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GLOBAL RISK SIU

From the Cases of Lewis Holms

Written by

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“He did not care for the lying at first. He hated it.

Then later he had come to like it. It was part of being an insider…”

–Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Chapter One

Angelique

PAMPLONA, SPAIN

Hooves thumped the dusty ground and the snarls reverberated within the tight space. Though the beasts could barely move, surges of hormones unleashed deafening roars, warning of the impending mayhem.

 Above the corral that encircled the thousand-pound black bulls, a banner read, “*Fiesta de San Fermín*.” Rich with history, the celebration was held annually in Pamplona in northern Spain since 1591. The festivities started at noon each day and would conclude a week later at the stroke of midnight. Thousands of revelers would sing “*Pobre de Mi*,” teary-eyed and assuredly a bit drunk. The words crooned “Poor me,” lamenting the end of the San Fermin Festival.

 But the thousands of morning visitors were there for one reason: to behold the *Encierro*, the running of the bulls. Just as Hemingway and millions of others had witnessed, at 8:00 a.m. each morning, a skyrocket would signal that the six bulls had been released. Thousands of adrenalin junkies would run for their lives down the narrow *Calle de Santo Domingo,* chased by the unrestrained beasts. For those who survived being trampled or gored, the half-mile route would end at the *Plaza de Toros,* to the final bull pen.

 The morning’s warm Mediterranean breeze carried the aromas of baked bread, fresh-ground espressos and fried *tocino* bacon to satisfy the early risers. There was a lively clamor of street vendors, trading friendly jibes as they prepared their goods. As far as the eye could see, happy hordes were arriving, all dressed in the festival’s traditional all-white with red scarves.

 However, one particular young woman stood out among the masses. On the adjacent *Calle Mercado,* the petite blonde appeared to be in her late-twenties. She wore a white sundress and red scarf –but that wasn’t the peculiar part. She had a distended stomach that a skilled obstetrician would gamble on being nine months pregnant.

 The woman craned her neck to see above the crowd. Unlike the thousands jockeying to get a better view of the street, she turned until she saw the *Museo de Pamplona*. The small museum, originally built as a Roman Catholic church in 924, had a gothic design with ornate stone carvings and pointed arches. Its faded stone contrasted with the morning’s stunning blue sky.

 Above the building’s arched doors, a sign announced, “*El Louvre - Exposición Itinerante,”* a traveling exhibition from the *Louvre* museum in Paris.

 Despite the young woman’s extreme expectant condition, she meandered through the crowd like a shadow, swiftly making her way towards the building.

 The small museum’s lone security guard, Diego, groaned with a full-scale hangover. He theorized that last night’s *Rioja* wine, layered with rum, tequila and squid croquettes, could’ve been the culprit. Glancing at his watch, he realized he had just ended his festivities only four hours earlier. But, as the museum’s newest employee, he knew he was on the hook to work the early shifts during the most exciting mornings of the year –alone, inside a dark, ancient chapel.

 *At least it’s quiet,* Diego supposed. He grunted as he lowered his 200-pound frame into a folding chair. The museum didn’t open until noon, so he’d have almost five hours of peace to remedy his throbbing head. Just as he closed his eyes, there was a meek knock at the door.

 One eyelid lifted, unenthused. Then three more hurried raps at the door. Diego wiped his face with a hand and labored to stand back up. Then four more powerful knocks.

 “*Alright, alright*,” he grumbled in Spanish. He peeked out of a small window on the door to see nothing but a sea of people looking the other way, all wearing white and red. Before leaping to a logical conclusion that the knocks could have been a ghost, he peered downward. To his surprise, he saw a short white female gazing up with wide eyes.

 Diego shouted through the door, “*Estamos cerrados!”* Wouldn’t people know a museum would be closed at 7:20 a.m.?

 If the woman’s pleading eyes could get any larger, they did. In beginner’s Spanish she yelled, “*El baño, por favor*..?” Her wide blue eyes seemed to glisten as if on cue. She then pointed down at her large, swollen stomach.

 *Use our toilet?* Diego paused. He had three older sisters who all had children, so he had a weak spot for pregnant women. Diego looked back down at the lady. How much harm could a 110-pound pregnant lady do? She was alone and had no bags or purse. With a sudden shaft of morning light, it dawned on him that he was standing in a former church, so wouldn’t letting her in be the good Christian thing to do?

 On a keypad, he disarmed the alarm and unbolted the double locks. He opened the door and feigned a quick smile and mumbled in Spanish, “*Come in, hurry!”*

 “*Gracias… Muchas gracias!*” The woman gave a wide smile as she stepped inside.

 Diego realized how tiny she was –110 pounds *with* the baby. Her skin was creamy white and she had delicate, refined features. Through some maternal instinct, she kept her hands on her tight belly.

 “*Apurate señorita, por favor,”* Diego fluttered his hand for her to hurry and follow him. He figured he would usher her to the employee restroom. She could be gone within fifteen minutes and he could be back to sleep in twenty.

 The woman trailed behind him down the ancient corridor, continuing to murmur a submissive, “*Gracias,* sir.”

 Diego opened the bathroom door. When the light flickered on, he was embarrassed to see the condition of the tiny room. A single commode, a sink and mirror. In the corner was an overturned plunger with paper strewn on the floor. *Not appropriate for such a lady*, Diego recoiled. But the woman entered without pause and grinned with a humble nod. He returned the nod and closed the door. He could hear her secure the lock from the inside.

 A corner of Diego’s mouth lifted into a something resembling a smile. Despite his splitting migraine, he had performed a good deed. But why would a woman in her third trimester even consider going to a festival notorious for crowds, chaos and stomping animals? *She has no one to care for her*, he concluded. His big sisters would be proud.

 Angelique thought the bathroom was atrocious. When she faced the mirror, her inane grin fell into an aloof expression. She reached down, lifted her dress with both hands over her head in a single move, and hung the garment on a door hook. Despite having nothing on but a black sports bra and a maternity skirt, she took pride in her athletic arms and toned shoulders. Angelique smirked with conceit.

 She lifted a blade from her waistband and stabbed it directly into the center of her bulging stomach. There was no blood. Angelique dragged the knife sideways, slicing a gash from side to side. She reached inside the hollow foam “stomach” to pull out a stun gun, handcuffs, a tiny headlamp, elastic bands and a small nylon pouch. She laid the pouch on the counter and unrolled it to behold her prized collection of precision knives and scalpels. It was time to get to work.

 Diego was concerned he might fall asleep too quickly, so he decided not to sit or get comfortable until he could steer the woman back outside. He peered out the front window and noticed that the mob of white and red had doubled in size in just the past few minutes.

 He shook his head and huffed, “*It is too dangerous for her*–”

 His words were abruptly severed by 75 million volts entering his neck from Angelique’s tactical stun gun. Diego collapsed onto the stone floor with a whump. Angelique hopped onto his back and hog-tied the man with the skills of a rodeo champion. First, she handcuffed him and then bound his ankles to his wrists with nylon. Next, she tied a gag across his drooling mouth. With her compact strength, she dragged him into the corridor, out of view.

 Angelique cocked her head at him and then stooped to peck a quick kiss on the top of Diego’s head. She cooed in flawless Spanish, “*Duerme bien guapo*.” Sleep well, handsome.

 Angelique spun, the countdown had begun. She dashed into the adjoining room, towards a wall covered with priceless 19th-century oil paintings. A brass sign labeled the collection as the works of French painter Jen-Luc Brûlé. In the center of the ten-foot-high wall hung Brûlé’s famous “Napolean Crossing the Range,” depicting the general on a white stallion. Surrounding it were eleven other works by Brûlé, all mounted in ornate wooden frames gilded in gold.

 Still clad only her black undergarments, Angelique ascended the wall, balancing on the room’s priceless chairs and the wall’s mouldings. With almost feline agility, she approached the first painting within inches. Using her head-mounted lamp, she illuminated the work and carefully selected the most suitable blade for the task. Starting in the top corner of the canvass and working clockwise, she delicately excised the painting from its frame.

 Angelique moved on to the next painting in the collection. Each painting was relatively small, less than eighteen by twenty-four inches in size. After she masterfully cut each canvass from its frame like a surgeon, she would hold it horizontally and drop it aloft to the ground like an autumn leaf before climbing to the next painting.

 When the wall had nothing but bare frames, Angelique hopped to the ground to gently collect and study each canvass. She wrapped the larger ones around her slender torso, secured with elastic straps. Smaller pieces were rolled around her thighs. She strapped the faux stomach back onto her waist and returned the tactical gear into its cavity. Angelique checked her watch and smiled; only seventeen minutes had passed.

 Back in the bathroom, she lifted the sundress from its hook and wiggled it back into place from her head down. She topped off her fashion with a red silk scarf around her neck. She raked her fingers through her blonde hair and turned back to the mirror. She puckered a kiss at her own reflection. Angelique knew she was good.

 She gently stepped over the snoring Diego in the hall. Angelique moved with caution, modifying her stride to appear natural despite the elastic bands and rolled canvasses. She stood on her tiptoes to look out the front window. After a patient moment, her watch displayed 8:00 a.m. Within seconds, she heard the muffled boom of a skyrocket overhead, followed by the swell of cheers from 2,000 people. The bulls had been released.

 Angelique opened the door and slipped outside. As far as her eyes could see, every human was looking the other way. The air seemed to vibrate from the rumble of hooves and the stampede of a thousand people merrily running for their lives.

 The “pregnant” young woman proceeded off the steps to enter the masses. With grace of a ballet dancer, she wove through the people with intricate choreography to ensure her face would never gaze towards a CCTV camera. She continued through the oblivious spectators to exit.

 No one noticed the anomaly that a dozen other pregnant young women were near the steps of the *Museo de Pamplona.* Some of the appealing blondes stood while others sat, all adorned in white with red scarves. However, the ladies did not seem thrilled to be there. They darted their heads at the commotion, not acknowledging each other, as if each were waiting for someone.

Angelique vanished within the sea of people as fireworks and beasts filled te air.

Chapter Two

Lewis Holms

SOUTH BEACH, MIAMI

“Mr. Holms, please state your name and your position with Global Risk Assurance,” Attorney E. Sheldon Mako asked the witness seated at the long onyx conference table.

 “Well, you just said my name,” Lewis Holms replied with a roguish grin. “And this, being your thirty-sixth lawsuit against our company, I figured you’d recall what I do.”

 The dour corporate attorney at Lewis’ side grimaced at his client’s wiseass remark. The company had summoned the older lawyer to accompany Holms, promising him it was to “offer him guidance.” Simultaneously, the same company instructed their attorney to “keep Holms in check.” The attorney touched Lewis’ arm, signaling him to behave, but he knew it’d be a long deposition. Just like all the others.

 The business district of South Beach was a kaleidoscope of pastel art deco. Designed between 1923 and 1943, the area flaunted whimsical architecture graced with curves, glass blocks porthole windows, and splashed with every Crayola color imaginable –from pastel blues and pinks, to bright oranges, yellows and greens.

 The Law of Office of E. Sheldon Mako was in one of the more photographed buildings, seen on travel websites and used frequently as a backdrop for *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit editions. With countless law offices at one end of Washington Avenue, a police station at the other, and dubious modeling agencies scattered wherever there wasn’t a bar, it was a place where palm trees swayed to the rhythm of shady deals. In this playground of mischief and palm-fringed boardrooms, even the seagulls had suspicious looks in their eyes.

 Other than that, the area was beautiful.

 “I’ll ask you one more time.” Attorney Mako raised his voice in a feeble attempt at authority. “Please state your full name and your current position with your company.” The five-foot-four Mako had close-set eyes that resembled raisins behind narrow glasses. He wore a $6,000 black Brioni suit, a choice a psychologist would say had been made to compensate for everything else.

 Conversely, the thirty-five year-old Lewis Holms wore tan khakis, no socks and a white linen Tommy Bahama shirt that contrasted nicely with his tanned skin and light stubble.

