

Beneath the Rose

A Tale of Terror and Love



David A. Charters



Peter Oulton is a haunted, wanted, hunted man. Haunted by the loss of his wife, and by the memory of a massacre he failed to prevent. Wanted by the perpetrator, imprisoned by Peter's testimony, and bent on revenge. Hunted by two women funded by a mysterious foundation. Beneath the Rose takes the reader on Peter's dark journey from the killing fields of Bosnia to a dramatic showdown with al-Qaeda on the snowbound streets of Montreal.

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PROLOGUE

Montreal, late November

At 7:40 on a Monday morning a middle-aged woman was trudging north on St-Denis, chin tucked into the front of her coat to cut the brittle, bitter wind that warned of the winter to come. Turning the corner onto Mont-Royal offered some shelter and, descending into the warmth and hustle of the Metro station, she allowed her face to emerge to confront the prospect of the week that unfolded before her: a week of editing, meetings, emails, phone calls, lunches at her desk, and office banter; a week that promised to end in the arms of her much younger lover and partner. That prospect brought a smile to a face, which, if not classically beautiful, radiated warmth of character that lingered in the memory long after the woman herself had passed by. Like most people, Laurie Magill carried her share of memories that she preferred to forget; they travelled in her wake like unwanted ghosts. But she was not the kind of person who dwelt on them. The only one that crossed her mind this morning – and then only briefly – was of a positive nature: a chance encounter the previous Friday. She mentally flagged it to follow up on her to do list, as it would entail a shopping trip. Only that, she told herself, and nothing more.

Meanwhile on the same morning in a second floor apartment over a bookstore on the eastern fringes of Westmount a middle-aged man was still asleep, having only reached that state a few hours earlier. About the time Laurie Magill arrived at work the man once known as Simon Reston, now called Peter Oulton, would wake still exhausted to face another day of declining fortune and increasing anxiety. Even

now healing sleep eluded him. If his body was at rest his mind was not. Had it been able to focus on that chance encounter a few days ago, to recall her if only a moment, it might have brought welcome respite. Instead, in the middle of the night, his mind had replayed the nightmare that allowed no escape from a darker past...

I see the big knife first, gleaming, already glistening with somebody's blood. So much blood. Then the head: the mayor's. It's trying to talk, but no words come out. Then all eight of them without heads but somehow chanting: "Guilty, guilty, guilty!" The Butcher is leading them, like an orchestra conductor, grinning at me over his shoulder. "It's your fault," says Abby, who is missing her heart. "I'm dead and it's your fault because you didn't love me enough." She pins a medal on my chest, pushing the pin all the way in and my heart feels like it's on fire. The Butcher becomes Ian Urquhart yelling down the barrel of the shotgun in his mouth: "Make them stop! Do something, Sir! We have to make them stop! STOP, STOP ME!" A blinding flash...

Peter lurched upright, his whole body shaking, shedding sweat like a winter coat. He swung his feet over the side of the bed, to steady himself on the cold floor, then lowered his head into his hands, and took deep breaths to reduce the panic and slow his heart rate. "It's okay," he whispered to himself, "I'm okay. That was long ago. The Butcher's in prison. And I'm safe here. Just relax..." When his hands stopped shaking, Peter reached for the pill bottle on the bedside table, shook out one green caplet, and swallowed it with a swig of water. He unbuttoned his damp pajama shirt and threw it on the floor then pulled on a sweatshirt and wrapped himself back up in the blanket. But even with the sedative it was nearly dawn before he finally succumbed to the grip of exhaustion and sedation and drifted into the restless doze that passed for sleep in his life. Haunted by so many ghosts, Peter never slept

well at the best of times. And these were not the best of times.
Had he known what was coming, he would not have slept at
all.

