

# The Invisible Drone

by

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Chapter 1

### Narrow Escape



**18 000 ft above the Alps, 13 April 1999:** Humphrey peered at the mountain ahead and his stomach churned. Charlie sat beside him in the pilot's seat and said there was nothing to worry about so long as they remained calm and followed standard procedures. He flicked through a bank of switches and pulled on the joystick. Humphrey glanced at the wings and his stomach churned again. The aerofoils should have moved but they hadn't. The plane was continuing on a steady descent. It was as if they were flying on autopilot and preparing to land. But they weren't on autopilot and there was nowhere to land.

Humphrey knew the area well. They were approaching the Saint Bernard Pass. He could see the famous monastery, built by Saint Bernard a thousand years ago. Snow-capped mountains lay beyond.

He tapped Charlie's arm.

'That's Mont Blanc over there.'

'Yes,' Charlie agreed.

'We're heading straight for it.'

'I'm aware of that.' Charlie's voice remained calm.

'Are you sure you switched to manual?'

'Perfectly ...'

'But we're not on manual.' Humphrey's voice rose. 'If we were the aerofoils would have moved and we would have changed course. You've had three tries ...'

'A minor technical problem.' Charlie thumped the control panel.

'That won't do any good,' Humphrey protested.

'It might.' Charlie thumped the panel again. 'There's a computer in there ... probably a loose connection. Stop fretting. I've been in far worse situations.'

Humphrey wondered what those situations might have been. He could think of nothing worse than flying over the Alps in a small plane that had developed a mind of its own.

He felt seriously stupid. Being too close to Charlie was dangerous. No one in their right mind would work for him. If he had not been so desperately short of money, he would never have taken on the present assignment.

A poorly paid university job was not enough to support his extravagant lifestyle. He needed a second source of income. Charlie paid well and the money was paid into secret bank accounts.

Charlie was the Western World's ultimate Mr Fix-It. Government agencies and big companies called on him to sort out problems they didn't want to handle themselves. Sometimes they lacked the resources. More often, they didn't want their staff to get involved in projects that could land them in trouble.

In the process Charlie made enemies. People lost out when Charlie came on the scene and some went to extreme lengths to protect their interests. Humphrey resolved to keep well clear of him in future ... if he had a future.

They were on their way back to London from Rome where they had attended a conference on cyber warfare. Charlie had gone to spy out the land. Humphrey had gone to deliver a paper on the encryption of security codes.

He narrowed his eyes with a growing sense of doom. Mont Blanc loomed ahead. A few years earlier, he had climbed it by the easy route. That had involved hiring a guide and setting off before daybreak. The climb is arduous and particularly arduous for someone who is overweight and not accustomed to strenuous activity. He was obliged to make frequent stops for rest but finally made it to the top.

The plane tilted slightly. A minor change had been made to their course. It was as if an unseen hand had taken control and was flying them to their deaths.

They were now on a collision course with the summit. Humphrey leant forward as patches of colour appeared against the glaring white of the snow. He identified them as climbers on the same route that he had taken. If nothing was done, they would soon be joining them.

The time for pussyfooting was over. Charlie could talk about standard procedures and the need to stay calm. This was not a standard situation. Staying calm could be fatal. Drastic action was called for.

'We've been sabotaged!'

Humphrey yelled at the top of his voice and yanked at the cover of the control panel. The plastic snapped and the cover came away. A maze of wires confronted him. There wasn't time to work out what they did.

'Get ready to go onto manual.'

His hand shot out and he tore at the wires.

'Right! Take over!'

Charlie pulled on the joystick. Humphrey expected to see the aerofoils move but, again, nothing happened. They remained in their old positions and the plane continued on its former course. He glanced at the mountain. Only seconds separated them from total oblivion. Charlie remained unperturbed.

'Have you ever skydived?' he asked.

'No,' Humphrey wheezed.

'That doesn't matter.' Charlie leant over the back of his seat. 'We'll go tandem.'

He produced a parachute and Humphrey resigned himself to the inevitable. Charlie always had a way out. That was why he had survived so long. He arched his back as a harness was fastened around him.

'Get ready to leave.'

A pair of goggles was slapped on his face.

