

The Thin BlueBreadcrumb Trail

by Chris Chelser

The flashing lights of police vehicles guided him to the villa's driveway, where the erratic blue smudges painted the house, the garden, and the crowd of curious onlookers at the gate.

Detective Inspector Hans Hauer surveyed the scene, gravel crunching under his boots as he strode up to the house. Several uniforms guarded the cordon around the secured premises; two sergeants took statements from nosey neighbours; the forensic team's van stood parked to the right; and as he passed, one of the Coroner's officers fumbled with a gurney and a body bag.

Say of Smith what you will, but he knew how to kick off a murder investigation.

Hauer identified himself to the nearest bobby and ducked under the cordon. On the steps to the villa's main entrance, a woman police constable consoled a sobbing elderly lady. Probably the one to have discovered the body. Never a nice experience, whatever the circumstances.

The clumsy white forensics suits already crawled around the inside of the house like ants at a picnic. Not that the owner would mind the intrusion, since the man's blood had spread across a substantial area of the marble patio. Hauer hung back. The dark-red pool reminded him of cheap cranberry syrup, the kind with all the sugar and colorants. He shoved his hands into his pockets and rubbed his thumbs against his forefingers. A deep breath filled his nose with the iron tang of blood and gunpowder. Better.

"Ah, there you are, sir. I was just about to give you a ring. Got stuck in traffic?"

Detective Sergeant Ronald Smith bustled over, carrying a smartphone in one hand and something edible in the other. Crumbs dotted his grin.

"Superintendent Cooper's 'brief meetings' are never brief enough." Hauer glared at Smith's chewing face. "What is that muffin doing at our

crime scene, Sergeant?”

“Haven’t had tea yet, sir. Sorry.” He crammed the rest of the glistening pastry into his mouth, chomped a few times and swallowed hard.

Hauer fought a wave of nausea. “Better you tell me about this enormous man with the ditto beard.” He nodded at the body. “Who is he?”

Smith flipped on the screen of his smartphone.

“This gentleman here is, uhm, Gilles de Rais? Well, that’s how the maid pronounced it. Apparently a French businessman. Sixty-four years old, but doesn’t look his age because he dyed his hair, obviously.”

“How so?”

“You’re joking, sir? That beard’s black as ink. Even has a weird blueish shine.”

“Whatever. Get on with it, sergeant.”

Smith had the decency to look chastised. “The bloke’s been on the Met’s radar for a while now, on suspicion of being involved in a smuggling ring. Hasn’t triggered any alarms since he got back from France a couple of months ago. He owns various properties on both sides of the Channel, but this is where he brought his new French bride.”

“Oh, wonderful. Bloody foreigners.”

“Uhm, aren’t you from the Continent yourself, sir?”

Hauer snorted to hide an embarrassed blush. “A lifetime ago, maybe. What I meant is, this has all the hallmarks of becoming an international case. You know how well those go.” He ran a hand over his gaunt face. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. New bride, you said? And he a senior citizen. Not a woman his own age, I bet.” He did a quick survey of the nearest rooms. “Where is the grieving widow, anyway?”

“Inspector Hauer? You have a moment?”

He turned to a masked forensics officer in a no longer pristine white suit. “This is not good. Not good at all.”

He snatched gloves and a pair of shoe covers from a nearby kit and followed the forensics officer down a flight of stairs into the basement. Old-fashioned lightbulbs lit a straight corridor some thirty feet long. Two more white suits stood in the only doorway, waiting.

“Please tell me that is the wine cellar,” said Hauer as he put on the covers and gloves.

“I’m afraid not, sir.” A white-clad officer pulled a half-face mask from an equipment bag and handed it to him. “Trust me,” she said through her own mask, “you’ll want that.”

The instant he stepped into the dank room, mask held loosely against his nose and mouth, he understood why.

