

# **The Bleiberg Project**

**A Consortium Thriller**

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Translated from French by Simon John

**LE FRENCH BOOK** 

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## **Praise for *The Bleiberg Project***

“A solid thriller.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“An astounding thriller.”

—Tele7jours

“A unique, exceptional thriller... a phenomenon.”

—Gérard Collard, TV host, France 5

“A mix between action movie and an espionage novel, with a tender, human story, all together making it unforgettable.”

—psychovision.net

“A solid, spellbinding, captivating story that skillfully alternates between fast-paced adventures in the present day and intermissions drawn from history.”

—mysterejazz

“A heart-racing story served up at an exciting pace. The action never lets up, with events piling up at a breakneck pace, leaving the reader barely time to integrate them. The character psychology finely perceived and believable.”

—Bouquinbourg

*The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.*  
—Winston Churchill

# DAY 1

## CHAPTER 1

### *Stutthof Concentration Camp, 1942.*

Two years. Two long years in the frozen hell of northern Poland. You couldn't say he wasn't devoted! Horst Geller had joined the *Schutzstaffel* at the beginning of 1936. He was twenty-three. He had never been a big Hitler fan, but when he saw the way the führer fascinated the mob, he knew joining up was the smart thing to do. Horst had chosen the SS to be left alone, not to be part of Hitler's personal protection squad. As a member of the SS, he knew his family would be respected and protected from the cloud of paranoia that hung over Germany. His homeland had gone insane and taken Europe down with it. But one day, the war would be over, and order would return. Horst was even willing to bet his little apartment on it.

In 1940, he found himself married and soon thereafter, a father. His whole life changed with this double reward. But 1941 hadn't begun well. His higher-ups gave him a promotion, which in itself was good, even if he hadn't asked for anything. But it meant a transfer to Poland to guard a prison camp. It was an important mission, and all of his attempts to refuse the transfer had failed. So Horst had gone, heavy-hearted, leaving his wife, Karin, and his baby daughter, Gisela, behind.

"At least it's not the front," he told his grief-stricken wife in lieu of goodbye. Two colorless summers passed, both followed by winters, proving every night that hell is, indeed, a very cold place. From time to time, Horst got leave and went to Danzig, thirty-five miles to the west, where he'd get drunk and try to forget his solitude with the "soldiers' girls." His pay kept his wife and baby comfortably fed, which meant one worry fewer. Work in the camp wasn't very complicated. He just kept an eye on the dissidents sentenced to forced labor in the *Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke*, a special weapons factory that belonged to the SS. Sometimes he pulled Jews out of trucks and shoved them into the barracks, and once a week he supervised the distribution of the meager rations of bread and turnip soup. He occasionally took pleasure in seeing the Jews in their rightful place, but there were also children, and it was becoming more and more difficult to bear their fearful gazes and pleading. Horst didn't want to hurt them. Of course, he had no sympathy for the Jews, and if he was asked to execute kids, he would, and for a simple reason: It was him or them.

Horst was an ordinary man lost in an endless winter, surrounded by hungry dogs and maniacal executioners. Sometimes he wondered how many other soldiers felt the way he did. How many of the elite soldiers answering to *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler wept at night? At least one other, he hoped.

But SS Geller was even more depressed than usual that night. The temperature hovered around five below, and he was standing guard at the hospital, an imposing building much cleaner than the prisoners' barracks. The hospital would have given him the chills if he weren't already frozen stiff. The Jewish children who still had the strength to stand were sent here to satisfy the needs of the strange man

who directed the place, known only by the name *Herr Doktor*.

The doctor never left the hospital and never mixed with the guards. Nobody had heard his voice. He communicated his needs in notes to the camp's new commander, Major Hoppe. Sometimes equipment was transferred from the weapons factory to the hospital, but the camp director was the only other person allowed inside. Horst had once come upon Major Hoppe unloading the shipping cases himself. Hoppe was a cruel, brutal man, not the kind of guy to take orders from just anyone, so the doctor had to be an intimidating character. Still, nobody tried to find out more. In the absurd world of Camp Stutthof, ignorance eased one's sleep and extended one's life expectancy.

November 9, 1942, was a special day. That evening, Himmler himself was going to visit the hospital. The camp's best soldiers were told to show the military and spiritual leader of the SS just how impeccably Stutthof was run. If everything went well, Hoppe thought they might receive more resources, men and equipment.

