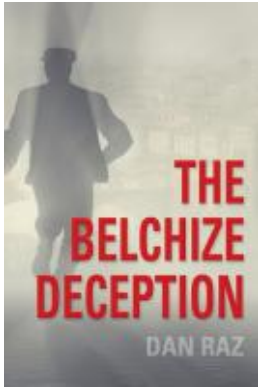


The background of the cover features a silhouette of a man in a dark suit and a peaked cap, walking away from the viewer on a beach. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a bright, hazy sky and a calm sea. The man's right hand is on his hip, and he appears to be looking back over his shoulder. The overall mood is mysterious and atmospheric.

THE BELCHIZE DECEPTION

DAN RAZ



The Belchize Deception focuses on the experiences of two CIA employees, a field operative and an office analyst, who never knew each other, working miles apart, and living separate lives. The operative gets caught in a deceptive plot and becomes an international fugitive. The analyst's curiosity into a two-decade old secretive project called "Operation BlackBear" forces her to escape death and leave everything behind. Together, they need to join forces to unearth the mystery behind Operation BlackBear...

The Belchize Deception

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THE BELCHIZE DECEPTION

Dan Raz

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First Edition

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

Madrid

Day 3

The man Steve was tailing had not made a move. For the past three days that he was on his tail, he had not uncovered any suspicious activities or movements made by his subject of surveillance. The subject just spent his life just like any retired person was doing. Stayed at home and worked on the garden.

On the day he arrived in Madrid, he went straight to the residence where the man lived. From the outside looking in, he could tell that the house was huge. More like a mansion than a house. 'The man must have made a fortune being able to live in a mansion like this' he thought then.

He surveyed the surroundings. The house looked ancient yet elegant. The house was isolated just like all the other houses in the neighborhood in the Alcobendas district in the suburbs of Madrid. The properties in the area were vast so the houses looked totally isolated from each other. Wide real estate spaces separated one house from another. All the houses were enclosed with fences and gated. The gate of the house of the man he was trailing was made of iron bars about six inches apart. He could see a glimpse of the house from the street directly in front. The fence was steep and made of solid cement. It will be difficult to scale it from the street without going unnoticed by bystanders, pedestrians and drivers along the street.

His objective for this assignment was plain and simple. Shadow a retired CIA man, Robert Ortega, a Hispanic-American who decided to live in Spain after retiring from the service a few months ago. He had been told that Ortega was suspected of violating his oath of secrecy by divulging CIA secrets to terrorist groups.

The agency received intelligence reports that Ortega frequently traveled from Spain to Morocco to meet with terrorist groups there and on other occasions, the terrorist groups came to Spain and met with him discreetly.

“Watch out for any contact or association with suspicious characters. Do not engage unless necessary. We need to know who, where and how his deals are done,” he recalled what his supervisor of Operations, Allan Schwarz, told him during the briefing. He is to gather any information he can uncover then pass it on to the Anti-terrorist operations group.

The agency had not made any attempt to bug Ortega’s phone lines nor did any field operative install spy devices in Ortega’s residence. They were still in the preliminary stages of the surveillance. Neither solid evidence nor proof had been dug up yet. Everything was still purely speculative at this point. Steve was the first Field Operative assigned to shadow Ortega first-hand.

This mission was different from the ones he had been assigned to in the past. Most of the missions he did were dangerous, calculated, and risky missions. Steve McNabb was a highly decorated United States marine during his prime having served as part of the US Special Forces. He headed the Advance Assault and Destroy Team (AADT) in Afghanistan which was an advance team sent to a designated target before an attack. Their orders were to distract, kill, and pave the way for the major attack. His specialization included, among others, sniping, bombing, and deception.

He was also the back-to-back champion of hand-to-hand combat of a tournament organized among the US Armed Forces military

branches. At 6 feet, he had an athletic build and had been working out to keep in shape.

After his military service, which lasted for four years, Steve was recruited by the CIA in Special Operations. He had been part of several dangerous missions with the agency. His latest was to setup the devastation of the terrorist's stronghold in Syria. The terrorist group was involved in the US Embassy bombing in Beirut. He was a member of the advance teams that went ahead to plant bombs and sabotage the surrounding area of the hideout.

The first day of surveillance of Ortega went quietly without any activity at all. Ortega never left the house, that is, if he was in the house. No one came and entered the house either. The day ended as just an ordinary and boring day. Steve stayed and slept in his car all the time which was parked a few hundred meters from Ortega's residence. No visitors came either.

The second day was no different from the first day. It was even more boring. But he had learned to be bored. That is what made him a good sniper and a good tracker. Patience was a virtue that he learned in the military and in the agency. He got tempted to enter the house but remained patient. That was his specialty as well. Patience. He had to maintain patience. He called up the agency office in Langley to ask if they could find out if Ortega left the country. The agency came back with a report that there was no record of him leaving through the airports.

Today, Steve was in his parked car sipping the hot coffee he bought at a neighborhood market a few minutes ago when he heard the iron gate of Ortega's house roll to the side. It was an automatic gate. His car was parked east of Ortega's house. He saw a silver gray Mercedes Benz come out of Ortega's residence. The driver window was open so Steve got a glimpse of the driver from his angle. It was Ortega as he remembered in the photographs he was shown when he was being briefed of his mission.

