



Preview: Chapter One

CHAPTER ONE

The next day: Val Thorens

Twenty-four hours after the discovery of the dead girl, Luc Hansen walked into the small police station in Val Thorens, stamped his feet to dislodge the snow and approached the counter.

“Inspector Maillot, please,” he said quietly.

“Is he expecting you?” the sergeant asked.

“Yes. I’m Luc Hansen of the DER,” he replied, referring to the *Département de Enquête et Recherche*, the European Union’s intelligence and security service.

The sergeant nodded, turned and walked off down a corridor that led further into the building.

As he waited, Hansen contemplated the events of the last few hours. The telephone call from Maillot had come in at eight that morning and had galvanised the DER into a frenzy of activity. He had been pulled from his current cases and sent from Brussels, via a quickly arranged military flight to a French

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airfield near Albertville and a rather unpleasant sixty-kilometre car ride through the snow to Val Thorens.

The sergeant returned, accompanied by a well-built, middle-aged man who immediately held out his hand.

“*Monsieur* Hansen, I’m Henri Maillot.” The men shook hands, rapidly assessing each other. “You got here quickly. I hadn’t expected you until the morning.”

Hansen shrugged, “The Director said it was urgent.”

“I suppose it is...I suppose it is. Not the best of facilities but we have some good coffee.” Maillot led the way through to his small office.

Hansen took off his thick parka, looked around in vain for somewhere to hang it and dropped it on the floor. Maillot gestured at a chair.

“Take a seat. Have you been briefed on developments so far?”

“All I know is you’ve got a dead body, a probable identity as Emma Darbly from her ski pass and you asked us to help.” Hansen handed over his warrant card, which Maillot glanced at and handed back.

“Inspector...why did you contact us?”

“I didn’t,” replied Maillot stiffly. “I called the Belgian international police liaison office. They put me through to you. I guess there must have been a flag on her name.”

Luc replied noncommittally, “Ah, I see. Do we have anything on how she died?”

“The medical examiner reckons her neck was broken before she went off the mountain.”

“So it’s murder?”

“We’re proceeding on that assumption.”

“But an autopsy hasn’t been done?”

Maillot shook his head. “No. We need a positive ID and a next-of-kin release.”

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“I checked around in Brussels before coming down. It appears Emma Darbly, of the European Press Bureau, is on a week’s skiing holiday. We should have an address by morning. This is a recent picture of her.” Hansen handed over a print.

“Yes, that’s her. *Mon dieu*, you lot work fast.”

“We aim to please.” Hansen’s smile flashed white teeth in sharp contrast to the olive-brown skin of his face. He ran his hand across his short-cropped black hair and noted that the other man relaxed.

“Mind you, the journey down wasn’t much fun. How about some of that coffee?”

Maillot nodded and went out. Hansen looked round at the piles of papers, forms and files that were so typical of a provincial French police office. He had seen many such over the years — and not always as a welcome guest.

Maillot returned with two steaming mugs. “And something to keep out the cold.” He took a bottle of brandy from a drawer and poured a shot into each mug. The coffee was as good as Maillot had promised and the brandy was welcome.

Maillot asked abruptly, “Why is the DER involved in a murder inquiry? I thought you were *s’occupé* with organised crime, terrorist threats, international fraud and intelligence work...”

Hansen considered the question and decided that, for once, the truth might serve him best.

“We have a particular interest in Gerald Darbly, Emma’s father. He’s a Member of the European Parliament so we have a file on him. Emma’s a well-known journalist and her murder raises all sorts of questions.”

Maillot asked suspiciously, “Oh, I see. Are you going to take over the case then?”

“No. The case is yours. I’m just here to help.”

Hansen knew full well that Maillot would want it. A high-profile murder is always good to have on one’s record

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but he did not have the resources that the DER could make available.

“*D’accord*. So what is the next step?”

“I’ll look around on my own and let you know what I find.”

He looked steadily at Maillot. The DER, under its charter, took precedence over national police forces in terms of authority and could act independently. He did not need Maillot’s permission, and he knew that Maillot knew that, but a cordial working relationship was better than an antagonistic one.