'Hold your breath.'

Charlie threw open the cabin door and dragged him out. A blast of cold air hit them and everything went with a rush. Humphrey felt weightlessness. His stomach seemed to be floating free. That was disturbing but it didn't last long. Weightlessness was replaced by a sensation of swimming.

The air swirled around like water and buoyed them up. Humphrey had read about it in books and guessed they had reached terminal velocity. Put in simple terms, they were going so fast that air resistance was stopping them from going any faster.

He recalled that terminal velocity, for the human body, is about one-hundred kilometres-an-hour. Or, was it miles-an-hour? He didn't care. The exact speed wasn't relevant. The main point was that terminal velocity is measured in the direction of down. They were hurtling towards the ground at a speed that would have devastating consequences if nothing was done to slow them down.

He opened his eyes and felt oddly better. The sensation was now more of hovering than falling. The air was clear and the afternoon sun shone on a peaceful scene below. Fear gave way to fascination. It was surprisingly busy down there. The mountain road was packed with vehicles making their way up to the pass.

He saw buildings that looked like tourist chalets and made out details. Then a sudden jerk told him that the parachute had opened. The air no longer felt like water. They had stopped falling and had started to glide.

He had experienced the sensation before. It was a bit like going down a steep hill on a bicycle.

His thoughts returned to the monastery. In times past, the monks operated a search and rescue service. They had dogs that dug stricken travellers out of snow drifts. They were called *Saint Bernards* and had small casks of brandy about their necks for people to revive themselves. He guessed the dogs had been replaced by a modern rescue service and expected to see vehicles with flashing lights.

None appeared. They continued on their glide and Charlie took them towards one of the chalets. They passed over a car park and landed on a patch of grass at the far end. There was a bit of a jolt but little else. A woman and child turned to watch. Otherwise, no one showed the slightest interest.

Charlie turned to Humphrey.

'Your tie is crooked.'

Humphrey straightened it.

'Put a comb through your hair.'

Humphrey did as he was told. He could scarcely believe he was still alive. They had been seconds from disaster. If they had stayed in the plane, they would both be dead.

Charlie folded the parachute and returned it to its pack.

'Don't look so glum.'

Humphrey managed a smile.

Charlie shouldered the pack.

'It's getting busy. We had better book in.'

'Book in?'

'Yes. We're not going to spend the night out here.'

Humphrey followed him towards the chalet. It was scarcely believable. Charlie was behaving as if life-threatening incidents were an everyday occurrence. All you had to do was stay calm and follow standard procedures.

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Half-a-dozen languages were being spoken at the reception desk. Charlie could have chosen anyone but stuck to English.

'I need accommodations for two persons?'

He spoke in a broad American accent. Humphrey guessed he would be using his American passport and hoped his wasn't needed.

The receptionist consulted her computer.

'Our only current availability is a suite of rooms with common bathing, masseuse and recreational facilities ...'

The price was staggering. Charlie wasn't fussed.

'That sounds just fine.'

He produced a bankcard. Humphrey watched as the transaction was approved and the card returned. Registration forms were pushed in their direction.

'I shall need to copy your passports.'

'My colleague is Danish,' Charlie said. 'Does he need to show his?'

'An identity card or passport is acceptable for EU citizens.'

Humphrey pulled out his Danish passport and kept his Australian passport hidden. He was legally entitled to both. He suspected that Charlie wasn't entitled to any of his. Right now he was James B. Heckman, a businessman from Detroit. In Rome he had spoken with a posh English accent and had used the name George Hanbury-Brown.

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Their suite was spacious and the view magnificent. Humphrey wasn't surprised that the price was steep. They had paid as much for one night as most people would pay for a week. Charlie took it in his stride. He was at home wherever he went. It wasn't difficult to imagine him kipping down in a dangerous slum or living it up on a luxury yacht owned by a billionaire. He dumped the parachute in a cupboard and went across to the drinks cabinet.

'How about a beer?'

Humphrey slumped into a chair.

'Something stronger would be more appropriate.'

'In what way?'

'It might steady my nerves.'

'What's the problem?'

'The way we got here ... it was a trifle unnerving.'

'We arrived safely.'

'That's not the point.'