Ortega drove west towards the Paseo del Conde de los Gaitanes and headed south. Once he reached Calle del Camino del Sur, he turned left going east and parked his car in front of a house. Steve called up the Langley office again.

"Give me an Intel on a house with address Calle Del Camino Del Sur, 10 Alcobendas. Our subject just stopped in front of the house and went inside," Steve said as he looked at the house from his car. The house was a two-storey house like built during the fifties. The house was likewise huge but not as huge as Ortega's. There was no car in the driveway. The main door of the house was left open when Ortega went in but Steve could not make out the inside as the door was only partially open.

A few minutes passed, Ortega came out of the door. Behind him, a small kid followed. Steve was staring from the car when his cell phone rang with a call from Langley.

"The house belongs to his son, Jose, who has a wife and a daughter. The son works during the day but his wife is not employed," the voice from Langley remarked.

Ortega brought along his granddaughter, around the age of 6 or 7 years, with him. Steve can tell because he himself had a daughter around that age who, more or less, was about the same height and built as Ortega's granddaughter.

Ortega let his granddaughter in his car in the front passenger seat and drove off. Steve followed suit. He followed for nearly two miles when he noticed a Ford Tempo car following them. Steve recognized the Ford Tempo earlier parked at the corner of Paseo de la Marquesa Viuda de Aldama and Paseo del Conde de los Gaitanis when he returned from the coffee shop that morning.

Steve was driving in between Ortega's car, who was ahead, and the Ford Tempo behind Steve. The sun was already up so from Steve's rear view mirror; he could make out that there were at least two men aboard the Ford.

THE BELCHIZE DECEPTION

Steve slowed down to let the Ford pass him and when he glanced from his side under his dark glasses, the men did not bother to look at him. They were focused on the car that Ortega was driving. Steve followed suit and kept within distance just in case Ortega turned to a street.

Ortega took the M-40 then to A-6 to Ctra. de El Estorial and M-505 in Las Rozas. Ortega turned to Exit 18. The Ford Tempo followed. Steve exited as well. When they reached the town of Majadahonda, Ortega slowed down and made a right to Calle Venezuela. The Ford turned right as well. Steve did the same. Ortega parked his car in front of the Belchize Supermarket along Calle Valenzuela. The street was a one-way street that exited out towards Avenida Belchize de Herreros. The two men continued driving and turned right on Avenida Belchize de Herreros. Steve parked his car on the other side of where Ortega parked along Calle Valenzuela.

Ortega stepped out of the car and opened the passenger side to let his granddaughter out. They walked towards the corner of Calle Valenzuela and turned right to Avenida Belchize de Herreros. When Ortega and his granddaughter turned the corner, Steve stepped out of his car and followed them. As he turned right on the corner, he noticed that the Ford was parked in front of the supermarket across the street. Avenida Belchize de Herreros was a one-way street so cars could park on both sides. The two men were still inside the car and never looked at Ortega and the granddaughter as they walked across them and into the grocery store.

The supermarket was in a two-storey building located in a busy location of the city of Majadahonda. There were two glass entrances to the supermarket which was the only tenant of the building. The glass sliding doors were about thirty feet apart from each other. Farther to the left of entrance was an open structure which looked like an opening leading towards an indoor parking area of the supermarket.

Steve followed Ortega to the grocery store but stopped in front of one of the two glass doors where he was able to see the Ford Tempo through the reflection from the glass. The men were not looking in the direction of the store but Steve sensed they were professionals with intentions.

He watched Ortega from a discreet angle inside the supermarket picking a shopping cart from a line of shopping carts. Ortega carried his granddaughter up and seated her in the shopping cart. Steve wondered about those two men who followed Ortega. He was quite sure that those men followed him or Ortega. 'Are these men Ortega's contacts or were they tailing him instead?' wondered Steve.

Steve positioned himself at a safe distance at an angle where he was able to see if the two men would come into the store and, at the same time, watch Ortega push his cart into the grocery aisles. The men never came into the supermarket. They remained seated in their car and so far, never showed eye contact.

Ortega and his granddaughter started to shop inside the store. For a few times, Steve saw the granddaughter point at something she liked and Ortega obliged by taking the item and putting it to his shopping cart. After so many rounds around the market with his shopping cart and the granddaughter seated in the cart, Ortega was done shopping and started to get in line on one of the cashier lines with his granddaughter still seated in the shopping cart.

Steve started to position himself to a corner in the store close to the main entrance where he came in. He pretended to read one of the magazines from a shelf, where he could observe both Ortega and the men in the Ford car across the store. However, he noticed that the men in the Ford were out of the car and nowhere in the street.

He checked back to look at Ortega who was unloading the groceries from his cart to the counter belt. He checked back at the Ford, the men were not there and he looked around the store. He saw one of them. He was walking behind the cashiers. He must have

come in from the other glass door entrance farther from where they and Ortega parked. The man stopped walking and was positioned directly straight to where Ortega was. Steve saw Ortega lifting his granddaughter out of the cart to put her down in front of him. The other man was nowhere to be found.

He looked back at the man in front of Ortega. He was looking straight at Ortega. Will he be making contact? Was this a drop point for messages?

