

# THE COLLECTION

**John Francis Kinsella**

BANKSTERBOOKS

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*“We hope to see a Europe where men of every country will think as much of being a European as of belonging to their native land, and that without losing any of their love and loyalty of their birthplace. We hope wherever they go in this wide domain, to which we set no limits in the European Continent, they will truly feel “Here I am at home. I am a citizen of this country too”. Let us meet together. Let us work together. Let us do our utmost – all that is in us – for the good of all.”*

*Winston Churchill, Amsterdam, 1948*

**The Clan**

I don't know which one of us invented the tag, but it suited the description. We were a clan. A tightly knit, if distantly scattered, clan. We were bonded by loyalty, our Irish roots and our links to Pat's bank.

To an outsider it would have looked incongruous, me with Ekaterina, my Russian wife, Pat Kennedy with his Chinese wife, Tom with his Colombian wife and Sergei who wasn't even Irish though his wife was, and Pat O'Connelly who wasn't sure who he was with.

## **PROLOGUE**

At first I was impressed by Liam's enthusiasm and his new found interest in art. He was jetting in and out of Nîmes almost every weekend, when he wasn't in Paris – where I imagined he was visiting the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay. Then the penny dropped, we saw him hand in hand with Camille de la Salle, strolling through the streets of Nîmes, near the Arènes – the Roman amphitheatre, they didn't see us and we didn't spoil their moment together.

Katya thought it was nice, the daughter of a hard-up Comte and a very wealthy young man. I must say I agreed.

What were we all doing in Nîmes in the South of France? That was a long story. It started more than a century earlier during The Belle Époque, when Paris was the cultural centre of the world, where the visual arts – painting, music and dance, flourished in an age of peace and prosperity. Cosmopolitan

Paris with its artists, writers, poets and patrons of the arts who danced in Montmartre, passed their afternoons in the cafés of Montparnasse, oblivious to the impending catastrophe of war and revolution that was to change their world forever.

## **Chapter 1**

### **A Visitor**

We've probably met before, I told you my story of meeting Ekaterina at the Pushkin. That's right I'm John Francis. Our family has grown, Alena now has a brother, William, named after my father, Will has two middle names, Wassily after Ekaterina's father, and Viktor after Alena's father.

He's just six months old and his nurse, Deidre, a young live-in London-Irish girl, cares for him weekdays and weekends when necessary. I have to admit that whilst I'm filled with pride at being a father I'm a bit puzzled by babies, I wasn't prepared for him, I mean he came so very late in my life.

Alena is a wonderful presence, she's now ten years old and seems to spend her life dancing and doing cartwheels. I had never imaged what a joy it could be to watch a child growing up, full of the exuberance of life, sure of herself, at the same time aware of who was watching and playing to her audience.

She now spoke near perfect English with from time to time a fault in pronunciation, or a Russian word creeping into her speech. At school she excels in dance and music.

Ekaterina is now absorbed by her family and the gallery and at moments I feel a little lost in this strange environment of managing a home and business.

The foundation runs itself, I am a figurehead so to speak, a fairly busy one. I suppose it's better than being just a decoration.

That said, it would be one of those weekends when I was an accessory. There was the exhibition about to be held at our Tuomanova Gallery, that's situated close to Chelsea Harbour, which would occupy Ekaterina full time. Alena had an astonishingly full programme of activities, that left William and myself at home. There wasn't very much I could do with William, I mean it wasn't as if I could play with a six month old baby.



*Chelsea Harbour and Battersea Park London*

It was late Thursday afternoon and the gallery was about to close. I had passed by to take a look at the final preparations for Ekaterina's exhibition 'New Names'. She was presenting, in partnership with a Moscow gallery, a new generation of Russian painters, including one whose paintings I liked very much, Sergei Nekrasov, a young painter from the Chelyabinsk region.

We were expecting a lot of expat Russians, including a few big names, at the invitation only vernissage on Friday evening, along with a crowd of art world and showbiz personalities with a number of well-known collectors and of course the press and paparazzi on the lookout for a celebrity scoop.