'Yes, it is. Outcomes are what matter.'

'We've not finished yet.' Humphrey loosened his tie. 'The people at the desk ... won't they find it odd?'

'Find what odd?'

'The way we arrived ... it was hardly conventional.'

Charlie surveyed the contents of the drinks cabinet.

'They must have seen us,' Humphrey continued.

'They see lots of paragliders.' Charlie removed a bottle of whisky and two glasses. 'As far as the people here are concerned, we came up on the bus.'

Humphrey remained unconvinced.

'Isn't it usual to alert the authorities?'

'What authorities?'

'The civil aviation authorities. Shouldn't we inform them that our plane developed problems and we were forced to bail out?'

'Certainly not!'

Charlie gave him a scathing look.

'I'm not in the habit of informing anyone of my problems.'

He poured two glasses and handed one to Humphrey.

'Get that under your belt and stop worrying.'

Humphrey raised his glass and savoured the bouquet. The whisky was very good. The bottle would have cost a small fortune. Working for Charlie had its good points. He pondered the possibilities. A more permanent relationship could get him out of teaching and into a more agreeable lifestyle.

Shouting interrupted his thoughts. People were crowding out onto the terrace and gathering around the telescopes that had been put there for the convenience of guests. Cries rang out in a multitude of languages.

'Plane crash!'

Charlie picked up his glass and sauntered over to the window.

'Looks like there's been an accident, Humph.'

'Probably our plane,' Humphrey replied.

Charlie shielded his eyes.

'It appears to have scored a direct hit on the summit of Mont Blanc. There's a lot of smoke. It must have caught fire. We were carrying a lot of fuel so that's not surprising. Everything will be totally destroyed. Our luggage will be burnt to a cinder.'

'You sound pleased.'

'Most definitely. People in my line of business avoid drawing attention to themselves. There is nothing to identify me with the plane and nothing to say you were on board.'

'But, there will be an inquiry.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Someone might have seen us bailing out.'

'That is conceivable.'

'They could check the hotel register. I used my Danish passport. That's real. It's not one of those fakes that you carry.'

'Stop worrying Humphrey.'

Charlie returned to his chair.

'Our presence here is perfectly explainable. We didn't give a car registration number so an investigating officer will assume we came up on the bus. Bus companies issue tickets, without recording names, so there is no way of proving otherwise. Tomorrow we shall leave by bus and vanish into obscurity.'

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The chalet served buffet meals. Charlie placed a modest portion of fresh trout on his plate and added a modest portion of boiled potatoes and green salad. He eyed Humphrey's huge plate with disapproval.

'You'll die before me.'

'I think that unlikely.'

'I'm old enough to be your father and twice as fit.'

Humphrey managed a faint smile.

'Some people think you are my father.'

'That's because your mother insisted on having your birth certificate made out in such a way that it recorded your paternity as *Father Unknown*.'

'She did it to upset my grandfather.'

'It doesn't matter why she did it, Humphrey. You can't go on stuffing food into yourself without paying the ultimate price. Obesity leads to an early grave.'

'I'm not obese.'

'You are heading that way.'

Humphrey returned some of the contents of his plate to the buffet table. Charlie wasn't his father but he had been his mother's lover. That was when they were counter-intelligence agents working for the Australian Government.

Charlie changed the subject.

'That plane was sabotaged.'

'Yes,' Humphrey agreed.

'I set it on autopilot and couldn't get it off. It was like being on duel controls. I had the feeling a second pilot had taken over and there was nothing I could do about it ...'

His voice petered out and he nudged Humphrey's arm.

'We have company.'

Humphrey followed Charlie's gaze to a man heading towards the buffet table. Olaf Magnusson had delivered a string of papers at the Rome conference and was an acclaimed expert on cyber warfare. He arrived by their side and was piling his plate with oysters when he noticed Humphrey.

'Dr Hansen. What are you doing here?'

'We dropped in after the conference,' Humphrey said.

Olaf looked past Humphrey and his face turned from rosy pink to ashen white when he saw Charlie. His hand went limp and oysters slipped from his plate.

'We decided to return by bus,' Humphrey explained.

Olaf stared at Charlie and more oysters fell to the floor.