The man was in a motion to reach something from inside his coat while standing steadily.

It was a gun.

Steve had to think swiftly. He was told to observe. Engage only when necessary. If this man shoots at Ortega, he will not be able to report anything back to headquarters. He also noticed that the granddaughter was positioned in the line of fire of the shooter.

He quickly went into his coat and grabbed his weapon. He fired at the man. But the man had already fired once before Steve did.

The man was hit in the head by Steve's gun. Down went the man he just shot. He looked back at Ortega. Ortega was getting hold of his granddaughter with blood coming out of her head. Ortega was shouting loudly for help at the sight of his granddaughter.

Steve heard a shot. Steve looked back at the man he just shot. It was not from the man as he lay motionless on the floor. He looked at Ortega. Ortega was falling down with blood trickling out from his head.

He followed the angle from where the shot came from. It was from the other man in the Ford Tempo standing at the far corner of the store. The man started to leave the store out through the other exit. Steve ran to chase him from the exit door closest to him. People started running out of the supermarket. People inside were either running or docking in panic. There was so much commotion everywhere.

Outside, he looked at the direction of the Ford Tempo. The man was heading that way. Steve did not have a clean angle for a shot as the man was shooting back at him.

People were running away for cover which made it hard for Steve to take a clean shot at the man. But he saw a clear path to the front car tire. He took a shot at it. Air came out loudly from the tire.

He ran after the man but the man was about to ride into the car. Steve was getting close to the car while the man was trying to insert his key into the ignition.

He got close to the man. Steve was standing by the window of the Ford Tempo.

“Freeze or I will shoot.” Steve had his gun pointed at the head of the man.

The man looked at him, seemed to be ignoring him while trying to start the engine of the car.

Suddenly, the man’s head snapped back into the head rest of his car seat. Blood started gushing out of his front and rear of the head. He had been shot by someone.

A sniper.

Steve ducked for cover but no shot followed. He crawled from car to the other cars parked along the street away from the direction of the shot. No shots followed. He slowly brought up his head so he could see around. The surrounding area was empty. The people have all vacated the area and cowering in fear inside buildings or hiding behind the trees.

Steve ran back to the store. The man he gunned down was dead. Ortega and the granddaughter lay motionless. They were all dead.

CHAPTER THREE

Washington, DC

Day 5

The CIA office where the Clandestine Operations Europe Division in Washington, DC was intended to be discreet as it was located in a building housed by the Washington U.S. Post office. Steve arrived into the CIA premises at past 9:00AM. He went straight into Allan's Office at the third floor. From the hallway, he could see Allan's office with stacks of paper on his desk. He was from the old school. He still preferred hardcopy documents over paperless online documents. The agency had been in a strictly paperless policy for security reasons. The order was executed to prevent hardcopy documentation to inadvertently be in the hands of unauthorized persons. Allan was an exception to the rule.

Allan was a short man, about 5 feet seven, and had his chair adjusted up high so he looked taller when seated. He preferred the room dark with only his desk lamp lighted up. He specifically requested the Maintenance Department to remove some of his office lights in the ceiling to make the room dark. His blinds were always closed preventing people from his office to see outside. This made it convenient for his visitors not to be blinded from the sunlight as they face Allan when seated in the guest chairs. His visitors' chairs were positioned straight facing Allan so visitors face front to him.

Steve used to report to Randy Daekstra, his supervisor since the time he joined the CIA. Allan replaced Randy about a month ago when Randy's health was slowly deteriorating.

Allan was brought in from Turkey where he was serving as a diplomatic envoy in the US Embassy there. Allan fit into the role of Deputy Director of the Clandestine Operations – European Division, where Steve works because of his exposure into terrorist actions in the Middle East and Europe.

Allan was looking at his documents on his desk when Steve reached Allan's office and peeked into the glass dividers. Allan's face was fronting the door rather than facing his computer which would have him face at a ninety-degree angle to the door. Allan saw him in the hallway and waved his hand to signal for Steve to come in.

The moment Steve opened the door, Allan started the conversation.

"So, we never got anything from Ortega," Steve had already briefed him over the phone after the incident.

"Everything happened quickly. It looked more like a hit than a contact situation," Steve replied as he was sitting down on the chair and after a pause continued to speak. "Did Ortega have enemies before he retired?" Steve asked.

"Nothing that the department knew about," replied Allan.

"What was his latest assignment before he retired?"

"It is not important. He was more on the end stage of his career. It was mostly desk work during the last five years in our embassy office in Madrid. He asked to be assigned in Madrid permanently after he met his wife about twenty-five years ago".

"What was his assignment prior to devoting to desk work?"

"Steve, you do not need to be involved in that anymore. I have a new assignment for you."

"Let me continue with this, Allan. I am curious that this man, already retired, spending time with his family most of the time I was

shadowing him for three days suddenly was shot down in front of everyone. And it involved his granddaughter as well. Everything was clean. It did not appear that he was involved in any discreet dealings whatsoever."

"I know you hate incomplete missions, Steve, but that mission is over. That will be turned-over to the Retirement section for closure and final status on his file."