 When Lewis opened his mouth to answer, he inadvertently grinned at the court reporter, a young woman with a trendy black bob, as if by reflex.

 “Answer the question!” Mako erupted with fists at his side.

 The court reporter flinched in her seat at the outburst.

 Lewis smiled at the woman, as in *I got this*, and then turned to Mako. “My name is Lewis Holms –*I’m currently single*– and I am the lead SIU investigator for Global Risk Assurance.”

 “Mr. Holms…” Mako paced with hands behind his back, mimicking a television legal drama. “Please enlighten us as to what an S-I-U is.”

 Lewis sighed. “SIU stands for ‘Special Investigation Unit.’ We investigate potentially-fraudulent insurance cases, Sheldon.”

 “So your job is to jet-set around the world at your company’s expense, in search of ‘fraud,’ or any other creative way to avoid paying your cases?” Mako stepped closer Lewis, “And refer to me only as *Mr.* Mako.”

 “On the contrary to your first point,” Lewis grinned, “I actually look for ways to *pay* my cases. But I struggle to do so when your clients stage thefts, own fake medical clinics, cause injuries or ignite fires just to–”

 Lewis’ attorney touched his hand again to shut-up.

 Mako plowed over Lewis’ words, “–Isn’t it true, Mr. Holms, that you’ve been accused of conducting careless and malicious investigations, even harassing witnesses–” Mako paused as Lewis’ head fell back with a mock snore.

 Mako spun to the court reporter, “Let the record reflect that Mr. Holms is doing a throaty... snoring sound, indicative that he is bored.”

 Lewis’ elder attorney half stood to intervene.

 “I object!” Lewis shouted with both hands on the table.

 “You can’t object,” Mako glowered as if Lewis were a fool. “For what?”

 “Speculation as to what I was indicative of,” Lewis exclaimed. “And saying I was snoring was a statement not a question, which is the purpose of pre-trial depositions.”

 Lewis’s attorney shaded his eyes in resignation.

 “Practicing law without a license again, Mr. Holms?” Mako gave a crooked grin. “Why don’t we talk about why you denied paying over $7,000,000 in bills from my client’s medical facility.”

 “You’re right, Sheldon.” Lewis cleared his throat and sat a little taller. “But only if I can speak personally to your clinic’s medical director.”

 “You could have,” Mako scoffed. “But you never even subpoenaed him.”

 Lewis gave a quick wink to the court reporter signaling, *watch this*.

 “Oh, *that’s* right, we were never able to subpoena him.” Lewis lifted a finger in the air, “Probably because the authorities had just ID’d his year-old corpse in a Mexican drug raid.” He turned to Mako, “So I guess we would need a Ouija Board.”

 Mako’s face sunk, bewildered.

 “What?” Lewis asked as if confused, “You don’t have any contacts with DEA, Sheldon?” Lewis’s voice shifted to a quickfire tone of an expert, “*They* would have informed you that your clinic’s seventy year-old medical director was reported missing by his seventeen-year-old girlfriend over a year ago. *Serendipitously,* during a raid in Sinaloa, they found a corpse that had been practically mummified in the dry Mexican air. The autopsy confirmed he was Alberto Esposito, your medical director, killed by thirty-two puncture wounds. I guess they discovered he’d an informant against the very same medical clinics you represent.” Lewis took a breath, “Based on the condition of the corpse, the time of death was estimated to be over thirteen months.”

 Mako’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish in a desperate search of a sharp response.

 Lewis cocked his head, “So, which one of yourclients have been forging his signature on all those medical reports for the past year?”

 Mako’s entire body locked. His eyes seethed with frustration.

 Lewis swiped his car keys off the table and stood. “Sheldon, are your own clients not telling you absolutely everything again?”

 The court reporter shot Lewis a devilish grin, radiating her enduring disdain for Mako.

 Lewis paused by a chrome logo on the wall of a vicious shark encircling the firm’s slogan, “We MAKO them pay!” He thumbed to the sign and turned to the stifled man. Lewis lifted a finger to utter something that would be both insulting and make the reporter chuckle. But he stopped; it was too easy. There would be no sport in it. Lewis tipped his head and left.

 In the building’s parking garage, Lewis took a breath in his car to reanalyze the past hour. He had brashly exited Mako’s office, peered out of the glass elevator with hands on his hips as it descended, and marched with purpose to his car. Now, he sat to collect himself.

 Lewis had been reminded on more than one occasion that he could overindulge in theatrics and sarcastic wit, especially when pitted against an adversary. But had he gone too far?

 His company’s own attorney had cautioned him that talking too much could prematurely reveal their entire defense. Even Lewis used to preach how people should respond in one of five ways during a deposition: Yes, no, I don’t know, I don’t recall, and “Can you please rephrase the question?”

 And now Lewis had broken his own rule. He had tipped his hand to Mako about the dead director’s signatures. This could provide Mako with the time necessary to concoct an explanation. No matter how ludicrous their excuse might sound, all Mako had to do was convince a jury. And a Miami jury, at that, would be even easier.

 Lewis’s ex-wife, two therapists, and a procession of managers had pointed out his graceless humor and persistent desire to “win” every argument. His bosses used corporate buzzwords, such as he needed to “be more self-aware.”

  *I’m pretty damn aware right now,* Lewis arched a brow in the rearview mirror. If he was able to perform a commendable job while injecting a bit of fun or humor, wouldn’t that always be better than being remembered as a bore? How could making someone smile ever, *ever* be a bad thing?

 Lewis flinched as his phone rang. But it wasn’t a flinch of alarm, in fact his blood pressure leveled and his entire soul warmed, all because of the ringtone. The ring was the opening chords of Taylor Swift’s *White Horse*. It was his eleven-year-old daughter Wren.

 In the grand theater of his fiery marriage, Lewis loved to say that if there was ever a spectacular encore, one that stole the show and left the audience breathless, it was his perfect daughter. Wren was the standing ovation, the encore that turned a chaotic performance into a heartwarming masterpiece.

 “Hi Daddy!” exclaimed the melodious, chirpy voice.

 “Hi Pumpkin Pot Pie,” Lewis’s entire face creased into a smile. “Are we still on for watching *Jaws* and eating take-out tonight?”

 “Yep! 1,000 percent!” Wren replied. “But only if we can get Dairy Queen!”

 Lewis adored how everything she said, wrote or texted always ended with an exclamation point. “You got it, sweetheart.”

 All was right in the world –except for the part he just remembered. He had to visit his boss in person with a debrief. Despite their world of virtual meetings and conference calls, Global Risk’s Vice President of Claims insisted on a personal meeting after any employee deposition. Lewis knew he would have to tell the truth since the corporate attorney would certainly draft his version of the events as well.

 At least Lewis knew he could put his own colorful spin on things.

Chapter Three

The Unwanted Shadow

“So now Mako miraculously wants to settle.” Lewis had his arms outstretched on the back of his boss’s couch. He flexed a brow, “He’s now demanding six million dollars; I’m at negative one million. So I figure I’ll negotiate up to zero.”

 Karl Vesper, Global Risk Assurance’s VP of Claims, pursed his lips, not amused. Vesper, a large man in his fifties, possessed a permanent glower. With his square jaw and golden hair, he looked like he’d come straight from central casting for “German Commander.”

 Vesper rocked his jaw and exhaled, “All it takes is one bad jury...”

 Lewis recoiled like he’d chewed a dry aspirin, ‘What is that supposed to mean?”

 Moments earlier, Lewis had made the dreaded trip to his boss’s office directly from Mako’s building. Dreaded*,* not because he feared his boss, but because for his overall disdain for the corporate world. Lewis worked almost entirely in the field, whether it was from his car while tracking witnesses, from hotel rooms during exciting international travels, from desks at various law enforcement offices –or simply at his small kitchen table with his laptop while enjoying a TV dinner.

 The international headquarters for Global Risk Assurance, LLC (GRA) was located on Miami’s luxurious Biscayne Boulevard. In the heart of downtown Miami, the high-fashion hustle of the area’s workdays felt like a stroll down a sunlit runway. The glass towers that reflected in Biscayne Bay appeared to be jewels in a high-rise tiara. The boardrooms seemed a little more exciting, and even the elevators had a touch of salsa in their ascent. GRA’s headquarters was a glass fortress of ambition and protection for its precious and sophisticated worldwide clients.

 Notwithstanding the building’s aesthetic awe, Lewis tried to go there as little as possible. When he arrived, he had strolled by the company’s twenty-foot chrome globe in the building’s plaza, emblazoned with “*Global Praesidium*,” Latin for global protection.

 *It’s not that creative…* Lewis would think. He could imagine a team of marketing experts working around the clock to craft a profound corporate slogan. They settled on “global protection,” which was essentially the company’s name. Someone perhaps exclaimed, “Let’s put in Latin, so it sounds more distinguished.” Or so people might think the company had hailed from ancient Rome instead of Newark, New Jersey.

 Lewis passed through the building’s security check-in that rivaled most embassies. He proceeded to the eleventh floor for its SIU department, its analysts and the C-suite.

 He still shivered every time he beheld the labyrinth of work cubicles. Employees came and went like automated worker bees. It was almost as if the cubicles had multiplied like bunnies since his last visit, in a maze designed by an eccentric crossword enthusiast.

 *I’ll take my laptop on a kitchen table any day,* Lewis thought as he approached Karl Vesper’s office.

 “What does ‘just one bad jury’ even mean?” Lewis sat across from Vesper’s raised desk in his mahogany and leather corner office.

 “It *means…*” Vesper paused with drama, “sometimes the facts don’t matter. Even when our findings are a hundred percent accurate, the plaintiffs are left with no choice but to attack our processes. Did we drop the ball? Did you skip one tiny step in our procedures?”

 “I get it,” Lewis raised a palm, having heard the lecture before. “Like when a hypothetical former NFL athlete commits a double murder. With more slam-dunk evidence against him than against Manson, the defense attacks police protocol–”

 “–Exactly!” Vesper slapped his desk. “They demonstrate to a naïve jury that we didn’t dot an “i” on page 1121 of our own manual. They roar to the jury, ‘See, they don’t even follow their own rules!”

 Lewis and Mr. Vesper had a unique relationship, given that one was the Vice President of a multi-billion-dollar international insurer, and the other was an insurance investigator who barely made six figures –over half of which went to an ex-wife, child support and heavy debt. They had established a long-standing rapport over a unique common interest: vintage ceramic tiki bar mugs.

 The two men had met at a fraud conference ten years earlier and ended up playing poker on a rainy night without knowing each other’s job titles. They had shared illicit Cuban cigars (Lewis had *a guy* who worked TSA in Miami International Airport) and they had heatedly debated Kentucky Bourbon versus Scottish scotch.

 In the years that followed, Lewis would hurriedly dash to Vesper’s office with his unorthodox theories, usually about stumbling upon yet another multi-million-dollar fraud scheme. Vesper, remarkably attuned to Lewis’ tactless way of speaking, had quickly discerned that Lewis was usually right. And his heart was always for the company’s benefit.

 With Lewis still dramatically fuming, Vesper stood and stepped to a shelf to lift a ceramic mug shaped like a smiling zombie’s head. He lifted it towards Lewis and smiled, “One of a kind. From Tiki Jack’s, San Francisco, probably late 60s. A birthday gift from Elaine.”

 As if their prior conversation had never happened, Lewis stood, genuinely fascinated by the mug. He gingerly took it from Vesper’s hand and held it within inches of his eyes. “It’s hand-signed and numbered. This has to be over two grand…” he exhaled. “And happy belated birthday, by the way.”

 Though they shared an affinity for Tiki culture, Lewis knew Karl was buttering him up for something else.

 “You do realize our company has been approached by a buyer? Insurex.” Vesper reverted to his somber self. “They are the largest carrier in the western hemisphere.” He put the mug back on its shelf and turned to Lewis. “They will not want to acquire a ticking timebomb of liability.”

 “*Relaaax...”* Lewis sat back down, flippant. “Insurex will still swoop in and save our precious livelihoods.”

