He threw the man against the oak panel wall. He jerked back his own arm to ram his palm up into the intruder's chin to snap his neck.

The man thrust an arm in front of his face to block the blow. "Hey, stop, wait! Don't. It's me for fuck's sake, Stuart."

A slice of light from the bedroom opposite the living room caught the man's craggy, lined face and the mass of unkempt brown hair. "Bishop?" Pablo heard a metallic click. He looked sharply over to the bedroom doorway. "No, no, no, don't shoot. It's not your husband. I know him." He released his grip on Stuart's blazer. "Christ man, why the hell didn't you call out?" He flicked on the row of brass ceiling lamps to be sure of the man's identity.

"You must have been too keyed up and not heard me. Get a phone, so I can call next time and avoid getting killed." He sagged against the wall, a hand over his chest as though to catch his breath, while he closed his eyes.

"You alright?"

Stuart, his eyes still closed, managed a slight nod. "Yeah, yeah, sure, don't sweat it."

"You certainly are."

"Just give me a minute, will you. You gave me the scare of my life. I'd forgotten how quick you are." He fluttered his eyes open after a further moment, inhaled deeply before pushing himself upright, and extending a hand in greeting. "There now, back among the living." He swung back and forth the front door, its undersurface scraping against the wooden floor. "Half the world's major cops and intel boys want Mr. Man-on-the-Run dead or alive, and you leave a door unlocked? You're getting pretty careless in your middle age."

"I must have been tired, when I returned from hiking and forgot."

"Shame on you, Pablo. With what you've been through, you should know better." Stuart glanced out beyond the front door to the dark and gave a flick of his head. "Guys, I found him. Come on in."

Two men in overcoats, one barrel chested and with bulldog jowls, the other sharp faced and hollow cheeked, trotted heavy booted up the steps into the living room, leaving muddy foot prints in their wake. Both had short hair, cut military style. Stuart didn't introduce them; neither did they. They glanced only a minute at the figure in the bedroom doorway before going into a routine, all business. The sharp featured one dropped into a crouch next to curtained windows near the front door, binoculars trained out into the night. His companion stepped heavy footed to the back of the farmhouse, also gripping field glasses.

Stuart kicked shut the door, turned the three locks, yanked the door knob several times with showy concern for safety. "I think we have security now. Hopefully anyway. Hell of a way to treat someone, who got your ass out of Vienna." An attempted joke, a bit of a smile.

"I thought you were someone else."

"Who, the Germans invading France again? Pity whoever he is, if he ever shows." Stuart looked around the living room. "Cozy place you got. Sure beats hiding out in a damp cave by a long shot."

"It was till you showed."

"Mum's the word, Pablo. Promise, don't worry. I won't tell George about your bolt-hole."

"Let's hope so. And I call it a farmhouse."

"Fine, a farmhouse. A remote one, too. Once we left Arles, it took ages to find. Exit this *autoroute*. Take that back road. Follow that *Centre Ville* sign. Pass that vineyard. You've got a real talent for disappearing."

"Can you blame me?" Stuart Bishop was a CIA bureaucrat with refined tastes, Pablo reminded himself. London theaters. Paris and Milan art museums. The idea of country living seemed foreign. "The provençal isolation helped my dad forget the headache running his hotel." He glanced across to the bedroom's doorway and noticed Gabriella still pointed the 32 cal revolver shakily at Stuart. He motioned to lower it. "*Ca va.*" It's okay.

"Who's the dark haired beauty?" Stuart tugged out a monogrammed white handkerchief from his breast pocket and used it to beat away dust from his jacket and pants.

"A friend."

He glanced with a raised eyebrow at Pablo. "Some friend. A Juliette Binoche look-alike in a negligee."

"Her name's Gabriella, Stuart. Her husband's a bigwig Paris politician, who's had one too many affairs. She wants out. He threatened to find and kill her, if she gets divorced. She's leaving anyway. We thought you were him when you showed." He had had enough polite small talk. "What's this about for crying out loud? You got scared? You have any idea how you scared *us*? You know what time it is?"

"Something bad's happened in London," Stuart said, ignoring his complaint. "Maurice is dead."

Pablo felt a sharp stab of pain in his stomach. "He's what?"