Aside from a single lamp, the only fixtures in the windowless room were six wooden slabs on shores. Improvised beds, given that on each slab lay a human corpse, all in a considerable state of decomposition. At the back lay mere skeletons, faces frozen in a mocking grin, whereas the bodies closest to the door still resembled a human, if you squinted. The shreds of decaying clothes suggested that at least three of the corpses had been female, although by now only a pathologist could say for sure.

The distinct sound of retching made him look over his shoulder. In the corridor, Smith leaned against the wall and intimately reacquainted himself with his factory-processed muffin.

“God, that smell... It’s disgusting.” Smith moaned.

Hauer lowered his mask. “Are you referring to your vomit or the bodies?”

“The bodies, the bodies...”

He suppressed a laugh, but didn’t blame his sergeant. The pine slabs were black with bodily fluids that had seeped from the carcasses over time. Where the putrescence had dripped between the shores, it had congealed on the cellar floor, forming a noxious crust. Only the most recent body still oozed slime. That stank to the high heavens, but Hauer had smelled worse.

“Next call we receive about a fire with fatalities, remind me to send you out on first response. You haven’t smelled death until you’ve had a nose full of burnt corpse.” He glanced around the cellar. “I’ve seen enough here. Tell the Coroner’s men to check first whether any of these lovelies qualify as the last-known mistress of the house. If you need me, I’ll be upstairs.”

He turned on his heels, but stopped at a nasty scratching noise under this boot. Annoyed, he crouched down to see what was responsible.

In the thick layer of rotting gunk lay a key. A door key, if he was any judge.

“Was this door locked when the room was found?”

“No, sir,” one of the white suits said. “The door was shut, but not locked.”

“Interesting. This isn’t a room to leave open for visitors to find.” He pried the key from the floor and cleared away the slime. The key fit smoothly in the open door’s keyhole, so he gave it an experimental turn. With a click, the lock popped out.

“If the key to this door was inside, whoever unlocked it didn’t care

about covering their tracks when they left.”

“Cos they ran away in panic?” said Smith, still a bit green around the gills.

Hauer scoffed. “Do you shut a door when you’re in a panic? No, not panic, but they were in a hurry. Interrupted, maybe.”

“The neighbours stated that the owner arrived in the middle of the afternoon.”

“Then he may well have come home a little too early for his own good.” Hauer pulled off the grimy shoe covers and the gloves and dropped them into a mobile hazardous waste container. “Come on, Smith. Let’s hear what the Coroner has made of Mr de Rais.”

Not much, as it turned out.

“Other than why his hairdresser gave him that ghastly colour job, there is little mystery to the man or his death,” the Coroner’s officer said as he pushed his glasses further up his nose. “Four bullets to the chest, coming from two distinct angles. My guess is that you are looking for two gunmen, not one, but the boys at ballistics will be able to confirm that.”

Hauer leaned over the body. “Tight cluster around the heart. Professional work.”

“Those who live by the sword, will die by it,” said the officer. “No doubt you will have noticed that Mr de Rais was not entirely defenceless against his attackers.” He pointed a gloved finger at the semi-automatic pistol resting in the dead man’s right hand. “Judging by the gun residue, he fired it. But since there is no other body lying about...”

“We need to go bullet hunting.”

“Oh, not for the ones that killed him. No exit wounds, you see. All still lodged inside after tearing his lungs and heart to shreds. The poor man was dead before he hit the ground, I should think.”

“What about his wife?”

The Coroner’s officer frowned. “Which wife would that be?”

“She isn’t here, sir,” Smith interrupted. “At least, First Response didn’t find anyone else when they swept the house, except for that cellar.” He shivered. “The elderly maid said that she’d seen her mistress before she – the maid, that is – left to run errands this morning, so I don’t think any of those corpses are the wife.”

“Then who the devil are they?” said Hauer. “And where has the wife gone? Did you check the garage?”

“Rich bloke, sir. Multiple cars. Can’t be sure if one’s missing, but two neighbours stated they’d seen a sedan pull up in the driveway and leave only a few minutes later. They didn’t notice any other vehicles.” Smith

nervously wiped his brow. “Are we treating this as a missing person’s case, sir?”