 “Not with another class-action!” Vesper barked. “Who would purposely buy a grenade with the pin already pulled?” He lifted a finger, “Juries detest big corporations. This *Mako* character advertises on every channel, during every illiterate reality show, twenty-four-seven.”

 “*Sheldon* Mako?” Lewis’s face buckled. “He’s an idiot. The same juries that hate big corporations also hate idiots. Have you seen the guy? He has zero jury appeal–”

 “–You’re talking about jury appeal?” Vesper interrupted. “You’re a smartass on the stand. We got hit with sanctions last month because you winked at a juror!”

 “I had something in my contact lens,” Lewis crossed his arms. “Plus –*even if I did*– I’d be guilty of actually being friendly? Not some humorless, corporate…automaton?” He leaned closer to Vesper, “Karl, the public has never seen an insurance employee smile before –no offence. Someone like me actually has a pulse, and I’m the best investigator you got–”

 With a whoosh near the door, Lewis turned mid-sentence. He caught a glimmer of a busy woman rushing by –a blur of brunette, medium height, and wearing heels. It wasn't because of her gender; it was because new faces were a rarity on the floor, and he had never seen her before.

 Lewis thumbed towards the door, “Who was that? A temp?”

 “No,” Vesper snapped. “She is not some temporary employee.”

 “Hello Mr. Vesper,” a vibrant female voice asked from the door. “Is this a good time?”

 Both men turned to see the same woman who had brushed by. The appealing, late-twenties Latina had Curly hair, dressed in a professional ensemble that effortlessly commanded attention with confidence and poise.

 “Yes, please come in.” Vesper cracked a meager smile, “Lewis, I want you to meet Lizette Covarrubias. She’s–”

 “–She’s the lead SIU investigator for Harbinger Insurance,” Lewis finished his sentence. He stood, almost awestruck by the woman. “I saw you speak in D.C. last year about the...reciprocal effect between fraud and the economy.”

 Lizette smiled with dimples. “*Formerly* of Harbinger. I’ve been consulting for about a year now.” She offered her hand.

 “Really..? Lewis gave a slow nod, “The consulting game. I’ve always considered that. What, you just show clients their loss stats and you recommend better ways? Stuff like that?”

 She cocked her head at his naïve description. “I’m more about identifying liabilities and opportunities for increased efficiencies,” Lizette replied, clinical. “Your industry is sort of a minefield right now.” She thew out her hands, “So, I guess I’m going to be your ‘shadow’ for a while, if you don’t mind –and thank you for the opportunity.”

 Lewis’s jaw fell open. He rotated to Vesper. “Be my *shadow*?”

 Vesper replied, blunt. “Insurex has hired Ms. Covarrubias to audit our SIU operation. To help assess our value. Lizette’s last step is to shadow you. To study your practices and results.”

 Lewis’s head bobbled and he stammered to find any words. Before he could even grunt, Lizette filled the pause.

 “Despite your department’s pending class-actions, I’m hopeful your division’s value exceeds its liabilities.” Lizette was an energetic mix of enthusiasm and corporate speak. “There are some great proficiencies we can implement right away. We’ll start by studying your workflow–”

 “–What the hell’s a *workflow*?” Lewis retorted.

 “Procedural steps an organization should be using for task management,” Lizette smiled.

 Turning his back as if Lizette never existed, Lewis glared at Vesper. “Karl: I work in the field. *Alone.* I can’t go around narrating every step that I do.” He flailed his hands to assemble an analogy, “It’d be like, explaining to…Helen Keller how to… land Airforce One.”

 “Mr. Holms,” Lizette’s dimples disappeared and her expression turned grim. “You may have an inflated view of your place in the system.”

 An uneasy hush fell over the room.

 “Luckily, you won’t need to train me in SIU skills,| she continued to Lewis. “In your same line of work, I’ve investigated over 1,000 cases, $750 million in savings, 250 convictions, three federal RICOs.”

 “I meant, *respectfully,”* Lewis raised a palm, “I have my own way of doing things.”

 “Which is precisely why I’m here.”

 All three turned as an enormous man filled the doorframe.

 “Yes, Toby, what is it?” Vesper asked.

 Toby, their lead SIU analyst, was over six feet tall and nearly three hundred pounds, with a bald head and a goatee. The young man's visible nervousness contrasted ironically with his imposing size.

 “Francois Pelegrin from Paris is on the phone,” Toby stammered. “He wants to know how soon we can get there.”

 “Paris?” Lewis’ eyes blinked with a renewed sparkle, “Francois is the Louvre’s new Risk Manager.” He grinned at Vesper, “Am I about to rack up more frequent flyer miles?”

 At a conference table within their SIU Strategy Room –named so by Lewis because “conference room” sounded too insignificant– Lewis sat between Vesper and Lizette. Toby, positioned across from them, operated a laptop. He and Lewis exchanged nods.

 Lewis enjoyed working with Toby. As an IT expert and their lead analyst, Toby could navigate a labyrinth of data with the finesse of a digital wizard, casting spells on spreadsheets, and summoning hidden data from the depths of information technology infrastructures. And he could also bake a masterful coconut flan.

 Lewis would often visit Toby and his husband Ernesto’s home for dinner. Despite Toby’s massive size, he was a master of gourmet desserts. All the utensils had to be extra-large to fit his mitt-sized hands. In fact, at work, the company had to order a special keyboard because Toby’s fingers were too large to accurately type.

 Lewis was among the few who knew an intriguing tidbit from Toby’s past. In his teens, while pursuing his master’s degree at MIT, Toby went by the screen name “GamerT-007.” The government's problem with that was because *GamerT-007* was a notorious “cyber threat actor,” a fancy term for a hacker. Toby's adept computer trespassing went undetected, and he had reformed his ways by the time he graduated. Even if he had been caught, Global Risk would have likely hired him anyway, similar to how the FBI recruits former hackers for their investigations.

 “I’ll bring you two up to speed.” Vesper looked at Lizette and Lewis, “The Louvre’s entire collection of Jean-Luc Brûlé’s were stolen yesterday in Pamplona.” He cleared his throat, “We just insured the entire set for $12.7 million.”

 A 72-inch monitor on the wall displayed the collection of priceless art. Operating the display from his laptop –with the extra-large keyboard attached –Toby scrolled through the dozen oil paintings.

 “*Napoléon Traversant la Chaîne*,” Lizette said in respectable French, in awe to see the famous painting of Napoleon on his white stallion.

 “A Louvre theft in Pamplona?” Lewis frowned at the screen, “I didn’t ready anywhere that they moved the Louvre to a friendlier city.”

 Vesper blinked, no time for his nonsense. “The art was in a traveling exhibit. Twelve original Brûlés, late 1800s.” He looked at Lizette who was eagerly scribbling notes, “The Louvre occasionally organizes traveling exhibitions. To showcase specific themes, artists, or periods. The moving exhibitions could feature works from their vast collection, as well as loans from other institutions.” He looked back at the screen. These pieces were relatively small, easily concealable. They were stolen before the museum opened.”

 Lizette’s face furrowed with confusion, “It’s almost inconceivable an artist’s entire set is insured –and then immediately stolen.”

 “Precisely why we are here,” Vesper replied.

 Lewis gave a silent affirmation with a nod.

 “More significantly,” Vesper continued, “the policies with us are only one month old.”

 “Here’s the site of the theft.” Toby had a gentle voice that didn’t match his exterior. With quick fingers on his large keys he navigated to an image of the ancient *Museo De Pamplona*. The photograph appeared recent, showcasing the exquisite building on a sunlit day. All three paused to study the image.

 Vesper added, “The burglary occurred during the first Monday of the San Fermin Festival –the running of the bulls.”

 “A classic diversion theft,” Lewis sucked his teeth. “Our thief was certainly a pro.”

 “And, in my opinion, there was deficient security.” Toby clicked to historic engravings of the museum, “The *Museo de Pamplona* is a *thousand* years old,” he underscored the age. “It’s a former church which allows no video or security cameras, surveillance or additional wiring due to its status as a fragile historic structure.”

 Lizette's expression tightened, “Don’t your policies require stringent security measures? Who at the Louve would approve that exhibit?”

 “Again, it was Francois Pelegrin, risk manager of the Louvre,” Vesper growled, equally perturbed by their set of facts. He turned to Lewis, “I want you to meet with Pelegrin in Paris. Immediately.”

 Lewis's eyes scanned the room as his gears churned. He then turned to Lizette with a roguish grin, “So, if you're ‘shadowing’ me, you'd have to come with me to Paris. Immediately.”

 “I just texted you your boarding pass and our itinerary.” She gave a tight smile, “Air France. We board in Miami at 7:15 p.m.”

 “We…” he repeated. After a bewildered beat, he tipped his head with a *touché*.

 His smile vanished when he checked his phone for the text. Just seconds before Lizette’s message, he had received a text from his darling daughter, Wren.

 Wren: “C-U-Soon Daddy! <3.”

 Lewis could vividly imagine her little fingers typing the exclamation point, and it felt like a sucker punch to his gut.

 Calling her back to tell her he couldn’t make dinner would be as challenging as his business trip.

Chapter Three

The City of Light

SOMEWHERE OVER THE NORTH ATLANIC

 “...In my very first consult after leaving Harbinger,” Lizette spoke a mile a minute, “I was able to *right-size* Insurex’s annual budget by over 37 percent...”

 Lewis sighed and leaned against the window in row fifty-two of the Boeing 777. He originally thought this *Lizette-consultant-person* was babbling out of nervousness, but he soon realized it stemmed from genuine enthusiasm. And this was before the espresso cart had arrived.

 Their Air France flight had departed Miami at 7:50 p.m., to arrive in Paris the following morning at 10:45 a.m. Most transatlantic flights were scheduled late in the day, allowing passengers the hopeful prospect of sleeping during the journey and waking up refreshed in Europe. However, Lewis had learned that reality often deviated from this ideal scenario.

 To Lewis, embarking on an international flight over the vast Atlantic was akin to a rollercoaster of excitement and discomfort. The anticipation of a fresh, new SIU case clashed with the misery of seats that seemed to get smaller every year. The peace and quiet of catching up on the latest episodes of a favorite series competed with the not-so-melodic symphony of a nearby child's enthusiasm. In Lewis's line of work, the anticipated destination often collided with unexpected hurdles –such as right now as the plane jostled.

 Lewis bolted upright in his seat. “Turbulence,” he groaned. As the plane shook, a wave of unease washed over him. Intellectually, he understood that it was just the plane navigating through pockets of air and just a temporary bump in their journey. Yet, his fingers gripping the armrest with subtle tension.

 “Wow…” Lizette mocked with a wide smile. “Mr. Expert, who travels the globe for a living, is scared to fly?” She tilted her head, playful. “Or just worried about your job?”

 Lewis scoffed, *yeah right,* then turned to look out of his window. He grumbled, “I get seasick.”

 “You mean airsick?” Lizette frowned.

 “Seasick –when there’s only the Atlantic to land in with any emergency.”

 She smiled as if endeared by his admission. “Have you ever wondered if there’s a better way to do your job?” She leaned closer, “Imagine not having to travel... Centralized case handling, done completely in-house.”

 Lewis recoiled and turned to her, “With our cases, I *have* to be at the scene of the crimes! We’re not some fender-bender car insurance. SIU departments are mandated by law to combat insurance crimes, so you can’t just disassemble us.”

 Lizette turned to face him, maintaining a calm grin to allow him his rant.

 “In Global Risk’s two-hundred years, our company has insured national monuments,” Lewis spoke with his hands, his gestures painting the air. “Did you know we actually have a policy to protect the Eiffel Tower from ‘nuclear radicalism’? We insured the payloads of NASA’s space shuttles. We insure the world’s largest casinos –from Vegas to Monte Carlo –from cyber-attacks.” He lowered his voice, “And I’m not even allowed to reveal the twelve celebrity body parts we insure. Here’s a hint: they belong to only five people. You want those cases handled from a lackey in a cubicle?”

