

THIEF OF ALWAYS

by

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2009

CHAPTER ONE

Basel, Switzerland

Friday night, February 8

“You never said,” Allegro whispered in her earpiece.

“Never said what?” Nighthawk replied. His voice was tight from the strain of his exertions.

“If you scored the other night.” Allegro descended, dangling by a thin cable attached to the lightweight harness around her legs, waist, and shoulders. She wore tight black pants and a black turtleneck, not thick enough to ward off the chill of Switzerland in February, but necessary for the task. And good motivation to hurry, because she despised the cold.

The darkened bedroom beneath her, seen through her infrared specs, was the best access point of the house because it had the least security, alarmed beams but no cameras. Above her, on the flat roof, Nighthawk braced his feet against the frame of the skylight as he slowly lowered her into place. They had been monitoring the home—two stories of ultra-modern glass and whitewashed brick—for the past week. Fortunately the place was surrounded by tall conifers for privacy and was far enough from neighbors that their twilight break-in would not be seen.

The homeowner, a diplomat, had just departed for Prague. An earlier call to his office had confirmed he was to be there through the weekend. There was plenty of time to locate and steal their target, a dossier containing the names of a Serb death squad involved in an infamous genocide case against the Bosnians.

“Yeah, I scored.”

“Liar.” Allegro couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “She was way out of your league.”

“Watch it, hot shot. I have you hanging by a string.”

Thin red rays of light surrounded her. “Is this guy paranoid or what? The place is swamped with beams.”

“Money’ll do that to ya.”

“So will guilt.” Allegro landed softly on thick carpeting and came face-to-face with herself in the mirror of the dresser. She studied her reflection as she unclipped from the wire. “I look so threatening in a ski mask.”

“Is that how you get the ladies in the sack? By putting the fear in them?”

She glanced up. Nighthawk grinned down at her from the skylight. He was an op who could blend in well in any environment. Average height and weight, dark hair, and no distinguishing features to remember, except for the gold tooth that showed itself only when he smiled.

“Did you just add jealousy to your list of shortcomings?” she teased.

He shook his head. “You know, someday...”

“I’d love to sit and chat about your sex life, or lack of it,” Allegro said, “but I’ve got work to do.”

Her agility and infrared glasses enabled her to avoid the beams with relative ease. She crouched under some and jumped over others until she reached the door to the hallway. Once there, she opened the small pouch attached to her chest, retrieved a mini periscope, and slipped half of it under the door.

The revolving camera on the opposite wall was pointing in her direction. She waited for it to complete its cycle and counted. When it was once again aimed at the bedroom door, she withdrew the periscope and counted down until she could safely open the door. As the camera was moving past, she belly-crawled across the hardwood floor, out the door, and down the hall as fast as she could, snaking in and out of the vertical beams and carefully avoiding the horizontal ones mere inches above her head.

The stale stink of cigar smoke greeted her as she reached the den.

She slipped inside and scanned the room with her penlight until she spotted what she was looking for, a reproduction of Corneille's *Femme Verte VII*. Negotiating the beams, she made her way to the painting and gingerly took it down, placing it at her feet against the wall.

"Bingo." She took off the glasses and pushed up her ski mask.

"You found it?" Nighthawk asked.

"Yup."

"And?"

"Well, I don't see the attraction," she replied. "Why paint her green?"

"Funny. Real funny."

"Oh, yeah, the vault's here, too." She trained her light on the small steel door she'd uncovered. The hiding place was so predictable. This was not a job she would long remember. The missions that lingered in her memory were those where the target had a little imagination and she had to be on top of her game. Cracking a safe was only interesting when the EOO couldn't tell her the exact location and it wasn't in the first places anyone would look, behind a painting or beneath the floor of a bedroom closet. She didn't get much satisfaction from doing jobs a second-rate burglar could pull off.

"Get busy, slick," Nighthawk said. "I'm freezing up here."

"I'll be out in ten." Allegro fit the stethoscope in her left ear and twisted the combination dial, listening for the telltale clicks that would help her discover the contact points.

"You're that good, huh?"

"No, just that horny. I have a date and I want to be on time." There was pathetically little challenge to the task. She quickly cracked five of the six digits. "Almost there."

"What the hell? Damn." Nighthawk's jovial tone was gone. "Change of plan. He's coming back. You have five minutes to get out of there. Otherwise, abort."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"I have him in my sights."

Allegro carefully spun the dial in the opposite direction, listening intently.

"Four minutes, thirty-six seconds," Nighthawk said.

"I can tell time. Now be quiet so I can hear what I'm doing."