"But who did the hit, Allan? It is not over. There is someone out there who had a backup plan and did not want to be exposed. How much information did Ortega give out to the terrorist groups? Don't we want to find out about it?"

"As far as our Department is concerned, we are done with this assignment. Based on our investigation on the situation, Ortega is just a suspect. There was, and is, no hard evidence that vital information was divulged. That is why your assignment was an easy one. Observe, shadow and report. That was what you did. You did not need to get involved with the men who shot him. For all we know, Ortega made enemies in his private life. Nothing to do with the agency at all. Besides, he is dead. No information can ever be exchanged again by or for Ortega. He is gone."

"I do not think that the assignment is over. There was a crime committed against one of us. It was a professional hit. That does not happen to an everyday man. Something big could have happened that made the big fish mad. We need to find the big fish because he can always use someone among us again."

"Steve," Allan interrupted, "this next assignment might give you more clues to that. You will again observe and shadow another retired ex-CIA person. Ortega and this man were friends for a long time. This man, his name is Ramon Robles, acted as Ortega's best man in his wedding. Ortega did the same for Robles wedding."

"Where is Robles now?"

"He is in Florence, Italy. He and Ortega worked in Madrid for a time and then Robles relocated to Florence about five years ago. But

they remained in contact as shown by text messages and calls over the past five years”.

“Anything else you want to tell me?”

“Nothing more from what I have already told you. This man is clean from our perspective. But he might be involved in secret dealings as well, who knows. It is up for you to find out.”

Steve thought that this could be a way for him to find out more about the Ortega situation. If he cannot get the information out of Schwarz, maybe this man will be able to supply him the information he needed from his last assignment.

“When do I leave?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Florence, Italy

Day 9

Steve arrived in Florence a little past six in the evening aboard a Pacific Horizon Airways that flew from Washington to Munich and finally Florence. He went over to the rental car area and rented a car in his name.

He had been in this city once visiting with his wife, Ellen. They went into the Licciardi bar at Piazza del Carmine and they were having fun. When Steve came back from the restroom, he found his wife engaged in a conversation with two men sitting in their table who apparently appeared to have had too much to drink. As he approached them, Ellen stood up and was getting ready to leave the table when one of the men grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to him so that she fell into his lap and started to touch her. Steve pulled Ellen away and gave the man a hard kick in the head. The drunk fell from his chair into the ground. The other man tried to punch him. Steve grabbed the man's arm with his left hand and twisted it. His arm broke. Steve sidestepped and hit him with his elbow to the midsection. The man grimaced in pain. They left the place casually into the streets that night only to be stopped by the police. He and Ellen spent the night in the police station until they were released the next day.

Steve did not want to have the same experience that night so he went back into the hotel to avoid another similar incident. He checked in at the Hotel Primo Luigi at Via Camillo Benso Cavour.

Using his iPad, he connected into the Wi-Fi of the hotel and searched Facebook and Google for Robert Ortega and Ramon Robles. Not much information there, so he took a shower and slept.

The next day, Steve was up early and was in the streets by 7:30AM. Steve traveled light most of the time. He did not leave anything in the hotel since he always anticipated that he may not be back at all. He did not want anyone to trace him. He registered under his own name.

It was about eighteen degrees centigrade outside. Cool enough to stroll the streets without getting warmed by the morning sun. He walked from the hotel to a coffee shop called La Plaza Cafe along Piazza S. Marco about 500 meters from his hotel. Steve ordered coffee and two pieces of biscotti. He sat by the eating area along the sidewalk in front of the coffee shop where he could overlook a book shop beside it. It had a "Closed" sign in the window. Shops normally open at 9:00AM in Florence, he figured.

He was not in a hurry. He opened his iPad and started to browse through the web with his 4G connection and looked at the news around the world pages.

He checked Madrid for any news two days ago. What he read disturbed him. The news talked about a man in his early seventies gunned down in a supermarket by a man in his early thirties wearing a beige coat and dark brown slacks. From what he recalled, the gunman was wearing jeans with a black overcoat.

He was wearing a beige coat and dark brown slacks that day.

Steve read on. According to the news item, the gunman walked casually out of the store. 'Everything was wrong,' thought Steve. The guy who shot Ortega was dead after he shot him and left him in the store.

And where was the granddaughter? Where was the other gunman who went running out of the store and was shot from a sniper shot in the car?

He was so focused in other news items from other sources online all having the same version when he glanced at the book shop which already had the "Open" sign in the window. It was ten minutes past nine when he checked his watch. He stood up and headed for the book shop.

The book shop smelled like old paper that you stock up in the attic in the house. The book shop was selling old and rare books usually used books. Some of the books were already faint in color. The man who appeared to be the owner of the shop was trying to open the light at the back of the main room and heard the door squeak open when Steve came in.

"Ciao, Sir. Americano?"

"Si, parla inglese?"

"Yes, Sir. Everyday English, American slang, southern accent, you name it, I speak it. How may I be of service to you?"

"The Company I work for is looking for a book about rare birds. Specifically, birds that exist only in Italy. Do you think you have one or can find me one if you do not have it now?"

"That book is rare and not the usual books that people would want to read. But I think I have one you may want to check out. It is not out here in the main area. If you would come with me to the back room I can show it to you."