Horst was jittery. He took a long, hard drag on his cigarette and felt the smoke warm him up. His black leather gloves reeked of cold tobacco. He caught sight of a guard with two huge attack dogs patrolling the camp's barbed wire perimeter. At least that guy got to move around.

There were nine soldiers waiting with Horst, conscientiously freezing their asses off in the name of their supreme leader. The group was silent, but the looks they exchanged said much about their general weariness. Himmler and his staff of brownnosers would arrive in a few moments. The men would perform their pantomime without a hitch, and tomorrow morning a hot cup of coffee would help Horst forget the frigid cold.

The evening was bright, and the moon and stars shone from an immaculate sky, lighting up the fine mist that perpetually rose from the region's boggy ground. (The bright yellow searchlights in the guard towers were turned on only in high alerts.) Suddenly Horst and the nine other men threw down their cigarettes and crushed them under their heels. The sound of a motor could be heard coming down the dirt road that connected the camp to civilization. The rumble grew louder. Soon they could make out two approaching military vehicles. To their astonishment, the motorcade had only these two vehicles. The latest news from the front was good, but how could such an important man have such a small escort? Horst concluded the visit was top secret or, at the very least, meant to be discreet. The gates swung open, and the vehicles rolled to a halt in front of the honor guard.

The ten SS men snapped to attention, rifles resting on their left shoulders, their right arms lifted at a forty-five-degree angle, hands extended. Major Hoppe and the doctor hurried down the hospital steps and waited motionless in the middle of the two rows of soldiers. Four blond men emerged from the first vehicle. None were under six feet tall. They wore simple black uniforms in spite of the bitter cold.

One of them moved to the second car, opened its rear door and saluted *Heil Hitler* in a single crisp motion. Heinrich Himmler stepped out and gave the colossal soldier a friendly pat on the arm. A stiff aide-de-camp followed behind, carrying a heavy briefcase. The four men swiftly surrounded the *reichsführer-SS* and his assistant.

Horst watched the spectacle unfold from the corner of his eye. Four Bavarian woodsmen, dressed for August, protecting two little men in glasses, wrapped warmly in their greatcoats. Himmler headed up the two lines of soldiers with his men in tow. Major Hoppe and the doctor tried to hide their disappointment as Himmler momentarily ignored them to review the honor guard, smiling and uttering words of encouragement to the men. Himmler stopped in front of Horst.

"Is this climate too harsh for you, private?"

Surprised, Horst felt his heart begin to race. The devil could read his mind! He seized the opportunity. A little sucking-up couldn't hurt. "For you, Your Excellency, I would guard the North

Pole.” Himmler came closer. He had the fat, round face of a prosperous family man, but his pince-nez framed a malicious and disturbing expression.

“That isn’t what I asked,” Himmler replied under his breath. Horst stiffened.

He’d been exposed, but he remained calm. He was tired of pretending. “Poland is hell. I miss Hamburg, Your Excellency.”

Keeping his gaze fixed on Horst, Himmler removed his glasses and wiped them clean. “You’ll be transferred tomorrow.” Horst’s smile evaporated, and he swallowed nervously. He’d gone too far. Time stood still. Himmler’s face wore a placid expression. “You’ll be sent to Wewelsburg Castle. I’m sure you’ll find the Westphalian climate more agreeable. I need more people like you—people who speak their minds. I’m surrounded by toadies, competent though they are.” He nodded, indicating Major Hoppe.

Horst tightened his salute in relief. “Thank you, Your Excellency.” He held back a *Heil Hitler* that wouldn’t have helped matters at this point. Himmler turned away and gave instructions as he walked. His assistant nodded in agreement. They joined the camp leaders and swept into the front hall of the top-secret hospital. The masquerade was over.

The other guards gathered around Horst, taking out their cigarettes and lighters in unison. They warmly congratulated their lucky colleague. Horst tried to conceal his happiness, aware that his companions would soon be tormented with jealousy. They eventually dispersed and headed back to their quarters, but Horst stayed alone, his feet planted in the middle of the path. The knowledge that he would soon leave seemed to sharpen his senses. From now on, every breath of this frigid air would bring him closer to Germany and closer to home. He would hate Poland for the rest of his life.

