

Harry's Bar in Paris is known for many things, not the least of which was the fact that it was one of Hemingway's favorite watering holes. Unknown to most people, it was also the place where James Jesus Angleton, the CIA's most well-known mole hunter, spent most of his time in Paris. The bar was also known for the fact that it was wholly unpretentious—dark-wood paneling scarred by years of careless drinking and walls festooned with college banners, including those from all the Ivy League schools in the United States. It was also the headquarters of the International Bar Flies, a club that could be joined simply by purchasing a tie from the bartender. Ties featuring that institution's logo, two flies wearing top hats, were a common sight in every club bar in New York and Washington, DC.

Jonathon was about to order two Bombay martinis, dry, when the bartender leaned across the bar and quietly asked him if he was Jonathon Price. Jonathon nodded, and the barkeep motioned for Jonathon and Sophia to follow him. They walked around the bar and into a short hallway. To the right was the kitchen, while to the left and front were blank, wooden walls. The bartender knocked twice on the side wall, which silently slid back, and their guide motioned for Jonathon and Sophia to go through.

They walked into a room with a small table and four chairs. In one sat an elegantly dressed, middle-aged man. The panel slid shut and the man rose, hand extended. "Hello, Jonathon. My name is Max Johnson. Welcome to my office."

Jonathon and Sophia sat down. "Hello, Max Johnson," said Jonathon. "This is my colleague Sophia Rostova. And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?"

"Only time will tell whether or not my company is pleasurable," Max said, grinning. "As to why you are here, I owe William a favor. By the way, I do offer my most sincere condolences on his passing. Having said that, he was also a miserable old prick and one of the very few people on earth who has bested me. But I do owe him a favor, which I am now going to honor.

"Before I start, however, let me say how lucky you are to have such a lovely colleague, a term I have always associated with sour-looking old men. And given my not inconsiderable experience in this regard, I'm thinking that perhaps Ms. Rostova has some unusual skills that are very different from those usually associated with 'colleagues.' In any event, on to business.

"First, you need to know that I am a criminal. I steal things, and I arrange transactions involving unpleasant people wanting to either purchase or sell instruments of death. I am motivated by nothing except money. I also have no scruples of any kind, except I insist that once terms are agreed, those terms are honored. Failure to honor terms is always handled swiftly and abruptly by my *colleagues*. As a result, please note that once we part company tonight, I will be harboring no residual goodwill toward you. Fair enough?"

Both Jonathon and Sophia nodded. It was quite refreshing to be informed of one's standing in such a clear fashion.

Max continued. "William approached me and asked me to be alert to odd requests making the rounds in my market. Recently, one such request has come to my attention. Someone in Afghanistan wants to purchase six large cargo ships and have those ships delivered to Colombia. I happen to think this is an odd request for several reasons. First, of course, is the country of origin. Who the hell in Afghanistan needs cargo ships? Second, why do they want them in Colombia? And third, the method of payment. In my business, all but the largest transactions are made in cash. Messy and cumbersome but necessary, given the difficulties most relatively unsophisticated criminals face in having bank accounts and accessing the wire transfer system. In this case, the buyers will pay in either cash or by wire transfer. In short, this is a very odd request."

Everyone sat very quietly when he finished. Then Jonathon asked Max if he had any ideas or clues regarding the identity of the buyer.

"I don't. You now know everything I know, and I view my obligation to William as satisfied. You may feel welcome to leave now."

Jonathon and Sophia had both stood up to leave when Max stopped them. "One last item," he said. "I am fully aware of who you are and of what you are capable, Jonathon. As a result, I do not wish to have you as an enemy. We're not pals, but you can rest assured that I won't be discussing this conversation or you with any person for any reason. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," replied Jonathon. "Good evening."

"You should also know that there are two rather shady characters waiting for you down the street. Good luck."

Jonathon and Sophia left the room, and Jonathon discreetly gave the bartender a one-hundred-dollar tip while Sophia used the ladies room.

Just like his grandfather, thought the bartender. *Very classy guys.*

When Sophia reappeared, they walked onto the Rue Daunou. They could see two men standing on the street corner.

"Guns or knives," whispered Sophia as they stood there.

"Guns, I think," said Jonathon. "It looks like they've got a car waiting for them, and I would guess that unless we discourage them, we'll be going for a car ride. Take

the head shot. They're probably wearing vests. Let's act like we're drunk until we get closer."

Sophia laughed a girlish laugh as the two of them staggered down the street. The men watching them obviously thought they had easy targets and very casually walked toward Jonathon and Sophia. As they got closer, Jonathon and Sophia raised their guns and shot them both in the forehead. The guns were silenced, so they made just a muffled *whoosh* as they were fired.

A quick search of the two corpses revealed two cell phones, two silenced Glock pistols, and the usual assortment of identification cards and papers. Jonathon and Sophia took everything, dragged the two men into a darkened alleyway, and walked back to the hotel at a brisk pace.

Once inside the hotel, they again carefully checked for suspicious characters, and finding none, went directly to Larry's room. Larry answered the door wearing a robe and looking a little frazzled. Liz entered the room just then, also wearing a robe. Her hair was a complete mess, and she too looked a little worse for wear.

Sophia laughed out loud as she surveyed the pair. "Do you two have rabbit DNA or what?" she asked, still laughing. "And when do you get any work done?"

Larry looked embarrassed, while Liz just smiled happily. "We enjoy one another's company," said Liz. "And you, Ms. Russian Princess, better be careful about calling the kettle black."

