

THE
BOOKSELLER

The First
Hugo Marston
Novel



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To my wife, Sarah.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



As much as I love Paris, I have been forced to take occasional liberties with its history and geography. Events have been created and streets invented to suit my own selfish needs. All errors and misrepresentations, intentional and otherwise, are mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER ONE



The largest of Notre Dame's bells tolled noon just as Hugo reached the end of the bridge, the brittle air seeming to hold on to the final clang longer than usual. He paused and looked across the busy Paris street into Café Panis. The yellow carriage lights above its windows beckoned as dim figures moved about inside, customers choosing tables and waiters flitting around like dancers.

Hot coffee was tempting, but this was the first day of a vacation Hugo didn't want, with nothing to do and nowhere to go, and he didn't much want to sit at a table by himself and think about that.

He squared his shoulders against the wind and turned right, leaving the café behind, heading north alongside the river. He glanced over the parapet as he walked, the growl of a motor launch floating up from below as the boat's propellers thrashed at the icy waters of the Seine. On cold days like this he wondered how long a man could survive in the river's oily waters, struggling against the deceptively strong current before succumbing to its frigid grip. It was a grim thought and one he quickly dismissed. After all, this was Paris; there was too much boat traffic, too many people like him admiring the river from its multitude of bridges, for a flailing man to go unnoticed for long.

Five minutes later he spotted a riverside bookstall, four green metal boxes bolted to the low wall and crammed with books, their colorful spines like the feathers of a bird fanned out on the shelves to attract passers-by. The stall's owner was stooped over a box, the hem of his worn, gray coat brushing the pavement. A shoelace had come undone

but the man ignored it, even as his fingers scabbled through the post-cards, inches away.

A barrage of shouting made the seller straighten and both men looked toward the voices, ringing out from a stall about fifty yards away, across the entrance to the Pont Neuf bridge. A man, squat and burly, poked a finger and yelled at the stall's owner, a crimson-faced woman who was bundled against the cold and determined to give as good as she got.

The old man shook his head and turned back to his box. Hugo coughed gently.

"*Oui, monsieur?*" The seller's voice was gruff, but when he looked up and saw Hugo he cracked a grin. "Ah, it's you. Where have you been, *mon ami?*"

"*Salut, Max.*" Hugo slipped off a glove and took Max's proffered hand, warm despite the chill of the day. They spoke in French even though the old man knew English well enough when it suited—like when pretty American girls were shopping. "What's all the fuss about?" Hugo asked.

Max didn't respond and together they turned to watch. The woman was waving an arm as if telling the stocky man to leave her alone. The man's response shocked Hugo: he grabbed her wrist and twisted it hard enough to spin her around, and in the same movement kicked her legs out from under her. She dropped straight onto her knees and let out a plaintive wail as she threw her head back in pain. Hugo started forward but felt a strong hand holding him back.

"*Non,*" Max said. "It's not for you. *Une affaire domestique.*"

Hugo shook him off. "She needs help. Wait here."

"*Non,*" Max said again, grabbing Hugo's arm with a grip the American could feel through his winter coat. "Let her be, Hugo. She doesn't want your help, believe me when I say that."

"Why not? Who the hell is he?" Hugo felt the tautness in his body and fought the desire to release it on the bully across the street. Something in Max's plea had resonated, the implication that by getting involved he could make things worse. "What's it about, Max?" he repeated.

Max held his eye for a long moment, then let go of Hugo's arm and looked away. The old man turned to his stall and picked up a book, then put on his glasses to read the cover.

Hugo turned to face him and saw that the left lens was missing. "Jesus, Max. Please tell me that guy didn't pay you a visit."

"Me? No." Max ran a sleeve under his bulbous and pockmarked nose, but didn't meet Hugo's eye. "Why would he?"

"You tell me." The quai was front and center for crazies, Hugo knew, drawn like mosquitoes to the water and tourists that flowed through the heart of the city. And the *bouquinistes* were easy and frequent targets.

"No reason. If you're worried about my glasses, I just dropped them, that's all." Max finally looked Hugo in the eye and the smile returned. "Yes, I'm getting old and clumsy, but I can still take care of myself. Anyway, your job is to keep your ambassador safe, protect your embassy, not worry about old men like me."

"I'm off duty, I can worry about whomever I want."

Again Max put a hand on Hugo's arm, this time reassuring. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"*D'accord*. If you say so." Hugo looked across the street to see the woman on her feet again, the man's arms flailing all around her, but not touching. Reluctantly, Hugo decided to leave it for now. He turned to the books on display. "This is how you take care of yourself, by fleecing tourists, *oui*? Do you have anything actually worth buying? I need a gift."