One day he’d forget the horrors committed here. He took out the photo of his wife and baby from his inside pocket and kissed it. Suddenly, his vision blurred. A sharp noise wracked his skull. Where was it coming from? He tilted his head to the right. Orange flames enveloped his shoulder. The cold gave way to warmth, the world teetered, and he fell face-down. As the life painlessly left his body, Horst saw a trickle of blood run across the ground and over the photograph he was still holding in his burned hand. A child’s bare feet scampered across frozen earth; this was his last vision. Horst Geller, SS man by happenstance, a husband and father swept up in the general madness of war, died November 9, 1942. He was one of ten official victims in an assassination attempt against Heinrich Himmler. The master of the Black Order survived.

The final solution rolled inexorably onward.



## CHAPTER 2

*Manhattan, present day, 9:48 a.m.*

This morning, like every other morning, I'm hung over. My brain is fried. I'm a piece of shit. My head is pounding, and as I grope for aspirin on the bedside table, the lamp falls to the floor and breaks. How did that get there? When I sprinkle two pills into my palm, I feel better already. I toss them back and swallow them dry—water's for pussies. I bury my head in the pillow. I don't know what time it is, and I don't give a damn. There's a nagging sound, like something continually falling—or a lot of little things. My mouth tastes like tobacco. I'm a human ashtray.

I identify the sound. Water. A girl is in my shower. What's her name again? I don't remember, and I don't give a shit either. If she's taking a shower, she's leaving soon. Fine by me. Everything is fine by me, as long as I take the hits. There's one thing left to do, but I don't have the guts. I just want to be done with it once and for all. I could use a rope or jump off a building, but I'm a coward. So until I find an easy way out, I'm killing myself one day at a time. It's the same thing in the end.

She comes through the room, and I open an eye to see what she looks like. Small, brunette, tight. Not bad. She doesn't look at me and probably doesn't know my name either. But now I remember hers. Rachel. Is it Wednesday? Rachel was Tuesday. Actually, no, I don't know her name. She makes an incredible amount of noise for somebody getting dressed. I hear her saying something from the other room. My face is still in the pillow, and I can't understand. Probably "see you later." Sure. See you never.

Finally I'm alone. I open my eyes. The fog in my head is gone, but it took its sweet time leaving. Ten in the morning, and I'm late for work as usual. That bitch splashed water all over the bathroom! I hate that. It's a holdover from the days when I liked everything to be neat and in its place. I mop up the floor with a towel and get in the shower. The warm jets of water massage my body and gradually wake me up.

I'm thirty-one. I'm an asshole trader who works for a piece-of-shit Wall Street firm. I'm just a nobody, but I still seem to have a name: Jay Novacek. I turn off the water and grab a pack of cigarettes that's been left beside the sink. I couldn't just leave it there all alone, poor thing. I light one, because if I'm going to stick with my two-pack-a-day habit I have to get cracking. I look in the mirror and have to admit that I'm pretty well-built, though the memories of college sports and my occasional squash matches seem pretty distant now. I'm a good-looking guy. Girls say so, anyway. Blue eyes and a square jaw—they like that. The mirror steams up, and I can't see myself anymore. Thank God.

10:20. I'm smoking my third cigarette and sprawled on the beige leather couch in the living room. A steaming cup of coffee rests on the glass coffee table. Coffee is the only way I'll make it through the day. If everything goes well, I'll be dressed in ten minutes and in my office before eleven. Miracles can

happen.

I hate my apartment. It reeks of money—big, empty and cold. Did I ever like this shit? Leather? Glass and black lacquer? Abstract scribbles and splatters by painters more fashionable than talented? I guess the answer is yes. I recognize my personality only in the plastic Spider-Man and Doctor Doom figurines on top of my stereo system.

I take another drag. I'm a piece of shit who can't even remember what he did last night. But I do remember every detail of one day by heart, to the point that I play it in my mind again and again. How long has it been? Six months? My memory of that day is as vivid as the coffee cup in front of me. I close my eyes and replay the events of that day for the umpteenth time...

I'm at the office. In front of me are six computer screens, blinking everywhere, with graphs, curves, trends, numbers. The world's economy in a nutshell. On the other side of the Earth, people get up, work, pay back their loans, do their best to scrape by. But to me they don't live. They produce. And what they produce makes me rich.

