

CHRIS ROPER



THE GYRFALCON FILE

THE FIRST EDWARD MORGAN NOVEL



U.S. Government Agent Ed Morgan's cover is blown. His idyllic life in the foothills of the Pyrenees has been shattered by the arrival of Kate, a scientist with a photographic memory and a medical discovery so revolutionary that someone is determined to abduct her. Morgan takes Kate under his wing and together they go on the run in a plot that relentlessly ramps up the action as it twists and turns across two continents.

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Gyrfalcon
File**

Chris Roper

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First Edition

CHAPTER ONE.

In a featureless basement office in Washington DC, Howard Maxwell was pacing back and forth. He was troubled and his frequent stops in front of a desktop computer did little to ease his agitated state. Outside in the access corridor a uniformed guard was trying to look attentive through the glass wall although he had long since lost interest in the proceedings.

Maxwell stopped and repositioned the metal-framed chair resting against the far corner. He turned to examine a rack of communications equipment which, with the computer desk, was the only other furnishing in the bare concrete of the room. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. Rows of lights indicating connections with far-off places flickered in a meaningless dance and he stared at them absently as if he hoped they might help with the task at hand. After a few moments he turned back to the computer and scanned the screen carefully for information. He didn't see what he wanted. He removed his jacket and looked around for somewhere to hang it but, finding nothing suitable, he hooked it over the top of the open door. He ran his fingers through the little hair he had left and looked out into the corridor.

"Can you get me a cup of goddam coffee?" he barked. The question was directed at the guard.

The sergeant jerked to attention then lowered his chin toward the microphone on his lapel.

"Boss wants some *goddam* joe," he said in a tone which he hoped was too low to be overheard. He looked up but Maxwell had already turned away. "Don't make it too strong," he added under his breath. "He's bouncing off the walls already."

A crackle in his earpiece signaled assent from somewhere else in the building. The guard assumed a rather more alert posture.

“It’s coming, Sir,” he announced. Satisfied that his deference had been noted, he relaxed a little.

Maxwell paced some more then he pulled the chair over to the computer desk. He settled into the hard plastic seat and clumsily grabbed the mouse, pushing a map up the screen and selecting a window with a list of names and places. He clicked. A third window appeared, a satellite map with an overlay of road names and small colored symbols which blinked as they moved. The area on the screen was rural, a spidery network of roads converging on a small town. Maxwell studied the images for a few moments then he stood to fetch his phone and a document from his jacket pocket. He compared some notes on the paper with the graphics in front of him before dialing a number.

“This is Maxwell,” he said curtly. Without waiting for a response he continued. “Looks like this thing’s going down.” His words were clipped, military, reflecting his status as Director of Operations. The person at the other end of the phone was asking questions but Maxwell cut him short. “That’s what I said. Yes, Webber, I know it’s a goddam mess. She never should have been allowed to leave Paris. Can you confirm that everyone over there...?” He stopped mid-sentence as a young woman in a uniform with sergeant’s stripes entered the room. She was carrying a Styrofoam cup full of black liquid.

“Your coffee, Sir,” she said. She sounded almost respectful. Impatiently, Maxwell motioned her to put it on the corner of the desk. As she bent forward he noticed her hair was scraped back into a bun; she obviously wore it much longer when she was off duty. He caught a trace of

perfume – or perhaps it was just a sweet-scented deodorant – as she straightened.

“Thank you,” Maxwell said. He probably wouldn’t have thanked the male guard. Damn women, he thought. They were everywhere in the Service nowadays. He managed a peremptory smile before turning his gaze back to the screen and his attention to the phone.

“Is everyone in place?” he said, re-phrasing and finishing the question. The voice at the other end gave the confirmation he needed. “I don’t like this,” he said, half to the phone and half to himself. “I don’t like this at all.” The person at the far end of the telephone started to justify. “I know all that,” Maxwell snapped. “You just have to make sure it goes right. Clean, by the book.” He paused again then took a deep breath. “OK. Let’s do this thing. Hold on.” He placed the phone on the desk without hanging up.

He clicked on the screen. Lifting the paper, he folded it until a grid of numbers was uppermost. With a sigh he fat-fingered the numbers into boxes on the screen, backspacing over his mistakes. He turned back to the map, and, more carefully this time, he panned around. It all looked in order. It had better be in order. Another window showed some details and grid references with associated values. Maxwell rapidly scanned back and forth between these and the map as if he was completing a spot-the-difference puzzle. At length he was satisfied. He grabbed at the phone again.

“You still there?” It was more of an order than a question. Agent Webber started to speak but Maxwell cut him short. “OK. We have a positive ID on Songbird. Everything is in place. People are set up. Weather is clear, no crowds, traffic practically nil, we’re not going to get a better chance than this.” He took a deep breath. “We are a Go. And for Christ’s sake, Webber, you better hope

nothing goes wrong.” He clicked on a window and pressed a couple of keys. “There, it’s done. Call me the minute you know anything.” More sounds of confirmation from the beleaguered Webber as Maxwell hung up the phone.

Maxwell reached for the coffee and took a sip. He surveyed the bare concrete walls, the rough lines where wooden boards had been used for casting. He idly wondered how they’d done that and whether they cast holes for the cables or drilled them after. Damn. He must stop this useless procrastination, this almost obsessive attention to irrelevant detail. Back to the job in hand. He knew he was finding a way to subvert the bad feeling he had, the sort of uncomfortable sensation which so often heralded an operation falling apart. His feelings were usually right. Jesus, this coffee was terrible, weak and flavorless despite its inky appearance. He glared at the cup he was holding.

“Narciso!” he snapped at the guard outside. “What is this shit? I asked for coffee.”

“Sorry, Sir,” said the guard. He briefly considered pointing out that he hadn’t been personally responsible for making it then he abandoned the idea. “You want me to get you some more, Sir? Stronger?”

Maxwell shook his head and put the papers back in his jacket pocket.

“No, just make a note that when I say coffee, I mean coffee. Not dishwater.”

“Sir.”

He studied the computer screen again for a moment, took another sip of the coffee and then put it down in disgust. He shook his head. This stuff really did taste bad.

“On second thoughts, get that girl back.”

“The one who was just in here?”

“That’s the one.” Maxwell considered that something stronger than coffee would be good right now but there wasn’t any possibility of that. Not down here. He turned his full attention to the screen, waiting for something to happen. Everything seemed to have stopped moving for the moment.

The young woman entered the room. She paused just inside the doorway, maintaining a respectful distance. Maxwell beckoned her over, and when she did not move he stepped up to her, close enough to invade her personal space. She drew herself back slightly but her feet stayed in place.

“What’s your name?” Maxwell asked.

“Sergeant Fields, Sir,” she replied.

“I can see that,” Maxwell said, flicking a finger at her name badge. His irritation was thinly disguised. The girl flinched but did not move. “I mean your name, your first name,” Maxwell continued.

“Gillian ... Gill,” the girl almost stammered. “I’m called Gill. With a ‘G’ not a ‘J’”.

“Well, Gill,” Maxwell paused. “Do you think you can take this—” he indicated the cup “—take this slop away, and fetch me something which actually tastes like coffee? Hot, black and strong. Strong is the operative word here. Strong,” he repeated. “Got it?”

“But—” she started, then bethought herself. “Of course, Sir. Right away, Sir.” She wheeled on the spot and with obvious relief she left the room. She shot a meaningful glance at Sergeant Narciso as she passed; he was intently studying the opposite wall and appeared not to notice.

Maxwell stood and watched her go. His thoughts were in procrastination land again. Not good. Slowly he turned back to the table.

The coffee seemed to be just another example of things not starting out well today. How hard was it to make a decent drink? How hard was it for this operation to go as planned? Now, out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement on the screen. Colored dots were changing positions, boxes with radio messages were appearing and vanishing again. He dragged the metal-legged chair into a better position. Easing his tall frame into the protesting seat he leaned back and watched the dots. They had a simple fascination, if he allowed himself to de-focus and see them as colors rather than people, places, life and death. Minutes passed. The phone rang.