"I have key chains, postcards, and *petit* Eiffel Towers."

"It's for Christine."

"Ah." Max raised an eyebrow and he waved a hand at his stall. "Then nothing I have out here."

"You keep the good stuff hidden, eh?" Hugo looked over his friend's shoulder and watched the burly man stalking down the quai, away from them, hands in his pockets. His victim, the *bouquiniste*, looked unsteady on her feet and Hugo saw her collapse into a canvas chair beside her stall, her face sinking into her hands. As Hugo watched,

she reached into a plastic bag beside her and pulled out a clear, flask-sized bottle.

When he looked back, Max was watching him. “That, in her hand, is her biggest problem,” the old man said. “But around here, it’s best to mind your own business.” He gestured toward his books. “So, are you buying or just wasting time? And by that, I mean mine.”

Hugo turned his attention back to Max. “A gift, remember?”

“*Bien*, let me see.” Max picked up a hardback, a book of black and white photographs of Hollywood stars from 1920s to the 1970s. He showed Hugo the cover, a picture of a smiling Cary Grant, all teeth and slick hair. “Looks like you, *mon ami*.”

Hugo had heard that before, from his wife, though he assumed she was just making fun. The caption said Grant was forty-one at the time of the picture, a year younger than Hugo. At six foot one inch, Grant was also an inch shorter than Hugo. But the men shared the same thick hair, though Hugo’s was a lighter brown—light enough to camouflage a few, recent, strands of gray. His was thick hair that had never been touched by the globs of gel, or whatever those guys used. In the picture, Cary Grant’s eyes glittered like jewels, a hard look Hugo could emulate when he needed to, but normally his eyes were a darker and warmer brown, more thoughtful than magnetic. The eyes of a watcher, not a player.

“Here.” Max took the book back, then stooped and lifted a stack of newspapers off a battered leather briefcase. “I have some books in there. Help yourself.”

Hugo knelt, unzipped the case, and peered in. “An Agatha Christie?”

“*Oui*,” Max nodded. “A first edition, so *très cher*. A humble diplomat like you cannot afford it, I fear.”

“I expect you’re right, but I know someone who would love it.”

Max grinned. “Someone who might love you for giving it, you mean.”

“Maybe so.” Hugo turned the novel over in his hands. He wasn’t quite an expert on rare books but he knew as much as many of the bouquinistes who peddled their wares along the river. This one was a

beauty, a 1935 first edition of *Death in the Clouds*, one of the Hercule Poirot mysteries. It was bound in full maroon Morocco leather, banded, and lettered in gilt with marbled endpapers, and it looked to Hugo like it had the original cloth backstrip. He spotted a short tear to the gutter of the final advertisement leaf, but overall he was impressed. It was clearly a fine copy. Hugo held it up. "How much?"

"For you, four hundred Euros."

"And for everyone else?"

"Three hundred, of course."

"In America we cheat strangers," Hugo said, "not our friends."

"You're not in America." Max's eyes twinkled. "You are a big man, Hugo, big enough to throw me in the river. I would not dare cheat you."

Hugo grunted and pulled another old book out of the bag. Covered in dark blue cloth, it exuded antiquity and a quick check inside confirmed that: 1873. Gold lettering on a red panel on the spine read *On War*, then the word *Clausewitz*. "The first English translation?"

"*Merde!*" Max hurried over and snatched the book from Hugo's hand. "This one isn't for sale."

"Why not?"

"Because." He clutched the book to his chest, then held up a hand in apology. "*Je m'excuse*, it's important. I just have to look at it more closely, before I decide."

"Let me look at it for you, be happy to advise," Hugo said, his tone intentionally light to mask his curiosity. It wasn't like his friend to be obscure, to guard his words.

"*Non.*" Max held the book tight. "It's not about the book, its value. Look, if I decide to sell it, I'll hold it for you. *D'accord?*"

"Sure." Hugo nodded. "Thanks."

"*Bon.*" Max smiled and pointed to the cowboy boots on Hugo's feet. "You are the only Texan who knows books, *mon ami*. But you haven't lived in France long enough to find a good pair of shoes?"

"No compliment without an insult. Sometimes I think you're an Englishman."

Max spat in disgust and muttered something unintelligible.

“Let’s see,” Hugo went on. “What else do you have?” He dug back into the case and pulled up a slim volume encased in a protective plastic envelope. Hugo inspected the book, which appeared to have its original paper cover. It was off-white, slightly pink perhaps, with a thin black line in the shape of a rectangle about an inch in from the edges, within which the book’s information was presented. The name of the author and publisher were also in black type, but the title was in block letters that would once have been blood red.