It's Monday morning, and Dow Jones has collapsed. My friends are all trying to sell, but I'm buying everything that comes past. At the market's close that afternoon, the results are unprecedented: an eleven-point gain. I'm a star. I've just made a billion dollars for my firm, and fifty million of it is mine. Nobody's hotter than me. My boss is on cloud nine. My clients call, one after another, to thank me for what I've done. Champagne in the boardroom with the decrepit senior partners, conservative assholes, every one. The associates join us, and we pass the bottle around. When it's empty we go to dinner—French and expensive. You do what you have to do. The other traders watch us go by like masters of the universe. They throw me dirty looks. They can go screw themselves, the losers. In the elevator we joke and slap each other on the back.

Up until then everything was going fine. The sound of the doorbell snaps me back to the present. 10:23. Shit! Who the hell could it be? Whatever. Go on, asshole, ring all you want. He's a persistent asshole. I drag myself to the door. This apartment is way too big. I slide back the deadbolt and turn the knob. Two huge military men are standing ramrod straight in the hallway. They're wearing their best brass, white gloves, hats, the whole nine yards. Even their medals are out, and these guys have a few. I'd say the first guy, the older one in front, has about fifty. His clone, twenty years younger, has nearly as many. They would seem to serve a purely decorative function.

"Mr. Corbin?" (Nobody's called me that for at least twenty years.)

"Mr. Corbin is my father. I'm Jeremy Novacek."

The penguins don't even flinch. "Jeremy Novacek, we're here to present our sincere condolences on behalf of the armed forces of the United States of America. Your father, Air Force Lieutenant General Daniel J. Corbin, passed away. It's an honor to present you with this flag, as well as your father's military decorations." They give a military salute—rigid but clean. I'm not sure what to do. They don't look like they want to come in and kick back. I salute in return. It seems to work. They turn to the left and leave in step with each other. I push the door shut and stand there. I'm holding a flag folded in a triangle and a box of metal scraps stamped with eagles and stars.

My old man is dead. I lean against the bar in the kitchen, grab a bottle of cognac and throw back a gulp. News like this calls for a celebration. Today's program has just changed: first the office and then a train to Poughkeepsie. I ought to tell my mother that Lieutenant General Corbin finally decided to kick it.

## CHAPTER 3

Bernard Dean wore his fifties with elegance. There were no lines on his face, but he was beginning to get moles on his forearms, the first signs of age. His accumulated years only strengthened his character, and the white hair at his temples didn't bother him. He watched the Hudson from the windows of his massive office. As a black man at the head of one of America's most successful financial firms, Bernard was proud of his background. Every day he spent a few minutes of his valuable time reflecting on how he had gotten to where he was and meditating on his success. He was a bold man, perhaps even a bit arrogant. He had overcome his beginnings and had proved to the world that persistence and hard work still had value. Sometimes he wondered if his kind of success would be possible in the future. He wouldn't bet on it. After all, his work was a major cause of unemployment, exclusion and social injustice. But maybe a dedicated black president could kick-start the old kind of American dream Bernard had once believed in.

For the past six months, his morning meditations had been increasingly clouded by his worries for Jeremy. He'd hired brilliant young Jeremy for his dynamism but also for his sensitivity, a rare quality in the world of finance. In a way, Bernard saw himself in Jeremy, who was white, of course, but still—nobody's perfect. They had both grown up without fathers and shared a fierce desire to succeed on their own terms. It took only a week for the two of them to forge bonds that went far deeper than their professional ties. Hypersensitive people tend to be drawn to one another, and with time Bernard had developed fatherly feelings for Jeremy. Maybe he was only filling a hole in his life, but their relationship was sincere. If he had had a son, Bernard Dean would have wanted him to be like Jeremy Novacek. That was why Jeremy's decline weighed so heavily on Bernard, who was frustrated by his inability to ease the young man's suffering. Lately, Jeremy had walled himself off from the world. Still, Bernard kept faith.

As the president of the board at Eckhart, Dean and Aldrin, he clung to the hope that one day peace and forgiveness would finally be granted to both of them.

The phone rang and snapped Bernard out of his daydream. He picked up and hung up without speaking a word. Then he turned back to the windows with his hands behind his back. His office door opened. "Good morning, Jeremy. You're early today. It's not even noon."

"It's a big day. Celebrations are in order." Jeremy's tone shifted. "I have to go to Poughkeepsie to see my mom. I'll be gone a few days."

Bernard turned, expecting to see Jeremy in his usual state of decrepitude. He was astonished to find him wearing an impeccable suit, his face freshly shaven and his hair neatly arranged. He repressed a desire to raise an eyebrow. "Well look at you, Mr. GQ. To what do we owe the honor?"