 “I get it.” Lizette shrugged, her expression smug, “Global is the oldest and most prestigious carrier in the world. But it’s no secret your SIU department is its most expensive division. You also have the highest exposure to excess verdicts–”

 “–We have to be expensive!” Lewis exclaimed, counting off on his fingers, “We need the best attorneys. Surveillance on almost every case. Travel to the scenes...” He paused for his finale, “My denials from fraudulent cases this year justified my entire salary by February twelfth.”

 “And some of those denials cost the company $8.9 million in fees, costs and bad faith verdicts,” Lizette replied soberly. “Imagine if everything could be done less expensively with in-house reps.”

 “What about knocking on doors?” Lewis’s eyes bugged. “Looking into the eyes of the perpetrators? Studying body language can tell you so much more than in a video chat.”

 “Hire local PIs to do task assignments,” she simply shrugged. “That would decrease liability exposure as well.”

 He emitted an audible groan, “You’re one of *them*…” He wadded his jacket to make a pillow against the window. “Just like cops who say I’m not a ‘real’ investigator. No one cares if someone fleeces a big company. Zero respect. I’m the Rodney Dangerfield of insurance!”

 “Rodney who?” Lizette frowned.

 Lewis rubbed his face with both palms. He hoped her brilliance could interpret that his body language indicated an excruciating headache, and that she might, perhaps, leave him alone.

 “I’m sorry,” Lizette offered, humble. “I’m talking too much shop. You’re probably used to traveling alone.”

 “Nope,” Lewis kept his eyes closed. “I travel with my three friends: Xanax, a fifteen-year Maker’s Mark, and my earbuds.”

 Experiencing a rare and unexpected emotion, Lewis heard the boorish tone in his own words. Considering the potential reality in what Vesper had shared, he grasped the importance of Lizette’s observations. They could impact the future of his job.

 Altering his response, Lewis opened his eyes and offered a more diplomatic tone, “I'm sorry too. I can get very… passionate about what I do.”

 Lizette smiled. “If you prefer, we can just talk about you.”

 *I just wanna’ sleep!* Lewis wanted to shout. “I’m sure an investigative consultant such as you would know more about me than I do.” He squeezed his eyes closed and snuggled into his coat.

 Her eyes rolled to a corner as she recited from memory, “You’re thirty-five. Currently unmarried. You’ve been with Global for twelve years. You passed law school *magna cum laude*–” She turned to him, “–but you never sat for the bar exam?”

 “I wanted their knowledge, not to be one of *them*,” he mumbled. “If I buy bullets it doesn’t mean I plan on killing someone.”

 Lizette uncurled a mischievous grin as she watched him struggle to sleep. “Interesting: your personality profile concluded that you tend to be, ‘pathological with delusional projection and passive aggression tendencies.’” She paused, “However, despite your obtuse personal and professional tendencies, you’re considered to be an…investigative genius.”

 He cracked an eye, “Right... Go on...” Despite the backhanded compliment, he couldn’t help but wonder who had run a personality profile on him and why.

 “Maybe that’s why I’ve been hired to watch you,” Lizette nodded. “To see if you and your department are as great an asset to Global as you think you are.”

 Lewis sat upright. A tomcat-like smile spread across his face, “Then you picked the right case to shadow me.” He added in impeccable French, “*Paris,* *La Ville-Lumière*. The City of Light.”

 “Careful... She narrowed her gaze at him, “I also report directly to H.R. And I’m young enough to be your... sister.”

 *Charles de Gaulle* Airport, a behemoth of glass and steel, stood as a testament to time and a triumph of architectural ambition. It was a paradoxical blend of awe and chaos, where the romantic excitement of arriving in Paris collided with the reality of navigating through a symphony of rolling suitcases, selfie-takers, and excited chatter.

 Lewis loved to reminisce about his first trip to Paris. The deep fatigue from the flight had been swiftly replaced by adrenaline, leaving him wide-eyed and excited, yet shrouded in a blurred haze that rendered everything even more dreamlike. The airport concourse carried the delightful aroma of fresh croissants, which was not an unfair cliché. And they still seemed to cost about one euro apiece; at a U.S. Starbucks, they would easily be $5.00 for a croissant-shaped bun delivered in cellophane.

 European travel seemed to have solved many issues that America, with all its grand wisdom, had not. For instance, the simple logic of loading and unloading passenger planes from both the front and rear seemed like a no-brainer. But the U.S. hadn’t been able to wrap its head around it. Customs procedures in the airports were remarkably thorough yet surprisingly quick and efficient.

 Lewis was banking on that efficiency as he and Lizette pulled their luggage towards French Customs. When he turned to look at her, he halted when he saw it: her eyes were wide, peering skyward, pupils slightly dilated –her body likely releasing dopamine, the “happy hormone.” Her mouth hung open with an audible inhale.

 “You’ve never been to Paris before…” Lewis surmised. “Have you?”

 “Is it that evident?” She wiped her nose and hastened her pace, as if shedding a moment of vulnerability.

 “What about your whole ‘*I’ve investigated a thousand cases…’*?” Lewis playfully mimicked her voice as they walked.

 “I worked domestic SIU. North America and Canada.” Her eyes followed a shop’s window showcasing prosciutto and brie baguettes.

 “Canadian fraud,” Lewis mocked. “That’s some sexy stuff.” He adjusted his tone, taking on a more sincere manner. “You’ll find fraud is fraud no matter where on the globe you are. The difference is in the law enforcement; whether they care or not. Even if it’s a million-dollar heist, some call it victimless because insurance will be covering it.”

 Lizette nodded –until she saw the line for Customs. It stretched at least three hundred people deep, coiling around rails like a queue for a Disney attraction.

 They both stopped with their bags. Lewis scanned the area to assess. To his right, he saw middle-aged female security clerk standing at a barrier rope for a line they had just closed.

Seeing a roped-off line, Lewis approaches a SECURITY GUARD. Glancing back at Lizette, he WHISPERS to the guard. The guard chuckles and LIFTS the ROPE. Lizette sees Lewis sliding a folded bill into the man’s pocket.

LEWIS (TO LIZETTE)

Right this way, Mademoiselle.

She’s wary but proceeds to the line. He lifts a finger as a CUTE LADY at a side pastry cart hands him two coffees. He returns.

LEWIS

The French appreciate the gravity of our job.

LIZETTE (PUZZLED)

Do they know you? Did you just bribe-

They’re interrupted as TWO uniformed CUSTOMS AGENTS approach.

CUSTOMS AGENT (FRENCH)

-Monsieur Louis Holms?

He pauses, upset –but not surprised.

LEWIS

Two guards -for cutting in line?

 CUSTOMS AGENT (FRENCH - SUBTITLES)

You are named in an Interpol bulletin. Please come with us.

Lizette’s confused. Lewis grows defensive. In perfect French:

LEWIS (FRENCH - SUBTITLES)

Bertrand, we’ve been through this. The violations are in Italy, not-

The agents HANDCUFF Lewis. Lizette becomes authoritative.

LIZETTE

What’s going on here? He’s an American citizen. We’re-

The stern agent turns to her. In a French accent:

CUSTOMS AGENT

-Your companion is under arrest. Who are you?

Lewis REACTS as they pull his hands taut behind his back. Lizette steps back, shaken. A slight stress crack.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. INTERPOL HEADQUARTERS – DAY – ESTABLISHING SHOT

The imposing building reflects in the Rhone river.

SUPER: INTERPOL HEADQUARTERS, LYON, FRANCE

INT. INTERPOL HQ – DAY

An exotically-attractive BLONDE AGENT (mid 30s) sits in a makeshift office. She’s speaking FRENCH on the PHONE, though it’s not her native tongue.

INTERPOL AGENT (FRENCH)

Yes officer, I posted the communiqué. Thank you for calling.

On her MONITOR is an INTERPOL BULLETIN –with Lewis Holms’ photo.

INTERPOL AGENT (CONT’D)

In May the subject attempted to board Air Italia with a firearm concealed in dirty laundry of...underwear.

She gazes at the image of Lewis on her screen.

 INTERPOL AGENT (CONT’D)

The bulletin was premature. I’m releasing the alert. He’s an investigator, not a “gun runner.”

She chuckles.

 INTERPOL AGENT (CONT’D)

No -he’s not a real investigator. He has no badge. He’s an insurance guy.

Her eyes narrow –what she’s really after:

 INTERPOL AGENT (CONT’D)

-Agent Bertrand... before you release him, perhaps you can find out which case he is investigating?

EXT. CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT – DAY

Lewis and Lizette EXIT the airport in a huff, Lizette keeping up.

LIZETTE (SHOUTING)

I need to know what that was all about!

He huffs (maybe humiliated) regaining his cool.

LEWIS

It was nothing! Every fifth trip or so. Europe’s one giant clown town. Competing agencies, trying to find out what I know.

He walks fast, approaching a CAR RENTAL AGENCY.

LIZETTE

But you’re not a cop..? They seemed to know you. Why are you-

He turns.

LEWIS

-I might not have a badge, but I also don’t have any jurisdictional boundaries. I can go everywhere. –They’re just envious.

Lizette narrows her eyes, unsure of his mindset -or his sanity.

INT. RENTAL CAR – DAY

LEWIS DRIVES fast –but knowingly- on Paris’s Rue de Belleville. She frowns at his risky driving as he PULLS OVER to the curb.

LEWIS

I’ll be just a sec.’

He darts out of the car before she can reply. She looks to see the STORE he entered: “EXPRESS DE NUIT –OVERNIGHT EXPRESS.”

Lizette turns, pausing to appreciate the setting: cafes, the architecture, EIFFEL TOWER in the distance. Not a bad job.

Her spell’s broken as Lewis RE-ENTERS the car with a small BOX.

LEWIS

What I miss?

He opens the box. Through bubble wrap, he lifts a Glock 17 HANDGUN. Lizette GASPS.

LIZETTE

A GUN!? Is it yours? You can’t-

LEWIS

-Relaaax... It’s legally registered. I shipped it overnight to myself.

LIZETTE (LIVID)

WHY!?

His crooked smile.

LEWIS

I assure you it’s easier than trying to get it on a plane.

She shakes her head, a staunch corporate suit.

LIZETTE

NO! An employee cannot possess a firearm in the course of business!

He turns to her, soberly.

LEWIS

I’m sure page six of some handbook states those precise words. -But did you know Global sends me to tactical firearms training every July?

 (beat)

Field work is not the soft insides of a four-by-four cubicle. Some of the players never learned how to play nice. If this is a little too “real,” I cordially invite you to go home-

LIZETTE (INTERRUPTING)

-To report that you’ve committed at least three international violations?

He PAUSES, but then brazenly puts the gun in his waistband. She’s agape, speechless. Smirking, Lewis has called her bluff.

EXT. LE LOUVRE – DAY – ESTABLISHING SHOT

SUPER: MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

The historic palatial museum on the Right Bank of the Seine.

INT. LOUVRE – DAY

Lizette gazes up at the ornate GILDED CEILING of the Apollo gallery. Gold and Sun Gods. She studies it with a straight face.

LIZETTE

Still extraordinary no matter how many times you see it...

Lewis stares at his PHONE.

LEWIS

The Marlins are up by two!

LIZETTE

Are you truly so accustomed to this that it doesn’t... impress you?

He looks around, shrugs.

LEWIS

It’s pretty. -But I helped underwrite thirty pieces here, so...

They stroll, moving into the Salle des Etats. Lizette stops. –In front of her is the MONA LISA. After a pause:

 LIZETTE

Does Global insure the Mona Lisa?

A VOICE with a French accent replies from behind.

MAN O.S. (FRENCH ACCENT)

No.

They TURN to see a portly, well-dressed MAN (40s.)

MAN (CONT’D)

La Joconde -your “Mona Lisa”- is priceless. So she cannot have a monetary value. That makes her-

Lewis finishes his words.

LEWIS

-uninsurable. She’s property of the French government, which insures itself.