“Maxwell.”

“Sir, there’s a problem.”

“Go on?” Maxwell tensed and leaned forward in the hard chair. It creaked ominously. He stared at the screen. He had been right. The mess he had envisaged was clearly about to deposited right in his lap.

The caller hesitated for a moment.

“Songbird got away. Seems someone interfered. The guys on the ground couldn’t pull this one back without making even more of a mess of things.” A pause. “An operational decision was made to stand down. But I do have positive confirmation that the Paris team extracted Groundhog.”

“Shit. I mean, good to Groundhog. But shit. Shit!” Maxwell banged the table in frustration. “Someone interfered? Deliberate or chance? I need more detail. What sort of someone? Spit it out, Webber.”

“Hard to say at this stage, Sir. We’ll know more when we have debriefed the guys.”

“And Songbird?”

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“Don’t know right now. Our team was too busy getting away to be certain. This guy – the one who interfered – he may have grabbed Songbird.”

“Damned amateurs. Where do we get these clowns?”

“Don’t know, Sir.”

“OK. So did they get a good look at the hero?” Maxwell leaned forward onto his bony elbows, his face a picture of exasperation.

“Not really. Well, maybe...”

“What do you mean, maybe? They did or they didn’t,” Maxwell snapped, interrupting him.

“One of the team thought it might be Morgan. Edward Morgan. Just might. Or it could have been any random citizen. Really it’s hard to say...”

“What in heaven’s name would Morgan be doing there? I’m not buying that. Call me back with more when you got it. One last thing – you said ‘an operational decision was made’ – who the hell thinks they are making the decisions here? I want a name.”

“Yes, Sir.” The phone went dead.

Maxwell leaned back in the chair which protested once more under his weight. Morgan? Not probable. But if he was involved it was going to be messy. Even more than it seemed right now. Damn, Edward Morgan had been dark for so long he was almost off the payroll. There wasn’t even any easy way of contacting him. The advertisement in the newspaper – well, that would take at least twenty-four hours to circulate and there was no guarantee that Morgan was checking anymore.

The sergeant returned with a cup of coffee which looked somewhat more dense than the previous one. Maxwell swirled the contents and raised the cup to his

nose. The girl stood nervously while he tasted the rich brew. He nodded in appreciation.

“Thank you, this may actually pass for real coffee.”

“You are welcome, Sir.”

“Remember how I like it for next time.”

“Sir.” She turned and left. Narciso grinned at her. She gave him a frosty glare as she walked past.

Next time, Maxwell thought. Next time. There might not be a next time if he didn't get this mess under control. Damn. Why did this have to fall on his watch? A week later and he'd have been on vacation in the Caribbean. He turned the cup round and round in his hands before taking a hot gulp of the potent liquid. After a few minutes, when he judged that the coffee had started to work, he reached for the phone.

“Maxwell here. Get me Communications. We need to place an advertisement.”

About the time that Maxwell was ordering his first cup of coffee, some four thousand miles away Edward Morgan was doing the same. He signaled to the proprietor from the circular cast-iron table outside the café and settled his tanned, fit body into his customary chair for the afternoon. The soft air was filled with the scents of a small French town, the Verlade church clock had just struck the first of its twin hourly chimes and the sun lit the honeyed stone of the timeless buildings with a warming glow. He ran his fingers through his untidy, sandy hair as the sound of an old truck's starter came from somewhere in the distance. It overlaid the chatter of men playing *Pétanque* in the square, the clink of their metal boules audible over the hiss and gurgle of Monsieur Benoît's coffee machine.

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Morgan rubbed the stubble on his chin. Have to shave that sometime, he thought. It could wait. He had to adjust the chain on his old motorcycle, he had to fix the shutters on his apartment window, he had to pay some bills. He probably needed to exercise some more too, but at six feet and around 195 pounds he hadn't exactly let himself go. All these things could wait.

Gaston Benoît came out with the coffee in a broad, low, handle-less cup filled to the brim. It smelled good. Morgan thanked him in flawless French. Gaston nodded and returned to the bar, calling to his wife who was in the back creating some sort of irresistible pastry which Morgan would surely be sampling later. The aroma of baking bread drifted out over the richness of the coffee. Morgan leaned back and placed his hands behind his head, locking his fingers. How was it that the French could make coffee which tasted every bit as good as it smelled, but his fellow Americans had never quite mastered the art? He smiled contentedly. This was about as far removed from his previous life as he wanted to be, basic and old-world charming but still civilized enough to be comfortable. He reached and idly unfolded the newspaper that Gaston had waiting for him every day.

Nothing much happening in the world, he observed. At least, nothing which would affect him too much. Some perpetual conflict in the Middle East, a scandal involving a politician with someone else's wife. A fly buzzed past Morgan's ear and landed on the table. He waved it away, thinking that if the newspaper had still been rolled up he'd have dispatched it much more effectively. Today was the fly's lucky day.

Out of habit – or duty, he wasn't sure any more – he turned to the classified advertisements section. Quickly scanning the short column display boxes he learned all that

he needed to know, which was absolutely nothing. That was good. He sipped his coffee. That was also good, very good indeed.

Chantal Benoît emerged from the café and offered Morgan a rather large scrap of sweet flaky pastry filled with soft cheese dusted in fine sugar.

“These will be excellent,” she beamed. “I am making a whole tray. Perhaps you will want to take some up to your apartment?”

“Thank you, Madame Benoît,” Morgan said, returning her smile. “Perhaps I will.” He bit into the pastry. “Very good, mm. Yes, please, put some aside for me. But these taste expensive.”

“Always the best price for my blue-eyed friend *Américain*,” she said, nudging his shoulder in an affectionate gesture. She was fond of Morgan and it showed.

Morgan smiled again. Gaston and his wife rarely presented him with a bill and when they did it seemed much too low to cover the countless cups of coffee and plates of snacks he’d consumed. They didn’t even chase him too hard for the rent on the large room he occupied above the café. He watched the woman return to the dim interior, noting her devil-may-care walk and the way her hips moved beneath the cheap floral-print dress and all-encompassing baker’s apron. She was much younger than her husband, maybe fifteen years younger, and Morgan idly wondered what she had seen in this dumpy restaurateur. Security, probably. Or money. Or both. Things could still be fairly basic in the Midi-Pyrénées. A beautiful part of France, and down here still relatively unspoiled and quiet. He took another bite of the pastry. It really was outstanding and he tried to identify the layers of different flavors in the creamed cheese filling.

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On the right of the square – more of a rectangle, really – was another restaurant. This was the province of Monsieur Tornais and it was a fine establishment which would not open for business until much later in the day. Despite the fact that it was not yet serving, the chairs and tables were set on the broad sidewalk already. The proprietor's son had probably taken care of that earlier, before Morgan had sauntered down from his apartment above the Benoît's café. Bicycles were leaned against the trees across from him, the men playing Pétanque were laughing and getting excited and Morgan could hear Gaston and Chantal arguing in their kitchen. They always argued and it didn't mean anything. The world seemed a peaceful place indeed.

And then he saw her. He missed her at first and had to do a double-take.

Seated at one of the tables outside Tornais' establishment was a woman. Straight dark brown hair, bobbed short of her collar, she was young, relatively speaking, and rather too well-dressed for this lazy rural environment. A dark skirt and jacket, white blouse; Morgan couldn't see her shoes but he guessed that they would be black with heels, the sort of thing women wore in the office. A small purse hung at her side, its cord strap worn over the opposite shoulder, schoolgirl style. She was typing something on her phone. The way she held it suggested that her glasses were not well-matched to her eyes, or perhaps they needed replacing.