"Good, may I have a look then?"

The man led Steve into a back room and produced a set of firearms from a locked drawer.

"Is there anything you like from this book collection?"

"I think this one with the eagle cover will do."

"That will be 45 lira." It was a code for a 45 caliber Beretta. Steve thanked the man and stepped out of the book shop with a book and the merchandise.

Now, it was time for the real business he came for.

*

Steve went to the known address of Robles at the Roma Apartment Florence SRL along Borgo degli Albizi. He was in luck when a man that looked like Robles from a photograph he got from the Department, came out of the apartment building and started walking casually out into the city street. He looked just about the same age as Ortega, only he had more gray hair. He was stocky for his age like he worked out a lot. Robles was wearing a black wool coat, black slacks and black Nike rubbers good for walking. He brought a cane with him but he never used it in coming down the apartment stairs and walking down the street. Robles had to walk briskly, almost like a run, to catch the bus which was loading passengers when he got there.

Robles stepped up into the C3 bus and rode it with the other passengers who were waiting in the bus stop. The bus went south into the city. Steve followed the bus with his rented car until the bus came into a halt at the bus stop in Magliabechi. Steve pulled over his rented car a few meters behind the bus stop. The stop led to the Via Antonio Magliabechi where the San Sebastiano Church was located.

Steve watched from his vantage point to check if Robles was one of those passengers who stood up inside the bus to get off. Yes, he was getting off.

Steve drove past the bus and pulled over the car to the church. He parked his rented car close to the church where he had a good view of the bus stop. The church was situated in a block. To enter the church, one needed to ascend a flight of steps which surrounded the church around the block.

He saw Robles get down from the bus and headed towards where Steve was parked. One other passenger, a man in his early thirties, who looked of Mexican or Spanish origin, stepped down the

bus and walked into the same direction of Robles who seem to be heading towards the Church.

An old lady stepped out of the bus as well followed by another man who seemed to be in his late thirties and of Latin -descent. All of them were walking towards Steve's direction. Robles walked towards the church and turned towards the flight of steps. The first man followed into the direction of Robles to the church.

The other man walked past the old lady, passed the church and headed straight into the direction of Steve.

Something was not right. The look in the man's eyes seemed to focus right at Steve. Steve tried to recall what he saw earlier. Back at the bus stop where they all boarded, the two men seemed to be laughing and engaged in conversation but when they stepped off the bus just now, they were like complete strangers with each other. The man approaching Steve had that look. The killer look.

This struck Steve. This was not happening again. Not again like... Madrid.

Steve took out his berretta and began stepping out of the car.

The second man was about ten meters to where Steve was. He had his weapon halfway up from where it was hidden in his waist to where he will point and aim at Steve.

Steve had his berretta out already but, being right handed, could not fire it until he was completely out of the car.

He was in the motion of getting his left foot to the ground when he heard a shot fired.

Steve was putting his weight on his left foot to step out of his car and saw where the shot came from. The other man had just shot Robles in the back just before Robles was able to complete the flight of steps of the church. Robles rolled down the steps with blood following his body as it rolled down the steps of the church.

Another shot was fired while Steve had his two feet on the ground and he was almost out of the car. The man approaching him had fired his gun towards Steve and hit the edge of the door of the

car. Steve, now in a good position to fire, shot back and hit the man in the head. The man slumped back firing another shot and hitting the old lady, who was looking at the direction of Robles as he was falling down. 'The old lady was shot in the head and went down hard with her face hitting the ground. She died instantly.

The other man who shot Robles started running away from Steve but stopped when he saw Steve running after him. He pointed his gun at Steve.

Steve dove head first into a magazine pile of a newspaper vendor and shot at the man with the gun. Steve hit him in the head. The gunman slumped back and fell hard on the ground, the back of his head slamming against the concrete floor. He was dead.

Steve checked everyone. The old lady was dead. Robles was dead. He looked around but did not see anyone looking as everyone in the streets was running away from the scene. He did not want to get involved with the police. He boarded his rental car and drove off.

There were now more questions to be answered as he left the scene with his rented car.

*

In about thirty seconds after Steve left the crime scene, an ambulance came speeding into the site and five men disembarked.

Four of them brought out two stretchers and two of them immediately bent over to the old lady, placed her in the stretcher, and threw her inside the vehicle.

The other two went for one of the men killed by Steve, loaded him on the stretcher and laid him into the vehicle as well. The two men who placed the old lady into the vehicle went for the other man that Steve killed and loaded him into the stretcher and on to the vehicle.

The fifth man had started cleaning the pavement for any traces of blood of the two men and the old lady. The other men helped out

to clean the whole area for blood after loading all the bodies into the vehicle. In a matter of five minutes, the whole area had been cleaned out except for Robles blood and Robles lying on the ground at the bottom of the steps. The other victims have been loaded into the vehicle.

Then they left the scene. While on the road, one of the men called someone and when the other party answered his call. He said "Got pizza and two sodas but no spaghetti," referring to the old lady and the two assassins. Spaghetti was Steve and they meant they did not get him.

The ambulance vehicle was long gone when two police cars of the Polizia di Stato came into the scene responding to a call from a bystander. When they arrived, they found Robles on the ground lifeless. They immediately checked for a pulse and found none. An ambulance car, different from the first one, came in a few seconds and the paramedic checked further Robles' condition for any vital signs. He looked at the police and shook his head.