CHAPTER 1

Late summer 2010

It all started with a tryst at a motel on the concrete strip called Côte de Lièsse in the sprawling Montreal suburb of St.-Laurent. They'd met at a chic bar in the Vieux Port: he, a city employee, married and bored; she, an exotic foreigner just passing through. A simple fling, no strings attached. Afterwards, they had watched sports on TV. What began as pillow talk became – for her – an idea, an idea so simple yet so bold it was almost bizarre that no one had thought of it before. Later, after the two had parted, the idea began to move. It became a text message sent to an iPad in Toronto. Attached to it was a proposal, not yet fully formed but full of promise – and danger. From that city it rippled outward in the same way a wave breaks from the prow of a ship. An email to an inbox held on a server in Spain became a quick phone call to a number in a seedy high-rise in the Paris *banlieue* of Clichy-sous-Bois. Other calls followed in sequence to Algiers, Port Said, Sana'a, and Peshawar. Each was sent from a disposable phone in a location separate from the one that had received the incoming message. Even when the message was hand-carried to a quiet walled compound at the end of a dirt road in the hill-bound Pakistani city of Abbottabad, the proposal stopped there only long enough for a meeting.

Face to face meetings between the world's most wanted man and his deputy were rare now, reserved for only the most important decisions. This one was weeks in the making and only minutes in the taking. Following the briefest of pleasantries the two men examined the message and the proposal.

“Why this?” Osama bin Laden asked. “Please tell me why this target is important.”

“Emir, you wish to punish Canada for its war against Islam,” Ayman al-Zawahiri replied. “This target, destroyed, will strike at its heart and soul. It will break them.”

Then he added, “And America will not be happy.” Bin Laden smiled.

“No, not happy at all,” his deputy continued. “They will be afraid, and angry at Canada. As Allah wills it, out of fear they may close the border. Then Canada will be punished doubly.”

“Allah,” the Emir agreed, “must have looked favourably upon our works to deliver us such a target. Surely it is a sign of his favour. Therefore, let us do his bidding.”

Then it was simply a matter of choosing the man. The deputy proposed only one name, “He is ruthless, he is motivated, and soon will be in our debt.” Bin Laden nodded his assent. “Protect him at all costs,” he added. The deputy assured him that he would; he already had a plan for that. “It will take time,” he said. The Emir shrugged, “They have the watches. We have the time.” The deputy delayed his departure just long enough to be assured by their host protectors that no Predator drones were in the area. Then he vanished like the snow in spring.

Transformed into a directive, information continued its journey. It traveled west in the hands of a young man serving as a courier in the Swat valley, then by jingle truck to Karachi, from there by *dhow* along the coast of the Emirates, by taxi through the crowded streets of Baghdad, from Paris by a cell phone later dropped in the Seine, in a whispered conversation at a mosque in Bruges, collected from a dead drop in a path behind Coram’s Fields, London, and hidden in a basket of fruit delivered to a respectable address in Potsdam, where four vital words known only to few were added. At that point it became innocuous messages shunted between innocent business addresses: a large construction

firm in Bosnia, an import-export company in Vienna, a shipping contractor in Marseilles, a bank in Lichtenstein, a customs broker in Cyprus, and a stevedore office in Turkey. Contracts, purchase orders, bills of lading, insurance waivers: all the mind-numbing detritus of globalized commerce, all sent in clear for all of the world to see. Like a magician's sleight of hand, it was hiding the real by showing the false.

Ironically, the information finished its journey only about a two-hour drive from where it began. In the dark of a November pre-dawn a man and a woman met in the empty parking lot of the Carlingwood shopping mall in west end Ottawa. The woman rolled down the driver's side window of her car as he did the same. She passed him a slim brown envelope. He opened it and pulled out a single sheet of typed paper containing a first and last name and a code-word. He looked puzzled. "This is it? This is all you've got?"

She gave him a sharp look. "It is more than enough, I can assure you."

"So, what exactly am I holding here?"

"The smoking gun." She rolled up her window and drove away.