“That depends entirely on the sedan. Did the neighbours recognise it?”

“Uhm, one neighbour thought it was a Vauxhall, but another said it was a black BMW.”

Hauer rolled his eyes. Concurring witness statements were as rare as hen’s teeth. “Pull CCTV of the cameras in this street. This house will have its own security cameras, too. Get me a license plate and find that car,” he barked, “and alert Heathrow, Luton, Stansted, Gatwick, Dover and anything else with a runway or port that Mrs de Rais is *not* to leave the country. Voluntarily or otherwise.”

The license plate number proved less elusive than the car or its occupants. The registration belonged to a black Mercedes E63 AMG. At least the witnesses had got the colour right.

More alarming was the Met’s file on Rais’ dodgier activities. It revealed evidence of several marriages, none of which had lasted very long. Unfortunately, the file contained nothing conclusive on how those relationships had ended, which in turn heaped suspicion on Rais’ corpse collection. Smith had begun to track the names of known ex-wives, but beyond that, they had nothing but a stack of preliminary findings and photographs to go on.

Hauer’s heart sank further when he leafed through the papers that the forensics’ assistant had dropped on his desk. The printed photographs meant little unless you knew what you were looking at, but the designation on the report itself made his blood run cold.

‘Incendiary device with time delay mechanism’.

Shooting Rais had not been enough for these people. They had rigged the gas pipes to blow the house to smithereens after their safe departure. Only a constable’s swift kick to the timer and a lot of luck had prevented a devastating fire that could have killed two dozen police officers. Himself included.

“Smith, any word on—? No, don’t answer that just yet.”

At the opposite desk, Smith stopped wolfing down a foot-long ham and pastrami baguette. Thick globs of mayonnaise and ketchup dripped from the bread and down the sergeant’s fingers, narrowly avoiding the computer keyboard as they fell on a grease-stained wrapper.

“Woo wansusu?” Smith swallowed. “Sorry. You want some, sir? I have plenty of crisps and two chocolate-chip biscuits, if you want.”

Hauer stared at the American style ‘cookies’, each one as large as his outstretched hand. Their sickly-sweet, fatty smell drenched the air. “I’ll pass, thank you.”

“You sure, sir? A man can’t live off coffee alone. Look at you, you’re skin and bones.”

“Food is a prerequisite to keep breathing, Smith, but what appetite I had for such junk food, I was cured of long ago. Now, where are you on those ex-wives?”

“Nowhere, really.” Smith licked some sauce from his hand, but froze mid-motion at the sight of Hauer’s flaring nostrils. “Uhm, our records show that Bluebeard was married at least seven times, sir, and—”

“Wait. ‘Bluebeard’?”

“Uh, yes. That’s what they’re all calling him. Because of—”

“Yes, yes, I get it. So, seven wives and no trace of any of them.”

“Nope. Only lead we have is pretty tenuous. Older surveillance photos show that one of the ladies had a lovely smile but an incomplete set of upper teeth. According to the coroner’s first findings, one of the bodies in the cellar has the same anomaly. He says it’s genetic and not all that common, so...”

“Seven wives, six bodies, and one widow on the loose. Do the maths.” A premature conclusion, perhaps, but in his experience if a piece of evidence looked the part, it played the part.

Hauer stared absently at the office wall while he tried to link the scraps together in search of a bigger picture. What he got instead were gaping holes, starting with motive. Why would two professional hitmen execute a fellow criminal? That sort of thing happened among drug dealers and gangs, as part of turf wars. Of course, Rais had been a suspected smuggler, and smugglers fought vehemently over trafficking routes, not stopping short of murder.

But six bodies in the basement opened up other possibilities. Provided they, too, were murder victims and not some private body farm, Mr Bluebeard’s death might well have been revenge. Perhaps one of the wives had been a relative of one of the shooters. A sister, or perhaps a daughter. Speaking of which...