MAN

I apologize for my delay. I am FRANCOIS PELEGRIN, Risk Manager for Le Louvre. I presume you are Lewis Holms?

Lizette steps in front of him, offering her hand.

LIZETTE

Bonjour, I’m Lizette Covarrubias.

He smiles and flirtatiously takes her hand.

FRANCOIS

Bonjour Mademoiselle. “Lisette...” –French for “Consecrated from God.”

Lewis rolls his eyes. She remains the stern professional.

LIZETTE

Regrettably, that’s not why we’re here. I am from Global Risk, assisting Mr. Holms.

Lewis steps between them.

LEWIS

I’m also consecrated from Global. We have a lot to discuss.

INT. FRANCOIS’S OFFICE – MOMENTS LATER

His office is a mix of technology and antique paneling. Ornate collectables adorn the walls. Old world, impressive.

Lizette and Lewis sit across from his desk.

FRANSOIS

Unlike the U.S., many European museum collections are not insured. In the Paris heist of May, 2010, a single thief stole irreplaceable art by Picasso, Matisse, Braque...

LIZETTE

-Which explains your recent interest in purchasing fine art policies.

FRANCOIS

Oui. Not for all –such as Mona Lisa. But many collections have been insured recently.

LEWIS

Very recently. Like four weeks ago recently.

Francois’s smile fades as he looks at Lewis.

FRANCOIS

It is my duty to preserve and protect our collections. The theft in Pamplona is very unfortunate.

LEWIS

As a former civil servant for the Minister of Culture, your new job here must be... beyond belief.

FRANCOIS (WARY)

I am fortunate. But considering the Louvre’s 35,000 pieces of art -risks from fire, flood, theft- I have unimaginable responsibilities.

LIZETTE

Does that include authenticating and appraising each piece?

Lewis is unsure where she’s going with this. Francois frowns.

FRANCOIS

Obviously. Appraisals must be verified to know how much insurance to procure.

Lewis looks at the desk to see a family PORTRAIT -a pretty WIFE, THREE TEENS and an INFANT. Lizette continues.

LIZETTE

Mr. Pelegrin, you approved Pamplona’s request for the traveling exhibit?

FRANCOIS

The Museo de Pamplona was the church that Jean-Luc Brûlé attended. The opportunity to display his own art there was a cultural first.

LEWIS

Did you realize the building had none of the required electronic security? Our policy explicitly requires-

FRANCOIS (INTERRUPTING)

-specific security while in a museum and during transit. The church is deemed a “historical landmark,” not a “museum.”

Lewis cocks his head –he’s debating policy with me?

LIZETTE

You know the wording of the policy’s exclusions very well...

Lewis winks at her like “good one.”

FRANCOIS

If you are complimenting the detail of my work, then merci.

Lewis does not like this guy.

LIZETTE

We’ll check the status of the museum when we’re in Pamplona.

FRANCOIS (STUNNED)

You are going to Spain?

Lewis senses the chink in his armor.

LEWIS

It is the scene of the crime...

FRANCOIS

I presumed that was the duty of police. I thought Global would simply validate the policy and-

LEWIS (INTERRUPTING)

-then just pay? My job is also to protect my company’s assets -as you do for Le Louvre.

Francois touches his fingertips together.

FRANCOIS

If not for Global’s sterling reputation, it seems you are searching for ways to avoid honoring your contract.

Lewis smiles...insincerely.

LEWIS

Monsieur Pelegrin, it’s so much easier for me to pay a claim. I could be on the first plane home.

 (motions to the portrait)

Considering your gorgeous family and impressive new career, I’m sure you’ve performed your job impeccably.

Lewis stands. Lizette joins him.

LEWIS (CONT’D)

My friends with the Pamplona police are waiting for us. Good day.

Francois reacts.

INT. LOUVRE ATRIUM – SECONDS LATER

Lewis briskly walks again, Lizette trailing.

LIZETTE

I’m impressed; you have contacts in the Pamplona police?

LEWIS

No, they hate me. I investigated their chief of faking a bull-gore injury.

A LARGE MAN (45) is on a bench. He moves his newspaper aside. He watches Lewis and Lizette exit Francois’s office. He has a SINISTER FACE with menacing eyebrows.

Looking over his shoulder, he walks towards Francois’s office...

EXT. PARIS-AUSTERLITZ TRAIN STATION – DUSK – ESTABLISHING SHOT

Dusk at the historic station on the Left Bank of the Seine.

INT. AUSTERLITZ STATION – NIGHT

Lizette stands alone, waiting for their train. She sees a young COUPLE KISSING as the man departs. Lizette gazes wistfully. Such a romantic locale...and she’s stuck with Lewis.

Her reverie is interrupted as Lewis approaches with two coffees.

LEWIS

Help me understand: we could’ve taken one plane for four hours, or two trains -changing in Hendaye and Irún- for thirteen hours..?

She takes her coffee with a grin.

LIZETTE

Global should consider purchasing bulk flight vouchers. It’d save your company sixty-two percent.

He sips his coffee.

LEWIS

That would be nice –if I had a crystal ball. I never know where my investigations will take me. I might need a seaplane -or a jungle river boat- with ten minutes’ notice.

LIZETTE (SHRUGS)

Just a suggestion. If Global lowers its costs, it might raise your value.

Under his breath:

LEWIS (SOTTO)

Consultants. Yay...

EXT. HIGH-SPEED “EURORAIL” – NIGHT- ESTABLISHING

INT. EURORAIL DINING CAR – NIGHT

Lewis and Lizette sit at a DINING TABLE. He cuts into Brie en Croute –melted brie, pecans and berries. She looks out the window.

LIZETTE

The French countryside, at 200 mph...

He has a glass of wine; she an espresso.

LEWIS

Bordeaux wine country –and the lady doesn’t drink.

LIZETTE

I still have work to do. You’re putting wine on your expense account?

LEWIS

He’s billing it as very expensive brie.

She narrows her eyes.

LIZETTE

Doesn’t that –by definition- constitute “fraud?”

He smirks, stymied. He pauses to change the subject.

LEWIS

I slid the porter fifty Euros to assure we get upgraded sleeper suites.

He winks. She frowns.

LIZETTE

I’m concerned you’re accustomed to traveling in only first class. Is this how you conduct all business? Upgrades and bribes?

A grave smile, resolute about his job.

LEWIS

That is how the game’s played. My cases never involve anything less than seven digits. It’s crucial to have the commensurate accouterments. Anything less...cheapens our brand.

Her eyes widen as if making a mental note.

LIZETTE

I apologize that I suggested an economy train instead of a Learjet.

LEWIS (SOFTENS)

The train’s okay. -We could use a few “bullet trains” in the states.

She lightens up, looking around as a memory emerges.

LIZETTE

Reminds me of the monorails at Disney.

 (pensive)

My dad used to have me on weekends. We’d go to EPCOT. It had a miniature Italy, Germany, France –even an Eiffel Tower. He’d say, “Where else can we have lunch in Mexico and dinner in Paris?”

LEWIS

I actually had a case once where I had brunch in Mexico and dessert in Paris.

She snaps, losing patience.

LIZETTE

This isn’t a competition! I get it -I was your equal at your biggest rival-

LEWIS (INTERRUPTING)

-Equal?-

LIZETTE

-And now I’m a threat, evaluating you and your team’s worth. What’s the quote? -“Adapt or perish...”

Silence. He feels like crap. After a sip he tries again.

LEWIS

Sounds like you had a cool dad. My daughter also loves EPCOT. An idyllic, safer version of the real world.

She exhales, relaxes. They’re both human.

LIZETTE

She’s lucky to have a fun dad too.

He pulls out a PHONE, quickly scrolls to PHOTOS. A proud dad.

LEWIS

Brianna. She just turned twelve. Lives with her mom. Sharon –my ex- says girls go bad ‘round thirteen, so I figure I got a solid year left.

She smiles sincerely at the photos.

LIZETTE

She’s gorgious, Lewis. -We don’t all go bad at thirteen.

 (pauses at the photo)

-I noticed you kept looking at Francois’s family portrait.

LEWIS

I believe the items people choose to show the world can be insightful.

LIZETTE (SHRUGS)

Looked like he has a nice family..?

LEWIS

His wife was about four points hotter than someone of Francois’s caliber should’ve been able to land.

She chuckles –but listens, amused.

WE SEE: PHOTO details he memorized: WIFE, CLOTHING, KIDS...

LEWIS (O.S.)

She was wearing this season’s Prada. Lots of bling. A skilled Parisian shopper. The kids -bless their hearts- inherited dad’s severe dental genetics. They’ll need exorbitant orthodontics. The newborn was surely a New Years oops.

Back to Lizette, throwing her hands up.

LIZETTE

How does that involve the burglary?

LEWIS

His wife’s accustomed to a certain lifestyle. Four kids –not even considering college- will drain him. He has one of the most esteemed jobs in Paris. He’d lose it instantly if he made any mistakes -like approving that exhibit.

She slowly nods.

LIZETTE

-Or mistakes in appraising the art.

LEWIS

I’m here for the theft –not to check his math.

She leans forward.

LIZETTE

According to French law, if he knowingly overstated the art’s value when obtaining the policies, he could face criminal charges.

His eyes dart as he absorbs her notion.

LEWIS

True... He did seem defensive when you asked about his appraisals...

A man brushes Lewis’s table as he walks down the aisle. When he passes, he TURNS –it’s the large SINISTER MAN from the museum...

INT. TRAIN’S SLEEPING CAR – CONTINUOUS

The sinister man, KRUG, ENTERS a sleeper cabin. He lifts a TABLET COMPUTER. On its screen is a surveillance IMAGE of LEWIS. Below it is illegible script –looks like RUSSIAN.

He lifts a cell phone and speaks RUSSIAN.

KRUG (SUBTITLES)

This is KRUG. Francois said the man is an insurance investigator. Not Interpol. But he is digging very deep.

An unsightly scowl.

KRUG (CONT’D, SUBTITLES)

Understood. –We arrive in Pamplona in the morning.

He studies the dossier of Lewis. He then SCROLLS down to a school PHOTO of a twelve-year-old GIRL –her name in English: “BRIANNA HOLMS…”

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

EXT. PAMPLONA – DAY – ESTABLISHING SHOT

SUPER: PAMPLONA, SPAIN

A sunny day in the rustic Old Square of Pamplona.

EXT. MUSEO DE PAMPLONA – DAY

Quaint old town, cobblestone streets, bustling cafes. Lewis and Lizette, in chic clothing, walk towards the church-like museum.

Lewis is puzzled as they approach the museum’s doors.

LEWIS

Why’s it open..?

LIZETTE

Why wouldn’t it be?

LEWIS

It’s the scene of a $12.7 million-dollar burglary!

LIZETTE

You think an entire CSI team should still be dusting after two days?

INT. MUSEO DE PAMPLONA – CONTINUOUS

A wall labeled “Jean-Luc Brûlé” states “EXHIBICION CERRADO.” They see a lone MUSEUM GUARD –it’s the guard from the theft.

LIZETTE

I’ll check-in with the curator.

He pulls her aside.

LEWIS

No! The police have been here. They have an attorney for the theft. They won’t talk to us non-badge-people.

 (points to the guard)

But that guy... I can rattle a minimum-wage rent-a-policía.

She frowns at his tactic, but he moves towards the guard.

 LEWIS (SPANISH - SUBTITLES)

Hello. Are you the guard who knows of the Brûlé theft?

The guard squints at Lewis’s pronunciation.

GUARD

Estoy...de guardia del museo..?

Frustrated, Lewis turns to Lizette.

LEWIS

He must be from here. His Basque dialect and my flawless Latin Spanish don’t mix.

LIZETTE

Let me try.

Lewis chuckles condescendingly.

LEWIS

He won’t recognize street Cuban-

LIZETTE (OFFENDED)

-I spent a year in Madrid. I speak perfect Castilian -and Basque!

She turns to the guard. They begin a smiling exchange in BASQUE. Lewis is like a child, frustrated that he doesn’t understand.

LEWIS

What’s he saying..?