“*Une Saison En Enfer*,” Max said, looking over his shoulder. *A Season in Hell*. “By Arthur Rimbaud. That is not a first edition.”

“No? The only collector’s copy of this I’ve seen is an early edition of Zelda Fitzgerald’s translation,” Hugo said. He also remembered reading about Rimbaud on a train to Paris from London, a couple of years back. “Can I open the plastic?”

“Have I ever let you?”

“I know, I know. I can open it when I buy it. Can’t blame a man for trying.”

“If you say so,” Max said. “The friend who gave it to me said it is in good shape, which you can see, but that it has some scribble in the front.” Max waved a hand. “But he is almost blind, so maybe you’ll be lucky and find the author’s signature.”

Hugo thought for a moment. It was an important book, in the literary world if not the reading one. An extended poem first published in 1873, it was as influenced by the author’s choice of drug as it was by his passionate homosexuality. “Christine does have a thing for Oscar Wilde,” he said. “This is close enough. How much?”

Max looked at him and shrugged. “Hard to say. I haven’t looked it over, it may be worth a lot or nothing.”

“Very helpful. How about I give you five hundred Euros for both books?”

“How about you just pull out that gun and rob me, eh?”

“Then you tell me.” Hugo smiled. “You negotiate like a fox, Max.”

“A thousand for both. First you pay and then you thank me for the privilege of paying.”

"I'm on vacation," Hugo said, digging into a pocket and pulling out his wallet. "I was thinking about a trip to the states, deliver these in person, but you're taking all my travel money. If I decide to go, I'll have to walk from the airport."

"Ah, but you will have something to read when you rest along the way."

"People don't read rare books, Max, you know that." Hugo handed the old man a wad of cash. "This is all I have on me. I'll bring you the rest later?"

"The ones who don't realize they are rare are the ones who read them." Max took the money but didn't count it. "We have banks in France, you know."

"Then if you can wait thirty minutes, I'll go find one."

Max spread his hands. "Where else would I be, but waiting for you?" He paused, eyeing Hugo. "You really think you're going to America?"

"Why not? The mad romantic dash isn't really my style, but nor is sitting on my ass for two weeks."

"You don't want time off from work?"

"Use it or lose it, they tell me. Not that I mind losing it, but the State Department is convinced my mental health will suffer if I go to work because I want to, not because I have to."

"You Americans." Max shook his head. "How you came to rule the world, I have no idea."

"We have big guns," Hugo said. "And we don't surrender every time the Germans invade."

"*Touche*," Max guffawed, then pointed again to Hugo's feet. "*Alors*, if you decide to go, bring me a pair of those cowboy boots, and next time I'll give you an even better deal. Size forty-one, *s'il vous plait*."

"*Bien*." Hugo looked at his watch. "I'll go rob a bank, make a phone call, and hopefully be back in less than an hour."

"You are welcome to pay me another time. To consider those books a gift, Monsieur Hugo, for now anyway. If I change my mind, I know where to find you."

“No, you might disappear to some beach somewhere, and I don’t like owing people money. I’ll be right back.”

They shook hands and for the second time Hugo saw something in Max’s eyes. But the old man looked quickly away, up at the clouds. “I think it will snow soon,” Max said, his voice flat.

Hugo glanced at the sky, gray and heavy, and started back the way he’d come, books in hand. Thirty yards later he looked back at Max. The old man was shuffling along the quai toward his neighbor and, as he crossed the street, Max glanced over his shoulder as if someone might be following him, or watching.

The wind tugged at Hugo’s hat, seeming to rise around him and shift direction, placing its cold hands on his back, propelling him along the quai. He walked slowly at first, then his footsteps quickened and he shivered as a chill settled around his neck, cold fingers spreading down his spine. He approached a middle-aged couple dressed in identical blue ski jackets, the man holding a camera and looking hopefully around him. On any other day Hugo would have stopped, offered to take the photo, but he strode past without catching their eye. Their need to capture a moment in time for their kids or grandkids was no match for the disquiet that crowded in on Hugo, the cold wind at his back, the leaden sky above, and a rising fear that he should have pressed Max harder, made sure that everything really was all right.

CHAPTER TWO



An hour later, Hugo stood on the curb of the Quai Saint-Michel, roughly a quarter-mile from Max's stall. He waited for a break in the traffic before hurrying across the street, heading in the direction of his friend. He kept his head down against the breeze but looked up every so often, trying to catch a glimpse of the old man, but soon the cold wind blinded him with his own tears.