“And you’ll keep me informed?”

“Absolutely.” Hansen smiled and stretched, easing the stiffness in his shoulders. When he saw Maillot’s eyes flicker towards his wrist, he casually pulled his sleeve down to cover the tattoo.

Maillot said, “*La Légion*, huh?”

Hansen nodded but said nothing and knew that Maillot would not ask. Legionnaires did not talk about themselves. He had joined the French Foreign Legion straight from university instead of doing his Belgian National Service. After serving in the Legion’s paratroop regiment, the elite 2nd REP, in Europe and in the jungles and deserts of Africa, he had left at the end of his second four-year contract.

“How long have we got before contacting the family?” He changed the subject to Maillot’s evident disappointment.

The policeman glanced at the clock. “It’s now, what... eighteen hundred hours on Tuesday. I can give you until Thursday afternoon...that’s when I have to tell the Investigating Magistrate what we’ve got. If she’s satisfied with our ID, we tell the family then. We only get seventy-two hours before the system kicks in.”

“How can I contact you direct?”

Maillot took out a card and handed it to him. “This is my mobile number. We’ve pretty good coverage up here. They even work on the slopes.”

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The après-ski drinking sessions were in full swing, the bars teeming with people, as Hansen made his way through the town. He had not told the policeman the complete truth: he already knew the address where Emma Darbly was supposed to be staying. The sharp air of the mountains felt good and the walk eased his travel-stiffness.

The apartment block was not easy to find and Hansen almost missed the entrance. A security lamp flicked on as he approached the door. Finding it unlocked, he made his way to the second floor. The door of the apartment stood open and he could hear female voices. Risking a quick look, he saw a redhead and a blond, both of whom seemed to be speaking at the same time to a third person beyond his view. The girls in the apartment appeared to be about to go out for the evening. He listened for a while longer and then returned to the ground floor.

Twenty minutes passed before the three girls left the building. Hansen let them get about thirty metres ahead of him and then followed. They walked arm in arm, showing no sign of stress or concern at the fact that they had not seen their friend for more than twenty-four hours. That intrigued Hansen. They entered a bar and sat down.

Hansen chose a table next to where the three girls were now drinking hot chocolate. He ordered a *café noir*, paid for it and listened to the conversation at the next table: clothes, skiing, what runs they would do the following day, clothes again, their plans for the rest of the evening — all the normal conversation of friends on holiday. The girls talked on and the build-up of noise in the bar became a distraction. As a result, he almost missed it.

It was the redhead speaking: "...after all, she's *your* friend, Gillian, and I think it a bit much not telling us where she was going."

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The blond said, “Emma may be my friend, but you know how she’s always secretive if there’s a new man about.”

The third girl, a plump brunette, joined in. “I bet she’s shackled up with a ski bum and doesn’t want to share him.”

“And I bet he has a tight little arse,” the redhead said and they all laughed.

The brunette said, “She’ll turn up tomorrow all innocent-like and we’ll have to beat it out of her.”

“You just want to know the gory details,” replied the blond as they put some money on the table and left the bar.

Hansen followed at a distance. He had a problem if they went straight back to the apartment, but if they went off to eat he could search their rooms before they returned. The three girls went through the sports centre, up past the swimming pool and then headed for the upper part of town. Hansen watched them enter a crowded restaurant where they were immediately surrounded by a group of attentive young men.

Hansen went straight to their apartment. In the dim corridor he pulled out a flat wallet and unzipped it to reveal a set of picklocks. Thirty seconds later he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The balcony door was open. He crossed the room and looked outside. There were plenty of footprints of various sizes but no sign of anyone.

He switched on the lights, shrugged at the disorder and started his search. It had been ransacked: clothes were scattered, cushions and magazines strewn about. It was the same story in the double bedroom. The next room was a single and, according to letters on the bedside table, occupied by the girl called Gillian. It was also in a state of disorder. Hansen considered: it was either made by a common burglar — there were enough of them around in a place like this — or it was a professional wanting it to look like a burglary. Then he thought

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that perhaps he had disturbed the intruder, explaining the open door to the balcony.

