

Diplomatic Security Agent, Sean Sullivan, faces his worst possible disaster. The French ambassador's daughters are kidnapped on his watch.

No More Chances

by David F. DeHart

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DAVID F. DEHART

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One

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All my senses slowly began to awaken. At first, I heard talking, although I couldn't make out the garbled words. Two men were vying to control a conversation at once, talking over each other, speaking faster and louder. My nose picked up a strong distasteful stench, an almost overpowering smell of disinfectant, rubbing alcohol, and body odor. I was still in darkness; but gradually, sparks of light began to twinkle in random corners, like a field vision test. My eyes opened from slits to dilated pupils, then closed again. Once they decided to stabilize and focus, I found myself in a bed, in a poorly lit room, with the granddaddy of all headaches.

From the corner of my eye, I saw an I.V. pole from which dangled a bag of clear liquid. There was a long tube coiled like a snake around the railing of the bed, with its teeth inserted into my left forearm. My fear of snakes caused me to involuntarily jerk, creating a stabbing pain in my arm.

Totally alert now, I tried to sit up. From somewhere in the darkened room a French-accented female voice cautioned, "*Monsieur*, do not move." She came closer, stood next to the bed, then leaned down. "You must try to stay still. You have a severe concussion."

With my sense of smell in hyper-mode, I could detect a mélange of lavender soap, breath mint, and warm female body. The voice was soothing, blocking out the men's harsh conversation across the room.

Leaning back on the pillows, I closed my eyes, but tried to stay awake. "I'm so damn sleepy. Are you drugging me with that stuff?" I pointed to the I.V. pole.

"No, *Monsieur* Sullivan."

She pronounced my name, 'Soo-lee-vahn.' I liked that. In fact, I liked this nurse and her sweet scent and warm body.

"You are mildly sedated. The doctor wishes you to be still, until the CT scan results are completed."

A gravelly American voice asked loudly, "Okay to talk to him now?"

The nurse patted my chest gently, then stepped back and turned to the tall man at the foot of my bed. "No, Sir, you may *not* talk to him now. He must rest. Maybe in one hour."

"Look, Lady," a different voice spoke up. "We ain't waiting any longer. Time is of the essence. We gotta talk to him ASAP."

The nurse released a rapid stream of French, some of which I understood. If my basic Rosetta course did not fail me, I think she said, "Look asshole! I said no talking now. Get the fuck out of this room!" Or, something like that.

I laughed, causing an instant cessation of talk in the room.

"Well, I guess he doesn't have a problem now." A man, the source of the sweaty odor I had detected earlier, stepped closer to the bed.

"I said, *leave* this room," the nurse ordered. "Or I will call security."

"We *are* security. I'm this man's boss. I must talk to him *now*. This a matter of life and death."

"Ralph?" I opened my eyes to see my supervisor, Ralph Hester, standing tall and ram-rod straight near the bed.

"Yeah. Look, I'm sorry you aren't doing so hot right now, but we *have* to talk. We gotta situation. You're the only who can help."

"Sir, you *must* leave." The nurse stepped out in the hall and beckoned for someone to come.

"It's okay, Nurse," I said, noticing the look on both men's faces, a look of urgency. For some reason, they appeared scared shitless.

She stepped back into the room. "Ten minutes only. And, you," she said looking at me, "do not try to get out of bed, you are attached to a catheter." She indicated the plastic bag hanging from the side of the bed with a tube running up under the sheet and between my legs.

That explained the other discomfort I had been experiencing. "Why do I need this?"

"The doctors are concerned you might have internal bleeding." She lifted the bag which contained about a cup of urine and examined the contents. "Looks like you do not. No blood. I will ask the doctor if it can be removed."

My senses were almost fully recovered. But what was I doing in a hospital? And why were these two embassy big-shots here? Ralph, my boss in the Diplomatic Security Service at the American Embassy, moved around to the side of the bed. Next to him was Hal Winlock, Legal Attaché, the F.B.I.'s senior representative in France.

Ralph walked over to close the door. "We have a bad situation. Hal and I've been waiting for you to come around for the past four hours."

"I can tell by the look on your faces you're not here out of concern for my well-being." I tried to reach the water jug from the bedside stand but with all the tubes and wires

connected to me, I was not able to get it. I slumped back down. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

The F.B.I. man, Hal, nudged Ralph aside. "Before we get into all that, I wanna know what you remember. Before you were brought here."

"When *was* I brought here? And why?" I reached up and felt a large bandage on the back of my head, which I stupidly prodded. "Ow! *Son of a bitch!* I guess *this* is why I'm here."

"You were brought in at four this afternoon. You've been out since then." Hal looked at his wristwatch. "Nine o'clock now. So, that was about five hours ago."

Four o'clock in the afternoon. What would I have been doing at that time? What do I do almost every day at that time? Pick up the twins at A.S.P.---The American School of Paris.

"What day is this?" I asked.

Ralph nervously paced the floor. "Monday. It's still Monday. Now, what were you doing at three-thirty today?"