He studied her for a while as he slowly ate Mme. Benoît's pastry. His training had made him something of a psychologist and he particularly liked to watch cute women. He would try to work out their background, education, marital status... But that was as far as it ever went. He didn't want involvement, to be caught up in

someone's baggage. Women seemed to gravitate toward him. It happened no matter how uninterested he seemed or how unkempt he happened to be. He hadn't quite worked that one out; even when he was downright rude they usually came back for more. He didn't consider himself to be particularly handsome, though he'd often been told he was. Maybe it was because he was surprisingly muscular. However flattering it might be, the female attention he attracted brought problems. The women wanted more, they became possessive, they had expectations. When that happened he had to move on. The very last thing he wanted, or needed, was to be tied to one place, to start to grow a circle of friends, to be encompassed by a new family full of brothers and sisters and nephews and grandparents, all asking questions and sinking little hooks into him that he couldn't easily shake off. Nevertheless, this woman was attractive, he reflected. Even with the glasses. But what in Heaven's name was she doing here, dressed like that, sitting outside a closed restaurant on a warm weekday afternoon in this nothing-special town? He felt a tickle of curiosity.

With his coffee and pastry finished, Morgan debated wandering over to speak with her. He wanted to stretch his legs and it might satisfy his new-found fascination. It was a tough call; he did not want to draw attention to himself just because he was interested in someone. He thought through the possibilities. A reporter? She didn't look like one. She didn't look like Government, her air was too naïve and innocent. Not once had she looked in his direction, far less had she made eye contact. But that didn't mean she was as innocent as she appeared. She might just be very good at her job. Morgan noted that she was sitting at an angle to an old Citroen that was habitually parked on the edge of the square; she might have been using the windows of that to

watch his reflection. He would have done that. Somehow he doubted it; she seemed far too preoccupied with her phone, shaking her head with frustration when she mistyped something. She wasn't even pointing the thing in his direction so unless it had a camera in the side all she'd be able to photograph were the boules players. It was a puzzle, and Morgan didn't like to pass up a puzzle until he'd had a crack at the solution. He decided he would stroll over and see what she had to say.

As he stood, Chantal Benoît emerged from the café with another coffee and a morsel of a different pastry. She followed his gaze and nodded with approval.

"You know her?" Morgan asked.

"Never seen her here before," the proprietress replied. "Go tell her that Tornais' is closed. Tell her she will find the finest coffee, best pastries and freshest croissants at Benoît's. Bring her back here." She paused thoughtfully for a moment. "That one looks as if she comes from the North, from Paris perhaps."

"I thought so too," Morgan said thoughtfully. "Nothing for her in this town that I can think of. Realtor maybe? Could be she's waiting for someone. I didn't see her arrive. Did you?"

"No, but perhaps she came on that last bus. I did not notice her earlier."

"Thank you." He leaned over the table to take a bite of the new pastry before sauntering idly in the direction of the potential property dealer. Another bus was due, and, having made up his mind to talk with her, he didn't want to watch her riding away. OK, he might as well admit it to himself. He *wanted* to talk to her. He wiped non-existent crumbs from his mouth with the back of his hand as he crossed the road.

She continued tapping away at her phone as he approached. If she was supposed to be reporting on him she was very good. No, he thought. No-one was good enough to fool him so effectively. Well, perhaps one person was, but she wasn't here. He continued his stroll in the young woman's direction.

Morgan was about twenty feet away from her when he had the first inkling that not everything was as it seemed. A mere fraction of an instant later he knew beyond any doubt that something was definitely not right. The small flat-bed truck he'd heard starting earlier had been slammed into gear and was accelerating toward them from the other side of the square. Simultaneously two motorcycles came into view, high-powered machines with riders wearing leathers and full-face helmets. They stopped at the far side of the square, their leathered pilots blipping the throttles as the truck barreled on toward the Restaurant Tornais. One of the motorcycles started to move toward the exit of the square on the road that Morgan had just crossed. The other proceeded to follow the truck, but slower, keeping to the side of the roadway. The woman at the table looked up, initially with interest and then with alarm. The boules players started to shout as they scattered before the truck.

For Morgan, the scene seemed to happening in slow-motion. He jumped forward. He grabbed one of the bicycles, a solid machine which had been propped against a tree. He lifted it chest-high. He threw it at the front of the truck as it pulled alongside the restaurant. The truck stopped short and the occupant of the passenger side tried to open his door but was prevented by the short length of railing in front of the sidewalk. The man shouted at the

driver, who tried to reverse, but he only succeeded in catching the cycle in the front fender and coming to another grinding halt. Now the vehicle was clear of the railings and the passenger jumped out of the truck as it stopped moving. He started for the table. The second motorcycle wobbled to a halt, narrowly avoiding a collision with the backing vehicle.

Morgan leapt for the table. He grabbed the woman's arm and yanked her from her seat. He thrust her away so that she was behind him. She recoiled against the restaurant's closed shutters and fell to the sidewalk. Morgan stood in front of her and faced the former occupant of the truck's passenger seat. This man was a squat, muscular individual in his forties; he looked like a night-club bouncer or someone's personal protection. He had that peculiar, ape-like gait of someone squaring for a brawl and he didn't look like the sort of person to engage in conversation. Nevertheless, Morgan thought he would try. It might be useful.

"What do you want with her?" he asked in French.

The man continued approaching; either he didn't understand or he chose not to reply. He was craning his short thick neck, trying to see behind Morgan to where the woman was crawling toward them. With some irritation Morgan realized that she was trying to grab his leg. He shook it. She grabbed it again. He thought he heard her trying to say something.

"What do you want with her?" Morgan repeated the question, this time in English.

"Stay out of it," replied the bull-necked man, an unplaceable American accent accompanying his words. "This has nothing to do with you."

The truck driver was continuing to crash the gears, trying to extricate his vehicle from the bicycle which was

firmly jammed under the front of the chassis. He gave up the fruitless exercise and opened his door. He obviously intended to assist his partner. The bouncer was approaching Morgan now, a half-amused sneer on his face.

“I said stay out of it,” he repeated. “Get out the way buddy.” More of a New York accent now, Morgan noted.

He felt the woman practically climbing his leg. He shook her off successfully this time and he stepped toward the aspiring pugilist.

“Still time to turn around and leave,” he said evenly.

The bouncer’s punch, when it came, was neither skilful nor accurate. Obviously he had not been expecting any resistance. Morgan deflected the blow with his left arm and simultaneously smashed his right forearm into the man’s nose. He heard the crack of bone and, as the man reeled back, he hooked his left fist into the would-be assailant’s stomach. The man doubled, blood streaming from his face.

“God damn you!” he yelled through his pain as he squared for another assault. Morgan batted him away with a straight blow to the cheek which was rewarded by a satisfying crunch of bone. The truck driver, who initially looked as if he wanted to join the *mêlée*, backed off cautiously and urgently signaled to the motorcycle which was still waiting behind the incapacitated vehicle. The rider reached into his leathers.

Morgan did not wait to see if a firearm was about to appear. He picked up an ornate metal chair and threw it at the biker. It connected. Man and machine toppled sideways. The truck driver was looking from Morgan to the bouncer and back again, an odd expression on his face. He had his hand clapped to his ear, a sure sign that he was listening to instructions over a radio. Now the bouncer was staggering in the direction of the fallen motorcyclist, blood

splashing onto the sidewalk as he went. The truck driver had abandoned any idea of action and had started running in the direction of the second bike.

Morgan registered the scene. Turning to the woman, he pulled her to her feet. She looked to be in partial shock but she didn't look to be as frightened as he might have expected. From her appearance he was satisfied that she had no idea this was going to happen. No matter. Half-lifting and half-carrying her he pulled her into the alley between the restaurant and the adjacent boutique. He propped her against a trashcan and, indicating that she should be silent, he started back for the square.