It was looking good, especially after a stressful ten days when several of the exhibits had gotten caught up in customs formalities at Heathrow.

I was admiring one painting I liked of a young red-headed girl when Jessica, one of Ekaterina's assistants, caught my eye and made a discreet sign, beckoning me over to a corner.

'There's a Frenchman who wants to talk to Ekaterina.'

'She's left. Is it something important?'

'He won't say. He only wants to speak with Ekaterina.'

My curiosity was aroused.

'Where is he?'

'At the reception.'

‘Fine, I’ll have a word with him.’

I walked over to the reception area and peeking around a corner I saw an elegant man of about sixty years old studying one of the exhibits.

‘Hello, I’m John Francis, Ekaterina’s husband.’

‘*Ah, enchanté. Parlez-vous français?*’

‘*Oui,*’ I said, a little hesitantly.

‘I see. Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Olivier de la Salle de Sommières,’ he paused an instant before adding in a dismissive manner, ‘Comte de Sommières, that’s in Provence.’

I smiled politely as I waited for him to continue.

‘I was given your wife’s name by Alice Fitzwilliams.’

‘I see. She’s not here at the moment. I’m a very old friend of Alice, maybe I can be of help?’

‘Perhaps. Is there somewhere we can talk in private?’

‘In the conference room. Come with me.’

I pointed the way to our meeting room, invited the Comte to be seated and closed the door.

‘It’s a long story Monsieur Francis. The history of my family goes back more generations than I’d care to count. My ancestor, the first Comte de Sommières, served Philip VI and fought in the Battle of Crecy,’ he smiled as he mentioned that famous battle,’ and our château dates from about that time, though the foundations we believe go much further back.’

I listened, waiting for him to make his point.

‘But I’m not here to talk about that. During the war, my grandfather sheltered a Jewish family who had fled Paris, in the in the Occupied Zone, for the Zone Libre. When the Nazis occupied the south in November 1942, Michel Kahn put his wife and two children on a ship in Marseille that was sailing for Buenos Aires. He then returned to Paris with false papers to settle his affairs and had his furniture and valuable objects sent to us for safe keeping. He then disappeared.’

‘I see,’ said, an interesting story though I didn’t see where it was leading

‘After the war, my grandfather tried to find Kahn, but it seemed he had been sent to Auschwitz, where he probably died. We then tried to find his wife in Argentina, but found no trace.’

I listened.

‘Your probably wondering why I’m telling you this.’

I smiled again and made him a sign to continue.

‘We stored Kahn’s furniture in one of the wings of our château, where it has remained to this day. My grandfather and father felt morally bound to keep it until they found Kahn, or one of his family members.’

‘I see,’ I said as the story became more interesting.

‘My grandfather passed away quite a long time back, and slowly the story of Kahn lost its interest, by the time my father died in 1981, it was a vague souvenir and was slowly forgotten.

‘Three months ago, I undertook restoration work in the wing and those rooms were opened with a view to moving the contents to make way for the work.

‘I commenced an inventory, there was a larger number of paintings, interesting, but apparently nothing of very great value.’

I must say felt a little let down when the Comte said that.

‘Naturally I know the secrets of our château and knocking on the wall I found one of the doors, disguised in the decorative wood panelling, which led to the servants passages, which was nothing unusual in our old French châteaux, they kept the servants out of sight,’ he said with an apologetic smile.

‘I hope I’m not being too lengthy?’ he said pausing.

‘Not at all.’

‘Well I took a lamp to see if there was anything of interest hidden away. There was nothing in the passage except dust, then out of curiosity I followed it to the stairway that led to the kitchens and laundry rooms in the basement. To cut a long story short I found a lot of other stuff, chandeliers and wall fittings, and behind a roughly boarded up alcove, quite a number of paintings, certain were framed, others on their stretchers, some rolled up, and a number of boxes and cases with folders full of drawings and sketches.