But Max was fine, he told himself. An angry man at a nearby stall and a pair of dropped glasses, and maybe Hugo's own need to find action where none lay. He'd known Max several years, they'd shared meals and more than a few cups of coffee, swapping stories about Paris and Texas, finding common ground in their love of books and slightly jaded view of the world. Hugo still felt a tug of urgency, but logic had slowed his walk and reminded him he was in Paris, a place to stroll, not stride.

To his right, an engine sputtered as a tourist boat cast off from the far bank. Hugo watched as the *bateau-mouche* chugged slowly into the middle of the river, its passengers huddled together on the open deck, blobs of color on a bleak winter's day. France had endured a drought since the summer, particularly to the south and east of Paris, and the little water that escaped the thirsty wine regions left the tourist barges sitting low in the river, almost too low for those on board to see over the embankment and take in the majesty of the Grand Palais and the Musee d'Orsay. As the boat passed by, he saw a little boy on the deck clinging to his father for warmth. Hugo bunched his hands deeper in his pockets. He'd find some coffee after paying Max.

He walked on beside the river, eyes watering when the breeze whipped into him as he made his way toward Pont Neuf. His path was blocked momentarily as two old ladies, bundled against the chill, held onto each other's arms and kissed hello. Their red noses bobbed from side to side, but their little bodies were too cold or too stiff to complete the second *bisou*, so they abandoned it with nods and waddled away, arm-in-arm.

As he approached Max's stall, Hugo felt a sense of relief. The old man was folding his camping chair and stowing it beside one of the metal boxes. He looked over at Hugo. "I assumed you'd run off. *Alors*, I meant to ask before, when you mentioned her. What is happening with Christine?"

"Well, I'm not sure really," Hugo said, glancing over Max's shoulder. The bouquiniste across the bridge had packed up her stall and gone. "Chrissy's in Texas, I'm here, and that was pretty much the end of it. I just called, though, and left a message about going over to see her, to talk about things."

"That's something," Max said.

"It's a long plane ride, is what it is." But with two weeks of vacation to endure, a last-minute dash to Dallas actually seemed plausible. Or only slightly idiotic. "We'll see what happens," he said. "Anyway, here's the rest of your money."

"*Merci*." Max's hand swallowed the roll of bills like that of a practiced pickpocket. "Need a receipt?"

"No, if I need one later, I know where to find you." Hugo hesitated, then put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Hey, you'd tell me if something was going on around here?"

"Going on?"

"With your neighbor. And I've never seen you drop anything, Max. A book, money, your glasses. Call it a feeling."

"*Ach*." Max turned away and shrugged. "You should have feelings for Christine, not me. Anyway, I'm thinking about retiring. Getting off the street. This job, I live around so many crazies I sometimes feel I might become one."

“You, retire? Are you serious?”

“Why not?” Max picked up a small bag of key chains and grinned. “Get a nice place in the countryside and write a novel. How about that?”

“Sounds wonderful. But I’m not sure I believe you.”

Max looked past him, along the quai, then met his eyes. “Everyone must know when to quit, Hugo. An old man can’t battle the forces of evil alone, you know, not for long anyway.”

“Forces of evil sounds a little dramatic. Are you serious?”

“*Mais oui.*” Max spat and then rubbed his chin. “The cold in winter, the heat in summer, the miserly tourists, the bums that harass me for my hard-earned cash every day.” He looked away. “There are many evil forces, you should know that.”

Hugo shook his head, unsure how serious Max was, and stood there for a moment watching his friend fuss in front of his stall. They both looked up as a seagull squawked low over the parapet, whirling down to the water. Hugo thought about Christine and being impetuous. Maybe he should go.

“It will be snowing within the hour,” Max said, a finger jabbing toward the sky. “I see it and I feel it.”

“Then you should pack up, old friend.” Hugo patted him on the back. “And maybe I’ll go pack a suitcase.”

But Max was no longer listening. His eyes were fixed at something over Hugo’s shoulder, his old face drawn tight. His hand opened of its own accord and the bag of key chains fell to the sidewalk.

Hugo turned sideways, alert, the back of his neck tingling as though the devil himself was breathing down his neck.

“*Bonjour, Max.*”

The man was tall and broad with an angular, chiseled face, and deep-set, dark eyes. He wore a beige raincoat and a fedora much like Hugo’s, but his was tilted low over his brow. He seemed to be ignoring Hugo on purpose, an artificial posture that heightened Hugo’s image of the man as a comic-book bad guy.

Max licked his lips and stood as tall as he could, a conscious effort at bravery. “Nica, what do you want now?”

