

## PROLOGUE

### PARIS

An unmarked white panel van travels slowly on the curving road through the countryside, heading toward Paris. Vast fields of grazing cattle and flourishing crops once lined the roadway, but all that remain are scattered stone farmhouses, intermixed with small industrial parks of corrugated-metal warehouses. Occasionally the van passes large brick buildings built during the war; some are derelict, but others are still used as storage spaces.

Earsplitting punk rock music spills out from the open windows of the van. Over the music, the lone passenger, an armed guard named Joseph, shouts, "Pull off! I need a smoke."

"We're not supposed to stop for anything!" bitches Gus, the driver, without letting up on the gas. He quickly grumbles, "What the hell, I need to stretch my legs before we hit the Paris traffic ... and I need a drag."

A short distance down the narrow road, Gus pulls off on a patch of gravel along the shoulder and stops. They both climb out of the van and promptly light up. "I've been thinking ..."

"Not healthy, Gus," Joseph snarls through a puff of smoke.

"What's with the small crated piece we picked up at that old olive farm outside Arles? Why is it going to Amsterdam?" Gus mumbles without disturbing the Gauloises dangling from his lips. "I know the art that the institute is shipping to the Pompidou has got to be worth something ... but art from a farmhouse?"

"When did you start wondering about what we're carrying? I have no idea and I don't really care." Joseph drops his cigarette and crushes it into the gravel with the heel of his shoe. "I just have to get it there safely. So let's get outta here, *allez, allez*," he says, gesturing toward the van.

A few miles down the road, Gus notices a tow truck pulling up fast from the rear. It seems to have come from nowhere and is picking up speed. "If this guy doesn't slow down, he's going to ram right into us!" Gus yells, watching in the rearview mirror with trepidation. Before he finishes his words, the truck has pulled around their van, cut right in front of them, and slammed on the brakes.

Gus screams, "What the hell?" as he brakes hard, but not in time to avoid a collision.

The hard jerk of their seat belts leaves them momentarily stunned. Gus is the first to recover and says with disgust, "Shit! We're screwed."

Two figures in gas masks jump out of the tow truck, carrying what look like fire extinguishers. One comes to each side of the van and through the open windows sprays the inside of the van before either Joseph or Gus can do anything. Gus would later report that all he remembered was a slight sickly-sweet smell before he blacked out.

The two assailants drag Joseph and Gus out of the van, then pull off their gas masks. They bind Gus and Joseph with zip ties, then gag and blindfold them. "We need to throw them in the back of the van fast, before someone comes along and sees us," barks one of the assailants. They stack them between the wrapped and crated art in the back of the van. One closes up the van while the other hooks up the tow bar to its frame. They jump back into the truck and tear down the road with the van in tow.

About thirty minutes closer to Paris, they turn off the paved road onto a dusty lane. Broken chunks of pavement lead up a slight grade to an abandoned brick warehouse in the midst of an unkempt field. The windows are all broken out. The large doors that once were at each end are long since gone. The wooden roof is partially collapsed, and the interior scavenged of all usable materials. "There's our ride," the shorter of the assailants says, pointing to a black SUV parked just outside the warehouse. They pass by the SUV and pull straight into

the warehouse. The driver of the SUV gets out and opens the rear hatch, then joins the other two in the warehouse.

“How’d it go?” he asks.

“So far, so good” was the quick answer.

They open up the back of the van and remove the bodies of the two unconscious men, dropping them away from the van on the concrete floor. They remove the crate marked for Amsterdam and carry it to the black SUV, putting it carefully inside. As the two assailants turn to re-enter the warehouse, they see that the blindfold on one of the men they had gassed has partially slipped off and he’s hobbling toward a side exit. “Damn, where’s he going?” At the sound of the assailant’s voice, the man instinctively hesitates and looks right into the faces of both assailants. “Merde, he’s seen us!”

The other assailant runs and grabs one of the gas canisters from the back of the open van and in a few steps reaches the hobbled man. He smashes the canister into his skull. The man crumbles to the floor. A small puddle of blood oozes from the wound. Both assailants kneel down next to the body. “Is he dead?” one asks the other.

“Well, his skull is bashed in.” He feels for a pulse. “Yeah ... he’s not going to identify anybody.”

“Throw him into the SUV. We’ll get rid of him later.” The two assailants pick up the body and toss it into the back of the SUV alongside the Amsterdam crate.

“Get the gasoline can out of the truck ... let’s get this job done and get out of here.”

As the other assailant grabs the can from the cab of the truck and starts splashing it over the tow truck and the van, the man on the ground slowly stirs, still tied, gagged, and blindfolded. He hears splashing and smells gasoline fumes. He hears a loud swoosh and instantly feels heat from the fire as the van and tow truck are engulfed in flames. In terror, he rolls as far as he can from the heat.

As the two assailants climb into the SUV, one screams to the driver, “Vite, vite.”

Before he pulls away, the driver asks, “Did you throw the GPS tracker monitor and gas masks in the truck so they’d be destroyed?”

“Yes, yes. You think I’m stupid? Get moving!”

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It seems forever to the man on the ground before he hears the sound of sirens in the distance. He prays that they are on their way to find him. He is sweating from the intense heat of the fire. He smells burning rubber and hears frequent explosive pops in the fire. The sounds, smells, and intense heat are terrifying. The ties on his wrists and ankles are cutting into his skin like blades. He wonders if this is the end as he mercifully drifts back into unconsciousness.

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His fuzzy mind seems to hear voices, but he isn’t sure if he’s just dreaming. He feels someone remove the ties and then at last his blindfold. He opens his eyes and blinks a few times and then looks around. Firefighters are everywhere, and the van and truck are still smoldering. He looks at the scene more intently, then starts shouting, “Joseph! Joseph!” The firefighter kneeling next to him quietly says, “I’m sorry, but there’s no one else here.”

Joseph was gone.