"Yeah, I know, it's hard to believe."

Stuart's face was as grimly serious, he noticed, as his must be hearing the news. "Dead, Jesus, Maurice?"

"I can't believe it myself, but I heard it briefly on the BBC London news, and that's not the half of it. I'm very sorry. He was a good and honorable man in a sometimes rotten profession. A rarity these days, considering who's running MI5's shop. We've a big problem on our hands. Got any candles?"

Pablo frowned at the odd question. "Yeah, several. In case of an outage during a Mistral."

"Get one. Just one and light it."

"What about Maurice?"

"Just do as I say, will you. Get one."

The brusqueness alarmed Pablo. He made his way right, toward the kitchen.

Stuart flicked off the row of brass ceiling lamps overhead, leaving the living room in darkness except for the light coming from the bedroom doorway. "You guys see anything out there?"

"No, guv, not a thing." The sharp featured man continued to gaze out with binoculars through a slit in the curtains.

"Jumbo, anything?" Stuart asked over his shoulder toward the rear of the farmhouse.

"All nights should be as quiet as this."

"After London and Maurice, quiet nights make me nervous," Stuart said. "Keep looking. And make sure those damn drapes are kept drawn as tightly as possible. *Tightly as possible*," he stressed.

Pablo shrugged bewilderment to Gabriella, who had put on a bathrobe, over Stuart's surprise visit as he crossed to a wooden dining table the other side of the room. He moved aside a pile of paperbacks, some ceramic pots, a canvas, several paint brushes, and a vase with sunflowers in it. He lit a lone candle, which he centered in a brass holder on the table. But instead of sitting, Stuart paced in front of him, hands in his pant pockets, head downcast, looking edgy. Pablo couldn't recall seeing George's second in command, normally self-contained, so keyed up.

Stuart stared across the room to Gabriella, who stared suspiciously back at him. "She speak English?"

"Not really."

"Meaning she speaks what? None? Or a little?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Stuart, she speaks no English. None, zip, nada, *rien*. That clear enough for you? Just French."

"Look, I know you'd rather be in bed, but I need answers. You've known her long?"

"Long enough. She's solid."

"Long enough is what? Three days? Three years?"

"Hell man, I don't know. Four months. Five months. Something like that. I was out hiking one day, when I stumbled upon her. Her Audi had broken down...she'd fled Paris. She was at her wits end, what with the car, fleeing her husband with little money on her. I gave her some funds, got her on her way to a nearby *auberge*, and it grew from there."

"How much she know about you?"

"A few odds and ends."

Stuart stopped in front of Pablo, looked sharply at him. "Don't be coy with me, Pablo. I'm in no mood. A few odds and ends like what?"

"Christ, man, I'm not being coy. I'm just tired, that's all."

"A few odds and ends like what?"

"Just that I own a small interest in a barge compa—"

Stuart continued staring at him, looking concerned. "You a silent partner?"

"As silent and invisible as I could get. Off the books."

"Good, no trace, go on." He resumed his pacing.

"She knows the *St. Helena* trades up and down the Canal du Midi and a few other things."

"Such as?"

"My family owned a five star hotel in Zurich. It went bankrupt. My brother's in a Swiss prison. I'm right handed and hate cauliflower and asparagus."

Stuart's face stayed grim, despite the sarcasm. He gave Pablo a sideways glance. "You ever tell her you worked for us? Even once?"

Us, meaning the CIA. Aren't we clever, Stuart, Pablo thought. If Gabriella caught the implication, she didn't show it. He shook his head no.

“Just to be clear, not even once? Like maybe I was your C. O. back in the dark ages?”

“You don’t have to be cute with the C. O. business, Stuart. I said she speaks only French. I’ve never mentioned, even once, you were my case officer.”

"She knows you're on the run?"

Pablo shook his head no.

Stuart exhaled heavily, as though having weighed the pros and cons of the answers and come to some conclusion. “Jumbo, front and center. We’re done here.” Then to Pablo: “All the same, despite what you’ve said about her, come on, outside, let’s go.” Without waiting for any response, he made his way to the front door, but not before blowing out the lone flickering candle and leaving the farmhouse in near darkness....