"Dad died, and I have to go break the news to Mom."

The news hit Bernard, and his smile vanished. "Well, stay longer than that if you have to. Your mother needs you. She'll be devastated."

“You mean she’s crazy.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s what the doctors say.”

“Your mother is an admirable woman. She’s just wrapped up in her worries. Even you can understand that.”

Jeremy didn’t react. “No, I can’t. But now Dad is gone, so at least she’ll have a good reason to cry. I’ll be back to business as usual in two days max.”

Bernard had been calm, but now his face grew rigid with anger. “Listen Jeremy, stop feeling sorry for yourself for two minutes, and think about it. You have enough money to live comfortably to the end of your days. Get out of here, enjoy what life has to offer, and stop torturing yourself. I’m sick of feeling sorry for you. You think you’re the only one with problems? The only guy who feels guilty? Don’t expect any more patience from me. You’ve profited handsomely. Get out of here. Go see your mother, and stay with her as long as it takes. I’ll tell security to throw you out if you’re back before next week.”

The two men stared each other down in silence. Jeremy smiled bitterly and turned to leave. “Whatever you say. You’re the boss.”

“My patience is wearing thin, Jeremy. If you’re trying to get fired, you’re on the right track.”

Jeremy sucked in his breath. “You can’t save me, Bernard. Nobody can. But no matter what you think, I’m glad you tried.”

“You’re the only one who can pull yourself out of the hole.”

Jeremy dropped his head and sighed. “You won’t get rid of me that easily,” he muttered. Bernard watched him leave. The man he had tried to help was going through hell, and it was, in part, his fault.

## CHAPTER 4

The ninety-minute train ride from Grand Central Station to Poughkeepsie seems to last forever. I only go up to St. Francis Hospital once a month. Truth is, I can't bear to see the life slipping out of my mother. The hospital has a good reputation. The doctors and staff are competent and attentive. Mom's been there five years. The Air Force picks up the bill—small compensation for a ten-year stretch with Lieutenant General Corbin. Bernard's right. She's not nuts. She has just let the pain gnaw at her and withdrawn into near-permanent silence. Only my visits bring the power of speech back. But the dialogue never lasts long. Conversations always begin with news of New York, then veer into the career of her little Jeremy. Invariably, the topic of dear daddy Daniel comes up. I pile insults on him. My mother begs me to be more understanding. When the conversation hits the wall, she withdraws into her world once more, and I catch the train back to my pitiful life.

Since what I call deep inside “the fucking accident,” of which Mom knows nothing, my visits are fewer and far between. I don't want to turn up a dirty, drunken loser. So I come less often.

Without really knowing how, I find myself in the middle of a long white hallway, outside room 204. A nurse comes out, startling me. “Hey, your mother will be pleased to see you.” As soon as she's said it, the young woman takes off down the hallway, a hint of reproach in her eyes.

Before the door closes completely, I grasp the handle and peek inside. Mom's sitting next to the window. She spends her days looking at the gardens inside the hospital compound.

“Hi, Mom.” Ann Novacek Corbin turns her head toward me. A smile lights up her wrinkled but shapely oval face. It's not hard to see what a beauty she was. And hard not to be moved by how fragile she is. “Hello, Jeremy, my boy.”

I step forward to kiss her. My throat's dry. Tears well in my eyes. I manage to hold them back. A long embrace. Neither of us wants it to end. I wish I could cry, lose myself in her gentle, protective arms and let all my hatred and pain gush out. Become a child again. Return to innocence. But I do none of that. We share an affectionate glance in a silence that Mom breaks. “So, how are you, dear?” I straighten up and shrug.

“In great shape. Don't worry.”

“Your suit's a marvelous fit. You always looked good in black. It brings out your beautiful eyes. You have your father's eyes. Did I ever tell you?”

“At least a thousand times, Mom.”

I pause. There are a thousand ways to break the news. But faced with the inevitable pain of the loss, none of them seem like the right one. I look down. “Speaking of Dad, I need to tell you something.”

“We're not going to fight, are we?”

“No, not today. I brought... Here.” I hand her the folded flag and the official letter. She reads it

without batting an eye, then folds it and slips it back into the envelope. Only the slight trembling of those parchment hands betrays her grief. They pick at the flag's stars like a cat playing with a blanket. A tear rolls down her cheek. "You're not sad, I suppose."