Once the message traffic had finished its work the money began to flow. From several carefully disguised sources in Eastern Europe and South Asia, small amounts that would not attract attention traveled in the wake of larger transactions that would be subjected to scrutiny by bank regulators and financial watchdogs. A deposit here, a withdrawal there. Stocks and bonds purchased then sold. Bank drafts converted to gold that then became diamonds later sold for cash. Cash was converted to digital dollars held briefly by hedge funds for transient commodity sales then turned back to cash. Deposited at one *hawala* and withdrawn at another. Invested in small companies owned by larger ones. It traveled from

company to company, bank to bank, account to account until its origins and purpose were undiscernable. And once it was thoroughly washed, it came to rest in a string of accounts belonging to legitimate banks, businesses, trusts, and foundations stretching from Zurich to Hong Kong, from the Cayman Islands to Toronto.

Only when the information and the money had finished their elaborate journeys did people begin to move...

Bosnia-Herzegovina, late November

Somewhere east of Jablanica the driver picked up a tail, just as his handler had predicted. The flights from The Hague to Zagreb had been uneventful. And for most of the long drive through the war-wasted land, whose scars still bore witness to humanity's capacity for inhumanity, the man had been almost alone on the road. His shadow was not obvious at first, just one more anonymous car riding the M17 highway as it flirted with the dark fringes of Jablanicko Lake. But soon the black Mercedes C-class was matching his every move, staying a consistent distance behind but ever keeping him in sight. Just letting him know, we are here.

'Who are they?' he wondered. 'Probably the OSA-OBA – the shadowy secret police.' At the meet he had asked his handler, "Surely they will know who I am?"

"Certainly," the man had replied. "You are famous. But do not worry. It is just the way things are now. They will want to talk to you, so they will set up a roadblock just outside Sarajevo. But, of course," the man had added with a thin smile, "you will not go to Sarajevo."

Little by little the driver inched his rented Audi ahead, increasing his speed and ever-so-slightly stretching the distance from his shadow, as he had been trained to do on the course in the remote reaches of Baluchistan. When he came upon a tractor pulling a heavily-laden wagon, he waited until

a rare stretch of straight road presented itself then swerved around the vehicles just before the next corner. His pursuers had to wait for oncoming traffic to pass and for another straight section of road before they could get around. By that time he was well ahead, putting more distance between them, until he came to this road, the road to Kiseljak, which would allow him to bypass the big city. A sharp uphill left turn around a corner and he was out of sight of his shadow. Through the trees he saw the black Mercedes continue toward Sarajevo. It had worked.

But his relief was short-lived and soon turned to frustration. The road was treacherous: little more than a narrow, twisting, one-lane track slashed out of the hillside, with sheer drops and no guardrails. Rain and snow overnight had left it perilously slick. Over the next hour he covered barely ten kilometres. As he nosed the Audi along in first gear the car lurched over a small pile of earth and the left front wheel landed heavily on a small exposed metal plate.

The pressure-activated TMA-5 mine, originally planted during the Bosnian war and recently moved, was designed to disable armoured vehicles. It pulverized the front of the car. A chunk of the engine block came through the firewall and severed the driver's torso from his legs, while the steering column decapitated him and flattened his head against the roof before spraying his brains into the sky.

Residents of Kiseljak, the hamlet closest to the foot of the hills, looked up at the sound and saw the residue of smoke and shards of a vehicle flying through the air before dropping down the cliff face. Some simply returned to their daily chores and pleasures. Everyone knows that road is dangerous, they muttered. Only a fool would try it and fools get what they deserve.

But the town clerk was a conscientious man. He called the police, and they came to investigate. After taking statements from the villagers, they had to wait for a mine clearance team from the European Union forces. Darkness

was already falling so the team did not come until the next day. Even then it took two days of cautious probing to pronounce the road to the site and the site itself safe. Still, the police were scared to be there; their investigation was quick and perfunctory. They traced the rear license plate to the car hire agency in Zagreb, and the rental agreement matched the name on the papers in the luggage found in the overturned trunk of the car. An open and shut accident report. The only surprise was the identity of the driver.



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