The police searched the surroundings for any witnesses. They found a man outside the church selling newspapers and magazines. They approached the man and asked "Did you see anything about this?"

"Yes," said the man looking terrified.

"May we know your name please?" asked one of the Italian Police.

"My name is Luigi Calmatto."

"How old are you?"

"I am 36 years old."

"Are you married?"

"No, Sir."

"What are you doing here?"

"You can see I am selling newspapers in this location. I have been doing this for the past three years, sir."

"Where were you when the shooting started?"

"It was a very dull day. I was standing here in my favorite spot when it happened."

"What did you see?"

"I saw a man drive up very fast and stopped in front of the church and brought out a gun and started shooting at the old man." The man was pointing at Robles.

"How many were there in the vehicle?" asked the police.

"He was alone, sir."

"Did you get a look at the man?"

"Yes sir. He was a tall man with brown hair. A big man."

"Will you be able to recognize him if you see him again or a photograph of him?"

"Oh, not only will I be able to describe him, sir. I was able to get the license plates of the car he was driving."

"Good. Will you come down to the station with us?"

"Sure, Sir. I feel it is my duty to report it."

*

After the incident, Steve left the scene of the crime where Robles was shot and did not wait for Italian Police to come and interrogate him. If that happened, this killing will be linked to the Madrid scene. More questions will be raised and it might take him longer to return home. There will be interrogations and investigations. He will be the prime suspect in an incident like this because of Madrid. He may spend the time in jail until cleared or bailed. Steve did not want to go that far.

He returned his rented car to the Grande rental office. He rode the Airport shuttle that will take him to the terminal, checked for flights on the Departures area and went to the Pacific Horizon Airways counter and bought a one-way ticket to Berlin. He went through the checkpoints at the airport and headed for the gates after clearing security and immigration.

He did not board the plane. Instead, he waited a little while. In a couple of hours, he went out of the departure area and went back to the rental car area. He went into another rental car office, Primo, and rented a car under a different name, Johann Hermacher, a German. As field operatives, they usually carry more than one passport as they might need to use a different one just like today.

After clearing the rental office area, he drove his rented car and went to a nearby restaurant to eat lunch. During lunch, he called the hotel to check out and apply the payment to the credit card he used.

After lunch, he opened his cell phone and went into the internet. He then called up the Magistrat Paris Hotel in Paris to reserve a room under the name Bram Vermeulen. He decided to drive to France rather than board a plane as the security in the airport will be very tight.

He checked his watch. It was 2:12PM. The trip was about eleven and a half hours, so he will reach Paris around 1:00AM. That will be good enough. He paid his lunch and started for the road.

The drive to Paris was easy. Not too many cars on the road. So, he had time to think of the last few days that happened.

Was it a coincidence that Ortega and Robles were killed at the time when he was there? What were the gunmen after? Was there any connection between the two former operatives? He decided that when he goes back to Washington, he will ask Allan about it.

He had an uncanny feeling about what happened in front of the church. When Robles was killed, the other man went straight to his direction and fired at him. Yes, the old lady was also killed, but she was killed accidentally. However, in the case of the other man shooting at him, that was not accidental. He had been in so many operations before to distinguish between an intentional hit and an accidental hit. Could it be that the man was eliminating any witnesses as they killed Robles?

He stopped at a coffee shop around 6:00PM in Casa Loma Caffè. He parked his car among where most of the trucks were so it will be

concealed from the highway view. He looked around the coffee shop for a few seconds observing whether there were police cars around, or if he was followed. During the trip from Firenze to the coffee shop, he did not notice anyone following him. That was good news. At least he knew that the last hit had no snipers unlike in Madrid. Maybe there was, except that the other gunman was killed by him. The sniper did not have to fire a shot but may have been waiting at some location if something went wrong.

Based on the parked cars, he estimated there were at least about fifteen to twenty customers inside the cafe. He locked the doors of the rental car and slowly went towards the entrance.

Before entering, he peeked inside the coffee shop to make sure there was no one there that he recognized or people who may look like detectives or the Police. Convinced that he did not find anyone that fit that description, he entered the coffee shop. Surely enough there were about thirty people in the coffee shop. It was more than his original estimate but that was because some of those in a vehicle may be riding with one or more passengers. The time was 6:00PM so it would be normal at that time that the coffee shop would be this full. Drivers wanted to take coffee before nighttime came so they will be wide awake heading to their destinations.

It had a TV screen by the counter where the man who appeared to be the owner of the coffee shop stood. Most of the customers have a good view of the television monitor. After ordering coffee and a sandwich at the counter, he found a spot at the end of the room, but it was not a window table. However, from where he was seated, he had a good view of the TV screen. Seated in the next table was a family of three. A couple and a kid. The kid was playing with his toy while the father and mother were finishing up their coffee and biscotti.

The TV was showing the news. It did not take long before the news flashed the scene of the crime in Florence. It was in Italian. Steve spoke and understood Italian. However, he could barely hear

the news audio as most of the crowd in the coffee shop was busy talking with one another. Most especially the kid near his table who was talking loudly to his mother.