"Monday? That's my day off. I can't remember what I did today. Sometimes I go to the *Place de la Concorde*, across the street and people-watch. I took up photography last year and ..."

"Bull shit!" Hal yelled.

An orderly, passing in the hallway opened the door and looked in. "*Tout bon, Messieurs?* Everything okay here?"

"Yeah, fine. Sorry I got a little loud." Hal motioned for him to close the door.

"Do you wish me to call the nurse, Sir," the orderly said to me.

"No," I said. "Like the man says, things are fine."

After the orderly left, Ralph said, "Not fine at all. Can you answer Hal's question?"

"I thought I did. I have no idea what I did today. My day off."

Ralph looked at Hal, frowning. "Was *supposed* to be your day off. Don't you remember? Randy had something to do and you swapped days with him?"

Trying to recall that, as well as attempting to summon up a genie to explain all this was making my head ache again. "I wish I *could* remember." I reached behind me to tug a pillow up as a headrest when I saw the blue writing printed on the hem of the pillowcase, '*Hopitâl Raymond-Poincare*'. "I'm in the University Hospital?"

"Yeah. That's right, just down the boulevard from A.S.P. That refresh your memory?" Hal pulled a chair over and sat next to the bed.

"I need a drink." I looked over at the bedside table where a glass and a white pitcher sat next to a box of tissues.

Hal laughed. "That's a problem? You *need* a drink? Isn't that fucking rich."

"Come on asshole. Why are you yanking my chain?"

"Listen, Sullivan, I don't need your insubordinate bullshit. We have a fucking crisis on our hands. We need answers. Like, were you drunk when you got up this morning? Were you still drunk when you and Larry Cramer drove over here to pick up the Ambassador's kids this afternoon?"

Ralph poured water in a glass and handed it to me. "Hal, why don't you just calm down. Here."

I took a sip, then drank the rest, and handed the glass back. "No, I was not drunk this morning or this afternoon...at

least I don't think I was. Would one of you tell me what's going on? How many damn times do I have to ask?"

Ralph looked back toward the hallway where the nurse and a doctor were talking. He lowered his voice. "While you and Cramer were picking up the girls after school, they were abducted. At 3:30 this afternoon in front of the A.S.P. You were knocked out. There was one witness, and he ain't talking. Not yet, anyway."

"Jesus H. Christ! Abducted? Oh shit!"

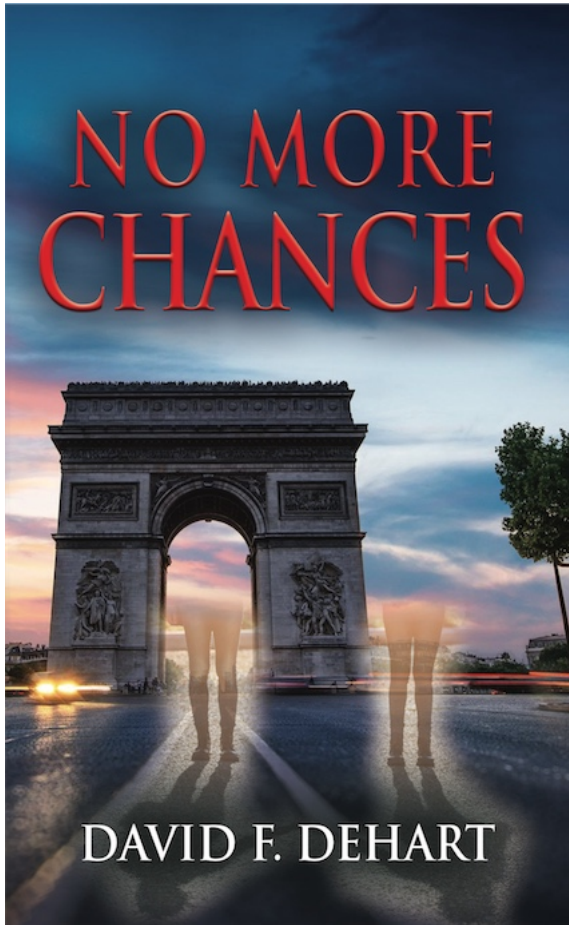
"You remember anything at all about this?" Hal rose from the chair and stood next to Ralph.

"All kind of vague. I'm not sure...maybe..." I leaned back and closed my eyes. "Is Larry okay?"

Hal glanced at Ralph and shook his head. "No, he was killed, shot once in the side of the head. The Escalade was found over in Saint Ouen on the north side near the docks. In an empty lot. Cramer was still in the car; the girls were gone. Their backpacks were also in the car but had been dumped out. Laptops and cellphones gone."

I suddenly felt as if someone had dropped an anvil on my chest. I could barely breathe. Larry Cramer, just 25, married last year, had been assigned here as a rookie, with me as his trainer. The ambassador's twin daughters, Sharon and Sheila, who were in my care, had been kidnapped, and my rookie agent partner was dead.

The anvil pressed heavily on my chest, causing the patient monitor next to my bed to beep loudly, and an alarm to sound out in the hallway. I took deep breaths but could not get oxygen. The black hole from which I had just emerged enveloped me again.



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