Charlie reached out a hand.

'George Hanbury-Brown,' he announced in his posh English accent. 'Dr Hansen and I decided to take in some of the scenery.'

Olaf shook his hand limply.

'I recall seeing you in Rome, Mr Brown.'

'Hanbury-Brown,' Charlie corrected.

'Yes. Please forgive me. I find your English names confusing.'

Olaf's accent had begun to sound more Danish than American. Humphrey recalled that he came from Bornholm Island and had won a scholarship to an American University at the age of sixteen. The boy genius had become a world expert on artificial intelligence.

'I attended your lectures on digital imagery,' Charlie said. 'I am interested in the work you are doing to record ancient monuments before they fall into total ruin. Dr Hansen and I visited Pompeii and were horrified by what we saw.'

'Yes. It is distressing,' Olaf agreed.

'An entire city was caught in a moment in time when Vesuvius erupted two thousand years ago,' Charlie continued. 'Archaeologists excavated it. Now, it is falling into ruin. It would have been better if Pompeii had remained buried. A priceless glimpse into the past is being lost. Future generations will condemn us for what we have done.'

Olaf's eyes bulged and he began to stutter.

'I ... I had no idea that you shared my views.'

He stared back and forth.

'I am currently working on a project to record the monuments digitally. The world has moved ahead since the Pompeii excavations. Everything is aimed at forensic investigation and ...'

He stopped in midsentence. Humphrey glanced towards the door. A man had entered. His arrival had a stunning effect on Olaf. He glanced in the man's direction then turned on his heels and walked away without saying another word.

## Chapter 2

### Flight-145

**Canberra, 2 April 2005:** Kirstin sorted through the morning newspapers. The front pages looked much the same. A photograph of an airliner was accompanied by pictures of anxious relatives. Headlines announced the mysterious disappearance of a Boeing-717 on its way from Paris to Toronto. A plane packed with politicians, bankers and captains of industry had vanished in mid-Atlantic.

Humphrey emerged from the kitchen. He was trying to reduce weight and had confined his plate to two poached eggs, a slice of toast and a single rasher of bacon. He placed the plate on the breakfast table and poured himself a mug of strong black coffee. Kirstin intervened before he could add cream to it.

'You are on a diet, Humphrey.'

'Yes, Mother.'

He glanced at the newspapers and grinned.

'There will be a few jobs going after this little upset.'



'Hardly little, Humphrey. There was a prime minister on board plus some senior bankers and their staff.'

'Bankers ...'

Humphrey squeezed tomato sauce onto his eggs.

'They won't be missed ... anyone we know?'

'One of your former employers. Sir Henry Thomlinson of the GNBC Bank was on the plane.'

'Good Lord!' Humphrey looked shocked. 'I never liked the man but I wouldn't wish this on him. I met his wife once ... a very nice lady.'

'Yes. Humphrey. We are talking about real people. They have families and others who will miss them.'

'It's just scandalous ...'

'What is, Humphrey?'

'The way planes can take off and simply vanish. The civil aviation authorities should insist that they maintain continual radio contact with a monitoring station. The necessary technology has been around for years. I've published papers on it and given interviews.'

Kirstin removed the tomato sauce from the table.

'Charlie doesn't want you to give anymore interviews.'

'Charlie?' Humphrey looked up from his eggs.

'He thinks he knows what happened to the plane and he wants to speak to you. He's flying in. David is already here in Canberra. We will be meeting them at the Paget residence this afternoon. Sir George has arranged everything.'

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The Paget residence was in Canberra's plush suburb of Red Hill. Kirstin wondered why she was still calling it as a residence. The term dated from when she worked for Sir George as a counter-espionage agent in his Special Investigations Unit. Convention demanded that senior government officers, like George Paget, lived in residences. Ordinary people, like herself, lived in houses. Charlie was George's son.

They had not met for almost twenty years. They had talked over the phone but that was different. Kirstin wondered what it would be like to meet him in the flesh. They had once been very close. She had even wondered if they would get married. It was probably as well they didn't. Charlie Paget was a great lover but would have made a terrible husband.