“Was anyone else living in that house, apart from the stiff and his wife? A child from a previous marriage maybe?”

Smith scrolled through his notes. “According to the records, the owner was the only official occupant. Wife hadn’t been registered yet, nor the servant. But,” he clicked few times, “said servant, Mrs Beaufort, did state that the new wife had brought her sister in from France.”

“Do we have a name?”

“Again according to Mrs Beaufort, the wife is called Marguerite, and the sister is called Anna. She didn’t remember their maiden name, but the French civil registry should have a record of the marriage. I called the officials there, but it seems they’re still in bed at this hour.”

Hauer steepled his fingers. “So, not only is the wife missing, but her sister as well.”

“Both were seen by Mrs Beaufort and neighbours in the last couple of days, so it’s safe to assume that they didn’t end up in that cellar.”

But Hauer’s mind barrelled along another train of thought.

“Rich man takes in a young woman and her sister. The man is killed – two shooters. Expert shots, full frontal, in a firefight. Wife and sister? No, women prefer more subtle weapons. Still, someone killed the husband, set an incendiary bomb to destroy the evidence, while the siblings ran— No, it couldn’t be.”

“Sir?”

He jumped to his feet, ignoring Smith’s questioning gaze in favour of pacing up and down the tiny office. He had to be mistaken. These memories, always at the edge of his awareness, had happened long ago and far away. They belonged to the past, and the past shouldn’t be allowed to influence his professional judgement so, whatever the similarities. This was the present, and in the present, he had two fugitive killers and two runaway women, who may be the same persons.

He’d missed a piece of the puzzle. Something he had failed to notice because he hadn’t realised it ought to be there. Why did this man die? Either his death was directly connected to his collection of corpses, or it wasn’t. If it wasn’t, then why kill him?

“Of course.” Hauer whipped around in mid-stride. “Not missing, but stolen.”

Smith blinked, slowly chewing the last bite of his sandwich. “Sir?”

“Think, will you? Your Bluebeard was as rich as Croesus. A man like that has a safe, his wife has jewellery. What valuables were taken from the house?”

Greasy fingers typed faster than should be possible. “Well, we haven’t received the list from the insurer yet, but forensics did find a safe in the study, exposed and empty, and a handful of relatively cheap items recovered from the bathroom and the bedroom.”

“No gold, gems, pearl strings?”

“None, sir.”

Hauer exhaled deeply. As much as the past obscured his focus, on

occasion it proved itself a valid advisor. “Smith, I think we’ve been barking up the wrong tree.”

“A robbery? Are you quite mad?” Superintendent Cooper clenched his dark hands into fists. “This man has hidden multiple dead bodies in his house, and you are telling me that it was just a coincidence?”

“As far as the shooting of Rais is concerned, yes. His death might well be merely collateral damage.”

“Rais’s wife and her sister are missing, Hauer. More collateral damage, I suppose?”

“We have no reason to believe they were kidnapped. If whoever drove that black Merc wanted them for ransom, they wouldn’t have shot the one person most likely to pay up. If they killed him by accident, the wife is worthless and they would have killed her, too. Only they didn’t.”

“It has been less than twenty-four hours. A ransom demand might still be forthcoming.”

“To whom? Their family? Besides, I have never known kidnappers to booby-trap the abduction site, much less place an incendiary bomb.”

Cooper’s sullen frown approached the quality of a pout. “I take it you suspect the wife.”

“I most certainly do, sir. Not of murdering her husband, though. Ballistics confirmed that the bullets in his body match professional weaponry, not a desperate housewife with a peashooter.”

“Did you consider she may have fled the violence?”

“We did. Rais drove a Range Rover, his maid told us. We found it parked in the garage, blocking the exit for the other three cars. If the ladies ran in panic after the execution, the only vehicle available was the Mercedes that the neighbours saw.”

“So, a straight-up robbery, you say?” Cooper deflated. “Does the evidence even support that theory?”

