

PROLOGUE

Jessica Stillwell was sure of only one thing in her young life, and that was confusion. It stalked her mind and body like a jungle animal, stopping here and there to gnaw away at the fiber of her sanity. She really, really didn't want to be going through this ordeal. Hadn't she spent the last few hours screaming that exact sentiment at whoever was doing this to her?

"Please, just leave me alone, and let me go. I swear I won't tell anyone; I promise."

Her 5'9" body was stretched as taut as a drum, hands tied over her head, legs spread wide, and each foot secured - to what, she had no idea. The evening had started great, just a fun girls' night out on the town with her two best friends, Jill and Carrie. Everything had been going so well, a few drinks, a little dancing, just the thing to loosen herself up after a long week of classes at the Savannah College of Art and Design, also known as SCAD. Around midnight she had begun to feel a little dizzy and slightly nauseated. She definitely hadn't wanted to get sick in front of her friends and a large group of strangers, so she had left the club and headed for her car. As she had got into her car, the strange feeling of disorientation had taken over. Then there was sudden darkness and the loss of consciousness that left her unaware of her existence until she awakened in this horrible condition.

She was one of the golden girls, sweet and innocent, protected from harm. That was her heritage from birth - to be adored and treated with a caring and understanding that befitted her station in life. She stared helplessly out from beneath a pool of frightened tears. The full, sensuous lips, so many had coveted in her nineteen

years, were pulled back in a grimace of pain. She felt she might choke with every breath she took, utterly violated from the ordeal this unknown entity was forcing upon her.

“Please, say something. What do you want from me? Why are you doing this? Please, just let me go.”

Her voice was starting to get raspy from her efforts to let her captor or captors know she needed to be released from this terrifying occurrence. Again she scanned the area, trying desperately to sort out the who, why and where of what had happened to her. Her vision was limited to the few details she’d already seen a dozen times, the bare wooden walls with peeling paint and the spider webs woven against the old stained boards. She felt as though she herself was spread-eagled in the deadly trap of some giant spider, lurking just outside her limited field of vision, waiting to devour her young body.

“Talk to me, God damn you! My parents have a lot of money. I swear I’ll get you whatever you want; just please let me go.”

She’d had the briefest glance of some tall, hooded figure passing by her feet, but it had been more like a shadow than a living thing. If it hadn’t been for the physical sensations inflicted on her powerless body, she might even have believed it was part of some strange nightmare.

She felt the sensations of warm water against her flesh. Her captor was giving her a sponge bath from the bottom of her feet to the top of her head. Now her hair was being washed and rinsed ever so gently, the sensations accompanied by someone breathing regularly and softly humming a tune she didn’t recognize. If this whole episode weren’t so incredibly bizarre, it would have been almost pleasant.

“Who are you? What do you want from me?”

At last the washing stopped, and she was being dried with a soft towel smelling faintly of lemon. Eventually the drying halted, and she sensed her captor moving away from her.

Once again she was left in a silence so deep and complete that the only sounds she heard were her own breathing.

From far off, someone was playing a piano. The sound sparked a distant memory of something she'd heard briefly in music appreciation class. She thought it was called Ragtime and was the creation of someone called Scott something or other. The sparkling notes superimposed against her abject terror created an odd, other-worldly sensation, as though she were here, but not here at the same time. Maybe if she tried really hard, she could release her mind to some other universe and leave her body trapped here on its own.

She heard the return of the shadowy figure. Her mind flashed back to the pictures of a cowed, shrouded form with a scythe she'd seen in countless books from childhood - the bent, stooped form of Death himself. This could not be real. What was happening to her could not possibly be happening.

"Please, don't hurt me. Please, let me go. Please, say something."

Again nothing, just the sound of breathing and then the prick of something that felt like a needle against her armpit. It didn't hurt any more than someone drawing blood, but the effects were much more immediate. As she quietly slipped away, even the sound of her own beating heart stopped, and the last thing she heard was a low, mirthless chuckle.

Chapter 1

Klaus Kruger rested his head against the softness of his first class Lufthansa seat and let himself relax. He'd be in Paris in a couple of hours and well on his way to becoming a rich man. Hans was already asleep beside him, and he was slightly envious of the big man's ability to sleep anywhere, anytime.

Klaus was fast approaching eighty, and it was definitely time to spend what years were left to him in the luxury of total financial security. It all seemed so odd the way his present circumstances had come about.