As Morgan emerged onto the street once more, the bouncer was getting on the back of the motorcycle which its rider had managed to remount. The truck driver had almost reached the other machine. It was rolling backwards, the rider beckoning frantically. Morgan picked up another chair but the motorcycle with the leaking pugilist let out a soulful howl and screeched off to be joined by the second machine which by now had the truck driver as a passenger. Both motorcycles sped away, narrowly avoiding hitting one another as they negotiated the tight cobbled street at the end of the road. Morgan watched as a turn signal smashed off against an iron bollard and the bike wobbled dangerously before the machines started to climb the long hill toward Cautain. The ancient truck remained abandoned, idling with the bicycle wedged below its fender.

Morgan considered turning the truck off and searching it for information. However he quickly discounted this idea. The boules players were shouting after the perpetrators of the mayhem and in a moment they'd come after him as a participant, however unwilling he'd been. There would be time for explanations later. Possibly.

Besides, he wanted to talk to the woman. Grabbing the phone which she'd dropped, Morgan ducked back down the alley to where he had left her. When he got to the trashcans, she wasn't there.

He thought about it. She couldn't have gotten far, not in those shoes. He looked down the alley. Before going any further he snapped the back off her phone and pulled the battery. If anyone was so keen to find her, they'd be tracking the phone for sure. He looked back toward the square but the *pétanquistes* were only interested in the truck, although one of them was standing, hands on hips, surveying the blood trail across the sidewalk. Morgan jogged down the alleyway toward the courtyard at the back.

As he emerged into the sunlight on the far side, he looked at unfamiliar surroundings. He wasn't sure how it was that he hadn't been down here before, but he supposed he'd never had any reason to do that. The courtyard was typical of those in the region; the backs of the business premises formed one side and the other three sides were residential, service premises and storage. A small railed herb garden took up just a few square feet in the center. But where was the woman? There were not too many places she could hide. And then he spotted the shoes.

They were lying in the railed garden, one a few feet from the other. So she wasn't stupid. She had thrown them rather than dropped them, in order that they would give no clue to her path. Morgan looked around. Several doors were open. From more than one he heard music or voices. Normal voices, not the sort of sounds people would make if someone came crashing into their world out of the blue. He stepped back against a wall and surveyed the scene a second time. He looked at the shoes and drew a mental line between them. He extended the line into the courtyard.

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This time Morgan got it. On the left was a store-room with a second floor reached by a hinged iron ladder, like a fire-escape. The ladder was pulled up on the balcony and the end was swinging ever so slightly. Quickly discounting the other possibilities – she might have pushed this ladder up as a decoy – he debated the best way to approach the situation.

After looking around the courtyard again, Morgan considered his position. In the space of a few minutes he'd come dangerously close to blowing his cover, if he hadn't already, and he wasn't quite sure how he'd allowed that to happen. He might have been better stifling his curiosity and letting events unfold while he enjoyed his coffee. If he'd stayed right out of it the bad guys would have grabbed the girl, or killed her, or done whatever else they planned on doing with her. Morgan already knew that there was no way he could have stood by and watched this drama unfold without intervening to protect the girl. It didn't seem likely that they wanted to kill her, they could have just driven the truck right at her if that had been the goal, but the more Morgan thought about the events, the more questions he had. He walked toward the store-house and stood below the balcony. Above him was an open doorway with blackness beyond.

He looked at the ladder. Although he could easily have jumped and pulled the ladder down, or even jumped up to pull himself right onto the balcony, he didn't think that was that the best approach. The woman might decide to drop something on his head or she may have armed herself with whatever was being stored in there. While he had no doubt he could overpower her, he didn't want to go there. Not unless he had to. She was obviously not just a regular citizen. He addressed himself to the darkness in the open door.

“Do you want to come down and tell me what this is all about, or shall I come up to you?” He spoke French, but after a moment’s silence he repeated the question in English.

“Well?” he continued. He was speaking quietly, matter-of-factly; he didn’t want to attract the other occupants of the premises around the courtyard.

“Why should I come down? I don’t trust you.” A longish pause. “Well, maybe I do.” The voice was hesitant. “You don’t want to hurt me?” She spoke English, or, more precisely, American English. Midwestern with a slight Southern inflection. Something like that. Morgan couldn’t quite place the accent, it seemed to have more than one origin.

“Lady, I have no intention of hurting you.” He scanned around slowly as he said this, taking in the empty courtyard. He turned back to the balcony. “Looks to me that you need help right now and I’m your best bet. Or I can walk away and leave you to sort yourself out. Right now I’m leaning toward walking away. Your call. Make it quick.”

“OK. Step back so I can see you as I come out. And keep your hands where I can see them too. No tricks.”

Morgan looked for the source of her voice and realized she was watching him from the gloom to the side of the balcony door. He was briefly annoyed at himself for not noticing this before. He made a mental note to himself that his tradecraft was slipping. Plus, she seemed to have a bit more brain than he’d thought when she’d been climbing his leg. He stepped back.

She came out onto the balcony slowly, carefully, all the while keeping her eyes fixed on his, back pressed to the doorframe, ready to dive back into the shadows in an instant. He half-raised his arms sideways from his body,

palms toward her so she could see he had no intent to harm her. At the same time he kept his eyes on her, now alert to the possibility that she might have a firearm. Her purse was rather small for any regular automatic but even miniature guns could be deadly and he'd been surprised by more than one concealed weapon in the past. Not that she was going to go for one now, she'd have drawn it before she came out. Her hands were empty. She stopped at the top of the ladder. Morgan shrugged expansively.

"You coming down, or do we stay here all day?" His tone was gritty.

"OK, I'll drop the ladder. Stand further back. Stay where I can see you."

"Look, I doubt those guys will come back right away but they're sure as hell going to try again. You don't want to be fooling around when they do."

She lowered the ladder and climbed to the ground. She quickly turned to face him as she stepped off the lowest rung, studying him closely as she approached him. Warily. Morgan guessed that she wasn't going to trust him immediately despite his encouraging words. It would no doubt seem odd to her that he would step in out of the blue to rescue her. She stopped just far enough away to make sure he wouldn't be able to grab at her, then she stood hands on hips, appraising him. Her expression was one of skepticism.

Morgan looked at her. Now that he could see her properly he found it hard to pin down her age but she was not a kid and she was definitely attractive. And fit, she was certainly fit. The business suit was dusty but she had class. Much classier than the women he normally got to spend time with these days. He was impressed.

The silence had gone on for too long already. Now she was looking at him questioningly, as if she expected him to speak. Morgan gave her a brief smile.

“That’s better,” he said. “Glad we got the trust thing out of the way. First we need to get out of here. We can trade stories once we’re somewhere less open. You OK? No injuries?”

“No injuries,” she said simply.

“Are you armed? I mean, a gun? Knife?” He felt it worth asking the question.

“No, of course not. Why would I be? Are you?”

He half-laughed. She had guts.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and giving a thin smile. Too much talk already. He looked around. “Go get your shoes while I think of a way out of this place. We don’t want to leave the way we came in and I don’t see another exit right now.”

She retrieved her footwear from the railed area. With some relief Morgan saw that the heels were reasonable, at least for walking. He assessed the courtyard and determined that if they could get through any of the buildings to the right, and preferably one in the far right corner, they would exit onto the street at the side. The further from the café the better. From there they could take a back lane and head toward the rear entrance of his apartment, thus saving any awkward questions from Gaston and anyone else who might know him. First, though, there was a need to throw the hounds off the scent. He pulled the woman’s smartphone from his pocket and replaced the battery. The screen blinked and asked for a PIN.

“Unlock it,” he said, handing it to her. “Don’t take too long.” She complied and he took it back. Quickly he copied

the contents of the SIM card into the phone's memory then he switched to airplane mode. He removed the battery and pulled the card from its socket. Reaching into his other pocket he drew out a cheap basic cellphone, a pay-as-you-go model. Flipping open the back he extracted his own SIM card and swapped it for the woman's. He entered the same four digits he'd watched her use, then he typed a screenlock code.