He could never settle down. Charlie was always looking for something new. Now in his early sixties, he was still behaving like the crazy twenty-four-year-old who won her over with his charms. His nephew, David, looked like him, at the same age, but had a very different personality.

They went in Humphrey's new car. He was now flush with funds and no longer addicted to rusting wrecks that he kept alive to save money for fine wines and other luxuries. But her son didn't splash money around

unnecessarily. The vehicle was modest. Humphrey didn't want to draw attention to his newly acquired wealth.

The car was a big improvement on its predecessors but Humphrey's driving was as bad as ever. The little boy who couldn't ride a bicycle had grown into an adult who couldn't drive a car. But he knew a lot about cars just as he knew a lot about guns. Mercifully, he had the good sense to keep well away from guns even if he couldn't apply the same caution to cars and other means of transport.

They turned a corner and the Paget residence appeared. It was one of the first to be built when Canberra was created, from farmland, and designated as Australia's capital. The house was less than a hundred years old but looked older. It was built in the grand style of an earlier era and hadn't changed much over the years.

Kirstin was amused to see lace curtains at the windows. She was reminded of visits for tea and cucumber sandwiches when she was a junior operative and Charlie was her boss' son. The curtains parted. Forty years earlier, she would have seen George's wife. Now, his equally nervous daughter appeared.

Her face lit up. Cecelia Paget was a kindly soul who laboured under the burden of having a brilliant father and an equally brilliant brother. Cecelia couldn't compete and regarded herself as stupid.

She threw open the door.

'Kirstin. I'm so glad you could come. The darling boy is here. He so wants to see you.'

Cecelia always referred to her son, David, as the darling boy. Kirstin recalled occasions when he had been driven to fury when he heard himself spoken about in that manner. Now, at the age of twenty-four, David seemed to regard it as a joke. He emerged from a doorway and strode towards her.

'How is my favourite girlfriend?'

'As beautiful as ever, David.'

'And how is Lizzie?'

'My granddaughter never stops asking about you.'

David moved closer and dropped his voice.

'Charlie says she has become a free operator.'

Kirstin saw the look of concern on Cecelia's face at the mention of the term *free operator*. David was her only child. Cecelia's greatest fear was that he would follow her brother, Charlie, into the murky world of espionage.

A furniture van pulled up outside and David's face broadened.

'Charlie's here!'

Cecelia peered through the curtains.

'In a furniture van?'

'Yes, Mother,' David grinned. 'Charlie is trying to save money. He got one of his mates to pick him up at the airport.'

Cecelia failed to get the point.

'I didn't know Charles was hard up.'

Kirstin watched as two men emerge from the van and removed a chest of draws from the rear. She recognised the driver. The elderly man doubled as Sir George's chauffeur and minder. The man beside him was, presumably, Charlie. Both men wore blue overalls and peaked caps. If David hadn't pointed them out, she would have assumed that they had come to make a delivery. Charlie always covered his tracks.

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Sir George's spacious study was on the second floor of the big house. Kirstin was the first to enter. She had known him for most of her adult life. George was now in his late eighties. His health had deteriorated but his mind remained lively.

She sat down in a leather chair and Charlie sat beside her. He had grown a beard. She suspected it came on and off like the spectacles he had been wearing when he arrived. Apart from that, he had an uncanny resemblance to George at the same age. The three generations of Pagets were strikingly alike in appearance.

David was twice a Paget. His mother had married a cousin of the same name. All three had sharply chiselled features. George and Charlie were brilliant linguists. David didn't share their intellectual skills but was a smart operator when practical problems had to be solved. He was there because George wanted him to follow the family tradition of spying.

The old man removed his spectacles and placed them on his desk. Kirstin was reminded of briefing sessions when she was one of his operatives. He was very thorough then. She guessed he would be very thorough now.

He glanced from one to the other.

'An airliner has gone missing. Two days ago, a Boeing-717 left Paris with some highly distinguished people on board. It failed to reach its destination and its loss is deeply disturbing. I and certain of my colleagues are reminded of a similar incident that occurred in Africa forty-four years ago. It was not properly investigated and we fear the same could happen in the present case.

We have accordingly resolved to mount an investigation and have assembled funds for that purpose. I call upon the four of you to join our team. Remuneration will not be at the preposterously high rates to which some of you are accustomed. However, you will not be out of pocket.'