“They didn’t ransack the house, so we missed the theft at first glance. Professional thieves are meticulous, but these culprits knew exactly where to look and what to take. I believe the intended explosion was supposed to erase their tracks, as well as any chance for the insurance company to identify the stolen items. After a fire, insurers consider all household effects lost, so if Rais’ jewellery is offered for sale anywhere, it won’t raise suspicion. The ultimate fence.”

Cooper sank deeper into his chair. “Plausible indeed. And here I was, willing to put money on her killing her murderous husband in self-defence.”

“Never bet on self-defence, sir. Especially when it concerns murder in conjunction with theft and arson.” The tang of nougat and white chocolate spread through his mouth, trailing after the words. He tried to rid himself of the foul taste, but to no avail. He would need another cup of black coffee to achieve that.

“How about the—” An urgent knock interrupted him, followed by the office door swinging open. “DS Smith, what is the meaning of this?”

“Sorry, sir, but I need the inspector. Aviation Security at Heathrow has found our Merc.”

Or what was left of it, anyway.

The Heathrow officers had emailed photos of a mangled, molten wreck on a hotel car park near the airport. Since automotive vehicles in general didn’t have the tendency to instantaneously combust, Hauer suspected that the destructive blaze had had a little help. Involving a timer, in all likelihood.

“Did the cameras catch them?”

“We’re working on obtaining the recordings, sir, but this here might be of interest.” Smith grinned as his eyes flitted across the screen. “An AMG turns heads, even at a posh hotel. One of the hotel guests is a real car fanatic, so he parked right beside it for a closer look.”

Hauer studied the photo. “The formerly silver Lexus on the right?”

“The same, which is why he came running when it and the Merc went up in flames. Now here is the great thing: in his statement he described two men and two women walking down the same parking lane where he had seen the Mercedes. He remembered because he thought it strange that they all wore sunglasses on an overcast day.”

“Eccentricity is not limited to criminals,” said Hauer. “They could have been anyone.”

This reality check didn’t curb Smith’s enthusiasm. “I checked the photos the responding constable sent, and they show only one other car in that lane, a two-seater. So those four people must have come from the Merc. But I found something else, sir. The car is registered to a shelf company. No activities, just a handful of assets. It is owned by yet another shelf company...

“Yeeees?”

“...which is in turn is owned by known aliases of – hold on to your hat, sir – the Carlton Brothers.” Smith spun his chair in triumph. “Two enterprising criminals who don’t shy from putting bullets in someone’s chest if it gets them what they want. Bluebeard’s murder definitely fits their MO.”

Hauer's jaw worked. He'd heard of these two. Greedy opportunists indeed, but hardly organised criminals. One piece didn't fit.

"That bomb in the villa's boiler room couldn't have been fabricated on the fly. They came prepared, which means that they must have been to the house before yesterday." He ran a nail across his chin. "Bring in the maid and show her the mugshots. Let's see if she can tell us more."

"Ah oui, I saw them," said the elderly Mrs Beaufort with an accent as thick as marzipan cake. "They attended the wedding. Madame's brothers, you see? Such charming boys, both of them."

"You were at the wedding?" Hauer caught himself before he gaped. "Did Rais invite all his servants?"

"Non, non, only me. I have worked for him for more than cinquante, eh, fifty. Fifty years. He was orphaned. I looked after him. All his life. And now... maintenant il est... il est..."

Hauer handed her the tissue box to stem the abundant flow of tears. "Having been a confidante of sorts, ma'am, I'm sure you can shed some light on his many marriages. None of them lasted long, it seems."

Her wrinkles deepened as she scrunched up her face and spat. "Menteuses, all of them. Lying, unfaithful girls. Of course he would not stay married to them."

"He divorced them?"

Her expression straightened like a shirt under a hot iron, but she held her tongue.

Hauer held up the evidence bag with the dirty key. "You knew about the cellar, didn't you? You knew what was in there."

"Monsieur Gilles was a good man. Too good for those horrid women," she cried. "He trusted them. Gave them all keys and said only that room they cannot enter. A simple order, non? They tell him they will obey, but they never do. All of them, all of them went in to see what was forbidden."