The final room was tidier but looked as though it had not been used for a couple of days. Hansen searched it methodically. The cupboard and dresser revealed nothing. The bedside table, however, produced a bunch of keys and a wallet containing large denomination euro notes, two credit cards and a driver's licence in the name of Emma Darbly. Jackpot!

Hansen opened the small cupboard beneath the drawer to reveal some books, a bottle of mineral water and a BlackBerry smartphone. He reasoned that there had to be a computer somewhere — journalists always had the tools of their trade with them. And the most likely place would be...yes...there it was under the bed. He reached under and pulled out the bag. Inside was an Apple laptop along with various cables and some blank CDs.

Hansen carried the computer into the main living area and sat down at the table. He switched it on and, after a few moments, a login dialogue box appeared. He swore quietly and switched off. He would have to take it with him.

It was the same with the BlackBerry. He put the equipment back in the bag, picked up the bunch of keys and, certain that he had left no evidence of his presence in the apartment, switched off the lights.

Wednesday 5 February, Val Thorens

The morning air was brisk and maintenance crews were still servicing the cable cars as Hansen walked down to the big covered car park at the bottom of the town. His earlier enquiries had given him the make and number of Emma Darbly's car and

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revealed that it was not at her home in Brussels. He wanted to see if it was in Val Thorens.

The car park was huge and about ninety percent full. He started at the top, checked each floor and had almost completed his search when he saw it. The Renault Clio was parked in a corner, covered in the same fine white dust that lay on all the vehicles. There was no one around so he took a closer look.

Judging by the thickness of the dust it had been there for a few days. He noticed disturbances around the door handles, the boot-lid and a rippled pattern of dust on the windows as if someone had recently entered the vehicle and then slammed the door. He looked through the windows without moving the dust but could see nothing. He walked round the Renault and saw no sign of forced entry. He wiped a window and took another look inside. Nothing out of the ordinary, but the rippling still bothered him.

He checked the dust on nearby cars but it was smooth and undisturbed.

He knelt down and looked under the car but saw nothing suspicious. He took out a small flashlight, lay down on his back and eased himself partially underneath the vehicle. The neat package of *plastique* with a trembler switch rested on the drive shaft, ready to explode when the engine started.

Merde! Hansen cursed as he carefully eased himself from beneath the car and away from the vehicle. This was very messy. He took out his mobile phone and dialled Maillot's number. The Frenchman was not going to like this.

Thursday 6 February, Brussels, Belgium

Karel Vandenhove, *Chef de Cabinet* to the European Union Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, looked at his watch and tried

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to hide his irritation. Why did these Thursday meetings have to take so damned long? He looked across the large table at the Commissioner for Foreign Affairs and tried to will him to get things moving. They needed an official position on aid to Iraq for next week's meeting of the full Commission and yet the pompous ass had only covered the first couple of items on the agenda. But Commissioner François de Foucaud seemed impervious to time constraints or subtle hints. Vandenhove sighed.

"Have you something you wish to contribute, my dear Karel?" de Foucaud asked sarcastically, his voice grating on Vandenhove's nerves.

"Commissioner, given the pressing urgency of the current situation and the escalation of violence in Iraq, we need to press ahead and establish a position on aid to the Kurds sooner rather than later."

De Foucaud flushed at the implied rebuke, "Quite, quite, Karel. You are absolutely right, of course."

Vandenhove was not concerned with the Commissioner's finer feelings or the minuet of protocol; if de Foucaud didn't like being told to get on then he shouldn't spend so much time on the unimportant. Damn but the man was a waste of space.

"May I propose, Commissioner, that we move directly to item six on the agenda?" Vandenhove spoke calmly and with a deference that fooled nobody in the room.

"Of course, Karel, if you feel we must."

After the general shuffling of papers had subsided, Vandenhove said, "Commissioner, let me be blunt. I firmly believe that we must take the position that the American and British approach on aid to Iraq is counterproductive. The European Union should take the lead in sending in aid." Vandenhove tried to hide his frustration. All he needed was for the Commission to take a position, any position, so he could tailor his plans accordingly.

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There was a general murmuring of agreement and fifteen minutes later, a position had been established: the European Union should commence aid shipments immediately — starting with aid to the Kurds in the north.