Sir George turned to David.

'I shall give the background to the case for your benefit. People of your generation have lived in a world that is very different from the one I knew at your age. When I was born, the Western nations ruled the roost. They had huge empires and thought themselves innately superior to the rest of humanity. They were mistaken. They owed their power to the industrial revolution.

Their forebears had developed the means to produce weapons of devastating power. The Gatling machine gun was one and it was decisive in their quest for empire. A few imperial troops, armed with that formidable weapon, could take on whole armies equipped with muskets and spears.

The Europeans set about conquering Africa and, by 1900, most of the huge continent was under their control. The French and British were the main players but not the only ones. The Belgian royal family acquired the Congo and ruled it as a private estate. Most was soggy rainforest with little economic potential but one part was immensely rich in minerals. They separated it off from the rest of the Congo and called it Katanga.'

Sir George glanced at his notes.

'By the late 1950s, a wind of change was blowing through Africa. The Africans began to acquire modern weapons and the colonial powers realised it was time to leave. The British pulled out gradually and the Belgians left in a rush. That was popular with the electorate back home in Belgium but the white settlers were deeply resentful. They felt that they had been let down. Most could do little more than complain but the mining companies had the power to act.

The miners backed a local politician called Moise Tshombe. He declared Katanga an independent country and set himself up as president. It was a cosy relationship. Tshombe needed the miners' support to stay in power and they needed him to keep the mines going as before. The newly created Congolese government refused to recognise Tshombe. War broke out and the United Nations intervened.

Sir George looked up.

'I come now to the crucial part.'

He returned his attention to his notes.

'The United Nations sent in peacekeeping forces and they came under attack. A crisis developed and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold decided to intervene. On 18 September 1961, he boarded a Douglas DC-6 airliner and was on his way to negotiate a ceasefire when the plane crashed near Ndola in what is now Zambia. Hammarskjold was killed together with fifteen others on board. Their bodies were retrieved but crash investigators were hampered by lack of cooperation from people on the ground.'

'Were you involved?' David asked.

'No. But my British colleagues were. Their Colonial Office was meant to be in charge of the case but effective power was in the hands of white settlers and they enjoyed a high degree of self-rule.

The investigation was inconclusive. My British colleagues were unable to prove anything but were left in little doubt that the plane had been shot down. Hammarskjold was near to putting an end to Katangan independence when he was killed.'

'And they suspected the miners?'

'Yes,' Sir George nodded. 'They believed the plane was shot down by forces working for the big mining corporation, Union Miniere. Former US President, Harry Truman, was of the same opinion. He didn't go so far as to name Union Miniere but came very close.'

'What's this got to do with Flight-145?'

'It looks as if the past has been repeated.'

'You mean there was a top UN official on the plane?'

'No. But there are disturbing similarities. Some of the investigators into the Hammarskjold crash are still alive. They want the plane's disappearance to be investigated by an independent team and I have agreed to help them put one together.'

'What sort of similarities?' Kirstin asked.

'Flight 145 was taking some very distinguished people to a high-level meeting in Toronto to discuss how national governments might rein in the powers of multinational corporations. The plane was owned by the de Villiers Foundation. Its present head is Richard de Villiers. He and others on the flight received death threats and were warned not to participate in the meeting.'

'Why us?' Humphrey asked.

'I know I can trust you.'

'Is that all?'

'You have the necessary skills.'

'Who pays?'

'My colleagues and I will guarantee a living wage. We don't have the resources to do more. There are people who would be willing to assist financially. We don't want to be beholden to anyone outside our small circle.'

'David can have my pay,' Charlie said.

'And mine,' Kirstin nodded.

She prodded Humphrey.

'Yes ... mine too.'

'So the three of you agree to be part of the team.'

Sir George turned to David.

'How about you?'

'I'm in, Grandfather.'

'Does that mean you have decided to abandon your career as a commercial diver and follow the noble tradition of espionage?'

'No, Grandfather. It means I want to find out what happened to Richard de Villiers. I know him. I've worked for Richard.'

'As a political activist?'