Nica stared at the bookseller for a moment, then appeared to notice Hugo, turning his head just slightly to meet Hugo's gaze. For five long seconds neither man looked away. Then Nica smiled and turned his eyes on Max. "Just to talk. Do you have a moment?"

"Say what you have to say," Max said. "I am busy."

Nica gestured to the stone steps ten yards from the stall, stairs that led down to the walkway beside the river.

"We should talk in private," Nica said.

"I can't leave my stall."

Nica looked at Hugo and smiled again. "Your friend can look after it. This won't take long."

"I don't think he wants to go anywhere," Hugo said.

"And I don't think this is any of your business."

"*Ach*, Hugo, my busybody American. *Ça va*, it's no problem." Max nodded to the stairs. "Come on then, let's talk."

Hugo watched them disappear down the steps, Max's old shoes scuffing loudly on the stone as he descended, and Hugo fought the temptation to spy on them. He forced himself to unfold the old canvas stool and sat on it, a temporary bouquiniste in a cashmere coat and cowboy boots.

He sat for a full minute, his mind busy but his feet numbing as he worried about Max. Using the cold as an excuse, he got up and walked to the stone balustrade, and looked down to the walkway. At first it seemed empty, but then voices rolled out from under the Pont Neuf. He leaned over the parapet and saw them in the shadows of the arch. He listened for a moment, unable to hear the words but recognizing the harsh tone.

He hesitated. Nica had said that this was none of his business and Max had wanted him to butt out, but it wouldn't hurt to wander down there, just to be sure. After almost twenty years in law enforcement, inserting himself into other people's disputes was second nature, sometimes an urge he couldn't resist—especially if the dispute seemed one-sided. Whether that urge was to protect the innocent or catch the guilty didn't much matter anymore.

Hugo started down the stairs. At the bottom he heard them again, Max's voice plaintive now. His quickened his step and looked past the men as he heard a low grumble from further under the bridge where a motor launch bobbed in the river behind them. Its propellers churned the gray water into white as an invisible hand throttled it against the current, keeping it close to the bank.

He was barely a dozen paces away when Max raised both hands, his old voice cracking, "Nica, *non*." But Nica ignored Max's pleas and grabbed the bookseller by his lapels, pulling him close until their noses brushed.

"Hey!" Hugo called out. He tried to control his anger, to keep his voice calm. Better to diffuse than inflame, he told himself. "What's going on?"

Nica released Max and turned. "I told you, this has nothing to do with you. Go away."

"Fine," said Hugo. "But if you're all done, I'll walk monsieur back to his stall." He held the man's dark stare and when he got no reply, added, "I saw some postcards I want to buy."

The movement was fast and unexpected, a blur that ended with Nica holding the ice pick high, as if he were proud of his flourish. He held the tip between Max's eyes, then pointed it at Hugo. "Go. Take all the postcards you want. They are free today."

Hugo hesitated. He could take two steps back and pull out his gun but, for as long as he'd carried a weapon, he'd never started a fire fight, and he had no desire to start one now. And if he wasn't quick enough, Max could be hurt, even killed. Even if he did win a shoot-out he'd pay dearly, justified or not: his job was to protect the ambassador and visiting dignitaries, not play Wyatt Earp with riverside hoodlums.

But he looked at his trembling friend and knew that he wouldn't just walk away.

"If this is a question of money," Hugo began, "I owe monsieur a little and would be happy to—"

"Enough." Nica spat the words and a sneer crossed his face as he turned his head to look at the boat behind him. Without warning,

he shoved Max against the high stone wall and started toward Hugo, moving like a boxer with his shoulders hunched forward, his steps small and quick, the ice pick circling. Hugo resisted the impulse to back away, instead turning sideways and taking one tiny step back as the man reached him, the point of the pick spiraling toward his chest. Hugo waited a split-second more, then stepped in close, blocking Nica's thrust with his forearm, bringing the palm of his hand up sharply into the soft flesh under his assailant's chin. Nica's head snapped back and his knees buckled, and Hugo swept his legs from under him to make sure he hit the stone walkway hard. Nica rolled on the ground, clutching his throat, the ice pick on the ground between them.

Hugo started forward, reaching for his gun, just as Nica propped himself on one elbow. His other hand flashed out toward Hugo who stopped in his tracks, his eyes drawn to Nica's sharp features, smug behind the silver pistol in his fist.

"If this had a silencer, you'd be dead," Nica snarled. Still watching Hugo, Nica climbed to his feet and waved an arm at the boat, which had drifted a hundred feet or more from them. The engine barked and the bow lifted a fraction as it lurched forward, its windows black in the shadow of the bridge. Nica grabbed Max by the scruff of the neck and put the barrel of the gun against his temple, narrowing his eyes at Hugo. "Stay here until I can't see you anymore. You try to leave, he goes in the water." Like crabs locked together, the two men edged backward toward the boat, sidling at the edge of the walkway. "Until I can't see you," Nica called out. "And I will watch."