Ranting on, her broken English descended into rapid French, too fast for Hauer to tell one word from the next. Exasperated, he left the examination room.

In the hallway, he found Smith listening at the door while sipping from a can of coke.

"Sir, are we absolutely certain that Bluebeard's collectibles have nothing to do with the missing wife?" said the Sergeant. "It just seems too big a thing not to be connected somehow."

Hauer mentally blocked the ghastly smell of soda. "The Carlton

Brothers are no more the wife's brothers than they are upstanding citizens. They infiltrated a rich man's life to rob him blind. Do you really think they gave a damn about a couple of bodies?"

"No," Smith said between sips, "but I'm guessing old Bluebeard did."

A strained sigh betrayed a smidgen of doubt. "Go on."

"Well, Mrs Beaufort said that Bluebeard gave his keys to the wife, right? He leaves, and she can enter all the rooms, even the ones she hasn't seen yet. So she scouts the place for valuables. There's plenty, so the wife and her sister gather it all and call in the Carlton Brothers. They've been pretending to be one big happy family, so should Bluebeard come back early, he will think they're just visiting. While waiting, the wife checks the last room, the forbidden one, thinking there must be more loot in there. But she finds the creepy bodies instead."

"We found the door unlocked. She was interrupted, then?"

"I think so, 'cos what she doesn't know is that her husband had planned it all. He comes back early, she hears him and closes the cellar door, but doesn't lock it 'cos she dropped the key in the muck. He asks for his keys back, then finds the forbidden one missing."

"The maid believes he killed his wives for that offence."

"He would've, too, only that's when the Carlton Brothers arrive and they shoot Bluebeard before he can shoot his wife. Whose maiden name, by the way, turns out to be an alias."

"That's quite a presumption to make."

"Not a presumption, sir. I got an email from Paris saying the name on the marriage certificate is a fake. Anyway, with Bluebeard dead on the floor, the gang has all the time they need to take whatever valuables they want and plant that bomb, which they expect will destroy all the evidence. Next they get into the Carltons' Merc, drive to the airport, rig the car to burn, and board the first flight out 'cos they think that as far as we know, everyone in the house died in the fire." Smith smirked. "How's that, sir?"

"Not bad, Smith. Not bad at all..." Hauer pinched his forefinger out of habit. "However, if they did slip out of the country, they'll be back."

"For what?"

"Think about it. All passenger luggage is screened. If suitcases full of valuables show up, they would be flagged for closer inspection. And stashing the loot elsewhere to smuggle it out separately takes time and preparation." His forefinger began to hurt. "Chase those CCTV recordings, Smith. I want to know where they went after abandoning the car."

That turned out to be a bridge too far in the otherwise surprisingly smooth investigation. The hotel staff had been more than forthcoming with their surveillance footage, but seeing the culprits walk off the hotel's premises was useless without the local traffic cameras picking up their trail from thereon out.

Like breadcrumbs, Hauer thought miserably as he stared out of the office window. Just when you had a solid lead, the birds got to it. Or in this case, bureaucracy.

"Uhm, sir?" Smith peered out from behind his computer. "I think you'll want to see this."

He sauntered over while Smith tapped the keys that controlled a grainy black and white video on his screen.

"The security cameras give a rough direction of which way our culprits went, but what I found was this." On screen, coming from the Mercedes, two men and two women strolled across the hotel car park, each with a large suitcase.

"How did they get those bags through customs?"

"They didn't, sir. Keep watching."

The video changed to another camera. The four figures walked to the hotel first, but passed the entrance and crossed to the far side of the car park, out of the camera's range.

"Now, we can't actually see them getting into a vehicle," said Smith before Hauer could comment, "but the only car to leave in the next three minutes is this one." He fast-forwarded to a white van driving up to the car park barrier, and froze the image. "License plate says it belongs to a bakery in Whitechapel. They reported it stolen a few days ago."