'No. As a volunteer diver. Richard funds marine science projects. He puts up the money for the logistics. The marine scientists and divers work for free. His projects are about preserving the environment. If he's

still alive, I want to work for him again. If Richard is dead, I want to know who killed him.'

## Chapter 3

### **Invisible Drone**

Dinner at the Hansens was always messy when Humphrey did the cooking. Charlie's intervention didn't help. Both regarded themselves as experts in the culinary arts and refused to take advice. Kirstin recalled the saying about too many cooks and spoiled broth. It was as true now as it had ever been. She left the kitchen and joined David in the dining room. He wanted to talk about her granddaughter Elizabeth.

'Have you any recent photos of Lizzie?' he asked.

Kirstin produced a photo album. Elizabeth was passionate about David. He was five years older and had flitted back and forth in her life since they were children. Kirstin couldn't imagine a better relationship. She found a photograph of Elizabeth, in a swimming costume, posing beside a bronze mermaid.

'Where is she now?' David asked.

'She finished her studies in Copenhagen and enrolled in a linguistics course at the University of British Columbia. That's in Vancouver. I have a cousin there and she is living with her.'

'Charlie says she's a talent spotter for free operators.'

'She is,' Kirstin nodded. 'Lizzie has put him in contact with people who can provide the sort of expertise he needs.'

'That's a bit of a laugh ...'

'In what way?'

'Some people are recruited. Others get sucked in. That's what happened to me. I guess the same happened to Lizzie.'

'She wasn't sucked in,' Kirstin protested. 'Elizabeth forced her way in against her father's wishes. Humphrey was determined to shield her from the hazards of our way of life.'

They were interrupted by Humphrey's booming voice.

'Dinner is served. Come and get it.'

He appeared, carrying a steaming casserole. Charlie followed with a tray of dishes. A rich aroma of fresh spices filled the air. Humphrey placed the casserole on the table and Charlie arranged the dishes around it. A bottle of vintage wine was uncorked.

Kirstin sat down and David took his place beside her. She was pleased to see that Humphrey and Charlie were careful to limit their intake of wine to a few glasses. She and David stuck to mineral water. This wasn't a party. It was a business meeting.

The meal ended. Charlie cleared away the dishes and Humphrey produced a sheet of butcher's paper. It was time for a case diagram. Kirstin sat back. It was like old times again. Sir George insisted on case diagrams. Kirstin and Charlie had been trained by him and they always used them.

Charlie selected a felt pen and drew a circle in the middle of the sheet. That was the defining point. A mistake could set them off on the wrong foot. He turned to David.

'What do I write here?'

'Flight-145,' David said.

'Agreed,' Charlie nodded. 'The case begins with the missing flight. I've checked the details with my contacts in the aviation industry. The plane was a Boeing-717, modified to accommodate sleeping and office facilities. There were five crew members and twenty-five passengers on board.

He included the information in the diagram and looked up.

'Humphrey thinks the flight was droned.'

'What do you mean by that?' David asked.

'Taken over by a third party. We think that's what happened to the plane Humphrey and I were in ... the one I told you about.'

'When you were forced to bail out?'

'That's right. The plane continued on its merry way and crashed into Mont Blanc. It was quite a spectacle. Some mountain guides recorded the event. They had reached the summit with their parties and had them lined up for a video when the plane arrived out of the blue.

The videos went viral. People were passing them around. Humphrey and I spent hours studying them. At first, we were reminded of the cruise missiles that knocked out Saddam Hussein's blockhouses during the First Gulf War. They were programmed to hug the ground and follow a programmed route to their target.'

'Do you think that happened to you?'

'No, David. I put the plane on autopilot after we left Rome and everything felt fine until I tried to go onto manual. After that it was like flying a plane with dual controls ... and another pilot had taken over.'

'That got us thinking about drone missiles,' Humphrey said.

'You mean like those used against insurgents?'

'Yes. They are flown by a pilot sitting at a desk and sending instructions by radio. He might be in the warzone or a long way from it. Distance doesn't matter so long as the signals get through.'

David rocked back on his chair and pursed his lips. Kirstin could almost see him thinking. He didn't have Charlie's skills with foreign languages or Humphrey's knowledge of computers but he had a good basic grasp of how things worked.