Hugo looked at the face behind the gun and felt adrenaline course through his body, urging him to act. But he knew better than to challenge an armed man, he'd seen the results of that before, so he just clenched his jaw and nodded, committing Nica's features to memory before looking one more time at the terrified Max, whose eyes implored Hugo for help.

In less than a minute the men were on the launch, leaving Hugo helpless on the walkway, his hands twitching for his gun, or at least his phone. But he couldn't risk consigning the bouquiniste to the slick gray

water, so he did as he'd been told and watched as the boat revved loud and swung away, heading east against the current, passing in the lea of Notre Dame.

He was a statue on the walkway, turned to stone by the figure at the stern of the boat, the sharp-featured man who stood watch over him and also over his victim, the huddled form of the old bouquiniste at his feet. Hugo glared back, his eyes fixed on the boat until it finally rounded the tip of the Ile de la Cité and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER THREE



Hugo stood by Max's stall and told his story to the first gendarme on the scene, a waif of a man who spoke no English and kept his pen and notepad busy as Hugo talked. A small crowd gathered behind the policeman, wide-eyed but wary, drawn like moths to the blue light that flashed atop his little white car.

"Wait here please, sir," the policeman said. "There is a detective *en route*, he will take your statement."

"Look, forget the statement. Right now I want your river police looking for that boat, maybe a helicopter, too. A man with a gun just kidnapped a friend of mine, in broad daylight and—"

"I heard you, sir," the gendarme interrupted. He looked over his shoulder as an unmarked car pulled up behind his. "*Voilà*, the detective. Talk to him about that, I don't have the authority."

The detective was tall and lean, with the dark skin and hooked nose that spoke of Arab descent. He wore a green woolen sweater under an open overcoat, and a matching ski hat that was pulled low over his ears. He slammed his car door, then looked up at the sky, sighed, and walked slowly over to the gendarme. He stood frowning as he listened to the hurried briefing, his hands deep in his pockets. When the gendarme had finished, the detective nodded and walked over to Hugo. He drew a hand out of his pocket and offered it to Hugo. It was ice cold.

"I'm told you are one of us, *mon ami*," he said. He spoke in French, his voice low and worn as if he'd spent all day smoking the unfiltered cigarettes that Hugo could smell on him. "My name's David Durand."

“Hugo Marston. What do you mean, ‘one of us?’” Hugo asked.

“Law enforcement.” He nodded toward the gendarme. “He says you work at the American embassy, speak French fluently, and carry a gun.”

“Former FBI, now security chief at the embassy,” Hugo said. “Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but—”

“I have given the order for our river police to look for the boat you described. If a helicopter can be found, we’ll send one up to help. But it will be dark soon and the pilots complain when we make them fly at night, especially so close to the center of the city. Not safe, they say.” He shivered and looked around. “Can you wait for a few moments? We have some witnesses I need to talk to.”

“Of course,” said Hugo, watching Durand approach a small group of on-lookers. Hugo was comforted by the assurances of police boats, and maybe a chopper, but equally irritated by the man’s languid attitude, his unhurried walk, as if this were a burglary with the intruders long gone.

Hugo turned and looked out over the water, picturing Max out there somewhere. He acted the gruff, tough guy, and maybe he once was, but Max was no longer young. Hugo had no idea what the thug Nica had wanted from his friend, but it wasn’t some random shake-down. He wanted something specific and Hugo wondered what he would do to get it. His face flushed with anger as he imagined them hurting Max, beating a weak old man. Even if he had the mental toughness to resist, Hugo knew that violence to someone Max’s age, even relatively a minor assault, could prove too much for an old heart. Whoever had Max, whoever wanted something from him, could kill him without meaning to. Without even trying.

Hugo spun around when he heard the detective behind him. Durand had a frown on his face and dark green eyes watched Hugo intently. “*Monsieur, un problème.* I have spoken to two people who say that your friend got onto the boat of his own free will.”

Hugo stared at the detective, wondering if he’d misheard or if his mind had somehow mistranslated. “What did you say?”

“Two witnesses, monsieur. They say your friend left of his own free will.”

“*Non*, that’s not possible, it’s not . . . Who are the witnesses?”

“Why? Do you plan to make them change their stories?” It was said lightly, but the watchfulness in Durand’s eyes remained.

“Of course not.” Hugo bit back his anger. “Look, the man had a gun, I can give you a description, I can pick him out of a line up. And I can assure you, Max did not go with him voluntarily.”