"So Heathrow was a decoy. Good job, Sergeant." Hauer smirked like a cat playing with a mouse. "Can you enhance the image of the occupants?"

"Maybe I can go one better, sir. Hold on."

Smith plugged another USB-stick into his computer and opened a series of images. "Nope. Nope," he said every time he closed a window with a photo. "Nope, nope, nope. Ha, there we are." He turned the screen to give Hauer a proper view. "The hotel's barrier contains a system that scans a car's license plate and snaps a shot of the occupants upon exiting. It's to identify car thieves. Does the trick, I'd say."

Hauer no longer listened. He recognised the driver from the mugshots they had shown the maid, but the woman in the passenger's seat... She wore a shawl and sunglasses, but even so, the small office suddenly

smelled of caramel, Sachertorte and whipped cream. On his lips lingered the taste of sticky little fingers stuffing his mouth with colourful gummy bears. All he could eat, and more. His stomach rumbled, undecided whether he was hungry or about to be sick.

“Sir? Sir. Oi, Inspector.”

A sharp yank at his sleeve pulled him from his daze before the words did. “What?”

“I said, the registration number of that van,” Smith pointed at his screen, “was just logged by a unit responding to a car fire in Winchmore Hill.”

“Well, it would,” said Hauer to himself. “She loves a good fire.”

“Sir? Look, I don’t know what you’re on about, but they’re reporting casualties. The occupants. Don’t you think we should—?”

“I think you need to print that photo,” Hauer said as he snatched his car keys from his desk. “Bring it. I’ll drive.”

By the time they arrived, the local fire brigade had already packed up their hoses. They had doused the fire with plenty of foam, but it had been too little, too late. The van’s carcass had burnt to a crisp.

When Smith opened his car door, the odours of charcoal, metal, petrol and sulphur drifted in, along with the distinct smell of burnt flesh. The sergeant sniffed twice and gagged. “You were right, sir. It’s at least as bad as that cellar.”

Not in the mood for even a sarcastic reply, Hauer only nodded and got out.

A flash of their badges and a quick introduction to their colleagues gave them full access to the scene. A white sheet had been draped over the burnt-out cabin. Hauer lifted one end and held his breath as he peeked underneath. Prepared for the nightmarish memories that the state of the victims would trigger, he pushed the old images back before they overtook him.

“Anything, or anyone, in the back?” he asked the constable in charge.

“No, sir. The firefighters cut the doors open while it was still burning, but the cargo compartment’s empty.”

“Well, well. Any clue on the gender of the crispy critters in the cabin?”

“Coroner’s officers aren’t here yet, but the eye witness who called it in spoke of two men, just sitting there. Say, did you expect more victims, Inspector?”

“I did, but then I should have known better.” He dropped the sheet. “Tell the Coroner’s that their clients are likely to be the Carlton

Brothers.”

Walking around the carcass, he pressed his hand to the warm, blackened metal. Even as a child, the hot glow after a fire sparked a sense of comfort, of relief. Relief that the acrid stench nipped in the bud, just like it had all those years ago.

Spell broken, he paced towards the constables.

“Paperwork can wait, gentlemen. We’re looking for two women and four heavy suitcases.”

The uniformed men stared at him in confusion.

“Don’t just stand there, go ask around. Two well-to-do women in sunglasses carrying heavy luggage stand out. Someone must have seen them. Smith, you take that photograph and go south with two men. I’ll take the other two and head north.”

“Sir, do you want a photo to—?”

“No need. I *know* who I’m looking for.”

He questioned anyone who might have been around longer than a few minutes, starting with the rubberneckers who had stayed to gawk from behind the police cordon. While he noted their answers, he calculated. The wreck was still warm, but did that mean anything? Not if she used a timer again. Still, neither she nor her companion could have gone far. Gold weighed as much as lead. Alternatively, a suitcase full of paper – bearer bonds, for instance – was barely lighter.