"Don't worry," he said. "The battery will be dead long before anyone can run up a bill for you. And only then if they can get past the keypad lock. Now, I need you to go over there..." he waved to the corner, "and look to see if you can find a way through to the street. Most of these houses have long passages running right through, front to back. You might have to charm the occupants. Do you speak French?"

"Badly," she replied. "But I can get by." Still the slight Southern twang to what was otherwise a non-descript accent. "What are you going to do?"

"That noise you can hear – that's the bus for Cautain coming down the hill. From there it goes on to Toulouse via every village on the map. This phone is going for a ride with your SIM card inside. Anyone using that to trace you is going to think you left town."

"But my contacts – my information—" she started.

"All in your own phone, which we still have." He waved her phone in her face. "I copied them over. The only thing you are losing is your number and that's only for now. Let's go."

"What are you going to do for a phone?"

Morgan shot her an exasperated look.

"Got several. This one doesn't matter. Move."

She turned for the corner and Morgan slipped back down the alleyway as the bus drew into the square. The locals were now crawling all over the abandoned truck so it wasn't too hard to avoid them as he stepped onto the bus. He asked the driver some questions about the route, dropping the phone into the slot for discarded tickets by the door as he did so. He said he'd take a different bus and thanked the driver. He headed back for the courtyard and a moment later he joined the woman in the corner where she was standing trying to blend in with the vines and aging stonework. He turned and stood next to her so his back was against the same wall. Although he expected no-one to be following them he wanted to watch the alleyway to the square. Just in case.

"Done," he said tersely. "You're on your way to Carcassonne. What did you find?"

"This one here. There's a passage right through to the street. The doors are open at both ends."

"They usually are. That'll do. Let's go." Without waiting for a response he took her wrist and pulled her quickly into the house. The passage was cool and airy and no-one came out to challenge them. They stepped into the street. As it was likely that the Benoîts had seen everything he didn't want to have to talk with them right now, in fact he was beginning to think he'd never be speaking with them again. Pity about their bill. Perhaps he'd mail them some cash later. Or perhaps not. He realized he hadn't asked her who she was.

"You got a name?" he said.

"Dr. Gibson." She looked a trifle embarrassed at her own formality. "Kate. Kate Gibson."

"Well, Kate, you'd better follow exactly what I say for the next few minutes. Then I think there is some explaining to do." He guided her toward the street.

“You didn’t tell me *your* name,” she said.

“No, I didn’t,” agreed Morgan. He was undecided whether he should give her his real name or one of his several aliases. The identity he was currently using in this town was favorite, but the question could wait. Somehow he felt he wanted to be genuine at this point; maybe he’d been living under an assumed name for too long. His cover was unraveling. He dismissed the thought. Pulling his charge closer to him he pointed to the lane opposite. “Later. Let’s go.”

They entered a narrow cobbled way that was definitely less clean and agreeable than the square or the courtyard they’d just left. There was a rank smell of stagnant water; heaps of trash and black plastic bags of garbage were piled up against the gates which backed the properties. They reached the top of the street. From there they turned right into a narrow passage between two houses. At the end of this Morgan stopped and looked around before he motioned to her to follow. Darting across the road he led her through a weathered wooden gate and up a flight of stone steps toward an open door. Window boxes with flowers long past their best festooned the wall along the yard. Kate could smell baking and fresh coffee coming from the open windows below the steps. Voices called out in French, but the conversation was not directed at them. Morgan ushered her through the doorway at the top of the steps and guided her into a dim hallway inside.

Blinking in the gloom she watched as he pulled a key from his pocket. Silently he unlocked one of the doors and motioned for her to follow him into the room beyond.

She looked around. The apartment was light and airy. It hadn’t been decorated in years but it was clean and almost obsessively tidy. A bed was the main feature and apart from a small dressing table, nightstand and wardrobe

there wasn't much furniture. Nothing personal in sight, no pictures, no books, not even a magazine. A door led to another room which she could see was a bathroom. On the opposite side from the door, sagging shutters and folding windows led onto a wrought-iron balcony overlooking the main square. Kate approached the window cautiously, conscious of being visible from the street. Suddenly she felt nauseous. She looked around for somewhere to sit and opted for the convenience of the bed.

Morgan looked at her, concerned at her sudden loss of color. He went into the bathroom and emerged with a glass of water.

"Here," he said sympathetically. "Drink this. Get your breath. Take your time, then tell me your story."

CHAPTER TWO.

Maxwell put the phone to his ear. So she was on the move again, heading for the big town. He thanked Stravitz in Tech-Ops and hung up. Then he dialed another number.

“You got me more detail on this screw-up, Webber?” he demanded.

“Not much, Sir. It’s not a total screw-up, I told you the guys in Paris got Groundhog.”

“Yeah, yeah, but we still have this on our plate. My plate. What more can you tell me?” Maxwell’s tone was one of long-practiced impatience.

“It would have been fine, but this guy came from nowhere and got in the way. While our operatives were busy dealing with him, Songbird vanished.”

“That bit may not matter too much. We’ll pick her up soon enough. I still want to know about this guy. Like, was he some random guy who happened to be in the way and decided to play hero or was he an actor in this show? Was he the opposition? Was the guy waiting for us? Someone mentioned they thought it was Morgan. I tell you, if it was Morgan he’d have left your goons in a bad way.”

“Whoever he was he sure messed up one of the guys. Knocked him about quite a bit but he didn’t finish him. But no, we’ve no idea if he was watching and waiting or if it was pure chance. Don’t think it was the opposition; they would use more than one guy, wouldn’t they?”

“Right. My thoughts exactly. So did this Captain America character actually grab Songbird, or did she run on her own?”

“Not clear on that one, Sir. I think he was too busy remodeling our guy’s face to have grabbed her. We believe she ran.”

“OK, we’ll get her. Just don’t use the same bunch of clowns. I want this done right.”

“One of them is in the hospital...”

“That sounds like Morgan’s work. Stravitz is tracking Songbird real time. Give him a call. Get things in place and let me know.”

“Yes, Sir. This time it’s gonna work.”

“It had better.”

Maxwell hung up the phone and sighed. Still too many questions. It was logical that it wasn’t the opposition. Or any one of several potential oppositions. Timing was too much of a coincidence; they wouldn’t turn up just as Webber’s crew made their move. Maybe there was a leak. But even if there was, Morgan wouldn’t work with the bad guys. He was still dark, unless there was information about him which hadn’t yet been shared. Probably just lousy coincidence.

A woman with cropped bleach-blonde hair entered the office carrying a red plastic tray with a Thermos and a small stack of Styrofoam cups.

“You wanted coffee, Sir?” she inquired.

“Where’s Gill?”

“Off-duty, Sir,” the tray-bearer replied. “She told me you like it strong, so strong it is. Hope you don’t have an ulcer. Sir.”

Maxwell grunted in amusement.

“I’m fine, thank you. On the table – please. You here for a while?”

“Until 4pm, Sir. Next shift takes over at four, until midnight,” she added unnecessarily. Maxwell knew the shift pattern, and she knew that he knew. She blushed. He appeared not to notice as he waved her away.

“Good. Thanks. This could be a long day.”

The Gyr Falcon File

Kate Gibson sipped the second glass of water – the first hadn't even touched the sides as she gulped it down. Morgan was standing watching her, bronzed arms folded, saying nothing. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable, wishing she could just slip away. Whatever she said at this point, it was just going to get incredibly complicated. She took a deep breath and set the glass of water on the floor.

"Thank you," she started. "I guess those guys were out to get me." She paused, waiting for affirmation.

"Definitely," Morgan said. He looked at her, her dark hair still dusty from the storehouse, her clothes marked from the sidewalk where he'd unceremoniously thrown her. She had lost her glasses, strange that, he hadn't seen them when he scooped up her phone. Under the table perhaps. Didn't look like she missed them. Hazel eyes. He had a thing for hazel eyes. Not much make-up. He was still mulling over the origins of the would-be abductors. Things didn't quite make sense yet. He nodded slowly in encouragement. "Go on."