The detective looked out across the water, a black ribbon in the gathering dusk. “*Bien*.” He turned to the gendarme. “Make sure you have a full statement, every possible detail. I will go supervise the search. If they are still out there, we will find them.”

“*Oui*, monsieur,” said the officer, flipping open his notepad.

Durand took a last look at Hugo, then turned and walked to his car, the word “if” hanging between them.



Max had been right—the snow began to fall twenty minutes later as Hugo was walking home. He crossed the street into Rue Jacob and paused for a moment, bemused and angry by what had just happened, somehow unwilling to enjoy, perhaps undeserving of, the warmth and comfort of his apartment.

He took off his hat so the flakes could tickle his face and opened his mouth like a child, letting them fizz on his tongue. He walked on, the sense of unreality that had settled around him magnified as the falling snow muffled the sound of his footsteps on the sidewalk. He paused again, once, and thought he could hear a hiss as the snow hit the ground and melted. The flakes were large, though, and stuck to his coat and hair, so he knew they’d stick to the ground soon enough.

At the door to his apartment building he stopped and looked up and down the street. A hush had descended, the quiet that comes with the start of a heavy snowfall. He turned, wiped his boots on the large

mat, and went into the foyer, nodding at the Cretian concierge who sat at the reception desk with a novel in his hand.

“*Salut, Dimitrios.*” Hugo took off his hat and batted the snow from it.

“*Bonsoir, monsieur.*” Dimitrios sprang to his feet. A wiry old man with a brush moustache, he looked after his tenants as though his life depended on it. “How are you? Friday night plans?”

“No, I’ve had my excitement for this week.” Hugo shook his head and kept moving. “Have a good night, Dimitrios.”

“*Merci. Vous aussi, monsieur.*”

Hugo trotted up the stairs to his apartment, passing straight through the living room and into his bedroom. He dropped the Rimbaud and the Agatha Christie on the bed and unholstered his gun, a Glock 19, and laid it next to the books. Then he knelt in front of a safe that he’d had specially built. Disguised as his bedside table, it was essentially a steel box with an elegant mahogany facing, and it was bolted to the wall beside his bed. He opened the safe and put his gun on the narrow shelf next to a larger, wooden-handled Smith & Wesson.

Hugo checked the time, six o’clock, so midday in America. A good time to call Christine again, but he had some things to do first. He wanted to call Max’s home, go there in person just to prove to himself that what he’d witnessed really happened, that Max hadn’t been a party to his own kidnap. But he realized that he didn’t even know Max’s last name, let alone his address or phone number. A vague recollection that they’d swapped last names, sure, probably over coffee or beer at their favorite dive, Chez Maman, but it wasn’t close to the tip of his tongue, and he felt a little ashamed about that. Instead, he dialed the police prefecture and asked for Detective Durand. Three dead-ends later, a man’s voice came on the line.

“Monsieur, you are looking for David Durand?”

“*Oui.*”

“*Alors*, he is not available. Can someone else help you?”

“Is he on duty and not available, or gone-home-for-the-day not available?”

The voice hesitated. "I'm not sure. Unavailable is all I know. Would you like to leave your name and number?"

"That depends," Hugo said tautly. "When will he get the message?"

"I can't say for sure. When he is available, I suppose. I know he works on Sundays."

Hugo hung up the phone, swore under his breath, and thought about calling his boss, the ambassador. But he had no real reason to pull strings, not yet at least. As far as he knew, Durand was out searching for Max, directing a manhunt on both sides of the Seine. But when he pictured the lethargic detective, he couldn't help but doubt it.

Instead, he perched on the bed and took a calming breath. He was not used to being shut out of an investigation, either by intent or through bureaucracy, and it was especially frustrating when his friend was the one who needed help, who needed very badly to be rescued—and soon. He looked at the phone. If he couldn't help Max, he thought, then maybe he could do something positive about the situation with Christine.

He picked up the phone and dialed. When her cell phone sent him to voicemail, for the second time that day, he tried her home number.

A man answered. "Hello?"

"May I speak with Christine, please?"

"Certainly." The familiar voice paused. "Is this Hugo?"

"That's Mr. Marston to you, doc."

"Look, I'm glad you called. I never had a chance to explain—"

"There's nothing to explain," Hugo interrupted. "You had an affair with a married woman who also happened to be your patient. And my wife. Now hand her the phone because there's nothing you have to say that I want to hear, and anything I have to say will be uncivil."

A moment later, Christine came on the line. "Hugo?"

"Howdy. So is the good doctor a permanent resident now?"