"No. He walked out on you twenty-five years ago, Mom. He walked out on us. Don't ask me to mourn the guy. At the very most, he was my progenitor. Not my father."

Mom closes her eyes. She mutters a brief prayer. When she opens her eyes again, I flash her a concerned glance. She raises her hands to the nape of her neck and delicately unclasps her necklace. She glides the locket along the long chain she is never without. Her fingers close over the gold medallion. She presses it to her heart, then opens my palm and places in it the most precious thing she has left. The locket infuses me with the warmth of her body. "Here. It's time you knew."

"Knew what? What are you talking about?"

I was expecting wailing, sobbing and a fight like the others we've had so often. Instead, she blindsides me with her locket. "You'll understand one day. Now leave me alone. Come back whenever you want. I'm tired now." She sits in her chair by the window and looks out. I'd waste my breath trying to get another word, the tiniest hint, out of her. I'm rebuffed, dismissed. Despite my curiosity, the blow-off suits me fine. Another minute in this place, and I'll explode. I kiss my mother on her forehead as her gaze wanders once more over the sparse trees in the yard bathed in the soft summer sun.

Dazed, haggard almost, I climb on the Manhattan-bound train, my heart filled with indescribable grief. Sitting on the train, head against the window, I close my eyes and wonder. What did my father die of? Where is he buried? Two crucial things to know, but until now they'd not even occurred me.

Late afternoon. A taxi drops me outside the building overlooking Central Park, at the summit of which I have my luxury penthouse. That evening, I soak longer than usual under the shower. The lump in my throat's been there for hours. I pull on a robe and pour myself a scotch. Drink has become the inevitable salute to a dying day. With night comes intoxication. But not this evening. I set the scotch aside and boil water for tea.

Who am I really? I chew on this for long minutes. Sitting on my couch, I enjoy the tea, looking in the steaming beverage for the solace that relentlessly flees me. Who am I? Jay Novacek—never knew his dad, mom lost her mind years ago? Or Jeremy Corbin, son of a respected senior Air Force officer? Neither answer is correct. The truth—the irrefutable truth—is to be found, as always, between two lies.

When I was a boy, the Corbin family lived in a cozy little house in Hampton, Virginia. Every morning, Daniel Corbin set off for the base, wearing his blue beribboned uniform with sober elegance. And every morning, proud as a peacock, I leapt into Daddy's arms. We had the same buzz-cut blond hair. Then I watched the family Chevy drive away. The rest of the day was spent at school or playing ball. I pointed to every plane that passed overhead. My daddy was flying one of them. Life was the same for lots of kids in the neighborhood. Then, one morning in December 1985, I got up and raced downstairs to kiss Daddy goodbye. And found Mommy crying her eyes out. From that day on, I only kissed a shadow. Adolescence turned sadness into hatred. An engine just like any other to keep going. As soon as I could, I took Mom's name, Novacek. Dad never showed his face again. Now he's dead, twenty-five years after walking out on us. My identity flew the coop and took all the markers I'd laid down with it. Military discipline and values hit the can. I wanted success, money and fast living. Straight A's at Richmond opened the doors to the world of finance. I rose quickly, headed for the holy of holies. Only Wall Street was big enough for my ambition.

Lost in thought, I fiddle with Mom's locket. My fingers glide around its perfect oval rim. A click, and the locket opens, releasing an object that bounces off the beige leather couch and lands at my feet. Cursing, I lean forward and retrieve a small key. I peer at my strange find. The miniscule flat bow of

the key is solid and tinted with rust. I delicately scratch it with my nail. The decomposed matter comes away to reveal an engraved motif. I gaze at it. I'm holding in my fingers a key embossed with a swastika.

## CHAPTER 5

*Virginia, same day.*

“Amateurism really jerks my chain. You see, my friend, a hit takes preparation. You watched too many westerns when you were a kid. Cowboys draw, shoot from the hip, and, bam, the baddie’s full of holes. In the real world, it doesn’t work that way. For example, you didn’t take me seriously. You rock up here with a gun in your hand, your ten-gallon hat and your hick boots. You don’t study the lay of the land, and, wham, you wonder how come you’ve got a bullet in your knee. I should be offended, you underestimating me like that. And quit groaning, you’re pissing me off.” Sitting on a tree stump dampened by the mist hanging over the hillside, the giant pulled a lighter from the pocket of his combat pants. He lit the butt of a cigar taken from his canvas jacket. Beside him lay a camouflage-painted sniper’s rifle with a telescopic sight. He scanned the lush, moist Virginia forest.