Hiding his smile of satisfaction, Vandenhove excused himself from the meeting. It would probably go on for another couple of hours but it could do so without him.

Back in his slightly smaller but no less sumptuous office down the corridor from the Commissioner's large and lavishly appointed one on the eighth floor of the Bâtiment Breydel, Vandenhove picked up the list of incoming telephone messages and scanned it. Near the bottom was the name Gärtner followed by a mobile phone number. He would have to make that call.

Vandenhove reached for his mobile telephone.

A man answered on the third ring. "*Mit* Gärtner."

"You speak with Karel Vandenhove."

"*Ach!* And how is the Commission this week?" The German accent was pronounced.

"As always. Now, what's the problem?"

"*Mein Herr*, calm yourself. I never call unless it is important."

That was true enough, thought Vandenhove. Dieter Gärtner, Head of Security at Groupe Franco Belge, never called anyone unless he wanted something.

"So tell me what is so important that you call me here."

"I need more information. The girl knew nothing but was suspicious of my interest. She met with a fatal skiing accident on Monday."

"That is indeed unfortunate, and potentially dangerous. She was well connected here in Brussels."

"I do what I have to do." Gärtner's voice contained no emotion.

Vandenhove sighed, "The park, 18.00 hours." He hung up.

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Two hours later Vandenhove left the Breydel, crossed to the Cinquantenaire Park and started walking towards the ghostly, floodlit triumphal arch that dominated the skyline. The constant drizzle made the tree-lined path an unpleasant route but the sodden grass beside it was not an option. He had gone less than fifty yards when he sensed someone beside him. He turned and found himself looking at a tall, muscular man in his late thirties, with watery blue eyes and dark hair, which Vandenhove knew was dyed. A deep knife scar was clearly visible against the pale skin of his right cheek, which was covered in neatly trimmed stubble.

“Gärtner, why did you kill the girl?”

“I told you. She became suspicious.” Gärtner shrugged. “It’s not important...”

Vandenhove snapped. “It *is* important. You’re not being paid to kill people, you’re being paid to protect our interests.”

“I do what is necessary.”

“Then do it more discreetly. Killing people attracts attention and we don’t want attention. Understand?”

“*Herr* Vandenhove, I need more information. I know where the Darbly girl worked and where she lived, but I need more if I’m to find how much damage she’s done.”

“Very well. I’ll call you on Monday.”

Friday 7 February, Brussels

Alan Radcliffe, the 58-year-old Director of the DER, had a rather distracted professorial air despite having been in the security services all his working life. The 7 a.m. Friday morning team meeting — an institution in the DER — had just finished and he was now sitting at the large conference

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table in his office peering at Luc Hansen over his half-moon reading glasses. “You were unusually silent in the meeting, Luc. What’s on your mind?”

“Emma Darbly. Her death seems so bizarre,” Hansen replied.

“Do you want to tell me why?” While waiting for a response, he regarded the 35-year-old ex-Legionnaire, his most outstanding find for the DER. At one metre seventy-five and extremely fit, Luc Hansen was a serious young man with outstanding military skills, a superb investigator, an excellent linguist and an exceptional agent who specialised in authorised but deniable operations. It came at a price, of course: he was a bit of a maverick and had to be reigned in occasionally, but was one of those priceless men who are both dependable and absolutely trustworthy.

Hansen glanced down at his notes. “According to the French pathologist at yesterday’s post-mortem, she was killed by a left-handed rotation of the neck delivered from behind — clearly a real professional killing — then thrown over the edge to make it look like an accident.”

Radcliffe said nothing.

“So, why plant a bomb in her car if you intend to kill the victim somewhere else? That’s just overkill.”

“And your conclusion?”

“Perhaps the killer wasn’t sure of getting her, or he was sending a message, or...”

“Are you sure the killer is a man?” Radcliffe asked.

“Yes, sir,” replied Hansen emphatically. “The girl was tall and strong, so the killer had to be around one metre eighty-five and powerful. Definitely a male, and left-handed at that.”

“So, not a casual killing?”