Her discussion ends with her motioning to Lewis and chuckling.

LEWIS

WHAT?

LIZETTE (TO LEWIS)

This is Ernesto. He was the guard on duty during the theft-

He interrupts, impatient.

LEWIS

-Why hasn’t the scene been contained? Did the police ID any prints?

She turns, translating. Her gestures seem to belittle Lewis’s questions. They chuckle –but she’s thrown by his last comment.

LIZETTE (BACK TO LEWIS)

He says this wasn’t a “murder scene.” The police were here less than an hour.

 (she leans in)

He said they cared very little because insurance will pay anyway...

Lewis seethes.

LEWIS

No respect now in twelve countries! -Can he at least describe the thief?

She asks the guard. He replies. She turns to Lewis.

LIZETTE

Female, twenty-five to thirty-five. Blonde, pretty, petit –and very pregnant.

LEWIS

Petit and pregnant? Interesting ruse. Ask if there are any photos.

She asks the guard. He replies and she turns.

LIZETTE

No video allowed in the building. But police confiscated tourists’ cameras. -He says they obtained many photos.

Lewis’s eyes widen.

LEWIS

Of course..! A million tourists attend the Running of the Bulls... There had to be hundreds of cameras -just outside these doors.

He moves fast towards the doors. She rushes to catch up.

LEWIS (CONT’D)

I have some kissing-up to do at Pamplona’s P.D...

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. PAMPLONA POLICE DEPARTMENT – MINUTES LATER

They EXIT a CAB. The sign on the village building states, “CUARTEL DE LA GUARDIA CIVIL.” Lewis stops to look at her.

LEWIS

Listen: last year I sort of accused the Police Chief of faking a gouge injury when he sued the city.

LIZETTE

Was it true?

LEWIS

I don’t remember. I was enjoying sangria and he was being all racist against insurance people.

 (leans close)

I might need your help doing that whole “charm” thing.

Before she can reply, he proceeds through the doors.

INT. PAMPLONA POLICE DEPARTMENT – SECONDS LATER

A busy FRONT DESK with OFFICERS milling around. Lewis pleads.

LEWIS

Chief Diego: I apologize. And I believe together we can solve this crime that has left a black eye on your fair city.

With large crossed arms, grim CHIEF DIEGO exhales in BASQUE.

DIEGO (BASQUE)

What does this idiot want?

With a mischievous grin, Lizette steps in front of Lewis.

 LIZETTE (TO DIEGO, BASQUE)

Chief Diego, I see you are comfortable speaking Basque. I am as well.

Diego’s busted. Lewis doesn’t understand.

DIEGO (BASQUE - SUBTITLE)

Why are you here?

LEWIS

What are you guys saying?

Lizette ignores him, proceeding in BASQUE with Diego.

LIZETTE (SUBTITLE)

I apologize for my backward associate. The truth is –and he cannot understand what we are saying- I will soon be replacing him.

A slight grin on the chief.

DIEGO (BASQUE)

Is that so?

Lewis is puzzled as he catches a word.

LEWIS

Did you say something about “replace?”

She continues in Basque to the Chief.

LIZETTE (SUBTITLE)

Yes. And I respect law enforcement -and all the ways we can help you...

Lewis is perplexed.

DIEGO (SUBTITLE)

What is it you want?

LIZETTE (SUBTITLE)

Do you have the tourist photos that reveal the museum thief?

Diego grins. He now speaks ENGLISH to Lizette and Lewis.

DIEGO.

So the brilliant Lewis Holms –the Sherlock of insurance crime- needs something from me...

He becomes antagonistic as he lifts a phone.

DIEGO (CONT’D)

I have many photos. And you will receive none of them. In fact, I am alerting Interpol that you-

Their heads TURN (and a few other officers) to see an exotic BLONDE WOMAN (mid 30s) approach –it’s the Interpol agent. She takes the phone from Diego and hangs it up.

INTERPOL AGENT

That won’t be necessary.

Lizette’s jaw drops as the woman kisses Lewis on the cheek.

INTERPOL AGENT

Riling the locals again, Lewis?

He flashes a blushing grin at a baffled Lizette.

LEWIS

Lizette, I’d like you to meet a friend, NIKITA POL. She’s with the FBI’s Art Crime Division.

EXT. SIDEWALK CAFÉ – DAY

CLOSE ON: A TOURIST PHOTO of the CROWD outside the museum. A PREGNANT BLONDE EXITING with her head turned away the camera.

LEWIS (O.S.)

So there was an actual thief...

Lewis, Lizette and Agent Nikita Pol sit at a sidewalk CAFÉ TABLE. Nikita passes them multiple 8 X 10 PHOTOS.

NIKITA (RE: PHOTOS)

Notice everyone’s in white with red scarves –the traditional colors for the Running of the Bulls.

LEWIS

The thief blended right in.

LIZETTE

Another classic diversion theft.

Lewis and Nikita look at her.

LIZETTE (CONT’D)

In 2006, didn’t thieves use the chaos of Brazil’s Carnival to steal $50 million in art?

Nikita nods, impressed.

NIKITA

You know your art crimes. They stole works by Picasso, Monet, Dali...

Lewis squints, a silent rivalry. Back to the photos:

LEWIS

In each photo, she’s looking down or away, then –poof- she’s gone.

NIKITA

The only defining characteristic is she appears pregnant.

LIZETTE

Have you noticed in each photo, there are a dozen other pregnant women –all blondes.

LEWIS

Maybe there’s a Swedish Lamaze class in the hood?

Nikita looks up, smiles.

NIKITA

When I was pregnant I wanted one last, thrilling getaway before I popped. Maybe seeing the bulls sounds adventurous to a new mom..?

Lewis gives her a familiar smile.

LEWIS

How old is Cassie now?

Lizette’s intrigued by their familiarity. Nikita beams.

NIKITA

Can you believe she’s three? An adorable, little chatterbox. She’s with my mom while I’m over here.

LIZETTE

You’re not a full-time European agent?

NIKITA

No. I’m with FBI in the states. I was asked to be a “seconded agent” with Interpol’s art crime team.

Lizette’s curious of this different side to the business.

LIZETTE

So you’re also an Interpol agent?

NIKITA

Interpol’s an international agency that helps member countries’ police. Despite what you see in movies, agents don’t carry guns or make arrests. –But as FBI, I can.

LEWIS (WARY)

Why are you on the Brûlé burglary?

She seems elusive.

NIKITA

It’s art theft isn’t it? Why are you?

Lizette interjects, defensive.

LIZETTE

-Global just insured the entire set. Why is FBI investigating “art?” Aren’t your priorities terrorism, kidnapping?

Nikita coolly sips her coffee.

NIKITA

International art crime is the third highest-grossing crime after drugs and arms trafficking. Between $6 and $8 billion a year goes to organized crime. Tied to laundering, arms and narcotics. -So, yes, FBI has an interest in art crime.

Lizette’s put off at her snide tone.

LIZETTE (SARCASTIC)

Fascinating.

NIKITA

Which is how Lewis and I met. -How old is Brianna now? Twelve?

She touches his hand. Lizette raises a brow.

LEWIS (SMILES)

Yep. My stunning genius. Lives with Sharon in Lauderdale. I was finally blessed with that divorce.

NIKITA

Really..?

Lewis notices Lizette to the side, excluded.

LEWIS

I’m Sorry. It’s just that Nikita and I have... “intermingled” a time or two. –Our cases that is.

They chuckle. With a hint of annoyance, Lizette moves forward.

LIZETTE

So, we’ve confirmed there was a burglar –and therefore a burglary.

NIKITA

Your young protégé is correct.

Lizette frowns at the “young protégé.” Lewis leans in to Nikita.

LEWIS

Niki...If you throw me some bones, I’ll share everything we got...

NIKITA

So you want me to get fired from the FBI and Interpol?

He lures her, sliding closer. A devilish grin.

LEWIS

We have month-old appraisals and hi-def digital scans of every piece of art. You got all that?

She pauses, vexed.

NIKITA

My photos are Poloroids from the 60s.

LEWIS (GOADING)

Come onnn... You can say we’re your... cultural attachés.

Nikita narrows her eyes, points at him, incensed.

NIKITA

You can observe. That’s it! Don’t touch anything, and none of your juvenile stunts!

Lewis grins at a wary Lizette. Mission accomplished.

EXT. PAMPLONA ALLEY – DAY

Chief Diego sits on a motorcycle. KRUG appears from the shadows.

DIEGO (BROKEN ENGLISH)

What do you want?

Krug remains menacing. In a Russian accent:

KRUG

To know what they know.

He pulls an ENVELOPE from his coat and hands it to Diego.

DIEGO

The insurance man and the girl know nothing. –But they do have photos.

Diego stuffs the envelope in his jacket. Krug’s angered.

KRUG

The photos were to be destroyed!

DIEGO.

Interpol shared the photos. Not me.

KRUG (GROWLS)

Interpol is here..?

EXT. TANGIER, MOROCCO – DUSK – ESTABLISHING SHOT

SUPER: TANGIER, MOROCCO

EXT. SEASIDE BAR – DUSK

A chic outdoor lounge. Drapes and pools overlooking the sunset. Upscale, trendy PATRONS.

The gloomy Krug stands out as he sits. From the crowd, a pretty BLONDE struts –it’s the museum THIEF. She’s ANGELIQUE (early 30s) carrying champagne and perturbed at Krug’s presence.

ANGELIQUE (BRITISH ACCENT)

You’re like a thunder cloud.

He frowns, his ominous act.

KRUG

Sergei is angered. You allowed yourself to be photographed.

She deflates him by pushing him to sit back down.

ANGELIQUE

Sergei wetting the bed again? Tell him to visit me himself. Not his post-Cold-War doorman.

He scowls, unflinching. She sees he’s losing patience.

ANGELIQUE (SUBDUED)

The photos were intentional.

KRUG

Who would want photographs!?

She looks over her shoulder. Leans forward.

ANGELIQUE

Before the theft, I posted an ad for a photo shoot. I requested blondes, all dressed as if pregnant.

Krug squints, gears churning.

ANGELIQUE (CONT’D)

The ad said to be outside the museum at 8:00 a.m. A dozen blonde preggos, all in white, all in the same spot...

She notices her sexy FEMALE COMPANIONS waving her over. Angelique stands to exit. A last brazen shout:

ANGELIQUE (CONT’D)

Tell Sergei there are plans within plans. Remind him I am the best.

She swaggers off to rejoin her coven of beauties.

EXT. MADRID, SPAIN – DAY – ESTABLISHING SHOT

SUPER: INTERPOL REGIONAL OFFICE, MADRID, SPAIN

INT. INTERPOL LAB - DAY

Nikita Pol’s large beautiful EYE. She’s gazing through a MAGNIFYING GLASS, studying a wooden picture FRAME.

NIKITA (O.S.)

The thief left the frames behind.

In lab coats, Lewis and Lizette lean in.

NIKITA (CONT’D)

Oak. Early 1800s. Brûlé built his frames from old French barns.

LEWIS

That’s riveting. Who’s the thief?

She looks at him like he’s a wiseass.

NIKITA

The thief’s a pro. There are no prints on this wood. The guard said she used gloves. No prints or DNA.

Lizette moves closer to the frame.

LIZETTE

Isn’t that a shred of the canvas?

With TWEEZERS she grasps a SHRED OF MATERIAL from the frame.

LEWIS

Can we use it to clone a new painting?

Nikita’s curious what Lizette’s intrigued by.

NIKITA

I checked all remnants -there are no prints..?

Lizette studies the shred through a magnifier.

LIZETTE

I get it, the thief was careful. Do you have a spectroscopic microscope?

NIKITA (PUZZLED)

Of course -but infrared spectroscopy is for confirming authenticity without destructive chemical tests.

LIZETTE

Humor me. All materials on earth, including those used in art, contain specific molecules. Those molecules change with the passage of time.

Nikita turns to a SPECTROSCOPIC MICROSCOPE and MONITOR. Lizette hands her the shred for analysis. Lewis frowns in skepticism.