"Look, I don't know why they should be interested in me. I'm just a researcher at the University. Maybe they got the wrong girl."

"Which University? What do you do?"

"Austin, Texas."

Ah, thought Morgan. That could explain the hint of a southern twang. It wasn't a full-on drawl. And this girl wasn't from Texas originally, that much he could tell. He inclined his head, encouraging her to continue.

"I'm working with Professor Arnaud on enzymes and metabolism. Cytochrome P450. Don't suppose you heard of it?"

Morgan half-smiled.

“Yes, as it happens. My late brother’s kid had some liver issues. Comes in different flavors, doesn’t it? 3A4, 2D6, that sort of thing?”

Kate looked impressed.

“Not many folks know that,” she said with a hint of surprise. “Anyway, Jacques – that’s Professor Arnaud – has decoded a bunch of new metabolic pathways related to the CYP450 process. By controlling them you can affect the whole body. His goal is to modify drug interactions.” She stopped, unsure if she was getting too technical. From Morgan’s expression it appeared that he was handling it just fine. She continued.

“This is the thing. By altering response you can achieve fantastic things with very small amounts of drugs, or you can make the body break them down so fast that they have practically no effect at all. New CYP450 oxygenase families show a lot of promise in this field and Jacques has found several pathways that were completely unexpected.” She paused for breath then launched into her description again. Her enthusiasm for her work was obvious. “But the big discovery is a totally undocumented analog to this process, one which we can manipulate at the sub-cellular level. There’s a sort of master chemical which drives it, which I found...” She blushed slightly. “I’m going on a bit, aren’t I?”

Morgan smiled encouragingly.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “After all that excitement down there you are entitled to let out some of the tension. And I am genuinely interested. You clearly love your work. Tell me more about this master chemical.”

Kate relaxed slightly and tried to slow down her delivery.

“Thank you, you’re right about the excitement. The master chemical. Well, we don’t even have a proper name

for it yet; Jacques suggested ‘the E-Factor’ but that might not stick. Early tests are incredibly positive. The implications are enormous.”

The enormous implications were already beginning to dawn on Morgan. Something the US Government would dearly love to own. Or suppress, or at least control. Other Governments too. But that couldn’t be the whole story.

“Why are you here in Verlade?” he asked.

“I was in Paris with Jacques.” She shrugged. “We were at the CEMAG symposium. Committee for European Microbiology and Genetics. The subject wasn’t directly related but that was deliberate, he wanted to test the water with a scientific community which wouldn’t be too hot on his topic. I was assisting and I guess I got a little carried away.”

“Like how?” Morgan wondered if he was in for another lengthy explanation but he decided to stay with it. The girl obviously needed to get everything off her chest before she was going to relax.

“I threw out some teasers for my own work. I can’t help it, I have a near-photographic memory and when people ask me things I just start to play it back. We were due to publish the first of the CYP450 peer review invitations this coming Friday. Reviews of Jacques’ work, that is, mine is still supposed to be under wraps. Folks started asking me more and more questions and I felt pressured. I think I fouled up a bit, said too much. It was getting uncomfortable.” She stopped for another breath and also to gauge Morgan’s reaction. He was still nodding encouragingly.

“Anyway,” she continued, rather more slowly now. “I decided to slip away from Paris and come down here for a few days to unwind. My real work was done anyway. I flew into Blagnac this morning and decided to take a bus

to, well, to anywhere. This place looked nice and quiet. I got off and I was going to find somewhere to stay. I was just enjoying the scenery when all this happened. I'd been here for maybe forty-five minutes, that's all. Then Jacques started texting me, he was pissed that I'd gone off without telling him." She reflected for a moment. "Some quiet place, huh?"

"Usually is," Morgan said with quiet cynicism. "Was until you showed up, anyhow."

Kate half-smiled. She took a slow breath and she suddenly realized how one-sided the conversation had been up to this point.

"You've pretty much got my life history now, what about you? Who are you? How come you were there to save me? Are you watching me?"

"Never seen you before in my life," Morgan replied. His honesty rang true but she was already formulating more questions. He forestalled her. "I saw you, thought I'd come and chat, and then the shit-storm started. If you flew in this morning, where's your luggage?"

She gave a sardonic laugh.

"Huh," she said. "Limoges, apparently. Baggage handling exception. Regional airlines at their best. Just like home. I'm supposed to call them when I have somewhere to stay and they'll send it on."

"That's one call you shouldn't make. You can kiss goodbye to your baggage from here on. In more ways than one."

She shrugged again. She was feeling more like herself.

"Doesn't matter for now. You didn't answer my question. Who are you, what are you doing here?"

Morgan held out his hand with exaggerated formality.

“I guess we haven’t been introduced. Edward Morgan. Friends just call me Morgan. At least they did when I had some. Now I’m pretty much on my own and that’s just the way I like it. As for being here in Verlade, well, it’s a quiet place – normally – and I don’t have to answer a lot of dumb questions.” This last bit he emphasized rather pointedly.

“Why would you have to answer dumb questions? You hiding from someone? Or something?”

Damn this girl, Morgan thought. She’s bright. Too bright, this could be trouble. But, he considered, he was going to have to move on anyway. No harm in taking her with him. Just for now.

“I was tired of the rat-race,” he answered with a finality in his voice that suggested she shouldn’t probe any further. “The question is, what are we going to do with you? Those guys won’t be fooled by the bus-touring phone for long. Someone wants you pretty bad to have set this up. Is what you know really that important?” He was sure he already knew the answer to that.

“I guess it could be, to the right people. I was slightly drunk in the hotel on the second night, maybe I was indiscreet. Jacques didn’t like it at all. He gave me one hell of a lecture after. In part that sealed my decision to get away for a bit. But who were those guys? French? Americans?”

“Hard to say. Only one of them spoke; he was American I’m sure but the operation was almost too clumsy for Uncle Sam. Unless they dropped their standards, and that’s certainly possible. Can’t rule out any of several other players either. How public was your work prior to this conference?”

“No-one outside the lab knew of it before. Like I said, the CYP450 research papers were due for publication and

review at the end of the week. My own work was definitely not on the agenda. The E-Factor is a bit hush-hush for now, I suppose. And I was the klutz who had to go and let the cat out of the bag. Damned Margaritas. They slip down easy, as the saying goes.”

Morgan weighed up the situation. Quite who the bad guys might serve wasn't the immediate problem. The fact that they posed a threat was enough. Their initial failure provided a little time but not too much. He needed to get out of there with Kate. Public transport was no option, they'd be watching the bus out of the town. Taxis didn't exist here. His only transport was an elderly Honda 125cc motorcycle and, despite its twin cylinders, no way was that going to carry two adults for any distance. Certainly not in its current state. Pity, he'd grown quite fond of it.

“I get the picture, I think. Enough for now.” He gave a quick nod to emphasize his words. “We have to move,” he continued. “You feeling OK?”

“Not bad under the circumstances,” she replied.

Morgan turned to the wooden dressing table and pulled the bottom drawer right out. He set it on the floor. Reaching into the space behind he took out a roll of Euro bills which he tossed onto the bed. Two pay-as-you-go cellphones followed, then a red-covered passport. Kate picked it up.

“It says Colm O’Kenny here, you’re Irish? I thought you said you were called Morgan.”

“Don’t you need those glasses you were wearing?”

“Ha, no,” she replied with a hint of amusement. “The optometrist at the labs insisted I use them for close work but they’re more hindrance than help. I guess I lost them in the scuffle. No biggie. What is your name, really?”

“Try this.” Another passport landed on the bed.

“Nah, Peter Dearborne. Now you are British. You sure don’t sound it. Who the hell are you? *What* the hell are you?” Her tone was starting to change from one of amusement to suspicion.