Steve looked around the cafe. He could see a few customers watching the news but the rest of them were engaged in a conversation. Witnesses were being interviewed but he could not make out what the newscaster was saying. Steve was reading the lips of the newscaster as he was speaking about the crime.

Initial information about the crime indicated that there was one gunman who killed Robles. Witnesses were saying that the lone gunman left the scene after firing shots at the victim. There was only one victim according to the news report. Police were currently investigating the crime but they have no suspects yet. However, the police were following some leads because witnesses have a description of a vehicle that was at the scene of the crime then.

It happened again. There was only one body found. All other bodies were cleared off the scene. One gunman. He figured he would be that one that the report was indicating.

Steve thought he might be safe for now, but he figured it will not be for long. If the vehicle the police were pursuing led to the rented car he drove earlier, the police might connect the dots and lead them to the hotel where he stayed and finally reveal his identity. He checked in the hotel as himself.

*

By midafternoon, the Italian Police have interrogated the newspaper vendor witness thoroughly and were convinced that the man did not commit the crime and a suspect he described could be the killer. The police could not find any other witnesses. The people inside the church were unaware of the shooting that happened outside. They just have one lead and that was from the only witness.

The Police have started tracking for the vehicle described by the witness. They were able to determine that the car was a rental car

belonging to the Grande rental car company. They called the Grande rental car company and identified the location where the rental car was rented and returned.

The Grande rental car office was in the airport area where all the other rental car companies were. A shuttle bus had to be ridden if the person who was renting came from the arrival area of the airport.

The Police were received by a lady clerk at the front desk of the Grande rental office. Police started asking questions to the rental company clerk and was able to obtain a photocopy of the license and passport of the suspect. The name on the license and passport was one Steve McNabb, an American.

The lady clerk had a good memory of the man who rented the vehicle. Perhaps she was attracted to Steve at that time. She said that after leaving the rental car, the man rode the airport shuttle bus back to the airport. The Police then radioed the other police to proceed to the airport and inquire if a Steve McNabb boarded any plane.

*

After consuming his food, Steve left the coffee shop without causing much attention. He wanted to stay longer but he did not know how far the police got into the investigation. He was afraid that his photograph might appear suddenly on the TV screens exposing himself to as many witnesses as possible.

When he left the coffee shop, he was startled to see a police car parked in front of the coffee shop. Two police men started coming out of the car.

Steve turned around to look at the free magazines that were posted near the entrance of the coffee shop. His back was turned as the policemen entered the coffee shop. He had his hand on his Beretta though just in case. Steve would not want to be taken into custody. He will have to come out of here free and prove his

innocence. The police officer did not seem to be looking for someone.

Once the police entered the coffee shop, he went for his car and drove away.

He drove on to Paris. He had about two hours to reach the border.

*

The police went to the airport and then inquired all airlines for information of a Steve McNabb. After half an hour of inquiring airlines, was able to ascertain that Steve bought a ticket for Berlin. Authorities then inquired for the manifest of the plane that left four hours ago for Berlin. In fifteen minutes, the police were able to determine that Steve never boarded the plane.

Italian Police also contacted all hotels within the vicinity and provided them with a photograph of Steve.

Police then ordered a full search for Steve McNabb in train stations, bus stations, small airports, and rental car companies.

Groups of police men were now searching the whole area for Steve.

*

Steve was tuned to the radio when a news item was announced. Police were searching for one man named Steve McNabb who was suspected of committing the crime on one Ramon Robles, an Italian-American who retired from the US Embassy six months ago.

The Police were very efficient, thought Steve.

He checked his GPS status, France was thirty minutes away. He had to reach France before the Italian and French border patrols were alerted.

He thought about driving past the speed limit but decided against it as it might attract attention with the highway police. He

decided to drive within the speed limits on the way to the Italian - French border.

There wasn't much traffic on the road. Steve hoped that the line of vehicles crossing the border was not long. He cannot afford to be stuck in line now that his identity had been uncovered.

*

The Italian police called up the Italian Immigration and Customs offices to be on the lookout for one fugitive named Steve McNabb. The Italian Immigration asked more questions from the police. Usually, the Immigration Office would react slower than the Police being a National Office unlike the Italian Police which was local. However, when national security was at stake, the Immigration Office was more aggressive and this situation was not an exception. A full-blown guarding of the borders needed to be disseminated immediately.

The Italian Immigration and Border patrols were then mobilized to guard all exits out of Italy to France, Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia.

CHAPTER SIX

Italy-France Border

Steve reached the Italian - French border in Tunnel du Mont-Blanc. He took the rightmost lane where there were a fewer cars lined up. The lane was close to the French Immigration Office building on the right. Only two lanes were opened today. There were a few cars ahead of Steve when he reached the border. One French Immigration officer in the booth was on the driver's side asking the driver of the first car questions while the other French border patrol guard was on the passenger's side looking inside the car. The border patrol guard was holding the driver's and passenger's passports. After a few more questions, they allowed the car to pass through.

Normally, border crossings were not so strict within the countries that belong to the Schengen Agreement. France and Italy were member countries. However, there were times when the border checkpoints were fully enforced at random since the terrorists' attacks of 911. Today, the border crossings were being strictly checked. And that was strange.