At the smoker’s feet, a man in his early sixties writhed in pain, clutching his left knee with both hands. The red blotch on his gray pants was getting bigger by the second. Judging by the hole and his sorry whining, walking would be a major complication in the future. If he had a future.

“We don’t have much time, so if you want to live one day more, let’s cut to the chase. Where’s the safe, Agent Pettygrow?”

“Jesus, what safe are you talking about? You’re crazy, man. You know that, don’t you?”

“Your tone is very upsetting. But if you want crazy, you haven’t seen anything yet.” The cigar-smoking giant ran his hand over his shaven head. Water moistened his palm. He wiped it on his pants and, in a single movement, whipped out a hunting knife with a serrated blade. He hunkered down next to the wounded man and inserted the tip of the blade into his right nostril.

“A swift recap of the situation will help you understand just how deep in the shit you are. One day, for a reason I don’t know and don’t care to know, you betray your country by selling classified information. You come across a buyer who wants intel on a former Air Force man who’s also working for the CIA. You excavate the file and feel your sphincter clench when you realize how sensitive the information is. You don’t trust your buyer, and you think that by smoking him just after the transaction, you’ll kill two birds with one stone: You keep the money and the secrets. Trouble is, your buyer’s even more paranoid than you, and he blows your kneecap away. And now here I am about to cut your nose wide open. Screaming won’t stop the pain, by the way. Then I’m gonna slice your eyelids off. This is getting gruesome now. Shall I go on, or have you got the general idea?”

A few minutes later, he had answers to his questions. The bald giant gave the wounded man a friendly pat on his plump, bearded cheek and straightened up. “See, that wasn’t hard, was it?”

“Who the hell are you?”

“A guy from far away with a mystery to solve. Far, far away. But if you’re keen to know my name, it’s Eytan Morg.”



The wounded man hauled himself up against the tree stump. The blood gushing from his knee seemed to come straight from his cheeks. He was deathly pale. “That doesn’t sound very American.”

“Correct. It’s Polish. From northeastern Poland, to be precise.”

“You work for the commies?”

“Sure! You really are stupid. I work for Mossad, my friend. You realize what that means.”

Eyes closed, William Pettygrow recited a silent prayer. Morg slipped his rifle over his shoulder and drew a 9mm pistol with silencer. The execution was swift and painless. The Israeli agent holstered the weapon and dug into an inside pocket. He pulled out a curious object that looked like a hockey puck and placed it on the body. Then Morg doubled back through the woods and headed for the road a hundred yards or so below. Behind the wheel of his pickup, he scanned the trees. A gray cloud wafted out of the forest and disintegrated as it rose into the sky. Having obtained the information he so badly needed, the killer stepped on the gas and was gone.

Later that afternoon, a hunter missed a deer. After an unsuccessful chase, he headed for the tree stump, a marker for all the local hunters. He trudged across a small crater, oblivious to the fact that an administrative operative from Langley had been killed there a few hours earlier. Back in Hampton, the guy stopped off for a beer in a hunters’ bar—the only one in the vicinity. To the other regulars he grumbled about his near-miss that afternoon. Close to the sympathetic group, a bald foreigner, taller than any of the other clients, bit into a hamburger and took a slug of Bud. He smiled into his glass. These new explosives really were something else!

Morg hated driving at night on an empty stomach. A quick dessert, one more drink in this rat hole and tomorrow morning, he’d be having breakfast opposite Central Park.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Khara studied law, worked as a reporter for Agence France Press, was a top-level athlete, and ran his own business for a number of years. Now he is a full-time writer. Khara wrote his first novel—a vampire thriller—in 2010, before starting his Consortium thriller series. The first in the series, *The Bleiberg Project*, became an immediate bestseller in France, catapulting Khara into the ranks of the country's top thriller writers.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Simon John was born in the United Kingdom. After graduating from Cambridge University, a quest for wine, women and goat cheese led him to Paris, where he began working in film production and translation. He primarily translates and subtitles movies, such as Michael Haneke's Palme d'Or-winner *Love* and blockbusters *Taken 1 & 2*. After twenty fertile years and 3,713 goat cheese salads in Paris, he is now based in Berlin.

## ABOUT LE FRENCH BOOK

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