He'd cared for his doddering elderly father until the old man's death six months ago at the age of 98. It had been a major problem for him having to deal with the senility of what had once been a strong tough man. But he'd done the best he could.

They had, after all, both served the Third Reich, he as a very young soldier and his father as an officer directly under the command of Hermann Goering. The war had bonded them for life, and they had often spoken of the good old days until ten years ago when his father had started to slip mentally, but all that was in the past and no longer mattered.

It had been weeks after his father's death before he could bring himself to go through his private papers. Most of them were junk, the ravings of an individual who no longer had a firm grip on reality. One journal entry, however, had caught his attention immediately. It spoke in great detail of an exploit his father had undertaken while he had been stationed in Paris. The old man had actually found two paintings he thought to be of enormous value,

which he had decided to keep for himself. He had hastily painted scenes of peasants over the originals and hidden them in the wall of the room where he had been billeted with every intention of sneaking them home to Germany to insure his own financial future.

The fall of Paris had come so quickly that he'd never had the chance to retrieve them before he was shipped to the Eastern front to fight the advancing Soviets. Because of his rank, the old man had been held in a Russian prison for over thirty years as a war criminal, and by the time he was finally returned to Germany, he was a broken man. He had been incapable at that point of doing much of anything except sitting by his favorite window and scribbling notes on what his life had been.

When Klaus had read more of his father's journals, he had found himself excited beyond belief. Not only had his father described in detail what the paintings looked like, but he had also listed the address where he'd hidden them. Everything was now in place, and Klaus was prepared to reap the rewards of his father's cleverness. Since he didn't like the feeling of carrying large sums of money on his person, he'd already wired sufficient funds to a Paris bank to cover all his expenses and those of his large companion.

Hans was no rocket scientist, but he was big enough to provide protection for the extended trip to Paris and then on to the southern United States. Some moron there had put three Degas pastels up on the Internet for sale, but when Klaus had asked for provenance, he had received no reply. Further messages had gone unanswered.

The Degas might be a wild goose chase, but the two paintings were a certainty, of that he was positive. Being filthy rich was now only a matter of time and miles away, and he was certainly still plenty healthy enough to take care of business.

In the event that the pastels proved to be real, he had called upon a few of his friends from the old days to set up a bank credit line of \$1,000,000. Even if he had to spend that much to acquire them, he had little doubt that he could triple his money with ease simply by selling them to German collectors to whom he was already well known. He intended to come back from this trip a multi-millionaire no matter what it took to accomplish that goal. François Michaud was angry; no, angry didn't cover it. Not even furious could properly define what he felt. Utter rage was the only thing that might describe his current state. He found himself pacing back and forth across the limited length of his antique shop on the rue du Cherche-Midi in Paris, muttering under his breath, "espèce d'imbécile." His cousin Jacques stood rooted to the spot near one corner of the Louis IV desk that François used for his work area.

"Sacrébleu! Can't I even leave this place for one hour for a glass of wine and some bread and cheese without you completely destroying my life? What in the name of all that's holy possessed you to sell those paintings? Didn't you realize that if I wanted to sell them, I would have had them on open display in the shop, not hidden behind my desk? God, I curse the day you were born. I swear to you the money will be coming out of your paycheck."

"Bu...but François," Jacques stuttered. "The American was looking specifically for small oil paintings, and he was willing to pay 600 francs for the pair. How was I to know? They've been in the shop for a long time now; I thought you'd be pleased."

"Jacques, I curse you. And I curse your mother and father for sending you to me. Two days ago I had an offer of 10,000 francs from an old German gentleman, who will be arriving in approximately two hours to pick them up.

He said they reminded him of some paintings his mother had owned, and he was going to check with his sister if these were the ones. What in the name of God am I going to tell him? Let me see the stupid receipt. Maybe I can catch up with the American and get them back.”

“François, I’m so sorry I didn’t write a receipt.

“What the hell do you mean you didn’t make a receipt? You moron! Excuse me, Jacques, would you be so kind as to hand me that Third Reich dagger sitting on the table next to you. I think I’ve found a use for it.”

As Jacques worked at becoming a part of a 19th century étagère, François’s thoughts turned to finding some sort of excuse with which he could placate the German. The man’s French had been excellent, but to a person of expertise, the slight German accent had been obvious. François hadn’t spent twenty-two years dealing in antiques for nothing. He’d become very good over that period of time in determining the origins of his customers.