The car in front of Steve moved forward and Steve followed behind it. The car in front only had one passenger. It was an old lady who seemed to be hard of hearing. The patrol guard had to ask her the question thrice.

In the meantime, a radio news item was again brought up on air. The Italian border patrol and the French border patrol have now been commissioned to search or stop a suspect named Steve McNabb from leaving Italy or entering France. Separate requests were also made to border officers of Switzerland, Austria and Slovenia.

Steve looked at this border station and it did not seem to be in full alert when the news item was announced. Steve had both front windows open in preparation for being interrogated by the patrol officer when he heard the phone ring inside the border station office. The border patrol on the other side of the car went inside to answer the phone.

The patrol officer and the old lady were still in discussion because the old lady could not quite hear what the patrol officer was saying. The patrol officer was trying to ask from the old lady for her passport but she kept on providing different sets of IDs.

Steve, since he had his windows open at both sides in preparation for the questions of the two patrol officers, could hear the conversation between the old lady and the patrol officer and likewise the conversation of the other patrol officer who picked up the phone inside the office building.

The patrol officer inside the border station pressed the speaker button of the phone as he answered the call, "Hello, Mont-Blanc office."

"This is Lieutenant Roux at the central Division. Who am I speaking with?" asked the man who called the office.

"Deputy Renard. What can I do for you, Lieutenant Roux?" said the officer who picked up the phone.

"This is a high level alert for a fugitive on the loose. We are securing all borders to make sure that he does not leave Italy."

Steve could slightly hear the phone conversation between Renard and Roux on the phone. He looked Renard who was inside the office and he was taking down notes. He looked back at the car

in front of him and the old lady and the patrol officer were still having a lot of discussions. He surveyed his surroundings. There was a car already at the back of his car so he could not move to the other lane. The car in front had to leave first before he can get out of this border check. He looked inside the border station and saw that the other patrol officer was now seated in the computer and the phone still in speaker phone.

Deputy Renard was now seated in the computer listening to the instructions of Lieutenant Roux.

"I am sending you an email attaching the memorandum to all border stations for the detention and arrest of a fugitive named Steve McNabb who is wanted for murder. The photograph of Steve McNabb is also attached in the email that I will send you," said Roux.

Finally, the lady and the patrol officer have concluded their discussion. The patrol officer returned the lady's passport and waved her through.

"Welcome to France," he told the lady.

Renard went into his email and waited for the email from Roux to arrive. Finally, it arrived. He opened the mail and read through the memorandum.

"Good evening, Sir. May I have your passport and Driver's license please?" The patrol Officer asked Steve.

Steve produced his German passport and German driver's license bearing the name of Johann Hermacher.

"Here you are," Steve told the officer while looking at Renard.

"What is your business to France?" asked the officer.

"I sell heavy equipment and has business with two companies who are interested in buying our equipment," said Steve.

"How long are you planning to stay in France?"

"If all goes well it will be five days. Maximum of seven days hopefully," said Steve.

"I do not see any entry into Italy from Germany. Where was your port of entry to Italy?" asked the patrol officer.

Steve remembered that he arrived into Italy under his real name Steve McNabb. He needed to get out of this conversation convincingly.

"Oh, I came to Italy on a chartered plane with my friend, Ingrid Helmut at the Milan. We cleared Immigration and Customs with our passports unstamped."

At this time, Renard was now printing the photograph of Steve McNabb and was about 85% complete. He looked outside and found his fellow officer chatting with a driver.

Steve could see a photograph of himself coming out of the printer where Renard was. The photograph was about 90% printed.

"Which airport did you say it was?"

"The airport in Milan," Steve repeated. He was ready to drive off if Renard will pull out the photograph from the printer.

Renard looked at the photograph. It was 100% complete. He pulled out the photo from the printer and started to go to the other police officer.

The officer interrogating Steve looked at the direction of Renard who started waving him to come over.

Steve shifted the car to drive and ready to pull out. The border patrol officer looked down at Steve and said "Welcome to France," and handed him his passport and driver's license.

Steve started to move forward.

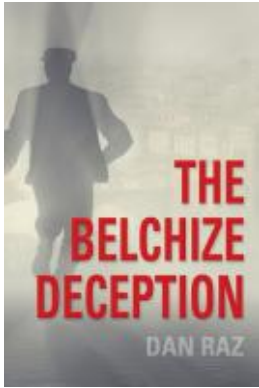
Renard was running out of the border station and showed him a photograph of Steve and said "We need to stop this man from entering France as he is a fugitive wanted for murder."

The Patrol Officer looked at the photograph and looked back at Renard and said, "He just went through."

By this time Steve was already gone.

Renard headed back to the border office and picked up the phone.

“Give me the French Police please.”



The Belchize Deception focuses on the experiences of two CIA employees, a field operative and an office analyst, who never knew each other, working miles apart, and living separate lives. The operative gets caught in a deceptive plot and becomes an international fugitive. The analyst's curiosity into a two-decade old secretive project called "Operation BlackBear" forces her to escape death and leave everything behind. Together, they need to join forces to unearth the mystery behind Operation BlackBear...

The Belchize Deception

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