"I'm a divorced woman, remember. You don't have the moral high ground anymore."

"Funny thing, Christine. Even when I had the moral high ground, you were the one who acted outraged." He took a breath. "I'm sorry, I didn't call to argue with you."

“Good, I don’t want that either. Your message said something about coming over.”

“Yes, but I can’t now. Something’s come up.”

A moment’s silence. “Well, there’s a surprise.”

“Take it easy, Chrissy, it’s not my fault.”

“It never is.” She sounded weary now. “That’s just how it works in your world.”

“And yet still you blame me.”

“You chose that world, not me.”

“I don’t want to rehash old arguments, Chrissy, I’d just like to be able to come over and talk to you. If this . . . situation gets sorted out.”

“Hugo, no. I’m sorry, I really am. But . . . I’ve moved on.”

“Moved on? I suppose I shouldn’t blame you for that.”

“Thank you.” He could hear the sadness in her voice, but tempered by a smile. “You always were insufferably understanding.”

“Thanks, but I’d like to know if there’s any chance of you moving back.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“You’re not even willing to talk about it?”

“No, Hugo. I really have moved on, so there’s nothing left to talk about. I’m sorry.”

He thought, for a few seconds, about pushing harder but he knew her well enough to take her at her word. “Well, you can’t blame me for trying,” he said. “You were quite a catch.”

“Were? Thanks a lot.”

He smiled at her mock outrage and looked down at the two books beside him. “Hey, this may sound weird but I bought you a couple of presents. OK if I mail them to you?”

“Oh. No, I really don’t think—”

“A couple of books for your collection. One’s a Hercule Poirot mystery, first edition, and the other is . . . kind of like an Oscar Wilde, but more personal.”

“You’re very thoughtful. But you’re right, it would be weird. Please don’t send them.” Her voice caught and he knew she was about to cry. “Please, I thought I’d got past all this, you’re making it difficult again.”

“OK, don’t worry about it. I’ll keep the books.”

“I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Me too. Take care of yourself.”

He hung up and dropped the phone on the bed. He picked up the Rimbaud and looked at the cover, then set it back down. He didn’t feel much like homosexual love poetry, either.

But what had he expected from Christine, really? They’d been matched up by socialite friends after their first marriages had ended, and they’d talked about being in love because of the fun they had, and the sex. But had they ever gotten around to falling in love? Marriage had seemed easier the second time around, especially without the pressure of new careers to distract them. And the gloss had been thick. His job as security chief in Washington, DC, had been prestigious and was followed by an exciting two years as head of security at the London embassy, with parties and meetings with heads of state and celebrities from all over the world.

And, of course, his stories from the FBI. All this had entertained Christine, kept her starry-eyed and impressed. She had been, too, an intelligent and attractive companion, someone he could discuss international politics with until their third or fourth martinis drowned all semblance of coherent thought.

It took a while for him to discover that everything she knew came from books or television. Not until the last year had he realized that, despite all her wonderful traits, a sense of adventure was absent. And adventure, the curiosity to explore a place or thing in person, to lay hands on it and see it with his own eyes rather than just read about it, that was what drove Hugo Marston. They had traveled, sure, but with her family wealth they had done so in comfort, even when in Mumbai or Windhoek. Perhaps especially then. Hugo, from a modest background, had been seduced by this comfort and had slipped into his wife’s travel habits. He hadn’t noticed until too late that he’d not inhaled the scents of the Cairo markets, or haggled poorly with a vendor in downtown Delhi but, instead, had watched from the car as their driver did it for him. But even knowing all this, he’d still believed they had a chance

because knowing someone was more important than what the movies and novels described as love.

He picked up both books and put them on the bedside table. As he did so, the Agatha Christie fell open and a business card fell to the floor. He picked it up: it was the card of a Paris bookseller, one Hugo had visited once, maybe twice, over the years. It bore the seller's name, address, and hours of operation. Hugo looked down at the books. He would have liked to add them to his meager collection, but the damn things had just become keepsakes of a marriage ended, and were unhappy reminders of what had just happened to Max, too. As he imagined selling them, his mind searched for reasons not to, and came up blank. One thought, a vague one, was that they might be connected with Max's kidnap, but it was a possibility easily dismissed: bouquinistes weren't kidnaped for books worth a few hundred dollars—if they were, a seller would go missing every day. And if the man called Nica had been after one of the books, Max would simply have told Hugo to hand it over.

Hugo ran a hand over his face, frustrated and tired, and thought about running a hot bath. That's what he needed now. Tomorrow morning he'd try again to find answers about what had happened to Max. He lay the card on top of the books and headed into the bathroom.