A third passport joined the others. This one was American, although it did not say Morgan in it. Then a cloth-wrapped Beretta 92L appeared together with three magazines, full. And another roll of bills of mixed currencies: Dollars, Euro and Pounds.

“I told you, I’m called Morgan. Honestly. This stuff is just part of my past life. That’s not important. Not right now. I’m not a criminal, if that’s what you are thinking. Please try to trust me. I know that’s a lot to ask but you are someone’s target and believe me, I’m the best chance you’ve got for staying out of their hands. Probably your only chance. We have to get moving.”

He looked at her attire. Not good.

“You need some practical clothes,” he said. “You are welcome to take anything of mine but I doubt there’s anything that will fit. Have a look anyway.” He pulled a large sport duffel bag from the wardrobe and began filling it with the items from the bed and some well-chosen clothes. He went into the bathroom and collected a few toiletries and a razor which he put into an end pocket.

Kate was going through the neatly folded clothing in the drawers without much enthusiasm and Morgan was testing the zipper on the duffel bag when they heard the car. It was being driven slowly, pulling up and moving on again. The engine sounded a lot more powerful than the elderly vehicles which made up most of the usual Verlade traffic. Waving Kate toward the back of the room, Morgan edged to the window. He unwrapped the Beretta as he moved. A magazine clicked into place. He pulled the slide and checked it before he looked through the gently wafting

drapes into the square. A dark gray Audi had pulled up on the far side and a thick-set man with sunglasses was leaning out to talk with the boules players. Another man in a suit was walking toward the truck and the blood-spattered paving slabs. His gaze was darting in all directions, scanning up at the windows one moment and down the streets the next. A professional. A third man was looking directly at the front of the café. Morgan moved back from the window.

“Forget the clothes,” he said tersely. “We have to go. Now.” He grabbed the duffel bag and ushered Kate toward the door. Opening it just a crack at first he checked outside. Clear. Satisfied, he stepped into the hallway. He quickly locked the door behind them. No point in making it too easy. He slipped his key into a crack between the top of the doorframe and the plasterwork. Peering out of the door at the top of the steps he saw what he wanted – the Benoît’s ancient Peugeot was parked just inside the double gates which led to the back lane. No-one was around. He started down the steps and turned to point at the car.

“That’s our transport,” he said with measured urgency. “You go open the gates. Quietly if you can. I need to pick up the keys.”

Kate was down the steps and heading across the courtyard as Morgan emerged from the back door of the café. He’d slipped the keys off the board and as an afterthought he had stuffed several high-value Euro bills into the space under the hook. At least he had paid part of his debts. The Benoît’s would be able to collect on the insurance for their car. He climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. Kate returned from opening the gates and she jumped in alongside him. Morgan selected a gear and slowly let out the clutch, trying to make as little noise as possible. The car inched forward but there was a

sudden horrifying squeal from the loose alternator belt. He had forgotten about that. He'd offered to fix it for the café owner many times. Too late now. By easing back on the gas he got the noise under control as he urged the elderly motor forward to the gate.

A man in a suit appeared in the lane as the nose of the car emerged. It was the same guy who'd been eyeing up the front of the building. Morgan swung the Peugeot toward him and the man threw himself back against the wall. In the mirror Morgan could see him reaching inside his jacket. Morgan jerked the wheel left and aimed the car down another lane. Damn, this direction curved round to the main street and nowhere else. Bad move. He briefly considered reversing but the man he'd forced to play chicken was now at the top of the lane, pointing something at him, something metal, something which caused the rear window to splinter with a loud crack. Another crack from the roof. Morgan stabbed the gas pedal and tore down the lane, slamming the protesting gearbox through the ratios as fast as he could. The gray Audi pulled into view across the end of the lane but the driver had gone too far, only its short trunk blocked their path.

Kate choked back a yell. Morgan twisted the wheel and the front right of the Peugeot struck the rear of the heavier car with a grinding crunch which deflected it left and upwards. Amazingly the Peugeot did not stop. It seemed to hang in the air for a split second then it crashed back onto the road behind the Audi, the little engine racing as the tires bit the cobbles once more. Morgan swerved left then right into the square and right again onto a road parallel to the one with the Audi. He imagined that they would soon be on his tail but he knew a couple of short cuts which they wouldn't be keen to take. He pulled the car into another smaller square on the left.

At this point Kate gave up wondering what the hell she was doing here. There wasn't time to think about it. She gripped the ledge at the top of the dash and hoped. She saw the square, the building in the center, the railings and the short flight of steps leading down the other side. And now Morgan was driving down the steps, the Peugeot's springs squealing with protest. If the vehicle had been equipped with hubcaps they would certainly have come off. Morgan turned right and then sharp left and he aimed for a narrow half-made road between several rows of trees. After three or four minutes he slackened his pace a little and allowed the engine to slow.

"You OK?" he said at length.

"I think so," Kate answered. "Bit shook up. But I'm all right."

"Shaken, not stirred, eh?" Morgan grinned. "Anyone behind us?"

She looked at the back window. It was opaque, a tight network of spidery cracks stressing the laminated glass in all directions. A neat hole marked the top center. A matching hole adorned the roof of the car just south of the broken sunroof. She noted it then craned her head out of the side window.

"Nothing. You lost them."

"We'll see. We might have lost them for now, anyway. Guess the phone trick didn't work." He lifted the gun from his lap and offered it to her. "You know how to use one of these?"

She gave him a curious look.

"No. Well, maybe I do, but I'd be more comfortable if you kept it. Why?"

"Just that you seem to be more switched on than any academic I've ever met. Tossing the shoes, how you

covered me at the storeroom. And you are way too cool about all of this; most women would have peed themselves by now.”

“How do you know I haven’t?” she countered. “OK, I haven’t, but I guess I have a confession.”

“Ah. I thought so. Confess away.”

“I used to work for the Drug Enforcement Administration.”

“The DEA? And then you became a what, doctor, professor? How does that work?” The farm track had ended and Morgan turned onto a better-surfaced thoroughfare. The car seemed to have survived the abuse and was running surprisingly well.

“It’s not quite as it sounds,” Kate said. “I’d done my first degree and was angling for a grad school place. It wasn’t happening. Biochemistry is a bit of an esoteric science and a proverbial bottleneck unless someone smiles on you. So I got a job with the DEA, scientific liaison, glorified clerical work really, nothing very exciting. But I had a boyfriend at the time; he led one of the teams which did the big drug busts, the action-packed stuff. I’d gotten it into my head that I wanted some of that and I made a lot of fuss about it. I must have been really annoying because eventually they sent me off to Quantico for agent training. I ran with a couple of minor operations but then my grad school opportunity magically appeared and the rest is history.”

“And the boyfriend?”

“He’s history too. Ancient history.”

“Uh-huh.” Morgan had already noted the lack of rings on her slender fingers.

“Morgan?”

“What is it?”

“Thank you.”

The car was now on a more regular road and there was some traffic, but despite the damage the old Peugeot blended with the local vehicles quite well.

“In about fifteen kilometers we’ll hit Beaulain,” Morgan said, wishing he could use the rear-view mirror. “No major roads and I doubt if anyone will be looking for us there yet. Beaulain is ideal for our purposes. Not a big place but big enough for you to get some proper clothes and whatever stuff you need. Toothbrush, that sort of thing. Just the essentials. No hairdryers or nail polish.”

“I can’t have a hairdryer? Aww, what’s a girl to do?”

The office was large and sumptuously appointed. The deep-pile carpet bore a huge, woven official crest. A cluster of flags fringed with gold stood in the corner by an impressive window that was occasionally splashed with the overspray from an unseen sprinkler outside.

The woman behind the massive oak desk looked like she didn’t stand for any nonsense. In her fifties and carrying half-rim glasses on her nose, she studied a report intently while reclining in a large wood-and-leather swivel chair. A gold nameplate on her desk identified her as Helen Rogowski. She closed the report then, almost as an afterthought, she picked it up and leafed through a few more pages before replacing it on the desk. She leaned forward and addressed her visitor, looking at him piercingly over the top of her glasses.