She smiled as the final wheel clicked into place. The dossier was nestled beneath a jewelry box, along with a handful of other documents. She photographed what she needed with a small digital camera, returned the folder as she'd found it, and pulled the ski mask down. "Okay, I'm moving out."

"Not the way you came. Initial location is too exposed to pull you back up through the skylight."

"I'm waiting for an alternative."

"I thought you were the all-knowing guru," Nighthawk said. "I'm working on it. Sit tight."

Allegro could hear the faint click of his handheld navigator as he searched the layout of the house, seeking an alternative escape route. "I'm getting bored."

"Shit." His tone rose slightly. "We don't have a choice. I'm going to have to cut the power line."

"You don't have time for that, and there's probably backup power as well. Go back to the van and guide me from there."

"How you going to get out of there, Houdini? The place is surrounded with cameras."

"Leave that up to me. Now go."

"One minute, twenty-eight seconds until he enters," Nighthawk said.

"Stop already with the human clock routine." Allegro slipped the infrared glasses back on. The alarm beams reappeared, the nearest one a few feet behind her. "You're making my brain bleed."

Car tires crunched on the gravel in the front of the house. In a crouch, she hustled under the first few beams, then climbed onto the diplomat's desk. Like a predatory animal interrupted during its feast, she froze, muscles tightening, her senses hyperalert. The slightest sounds were amplified as she braced for a calculated leap. Her precision jump over the next pair of beams brought her to the doorway. The rush of adrenaline was intoxicating. Her heart hammered and her clothing clung damply to her skin. Using her periscope, she checked the camera in the hallway and waited for the right moment. She would have only ten seconds to negotiate her way past several more beams to the end of the hall and around the corner.

"He's parking in the garage and entering the house through the

kitchen, as usual,” Nighthawk reported. “You have less than a minute to get out.”

In eight seconds, she reached the end of the hall and turned the corner, where she paused, hidden from the cameras. To her immediate left a staircase led to the ground floor, the obvious choice, but the steps were riddled with thin beams of red. It would take too long to escape through them. On either side, waist-high railings enabled her to surveil the ground floor. She leaned over and, in a quick, assessing glance, took in the position of the cameras below and the crisscross pattern of infrared beams.

Calculating the drop and the timing, she took a deep breath, grabbed hold of the railing, and pushed herself over, hanging there briefly before dropping to the left of one of the beams. Ignoring the brief flash of pain in her shins and ankles, she ducked quickly back into a crouch and moved through the living room and dining room toward the kitchen. Her time was about to run out. There was one cam in the kitchen, mounted above the doorway. As she stood beneath the device, counting, she heard the motorized hum of the garage door. He was coming.

When the camera swiveled away, she shot across the room. “I’m in the kitchen,” she relayed to Nighthawk in a whisper.

“Are you crazy? I told you he was coming in through there.”

“Relax. I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re not to hurt him. I repeat, you are *not* to hurt him.”

“We sat at the same briefing. I got the message the first time.” The sweat on her forehead left a damp circle on the ski mask.

The camera began its slow pivot in her direction. Five seconds until it reached her. Allegro heard his key in the lock on *four*. He entered the kitchen and fumbled for the light switch on *two*, and she slipped silently between his back and the door, catching a whiff of his musky cologne.

The garage was dark, but moonlight spilled through the narrowing space beneath the automatic door as it descended. She had only seconds before her escape route closed. She bolted across the concrete floor and dove for the gap, sliding through without an inch to spare.

“You got some balls, lady,” Nighthawk said once they were safely ensconced in the van. “Balls, and a whole lot of luck.”

“Luck’s got nothing to do with it. We’ve been watching this house for a week. So when you said he was coming in through the kitchen, I knew I was golden.”

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised. “Are you going to tell me you timed the garage door?”

“Are you going to tell me you’re surprised?” she asked cockily.

He snorted. “Freak.”

“Amateur.”

Her voice betrayed her heady relief. Although she’d had no choice in the life she was leading, she often wondered what she would have chosen under different circumstances. Would she have wanted an ordinary life, even if it were a possibility? The answer was always the same. No. She wasn’t cut out for a dull existence, working nine to five, going home to watch TV or look after a family. If she’d been able to make the choices most people made, she would still have ended up doing something similar to what she did now.

Allegro stared out the van window as they left Basel behind and entered the long stretch of dark highway that wove southeast through pastureland and thick forests. An occasional farmhouse or distant village provided the only lights. She recognized that the Organization had formed much of who and how she was, but she also knew she needed the challenge. She craved the excitement and intensity of her work. Moments like the one in the diplomat’s kitchen made her feel alive.