LEWIS

How’s confirming the age going to help find a thief? –And how do you know all this nerd-tech?

LIZETTE

At Harbinger I helped authenticate pieces for the Guggenheim.

Nikita shakes her head but runs the shred through the system. ONSCREEN: The monitor fills with a DIGITAL SPECTRUM.

LEWIS

Does it confirm it’s still stolen?

NIKITA

There’s paint residue on the fabric.

LIZETTE

Which painting was this from?

Lewis scrolls to a PHOTO of a PAINTING on his LAPTOP.

LEWIS

It was the largest frame, so it’s “Le Domaine.” It means “The Field.” Why?

They look at the IMAGE: a FIELD OF FLOWERS with CLOUDS above.

NIKITA

This shred came from the top –so it’s where the clouds were painted.

 LIZETTE

So the paint on the canvas is white paint. –Can you run it for compounds?

Nikita huffs, baffled, but proceeds. ONSCREEN: A GRAPH of CHEMICAL COMPOUNDS. Nikita’s jaw drops -she TURNS to Lizette.

NIKITA

How did you know this..? This contains titanium white.

Lizette flashes a self-satisfied grin.

LIZETTE

A pigment not available until 1920.

Lewis freezes as he thinks it through.

LEWIS

But Le Domaine was painted in 1860...

Nikita states the deduction.

NIKITA

This was painted sixty years later. The stolen painting was a fake!

Lewis turns to Lizette.

LEWIS

How’d you know to even go there?

LIZETTE

Procedural reasoning: I like to confirm what is stolen before crawling into the head of who did it.

Lewis hurriedly hands Nikita the next frame to examine.

LEWIS

If they’re all fakes, how’d they get approved by Francois at the Louvre?

LIZETTE

It sheds light on his reaction to me asking about the appraisals.

LEWIS

Then the thief’s also a victim. Whoever ordered those paintings stolen is going to be very angry...

This strikes an ominous chord with Nikita.

NIKITA

They’ll be extremely angry...

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. MADRID RESTAURANT – NIGHT

SANGRIA FLOWS from a pitcher. Lewis shouts a toast.

LEWIS (O.S.)

Here’s to Niki, confirming $12.7 million in forgeries!

A busy, FLAMENCO MUSIC-filled restaurant. Lizette, Lewis and Nikita sit with FILES and PHOTOS covering their TABLE.

NIKITA

Lizette deserves all the credit.

Lizette smiles at the unexpected compliment. Lewis places a jovial arm around her.

LEWIS

Now you see the need for travel? $12.7 million would’ve already been paid from an automatic printer back home.

Nikita –relaxed (maybe buzzed)- touches his hand.

NIKITA

Now it’s your turn to help me... -I still have a thief to catch.

Lizette notices her touching his hand.

LIZETTE

Why do you still want the thief? -She stole fakes. Her bad karma.

Lewis RE-FILLS Nikita’s glass.

LEWIS

I still need to confront Francois with our findings. –But why are you still chasing a bad-luck thief?

Nikita drinks, pauses -then scowls at Lewis.

NIKITA

I know you..!

Lizette’s confused.

NIKITA (SCOLDING)

You know alcohol is like truth serum with me!

 (covers her face) I should’ve known...

LIZETTE (PUZZLED)

What..?

Nikita looks at her like a big sister.

NIKITA

Be careful: your charming partner is an expert at socially engineering information out of anyone. He knows all the right buttons to push...

Lewis throws his hands up, mock insult.

LEWIS

I am offended! Sue me for desiring the privilege of helping you, which -in turn- helps me. It can be a win-win-win.

Nikita crosses her arms -a challenging smirk.

NIKITA

What do you have that I need?

LEWIS

Francois’s appraisals. Signed and notarized under oath of the art’s validity... You got all that?

She leers, frustrated –but looks at Lizette.

NIKITA

I’ll tell you –not him.

She takes a generous gulp before continuing.

NIKITA (CONT’D)

My suspect is a contract thief known as Angelique. I believe she works freelance for a larger criminal enterprise. When they find out she stole fakes, we’ll find her severed head in the Seine.

Lizette’s EYES BULGE. Lewis is animated at her admission.

LEWIS

I knew there was a reason you’re here! Somehow you knew I was on the case. With your thousands of cases, you come barging in, right where I was standing.

He turns to Lizette.

LEWIS (CONT’D)

-Don’t let this lady fool you. She may look like a model, but she...

He STOPS himself. He sees GIRLS at a table posing for PHOTOS. An epiphany. He begins rifling through the TOURIST PHOTOS.

LEWIS (SOTTO)

...Looking like models...

LIZETTE

Who looks like a model?

He begins CIRCLING the PREGNANT WOMEN in the photos.

LEWIS

One, two, three...there are a dozen pregnant blondes –all in a two hundred-square-foot area.

LIZETTE

I already told you that..?

The ladies lean in to look.

LEWIS

Do third-trimester women with swollen feet really want to mix with a million tourists running from bulls?

He pulls out his PHONE and EXITS. The ladies are left gazing.

NIKITA

That was his epiphany face.

After an awkward pause, Lizette looks meekly at Nikita.

LIZETTE

Curious: from studying the dynamics, do you and Lewis have a... past?

Nikita takes a sip before answering.

NIKITA

Lewis and I have been in this game a long time. We’re the same age. Single parents. He’s smart, cute -and sort of amusing-

LIZETTE (INTERRUPTING)

-Forget it. Not my business-

NIKITA

-Honey, don’t worry. There’s nothing now. Feel free to-

Lizette abruptly interrupts.

LIZETTE

-No way! I was hired to observe his work, not him. Plus he’s, like, ten years older!

Nikita again comes off unintentionally condescending.

NIKITA

Liz, you’re not under oath. The job has long hours. Exotic travel...

 (as if talking about herself)

...For such a stimulating job, it can get very...lonely...

EXT. SIDEWALK IN FRONT OF THE RESTAURANT – SECONDS LATER

Lewis paces with his CELL PHONE, anxious.

LEWIS

Toby: Find out if there’s a Spanish equivalent of “Craigslist.”

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. TOBY’S WORKSTATION, GLOBAL’S HQ – DAY

Toby has a headset, quickly typing on his keyboard.

TOBY

That site’s international –you looking for a new bed?

BACK TO LEWIS.

LEWIS (RAPID)

Cross-ref all classifieds for Pamplona. Anything like a “photo shoot.” The same date as the burglary.

ON TOBY: As he searches.

TOBY (BAFFLED)

Is this what you do at midnight in Spain with two hot chicks?

 (pauses, eyes wide) There is one! -How’d you know? Posted four days ago. A call-out specifying blondes for a maternity ad! To meet in front of the museum-

LEWIS (O.S. INTERRUPTING)

-Get the IP address the ad was posted from!

INT. MADRID RESTAURANT – MOMENTS LATER

Lewis briskly returns. The ladies are almost bonding.

NIKITA (MIDSENTENCE)

...notice he only gets sarcastic when he feels threatened...

They laugh and look up at him.

LEWIS (TO NIKITA)

I need your Interpol clout to obtain a security video. -And borrow your facial-recog database.

 (meekly)

And maybe those cool, free government seats on the next plane to Paris?

The ladies are agape.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. AIR FRANCE AIRBUS 380 – NIGHT – ESTABLISHING

INT. REAR CABIN OF THE PLANE – CONTINUOUS

Lewis, Nikita and Lizette are stuffed into rear JUMP SEATS.

LEWIS

The best Interpol can do is jump seats?

He looks nauseous. Nikita recoils.

NIKITA

You’re lucky an Airbus has three jump seats, ungrateful...cultural attaché.

Lizette’s eyes dart, things are moving fast.

LIZETTE

Toby found the IP? We know which computer the ad came from?

NIKITA

Bad guys don’t use their own computers. They use public Wi-Fi, internet cafés, libraries...

Lewis winces from the turbulence.

LEWIS

Our thief, Angelique, used an IP traced to a coffeehouse in Paris.

LIZETTE

So it’s a dead end..?

NIKITA

We know the precise time the ad was uploaded. We can review the café’s security video for that time frame for anyone who fits the profile.

LEWIS

I’ll run any suspects through Interpol’s facial-recognition database.

LIZETTE (TO NIKITA)

Can you get in trouble for helping us?

Nikita glares.

NIKITA

Just fired from Interpol and FBI, sprinkled with criminal charges. -The ONLY reason I’m helping is I believe Angelique will be killed.

LIZETTE (ANXIOUS)

Killed..?

Her eyes widen. This is inching beyond the scope of her duties.

INT. AIRPLANE BATHROOM – NIGHT

Claustrophobic and shaky. Lizette ENTERS with a TABLET COMPUTER. After attempts, she’s able to access a pixelated VIDEO CALL PROGRAM. Through static, the stern face of Karl Vesper appears.

VESPER (FILTERED)

...your status is six hours overdue-

LIZETTE (INTERRUPTING)

-I’m calling from 30,000 feet. Things have escalated. We believe the art-

Vesper interrupts, equally terse.

VESPER (FILTERED)

-I don’t care about the art! Negotiations with Insurex are progressing faster than anticipated.

LIZETTE

How..?

VESPER (FILTERED)

Insurex filed a pre-merger notification. The cat’s out of the bag. They’ll want your assessment the second you land. Have you found grounds for his termination or not?

She pauses, either torn -or nauseous.

LIZETTE

I need twenty-four hours. We have a bigger hazard on our hands.

EXT. YACHT IN MEDITERRANEAN SEA – DAY – ESTABLISHING

SUPER: MEDITERRANEAN, OFF THE COAST OF GREECE

An IMMENSE SUPER-YACHT anchored off the coast.

INT. YACHT’S PLUSH OFFICE – CONTINUOUS

KRUG SITS waiting. An onyx DESK, priceless LOUIS XIV CHAIRS. For the first time, Krug seems troubled.

A handsome Chechen, SERGEI (38) ENTERS. Black hair, chiseled.

SERGEI (RUSSIAN ACCENT)

You saw her and did not bring her to me?

KRUG (HESITANT)

Ya –it is all part of her plan.

Sergei SITS behind his desk. Gold chains, black silk, imposing. He rolls a boiled egg in his hands to crack and peel it.

SERGEI

Her plan? To be captured by a hundred cameras?

Before Krug can reply, Sergei slaps the desk, SHOUTING.

SERGEI (CONT’D)

SHE IS TO COME HERE!

He calms, major bi-polar. He repulsively bites and chews the egg.

SERGEI (CONT’D)

But not to slit her neck. Yet. Tell her I have a... new task for her.

Krug hesitates before asking:

KRUG

What about any...investigators?

Sergei crushes another egg to peel it.

SERGEI

If any path leads to Francois, any person on that path will need to go to heaven.

EXT. PARIS COFFEEHOUSE – DAY – ESTABLISHING

A small, trendy coffee bar in downtown Paris.

INT. COFFEEHOUSE – CONTINUOUS

A BARISTA sees Nikita, Lewis and Lizette approach fast. Nikita pulls out her BADGE.

 NIKITA (FRENCH - SUBTITLES)

Nous avons besoin de votre aide. (We need your help)

LEWIS

You can help save the world!

The barista’s eyes bulge.

INT. COFFEE HOUSE’S BACK OFFICE – SECONDS LATER

The three huddle around a CLUTTERED DESK reviewing SECURITY VIDEO on a MONITOR. The meek barista drops off coffees.

NIKITA (INTENT)

-Okay, we got a seven-day DVR. Searching for two days before the theft, prior to 4:20 p.m.

Lewis types on his LAPTOP that’s wired to the video. Lizette sits with him, observing.

LEWIS

Great high-res: 480 frames-per-second. The facial-recog is online.

ONSCREEN: video of the shop in FAST FORWARD. A flurry of patrons, in and out. It STOPS at a date stamp: 04,JUL 16:22:00.