They were obviously old, at a guess from the styles about 1900. A closer look and I recognised a couple of the artists' signatures.'

My interest perked up again as the Comte lowered his voice.

'Now I'm not an expert, and I did not want to contact one in France, at least before I had some outside advice. There were several questions, first it was necessary to identify each painting, and secondly determine whether they part of Kahn's property or not, you know the legal question of ownership.'

'I see.'

'It was why I contacted Alice, hoping she could introduce me to a discreet specialist in London.'

Now I was listening.

'Can you tell me who the artists are?'

'Yes, but perhaps we should sign a confidentiality agreement,' he said with an apologetic shrug. 'You understand I have to take a minimum of precautions.'

'I'll call my lawyer if you agree,' I proposed.

'That won't be necessary, I already have a document with me. It also stipulates you examine the paintings within seven days.'

I sensed it could be interesting, but I had to know if a visit was worthwhile, if the paintings were of real artistic and market value.

‘Good. If you’d like to show me your agreement.’

He pulled a couple of typed pages from a small document case and slide them over to me.

I browsed over the details, they were pretty standard, probably downloaded on the internet.

‘So would you like me to sign?’

‘Yes,’ he said pointing to the spaces where I had to fill in my name and address and a place to affix the date and my signature.

I complied. He kept one copy and gave me the other.

He smiled, ‘I suppose you like to see the list?’

I nodded and he passed me another sheet of paper, a list which I carefully inspected.

‘May I ask what you know about Kahn?’

‘Not very much to tell you the truth. I think Kahn was a lawyer and had done some work for my grandfather. It seems he was a friend of Gertrude Stein, who amongst other things was an art collector, so I suppose he moved in that circle, you know, artists, writers and intellectuals.’

‘I see,’ I replied, vaguely remembering Gertrude Stein as a writer who’d met James Joyce in Paris in the twenties or thirties.

‘It seems that he was quite wealthy, and in 1940, when the Nazis were approaching Paris, many other Jewish families

confided their valuables to his care, including works of art. The idea was he could sell them and forward the proceeds to them, overseas.

‘The trouble is there was no market and many of the paintings at that time still had no value.’

‘So what happened then?’

‘Well after the Nazis occupied the rest of France everything happened very quickly, which was why Kahn returned to Paris and disappeared, leaving everything in my grandfather’s care.’

‘I see. Where are you staying? In London?’

‘I’m taking the Eurostar back to Paris this evening,’ he said looking at his watch.’

‘Oh!’

‘Then tomorrow morning back home. Sommières is near Montpellier. Do you know it?’

‘As a matter of fact I do. I was there three years ago with Ekaterina.’

‘Well if you’re interested you’ll have to come quickly, within seven days.’

‘Yes, let me see, I was thinking quickly, at the beginning of the week.’

‘Tuesday if that suites you.’

‘Good, I’d like a copy of the lists if you don’t mind.’

‘Well... alright, Alice said I could trust Ekaterina.’

‘Have you shown these to anyone else?’

‘Not for the moment.’

He produced an old fashioned copper plate visiting card emblazoned with the family crest.

‘This is my card. If you intend staying in Sommières I can book a hotel room for you.’

‘Fine, I’ll call you when I know the time of my arrival.’

I made a photocopy of the list and asked if he’d like me to call a taxi, but he declined. ‘I can drop you off somewhere if you like. I’m on my way home, near Victoria Station.’

‘If you insist.’

I dropped him off on Buckingham Palace Road, near the station. It was the least I could do. There I suspect he took the underground to St Pancras for the Eurostar.

Almost as soon as I’d said goodbye to de la Salle, my mobile rang. It was Ekaterina to know where I was. I hurried back to our place, it was not far, on Royal Hospital Road.

Ekaterina was talking on the phone when I arrived, something to do with the arrangements for the caterers for the vernissage.

Over dinner I mentioned the visitor and my intention to go to France, she was surprised, but her mind was elsewhere, what

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