“So, Howard. What do you have to tell me about this unfortunate catalog of disaster?” Her voice was firm and even. Maxwell cleared his throat.

“Let’s focus on the positives first,” he started.

“I don’t give a damn about the positives. The positives are what you are paid for. We expect the positives. We achieve the positives. Tell me about the disaster. Tell me about Morgan.”

Maxwell squirmed inside but tried not to show it. He shuffled awkwardly in the chair.

“We had a coordinated plan to snatch Arnaud and Gibson – Groundhog and Songbird – at the same time.”

“Songbird?” the woman interrupted. “Who chose these names?”

“I did. Groundhog just seemed to fit the guy. Little, fat, and quicker than he looked. Songbird – well, she was starting to sing,” Maxwell offered, relieved at the apparent opportunity to sidetrack. “That’s what I was told. Told that she was more than slightly drunk one night at the CEMAG conference, blabbing about a bunch of stuff we’d rather not have out in the public domain.”

“OK, good enough. For now. Go on with the disaster.”

“The order had been signed to take both Groundhog and Songbird out of circulation at the same time.”

“I know. I signed it myself.”

“Ah. I didn’t know that. Anyway, I drew up a plan to snatch them from the hotel in Paris. Simple enough, fake Room Service, shot of Propofol or whatever the current drug of choice is, then spirit them out before anyone could miss them. Standard procedure. Piece of cake, or it should have been.” He paused. Rogowski was resting her chin on her interlocked fingers. Despite her provocative manner he couldn’t be sure where she stood on this. Yet. He was about to get his answer. He continued.

“That was fine for Groundhog, it worked. But while we were setting it up, we discovered that Songbird had skipped Paris. She had decided to fly to the South of

France.” Maxwell immediately regretted the choice of phrase. “No big deal, it...”

“But it was a big deal, wasn’t it, Howard? A very big deal. A big enough deal for you to let her slip through your fingers.” As if to emphasize this she unlinked her own fingers and sat back in the chair. “Continue.”

“We tracked her cellphone all the way to Verlade. We had to delay Groundhog. Couldn’t take one without the other, they were too close. In a professional sense. Groundhog was hopping mad when he found she’d gone; texts were flying back and forth right up to the operation. Verlade should have been straightforward. Two operatives identified her in the square. Positively. No-one else around except a bunch of old guys playing that stupid bocce-ball or whatever it is they do.”

“*Pétanque*,” Rogowski corrected. “A version of Boules that’s very popular in the region. It’s not stupid at all, at least not to *les paysans*. It can be friendly or it can change the course of local history. A bit like your business. Maybe you should have done more research. Go on.”

“Again, it should have been simple. One naïve female target. Two big guys in a truck you wouldn’t look twice at. A couple of guys on fast bikes for backup and set to deal with any trouble. One truck guy jumps out, bundles her in and off they go. That’s what was supposed to happen.”

“Until Morgan showed up.”

“Until Morgan showed up,” Maxwell repeated slowly. “We don’t know where he came from. One minute there’s no-one but Songbird and a bunch of geriatric locals in the square, the next minute Morgan appears large as life and starts aiming bicycles and chairs at our guys.”

“Your steely-eyed crime-busting operatives were beaten by bicycles and chairs?” Rogowski’s eyebrows

arched toward the exquisitely decorated ceiling. Maxwell shuffled again in obvious discomfort.

“They weren’t expecting any trouble,” he said defensively.

“They are paid to expect trouble. They are trained, at great expense, to handle any crap that gets thrown their way. That includes furniture and the occasional bicycle.”

“We’ll review the training.” He pretended he didn’t hear the derisory snort. He continued swiftly. “Songbird got away in the confusion. We thought we had her when her phone started to move toward Cautain, but when we stopped the bus she was supposed to be on we discovered the phone in the trash. A throw-away phone with her SIM card in it.” This time the snort was louder. He ignored it and carried on. “We brought in some heavyweights to track down Morgan and the girl. They found Morgan’s apartment very quickly. But the bird had flown, so to speak. Someone at Ops found out that her eyeglasses had a tracking chip – still not sure about that – but that was a dead end because one of our agents picked them up.”

“You are absolutely sure it was Morgan in the square?”

“Positive. One of the guys ID’d him 100%. Morgan took the café-owner’s car and, this we are now absolutely positive about, he took Songbird with him. The car took a hit but they managed to get clean away.”

“Took a hit? You mean to say that there was an exchange of fire?”

“Just one of our guys loosing off. No exchange. Nothing to suggest there were any injuries.”

“I see. So help me with my understanding of this, Director Maxwell. The situation right now is that Arnaud is currently enjoying our hospitality so we have no immediate

problem there. I can tell you that the research papers and computers are under lock and key and no awkward or embarrassing reports will be getting published anytime soon. The girl you call Songbird said rather too much in Paris and we don't know who was listening. We'll get to that. You failed to notice that she was about to skip to..." she looked down at her notes "...to Verlade, and then you embarked upon a monumental series of errors and miscalculations in your ensuing attempts to take her. At some point in this sorry business one of our best and most effective agents, a man we've kept dark for a long time, for reasons I won't go into, becomes involved ... and now this self-same operative appears to be protecting the person we, and in all probability others, are keen to get our hands on. Do I have it right? Is that all?"

Maxwell relaxed slightly. Rogowski seemed more interested in the events than assigning blame.

"That's all."

"That is not all." Her eyes flashed. "That is most definitely not all. Do you think Morgan knows he's just taken on the United States Government? If he thinks he's protecting her from the opposition we may have a real fight on our hands."

"I invoked the contact protocol," Maxwell said. "He should be calling in soon."

"If he trusts the protocol," came the acid reply. "Some genius discharged a weapon at him." She gave Maxwell a slow, meaningful look. "He's going to be paranoid right now. You know what that means."

"Uh-huh."

"That's not even the half of it. Morgan is a problem. A tough enough problem, true, but he's not the real issue. It's the girl you codenamed Songbird. It will no doubt surprise you to learn that we know a great deal about her. We know

her background inside out and upside down. We know all about her research and her papers. We're into her in a big way. Did you know that she used to be DEA? We trained her, gave her the smarts to survive, although to be fair that was incidental and not part of the overall goal." She sat back and studied Maxwell's face to see if he was taking it in. She continued.

"This girl is bright, very bright. We steered her into research with Arnaud. He's been directing her work and feeding us reports for years. She is on the verge of a big breakthrough and she has a photographic memory. With her knowledge she represents a massive liability if she falls into the wrong hands. We were the ones who planted the tracking chip in her eyeglasses. It's RFID, by the way, very short range, office-grade only. Your techs are slipping." She relaxed slightly. "Here. I want you to read this."

Adopting a more conciliatory manner she took a blue-stripped folder with a large red label from the desk.

"Gyrfalcon," she said quietly, handing it to Maxwell. "A name you are soon going to wish you had never heard. We've been working on this project for quite a few years. Only a handful of people have full knowledge. Now you are in the loop. You can see why it is vital, and I repeat, vital, to bring in Morgan and this girl as soon as possible. And, *inter alia*, you will see the unfortunate coincidence over the code-name you chose."

Maxwell leafed through the folder. He stiffened and re-read the third page.

"Jesus," he said at last. "She has no idea what she has in her head. No idea at all."



U.S. Government Agent Ed Morgan's cover is blown. His idyllic life in the foothills of the Pyrenees has been shattered by the arrival of Kate, a scientist with a photographic memory and a medical discovery so revolutionary that someone is determined to abduct her. Morgan takes Kate under his wing and together they go on the run in a plot that relentlessly ramps up the action as it twists and turns across two continents.

The Gyrfalcon File

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