'You think someone tampered with your plane?'

'Precisely, David. We think it was converted into a drone. Perhaps during servicing. Maybe at some other time. A competent team could have completed the transformation in a few hours. A single person would have taken longer. That would be my way of doing it. The fewer people involved the better.'

'And you didn't notice anything?'

'No,' Charlie shook his head. 'You wouldn't in a modern plane. Pilots don't pull levers anymore. The same goes for cars. Drivers once used muscle power. Then power steering came in. The next big change was when computers came on the scene. Drivers and pilots now rely on them and computers can be accessed from outside. It's no longer necessary to break into the pilot's cabin to hijack a plane. You can do it from the other side of the world if the plane has been suitably modified.'

'It's a frightening thought.'

'It is, David, and it doesn't stop there. Have you ever wondered why you are told to turn off computing devices during take-off and landing? The message for humble passengers is that their computers can stuff things up. Even without trying they can menace the operation of a plane. Think what they could do if they tried.'

'You think that happened to Flight-145?'

'It's a distinct possibility.'

'And the plane that hit Mont Blanc?'

'Ninety-nine-point-nine percent certain. It was a precision shot. The plane zeroed in on the summit. The investigators were amazed by what happened but couldn't find anything to explain it. There were no charred bodies and no black box because the plane wasn't carrying one. Everything that could burn had burnt. The plane's electronic circuitry was totally destroyed. The incident has gone down in the annals of aviation history as an unexplained mystery.'

'I think of it as an invisible drone,' Kirstin remarked.

'A what?'

'Invisible drone, Humphrey. It's one of those things that you fail to see because you think it is something else. It looks like a normal plane but it is really a drone.'

Humphrey crossed out *Droned Plane?* in the case diagram and replaced it by *Invisible Drone?* Then he wrote *Olaf Magnusson?* beside it and drew a line connecting the two.

'Who is Olaf Magnusson?' David asked.

'A clever fellow who invented a control system for drones and failed to take out a proper patent. He accused the companies that manufacture drones of bribing his attorney to make a bum job of the patent application. He could be right for all I know. At any rate, he lost a lot of money when he should have gained a fortune. It made him very bitter.'

'What's that got to do with the plane crash?'



'Magnusson was staying at a tourist chalet near the Saint Bernard Pass when we dropped in. He was more than a little surprised to see us. We met him at dinner and had a confused conversation. Then a sinister-looking fellow arrived and Olaf took off. I had seen him with Olaf at a conference in Rome. He never let Olaf out of his sight.'

'Like he was Olaf's minder?'

'Precisely.'

'Is that the only thing to connect him with the plane?'

'No. The patent attorney, who let Olaf down, died in a mysterious car crash. The man's widow sued the car's manufacturer, claiming that the vehicle's cruise control had malfunctioned. The manufacturer produced convincing evidence to prove otherwise. Witnesses described how the car left the road and made a series of complicated manoeuvres before crashing through a fence and plunging into a reservoir. A coronial court recorded a verdict of suicide.'

'You think the car was converted into an invisible drone?'

'I think that is a distinct possibility,' Humphrey smiled. 'At any rate, Kirstin and I intend to go to Europe to see if we can track down Olaf Magnusson. On the way, we shall visit an elderly fellow, called Steven Mason, who is a close friend of the de Villiers family.'


He handed the felt pen to Charlie.

'Tell us about the de Villiers.'

'The missing plane belonged to the Simon de Villiers Foundation,' Charlie said. 'In his day, Simon was one of the world's great mining moguls. His interests stretched from gold and diamonds in South Africa to copper and other minerals in South America. His eldest son, Richard, now heads the de Villiers empire. Richard is best known as a political activist and environmentalist. He is also an exceedingly rich and powerful man.'

Richard married a black lady who died some years ago. They had two daughters. Steven has met both of them. Petra is twenty-two and of a serious disposition. Anna is five years older. She is a very different sort of lady.'

**INVISIBLE DRONE ? ... Invented by Olaf Magnusson?**



**FLIGHT-145**

**MODIFIED BOEING 717: Owned by Richard de Villiers: Rich guy/political activist: On plane when it vanished.**

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