An hour later, Nighthawk parked the van in front of the entrance to the Marzili, a vast green space in the city center of Berne that featured swimming pools, a tree-shaded park, and an old-fashioned funicular. Jammed on weekends when the weather was nice, the park was nearly deserted on this cold winter evening. Allegro entered alone, strolling at a casual pace until she came to the lit fountain as instructed. The middle-aged man standing there wore only one glove. He held the other in his hand.

She approached from behind. “*Il fait très froid ce soir. N’est-ce pas?*” It’s very cold tonight, don’t you think?

The man turned to face her. “*Trop froid pour un gant,*” he replied. Too cold for only one glove.

Allegro retrieved the memory card she’d taken from her camera, slipped it into an envelope, and left it on the edge of the fountain. Without another word, she headed back to the van. After changing their clothing and ditching the vehicle, she and Nighthawk returned by tram to their hotel in Berne’s medieval old town, where they’d been playing cozy couple for the past week. They were now typical Americans on vacation, dressed in sneakers, jeans, and sweatshirts, happily returning from drinks somewhere and, from all appearances, planning more intimate fun in their shared room.

The three-and-a-half-star tourist hotel was comfortable but not posh. Its eighteenth-century exterior blended in well with its surroundings, the façade the same arcaded sandstone as nearly all the buildings on the quiet, cobbled street. Recent renovations had thoroughly updated the interior. Their room was spacious and bright, the furniture was modern, and they had a view of the Aare River.

They’d barely closed the door when Allegro’s cell phone rang. She checked the caller ID, although she knew who it was. It was twenty-thirty—eight thirty p.m.—and Montgomery Pierce, Chief Administrator of the Elite Operatives Organization, was always prompt. She flipped the phone open, greeted him with, “Mission completed,” and listened to a few instructions before closing the cell and stripping off her clothes. She was naked by the time she reached the threshold to the bathroom.

Before she could make it inside, Nighthawk turned from where he’d been staring out the window and queried, “Are you going to share further orders or make me guess? Can we head back?”

Allegro pivoted to face him, enjoying the blush that spread rapidly over his cheeks. “Well, let’s see, I have about ten hours to get showered, dressed, and laid. So, yeah, we have to head back. We’ve been booked on an oh-seven-hundred flight tomorrow and Monty wants us in his office by twenty-two-hundred sharp for a debriefing.” She snapped her fingers as if a sudden realization had hit her. “Hey, what do you know? Someone finally wants to *de-brief* you, pal. Goes to show you, there’s always hope.”

After a quick shower, she pondered what to wear for her date. Her options were limited, considering she’d packed only the bare essentials

for the job, and besides, whatever she chose would be irrelevant. Her clothes would be on the floor ten minutes after her arrival at the woman's house. She threw on her last pair of clean jeans and a short-sleeved black turtleneck. No need to bundle up since the car would be warm in no time and she would soon be in her date's bed, or on the couch, floor, counter, or whatever. She checked herself in the mirror one last time and grabbed her brown leather jacket and the keys to the rental Camaro.

She made the necessary cell phone call as she took the stairs down to the street. "Hey, beautiful. It's Mishael."

"*Bon soir*. You're not going to cancel, are you?" The female voice on the other end was heavily accented. "I have been looking forward to getting you naked since I laid my eyes on you two days ago."

Allegro smiled as she propped the cell phone between her shoulder and ear and unlocked the car. "How could I possibly cancel on such a beautiful woman? I'm calling because I'm running late."

"Just for that, I'm going to expect you to make tonight worth my wait."

"I think I can manage that...and more." She left the garage and guided the Camaro toward the highway.

"Do you really think you can make it up to me, Mishael?"

"As a matter of fact, I know I can make it up to you," Allegro promised before disconnecting. She turned the music up full blast and pressed harder on the accelerator. This was what she loved the most—speed, loud music, and more speed, until the world made sense. The music was so loud she didn't hear her cell phone, but she felt the vibration on her lap and checked the caller ID. "Perfect," she muttered as she flipped open the phone. It wasn't like she had anything better to do tonight. "Allegro 020508."

The instructions were brief, the change of plan nothing unusual. She and Nighthawk were expected in Venice ASAP and would receive further instructions upon arrival. That should have been the end of it, but Allegro was never one to adhere strictly to protocol.

As she turned the car around, she replied, "Sure, no problem. I mean, who doesn't want to turn down a sex-filled evening with a beautiful woman?"