“No, sir. I think the killer was also after her computer and ran off when I broke into the flat. That’s why I took it.

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The local police were not happy but I think they understood, especially when I told them about the bomb under the girl's car."

"And what was in her computer that would get her killed?"

Hansen shrugged, "I don't know...yet. She was a journalist who wrote some really in-depth exposés so maybe she got too close to something."

"And you want to run with it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I'll reassign your other cases, but Claudia Chalon has the Gerald Darbly file, so liaise with her." Radcliffe waited until Hansen nodded agreement and then said, "Right, you'd better get on with it."

Despite the slow moving traffic, the yellow BMW 1100 GS was making good progress around the Brussels inner ring road, its throaty exhaust hammering at the inside of the tunnels. The rider handled the big bike with confidence, correcting expertly as the rear wheel momentarily lost traction on a patch of oil, before powering up the slope from the Porte de Hal Tunnel and then down to the railway viaduct. Pausing for a moment at the lights, the rider turned left towards the Gare du Midi, the Brussels South station, and then accelerated hard under the railway, across the tram tracks and down the steep slope into the underground car park.

Ten minutes later, the rider strode across the reception area of the DER while removing the bright yellow helmet to reveal the smiling face and short black hair of a female in her late twenties.

The security guard looked up and said, "Morning, Miss Donnelly."

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“Hi, Marty!” Her voice was light and tinged with an Irish lilt.

The guard opened the barrier and Joanna Donnelly went down the corridor to the office she shared with Luc Hansen.

“*Merde!* What are you doing here? The boss said you’d pulled an all-nighter.” Luc sat back and lit a cigarette.

Joanna pointed her right index finger at him in a simulated handgun fist. “I thought you were quitting the weed.”

“And I thought you were dealing with security attacks on the Commission’s computers at the Breydel.” He ignored her comment.

“Done and dusted. So what have we got?” She dumped her rucksack beside her desk.

“A dead girl, a computer and a BlackBerry.”

“Sounds fun. Let me get out of this lot and you can tell me all about it.”

She started to remove the protective clothes, knowing Luc was watching. Conscious of her own good looks, she was used to male attention, but didn’t trade on it as a matter of taste.

“You can take your eyes off a girl while she’s undressing...”

She and Luc had been operational partners for two years and while Luc did what she called ‘the action man stuff’, she was responsible for the team’s communications and technical support, and deployed a range of computer skills that he did not begin to understand.

Joanna ran her hands through her hair and sat down.

“Who was the girl?”

“Emma Darbly, daughter of Gerald Darbly, MEP.”

Joanna whistled in surprise. “How did she die?”

“Someone broke her neck and threw her off a mountain.”

He pushed Emma Darbly’s computer and BlackBerry across the table. “We need to know what’s hidden inside these.”

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“I assume these are hers,” Joanna said neutrally.

“Yes.”

“And did we get them legally, Luc, or did you just take them?”

“Who me?” he asked innocently.

“Jeezus, Luc, the boss is not going to be pleased.”

“You’re one suspicious *poule*, Jo Donnelly. I’ve already told the Director, so there.” He pushed a bar of chocolate across the desk with a smile.

Joanna shook her head in mock exasperation. Luc was right, of course. She was suspicious, but the DER had procedures and he did not always follow them. She knew he had run-ins with the Director from time to time but usually got away with them. He was the team leader so there was not much she could do about it.

She nibbled the chocolate, then picked up the BlackBerry, opened her laptop computer, took a multi-format cable out of her desk drawer and connected the two. A few keystrokes later, she scribbled two numbers on a pad of paper and handed the phone and paper across.

“The first is the four-digit basic PIN, but she had a second one of eight digits, the master PIN number.” She yawned. “God! I’m knackered. I’ll take the computer with me and get you the passwords and answers over the weekend. Okay?”

“She was obviously into security. You anticipate any problems?”

“If I hit a wall I’ll come in Sunday night and run *CrackIt* on the main computer.”

“Monday will do. Get some sleep.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Check out Emma Darbly’s apartment this afternoon before the police start walking all over it.” He picked up the paper with the PIN numbers.