Lewis’s screen: He DIGITALLY OUTLINES each female’s face. DATA SCROLLS but each FEMALE FACE blinks RED: “NEGATIVE.”

NIKITA (O.S.)

All blondes aged twenty to forty.

LIZETTE

There are no brunette wigs in Paris?

Lewis smirks. He captures the face of a petit BRUNETTE. Facial recog captures her facial symmetry –a pause... GREEN: POSITIVE.

LEWIS (EXCITED)

Hello, Miss...

They await the identity as INTERPOL DATA scrolls by her face.

LIZETTE (READING)

Angelique Louise Petijohn. Thirty-two, born in London...

ONSCREEN: A mug shot of Angelique. Her HISTORY appearing.

LEWIS (ASTOUNDED)

Incarcerated in 2008 –for an art crime! Stolen Fabergé eggs in Palm Beach!

LIZETTE (ANNOYED)

That was one of mine!

NIKITA

She was released six months ago.

 (she turns, grim)

We’ve got our thief. Now we need her -before it’s too late.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. FRENCH CAB – MOMENTS LATER

The three are stuffed in a cab. Nikita finishes a phone call.

NIKITA (FRENCH)

...Merci Agent. Je vous dois.

NIKITA (TO LEWIS)

That was her Agent de Liberté conditionnelle –probation officer. Angelique must report her home address. -It’s here in Paris.

She shouts to the DRIVER.

NIKITA (CONT’D - FRENCH)

1187 Hunterwasser, Ward 20 eme!

Lizette touches Lewis’s arm. Under her breath:

LIZETTE

You still have that gun, right..?

His cavalier grin says I told you so...

LEWIS

Who’s delusional now?

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING – DAY

The cab pulls up to an Art Nouveau-style APARTMENT BUILDING.

INT. ANGELIQUE’S APARTMENT – A MINUTE LATER

WE SEE only the DOOR from inside. Nikita tries KNOCKING first.

NIKITA (SHOUTING, O.S.)

...Repeat: Interpol! Open the door!

Lewis BUSTS the door OPEN. Nikita ENTERS, GUN drawn, Lewis also holds his weapon. Lizette is behind them, cautious but curious.

NIKITA (SHOUTING)

Angelique Petijohn! Are you present?

The apartment is VACANT. Not a crumb. They’re deflated.

LEWIS

Guess she didn’t update her PB officer.

LIZETTE

But that’s illegal.

They look at her.

MONTAGE: They check the rooms. Nothing left behind. A dead end.

As they approach the door to exit, something catches Lewis’s eye –a GLINT from the windowsill. He approaches. Propped upright is a small gold JEWELER’S LOUPE. He lifts it.

LEWIS

A jeweler’s loupe. To inspect fine art. Antique. Forty carat... She didn’t forget this.

LIZETTE

Maybe it’s a calling card?

Her words resonate with Lewis. Epiphany number two...

LEWIS (REFLECTIVE)

Yes... It was on purpose. Means she’s in control. She’s no victim...

 (turns to Nikita)

She knew the art were fakes. Who hires a thief to steal fakes?

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING – A MINUTE LATER

They RE-ENTER a CAB. –But the vantage point is from down the street. Someone is watching them.

Angelique watches from a car. Far enough away, in sunglasses. A smirk of satisfaction. She glides off in her gold BMW X6...

EXT. LE LOUVRE – DAY – ESTABLISHING

INT. LOUVRE, GRAND ENTRANCE - CONTINUOUS

Lewis leads them, rushing through the lavish grand entrance.

NIKITA

You believe Francois knew they were forgeries?

LEWIS

He’s got twenty years’ experience. It’s not rocket surgery.

LIZETTE

But he insured them at full value..?

LEWIS

Niki, get that badge ready.

EXT: FRANCOIS’S OFFICE DOOR – SECONDS LATER

They stand at Francois’s door. Nikita knocks, badge ready.

NIKITA (FRENCH)

Monsieur Francois Pelegrin?

LEWIS

Security says he’s in there. I’m goin’ in.

He positions himself to charge the door.

LIZETTE (AGHAST)

That’s a priceless three hundred year-old door!

LEWIS

Add it to my liabilities.

He CHARGES the door. Has to try twice. It BREAKS inward. They ENTER the threshold. They freeze, HORRIFIED.

INT. FRANCOIS’S OFFICE – CONTINUOUS

Francois’s lifeless body hangs from the ancient rafters. Nikita moves in. Lizette covers her face in dismay.

LIZETTE (HYSTERICAL)

He’s dead! Oh my God! Why..?

Lewis instinctively comforts her, protective, gears turning.

LEWIS

There’s something he couldn’t live with-

NIKITA

-Or afraid of something even worse.

Lewis notices FRAMED PHOTOS face-down on the desk. He lifts them –they’re portraits of Francois’s family. He reflects.

LEWIS (PENSIVE)

His job was to protect the Louvre. If it became known the paintings were forgeries, he’d lose his job, lose everything...

With a tremble, Lizette struggles to regain her composure.

LIZETTE

A strike against the museum’s reputation. Maybe he discovered the fakes after buying them..?

Lewis nods, a connection of agreement.

LEWIS

If they were quickly stolen, no one would ever know. Then we pay the museum their money back.

NIKITA

So he hired a professional thief.

Lewis gazes mournfully at Francois’s family. Nikita shouts:

NIKITA

There’s something in his hand!

With a gloved hand, Nikita removes a SHRED OF PAPER from François’s hand. Scribbled ink reads “SERGEI DYOMUCHKA.”

NIKITA (O.S.)

Sergei Dyomuchka.

She’s stunned, as if assembling pieces.

LEWIS

Sergei? –Who is it?

With a hand to her eyes, she should’ve known.

NIKITA (SIGHS)

A rising Chechen crime lord. He’s one of my targets. I couldn’t say anything.

Lewis feels slighted –she used him for her investigation?

LEWIS

I should have known. Interpol. On this case. I’m sure hope we helped...

Seeing Lizette in the shadows, he goes to her. She seems unusually frail, voice quivering.

LIZETTE

This was a pre-merger audit of a blue-chip corporation...

 (she looks at him)

I’ve cracked a thousand cases with hundreds of arrests. -But I’ve never seen a dead body. And he was a father. Interpol suggesting...Russian mafia.

Lewis holds her as SECURITY arrives.

LEWIS

It’s a world few know about...

FADE OUT

FADE IN:

EXT. A WAREHOUSE – DAY - ESTABLISHING

A large, rusted WAREHOUSE overlooking the hills and sea.

SUPER : VOULA, GREECE

INT. WAREHOUSE – CONTINUOUS

SERGEI walks a CATWALK to observe his SWEATSHOP. He looks down on a HUNDRED ELDERLY MEN sitting at ROWS of DESKS.

The old men are all wearing MAGNIFYING GOGGLES. Using images, they’re creating COUNTERFEIT PAINTINGS. Perfect forgeries.

Krug approaches Sergei.

SERGEI

Francois was an important buyer.

KRUG

There are others.

SERGEI (IN AWE)

But he created the plan. “Strahovanie.” (Russian) Insurance.

Krug doesn’t understand.

SERGEI (CONT’D)

Purchasers buy my work. Full price. Before scrutiny, the work is stolen.

 (snaps his fingers)

The museum gets their money back from the insurance. Everybody happy.

Krug cracks his first smile.

KRUG

How you say...victimless. Perfect.

Sergei turns furious.

SERGEI

Was perfect! A laundry for funds I need for many, MANY things...

 (a menacing glare)

Krug: I need to know –are there others still on our path?

Krug’s sinister bearing resumes.

KRUG

Da. (Russian)

EXT. RUNWAY, PARIS-CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT – NIGHT

The three on the tarmac, Lewis and Lizette waiting to board.

NIKITA (TO LEWIS)

I’m sorry I couldn’t reveal more.

LEWIS

Not being a real cop and all?

She leans in, planting a gentle KISS on Lewis’s lips.

Lizette looks away; it’s not her business. She takes a last glance of Paris; the lights, the moon. But looks again at Lewis.

LEWIS (TO NIKITA)

I can help you. We pay double any government job. Come work for me...

She openly laughs at him. Lizette smirks.

NIKITA (FRENCH, WAVING)

Au revoir et bonne chance...

END OF ACT FOUR

END TAG

FADE IN:

INT. KARL VESPER’S OFFICE, GLOBAL RISK’S HQ – DAY

Vesper sits stone-faced. Lewis and Lizette sit, presenting their conclusion. Lewis is his charmingly arrogant self.

LEWIS

...The Louvre approved $13 mill’ for Francois to buy the Brûlé collection from a broker in Greece. Then he discovered they’re fakes.

Vesper leafs through a report as he listens.

LEWIS (CONT’D)

He can’t run to his new bosses and say, “my bad…” He quickly approved an off-site exhibit with minimal security-

Lizette beats him to the punch.

LIZETTE

-And then he hired a thief.

Lewis smiles at his informal “partner.”

VESPER (STERN)

Bottom line?

Lewis has a rare flash of sincerity.

LEWIS

Sadly, Mr. Pelegrin took his own life. I understand he was a wonderful husband and father.

He looks down. Lizette plows ahead before Lewis can.

LIZETTE

The fact remains this was a non-accidental loss. Insurance obtained for fraudulent purposes. You can deny the full limits of $12,700,000-

LEWIS (UNDER HIS BREATH)

-With just seventy-two hours’ of field work.

Vesper frowns, something doesn’t add up.

VESPER

You did all this alone?

Lizette looks at Lewis.

LEWIS

Just me and my shadow here... And my global network of contacts.

Vesper puts down the report with finality.

VESPER

Thank you, that is all.

Lewis is baffled by the bitter man.

INT. HALLS OF GLOBAL HQ – MOMENTS LATER

Lewis walks with Lizette. He’s exuberant.

LEWIS

I’m outta’ here -I have Brianna this weekend.

LIZETTE

That’s great. I won’t disturb you ‘til Monday. We can meet at 8:00 to review those budget deviations and workflows.

Ignoring her, he unprofessionally kisses her hand.

LEWIS

Adieu mademoiselle.

She’s aghast, looking over her shoulder for spectators.

LIZETTE

That’s the type of H.R. violations I’m here to observe!

A swashbuckling grin as he walks off.

INT. VESPER’S OFFICE – MOMENTS LATER

Lizette ENTERS Vesper’s office. She closes the door and sits.

VESPER

What’s your evaluation?

LIZETTE (SHRUGS)

He made a few reckless decisions. Cut corners. But I have to confess he has an acuity for things that I-

Vesper tersely interrupts.

VESPER

-Insurex didn’t hire you to enjoy his antics. They want to know if you consider us an irreparable liability. What is your assessment?

She sits upright. The one in control. Perhaps the “real” her.

LIZETTE

Sheldon Mako’s filed new class actions specifically citing Lewis’s cases. My recommendation is to attain a legally-sound rationale to eliminate him.

Silenced, he nods, not surprised.

VESPER

Did you observe him doing anything illegal or against corporate policy?

She pauses an eternal second to deliberate.

LIZETTE

No. Not enough to defend any wrongful-termination lawsuit. Maybe I’ll have better luck next time.

He nods.

VESPER

You’d better. You have only thirty days...

EXT. LEWIS’S HOME, SOUTH BEACH – DAY

The driveway in front of Lewis’s small, vintage ART-DECO HOME. With a wide smile, Lewis drops duffel bags at the feet of BRIANNA (12) cute, but slightly introverted with glasses.

BRIANNA (AMAZED)

EPCOT! Really? You never wanted to go.

She’s bouncing a TENNIS BALL. He takes her hand.

LEWIS

Where else can I take my princess to lunch in Mexico and dinner in Paris?

He kisses her the top of her head and jogs back inside.

Her BALL BOUNCES into the street. As she carelessly CHASES it, it stops at a MAN’S black shoe. A large man lifts the ball.

KRUG (LEERING)

You must be very, very careful, angel.

Richard Wickliffe, \_\_\_\_\_\_, 2023 – Somewhere over exotic locale