He thought back to how he’d found the paintings. A heavier than usual rainstorm had caused some damage to the roof of his private quarters over the shop and resulted in a loss of plaster on one of his bedroom walls. He’d cursed the rain in general, and the exorbitant rates some local buffoon would charge him for the repairs, so he’d set about doing the job himself, and in the course of removing an old section of the plaster, had spotted the two small paintings nestled up against a stud in the outside wall.

He had removed them with great care, his heart in his mouth, sure that his fortune was at last staring him in the face. Further examination had determined them to be unsigned and of not very good quality. Not only that, but they too had suffered water damage, which meant that in a short time he’d be able to observe the paint chipping away, reducing their value to a point of near

worthlessness. With this in mind, he'd resolved to dump them on the very first interested party. Better to wind up with something rather than nothing.

Both paintings had been of peasants working in the fields, but the figures had been rather crude and the colors less than imaginative. François had reflected at the time that he himself probably could have done better, given a week or two. That, however, was beside the point. The German had seemed almost sure that these were the paintings he'd been looking for, and François had already spent several hours contemplating what pleasures he could afford himself with this unexpected windfall. Now it had all been taken away in an instant by his idiotic cousin. Rubbing the ache that was beginning to form in his temples, he turned to find the ashen-faced Jacques edging his way toward the front door.

"Oh, no, you don't. Get your skinny little butt back in here. When that German shows up, you're going to be the star of this little fiasco. I want you front and center, Jacques. I think I just may sell him the dagger and let him have his way with you, you idiot."

Jacques, who was pale skinned under normal circumstances, was turning even whiter and visibly shaking. He was indeed endowed with a skinny butt along with a skinny everything else. His 6' 1" frame supported perhaps 140 pounds. His glasses were continuously perched at the end of his long, hooked Gallic nose, and his watery brown eyes had a way of seeming to be constantly in motion, almost as though focusing on a particular thing or person was more than they could handle. His moustache was as thin as a piece of dental floss and did little more than accentuate his mouth. The thinning black hair, which he combed from the left side of his head over the top part of his head to hide a large and obvious balding area, completed the picture of a man who

probably had little success in any phase of his life. He also talked with a constant stutter, which built neither enthusiasm for conversation nor a desire to be a friend or lover in others.

François stopped himself in mid-course as the reality of the situation set in; there was little else he could say to Jacques that would make him feel any worse or himself any better. It was, of course, at this tender point in time when the elderly German entered the shop. His eyes were nearly hidden under his bushy white eyebrows as he stared from one man to the other.

“Ah, Monsieur Michaud, I have come for my little paintings. I have brought you cash since I thought you might prefer that method of payment.”

“Mr. Kruger, I have some rather bad news for you, I’m afraid. I am sorry to tell you that my assistant Jacques sold them without my knowledge not two hours ago to an American gentleman. I do hope you will accept my most sincere apology for this unfortunate occurrence.”

Silence hung in the little room like the blade of a guillotine suspended in the air, ready to drop with a terrible sickening speed upon the neck of the first person foolish enough to utter a sound. Mr. Kruger’s eyes narrowed. He maintained his frozen stance until he at last regained his composure. The man looked to be in his seventies, with a full head of white hair and an equally white beard and moustache. Despite his age, he was obviously in good condition, with a massive barrel chest, and powerful looking arms. Though he stood no more than 5’9” or 5’10”, he cut an imposing figure.

“Ah, how unfortunate, Monsieur Michaud. You wouldn’t, by any chance, have the name of this American, would you?”

“No, I am terribly sorry, Monsieur Kruger, but I’m afraid Jacques did not make out a receipt; however, I’m sure he

could give you a very good description of the gentleman, couldn't you Jacques?"

"Y-y-y-ess s-s-sir. He was about sixty-five, approximately 5'10", and he wore glasses. He had g-g-graying hair, thinning on the top, and a very jolly look to him. H-h-h-he spoke with that accent of an American living in the Southern part of the United S-s-states. T-t-that's about all I can remember, sir."

"I don't suppose the American happened to mention where he was staying, did he?"

"W-w-why yes, sir, as a matter of fact, he did. It was the Crillon, but I seem to remember him saying something about leaving tomorrow."

"Thank you. Perhaps I can catch him before he leaves for home. Gentlemen, adieu."

As the German exited the shop, François saw not a person leaving, but rather the embodiment of 10,000 francs, which he'd already spent several times over. He couldn't believe he hadn't asked Jacques where the American was staying before. He should have asked him that earlier. He really was getting forgetful in his old age. He resumed his mutterings, most of which pertained to the early and painful demise of Jacques Archambault.