But perhaps ‘Marguerite’ had never planned to go far in the first place: less than half an hour later, his mobile phone rang. Smith. The women had been spotted entering a cottage near the church.

“The sign in the garden says the property was sold recently, so I checked the registers to see who owns it now.”

“Let me guess: your Bluebeard.”

“Got it in one, sir. There’re no curtains or furniture, but I see movement in the living room. One person. Long blond hair, I think.”

“Block the exits, but do not initiate a confrontation, you hear?” Hauer panted as he ran in the direction of the church. “Three men are dead because of her. I don’t need you to make that four, so call the SCO19 for armed back-up.”

Within minutes, he rounded the corner of the churchyard, where Smith patrolled a small gate to a garden.

“Armed unit is on the way, sir,” his Sergeant announced, but whatever came next faded as Hauer gazed at the house beyond the hedgerow.

A small cottage, half-hidden among yew trees and juniper bushes. A thatched roof and mocha-coloured walls, like the gingerbread houses

that old Nanny Katharina used to bake for his sister and him. Even the white facings of the front door louvre reminded him of icing trimmings, and blossoming hollyhocks dotted the brown walls like coloured sugar sprinkles.

Of course Nanny's wards had to finish every last crumb. Every day anew. Biscuits, cotton candy, liquorice, chocolate, lemonade. Until one day his sister had had enough.

His stomach squirmed at the memory and the lingering stench of the burnt corpses clinging to his nostrils didn't help. He pinched his forefinger to stop the queasiness. A tried method, but this time it failed. He stumbled into a nearby shrubbery for a modicum of dignity while he heaved until nothing remained in his stomach.

From there, he operated on the autopilot of experience. The SCO19 team arrived, guns at the ready, and broke down the gingerbread door. He listened for shots, but heard nothing. Within forty seconds of going in, the team leader declared the scene secured.

Past memories mingled with bouts of obscene clarity as he strode towards the cottage. Stepping across its threshold felt like stepping into another world. The very world he had so wanted to forget when he escaped his past and moved to London.

In the entrance hall, sprawled at the bottom of the stairs, lay a young, dark-haired woman. The angle of her neck explained her vacant eyes as well as the general disinterest in her wellbeing. At the far end of the hall stood the four suitcases. One had been kicked over, priceless jewellery spilling out.

"We've got her, sir," said Smith. "Even if we can't make the rest stick, at least she'll go down for theft."

Hauer nodded, but winced when a sudden outburst of sobs assaulted his ears.

Someone wept. Loudly and with the same flair that had brought the law enforcement of his birth town to their knees. He gritted his teeth until it hurt. Much as he wanted to walk away from this nightmare, he couldn't. This had to end. For good.

On the barren floor of the living room, hands cuffed behind her back and surrounded by three policemen with semi-automatic rifles, sat the woman who had crowned herself 'Marguerite de Rais'. The illegitimate queen of a broken empire.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Her blond locks obscuring her eyes as she wailed. "My husband killed those poor women, not I. He even pulled a gun on me and my sister." She gasped dramatically between

sobs. “My brothers, they saved us. They said to wait for someone to take us home, to France. But then poor Anna fell down the stairs—”

“With some considerable assistance from you, I take it.”

His voice, cold and hard, echoed in the unfurnished room. At once the woman’s head snapped up, her red-rimmed eyes infuriated rather than frightened. The fine lines on her tanned skin betrayed that she was of his age – too old to be the dead girl’s sister, as she claimed. Yet nothing about her gave away what deranged mind hid behind this act of innocent self-defence.

An old trick of hers, but one he remembered well. And now she remembered him.

“H-Hans?”

A whiff of lemon drops filled the air. “Murder and robbery, served with gratuitous arson. I should have known I would find you at the end of this trail.” His lips pulled into a sneer. “Hello, Gretel.”

The End

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You will find more of my work on my website. [Click here](#) to have a look.

I love to connect with you, so feel free to email me at chris@chrischelser.com or find me on Twitter [@chrischelser](#).

Let’s stay in touch!

Love,

Chris