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Emma Darbly's top floor apartment was located in a *fin de siècle* townhouse at the end of a cul-de-sac off a quiet, narrow street near the lakes in the Ixelles neighbourhood. The house itself was vaguely art nouveau but the panel of bell pushes was very modern, as was the combination lock panel to the right of the front door. A discrete sign in etched plastic next to it provided instructions in a dozen European languages and Arabic:

The Occupant may have given you a one-time four-digit code. Enter that code and press the talk-key for that apartment. Otherwise ring for Reception.

Luc scratched behind his ear. It seemed obvious that apartment key-holders would use the same keypad for their own entry. From memory, he tried Emma Darbly's birthday in both European and American orderings, the subgroups of four-digit pairs in her phone numbers, both fixed and mobile, her birth year forward and backward. No luck. He fingered the useless picklocks in his jacket pocket.

An elegantly dressed but elderly woman approached the door and Luc stepped aside courteously. He watched her enter an eight-digit number and the door clicked open. As the door closed behind the woman he turned away and thought for a while. Would the system have individual combinations for each flat? It seemed likely.

Luc turned to the keypad and entered, '12481632'. The door clicked open and he entered a well-lit hallway, grateful for his ability to remember numbers after seeing them only once.

He ran silently up the stairs. A hall light clicked on as he reached the right apartment. He pulled on a pair of surgical

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gloves, selected a key from the bunch he had found with Emma's things and opened the door.

The apartment was a surprise. One large dining-come-sitting room with an open fire, a small but functional kitchen, a bathroom and a bedroom with a king-size bed. The whole place was obsessively tidy and organised. Luc inventoried the bathroom: female toiletries, no lurking razor and aftershave: no sign of a resident male. He checked the bedroom: tidy, overly so. Beside the bed was a pile of novels: Jilly Cooper, Anaïs Nin, Simone de Beauvoir, Catherine Cookson, Amanda Scott. The dressing table echoed the same obsessive neatness. Perhaps she was just a well-organised young woman.

The sitting room had a desk positioned against one wall with a fax-answerphone, space for a computer, a printer and a range of dictionaries.

But something was not right.

Then it came to him. He had not touched anything but now ran his finger across the bookshelf in front of the dictionaries, then squatted down to look obliquely across several flat surfaces that were backlit by the windows. There was no sign of dust on any of them. He would easily have spotted the inevitable fluff even after a day's absence, never mind a week. The place was spotlessly clean as though someone had very recently wiped it down. Was there a super cleaning lady in the picture, or...had a professional already searched the apartment?

Luc took out his wallet of picklocks, extracted a dentist's mirror and a small pencil flashlight. Then, cautiously, he opened the desk drawer a short way and peered inside with the aid of the mirror. Nothing of interest. The first drawer of the small filing cabinet gave nothing more: mainly private papers, bank statements and proof copies, presumably from some of her published articles. He had already determined that she

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had a good income and paid the rent regularly. No obvious outstanding debts.

He inserted the mirror into the second file drawer and switched on the flashlight. Wires led from a lever switch to the back of the drawer...it had been rigged.

Very carefully, he removed the mirror, put it away and reached for his mobile telephone.

Two hours later, Jacques Legrand, the DER scene-of-crime officer, a tall, thin man with small gold-framed glasses, closed his notebook and nodded to his forensics colleague, Dr Monique Verhagen, who showed Luc the explosive device.

“*Plastique*. Probably military stock C4 but we’ll check. Simple lever detonator. You were very lucky,” she said.

“So it seems. Can you find out where it came from?”

“Possibly, but it’ll take time. This stuff needs an End User Certificate and it’s closely controlled. I’ll let you know.”

Luc nodded his thanks and turned back to Legrand.

“Is there anything else you can tell me, Jacques?”

“No fingerprints. Your guy also uses surgical gloves. Very professional. The answer phone had seven messages plus a number of connections that didn’t leave a message.” He referred to his notebook: “Six messages from people wishing her a good holiday and one from her father earlier today.”

“Saying what?”

“‘Emma, where are you? This is your father. Call me. We need to talk.’ Then he rang off.”

“Interesting! I wonder why no one has told him she’s dead.”