Now it was Sophia's turn to look embarrassed. "All right, let's break up the little love fest, if you don't mind," said Jonathon. "I'm going to assume you didn't get much done while we were gone, but I've got some stuff here for you to look at." He laid the papers and phones on the table.

"Hey, how did you get all this stuff?" asked Larry. Then he slapped himself on the side of his head. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking. We'll get on this stuff tonight. In the meantime though, you'll be happy to know that Toby called. He and Bruce are at the airport waiting for the guys to come from Germany. He said they would all be here at the hotel some time tonight."

"That's good," said Jonathon. "Sophia and I may be irritating some folks."

Larry looked at the phones and documents on the table. "I'll bet you are irritating some people, Jonathon. Nobody likes losing his phone or passport."

"You know, they really don't. Okay, I think that as long as you've gotten so comfy that I might too. We've got adjoining rooms, by the way, and with your permission, I'd like to keep the door between the rooms unlocked. We will of course knock before opening, as should you."

Jonathon unlocked the common door and walked into his room happy that he'd had the good sense to specify a room with two king-size beds as he'd done in Zurich. There was no sense in encouraging speculation. He walked into his bathroom, took a quick shower, put on his exceptionally fluffy robe, and returned to the bedroom where Sophia was sitting in her robe. And smiling that beautiful smile.

"You want to play?" she asked.

He did.

* * *

The phone rang at three in the morning, and Jonathon groggily answered. "Yeah."

"Sorry about the late hour," Toby said. "I thought you'd want to know we're here. We've got the two rooms that flank your two suites and one directly across the hall from you. The guys I brought with me are suitably impressed."

Jonathon chuckled. "Yeah, I bet they are. Travel on a G6 and rooms at the Ritz. That's not bad. Have everyone report to my room at 0800 hours." The reversion to military time just happened without a conscious thought. This was now a military mission.

"Aye, aye," said Toby.

He felt Sophia stir beside him. "Hey, Natasha, we've got to be up and presentable early tomorrow."

"I heard," she said. "Now leave me alone. I need my beauty rest."

* * *

He was awakened by Sophia whispering in his ear while her hands moved down his chest and kept going. "Good morning," she said.

"And a good morning to you too," Jonathon replied. "But we've no time for fun this morning. We've got to get ready to meet the new guys."

An hour later, they were up and busy. Sophia went to get Larry and Liz while Jonathon ordered breakfast for the whole troop. By 0800, the table was set and covered with silver domes, china plates, crystal stemware, full pitchers of orange juice, and silver utensils. It was very civilized.

Right on time, Jonathon heard a knock, answered the door, and ushered in the six men. "Have a seat, gentlemen," said Jonathon, gesturing at the table. "We'll get to know one another while we eat, and then I'll fill you in on what we're doing now and what our plan is."

They all sat down and Jonathon started making introductions while everyone piled into the food. Knowing how Special Forces troops ate, Jonathon had ordered extra servings of the bacon, sausage, and eggs, and there was a lot of fresh fruit and croissants as well.

When they had nearly finished, Jonathon turned to Toby. "Okay, who's who and from where did they come?" he asked.

"The four additions to the group are all ex-SEAL Team Six operatives: Joe Hill, Walt Smith, Bobby Thomas, and Jim Frederick. Bruce and I have worked with all of them from time to time. All of them have substantial experience in Afghanistan. They recently formed their own firm and, as a result, answer to no one. As an aside, they are all single and without ties."

Joe, who seemed to be the leader of the new group raised his hand and spoke. "On behalf of the entire group, we are very pleased to be working with you, sir," he said, nodding at Jonathon. "You're something of legend in the whole of Special Forces."

Jonathon looked a little uncomfortable at this. "Well, I'm very happy you've decided to join our little band of warriors. This lady," he said, gesturing to Sophia, "is Sophia Rostova, an active FSB operative on loan to us. She understands the business end of a knife, is an excellent shot, and is quite adept at loosening recalcitrant tongues. It seems the FSB is not so fussy about how tongues are loosened as long as they become unstuck. If the situation arises, you can be absolutely confident she will have your back.

"Finally, this nice man," he said while pointing to Larry, "is Larry Green. The pretty lady with him is Elizabeth Galati. The two of them represent the absolute best anywhere at making computers and the Internet cough up useful information. They are also superb cryptographers. One of your jobs will be ensuring their safety no matter what. I want to be very clear on that point. Do we understand?"

Everyone nodded.

"Okay. Now why don't you gentlemen tell me more about yourselves and your individual skill sets?" Jonathon said to the four new additions.

Joe began. "I'm a graduate of the University of Michigan, and I'm the team mission planner. All of us are multilingual, and I speak Arabic and French. I'm also the group's explosives expert. Walter and Bobby graduated from the Naval Academy

and Cal Tech respectively, both come from long-time navy families, and they are the best hand-to-hand combat fighters around. And then we get to Jimmy, an honors graduate from the School of Hard Knocks. He grew up in the worst part of Harlem, fought his way out of the gang life, and joined the navy. It turns out that he has an incredible aptitude for language, is fluent in at least five different languages, and is scary good with a knife. After we left the military, we formed a company to assist insurance companies that offer kidnapping insurance to wealthy individuals and companies. If one of their insured parties gets kidnapped abroad, our job is to find them and bring them back in one piece. We did a fair number of hostage rescues in the SEALs and that's what we've been doing until now. When Toby called, this job sounded like an interesting change of pace."

"That's very impressive, and I'm delighted to have you as part of our little gang," said Jonathon. "Having said that, I need to stress one point. We don't need any heroes, and no one, absolutely no one, goes or does anything alone. We must operate in pairs at all times. Understood?" Again, everyone nodded. "Also, we will all wear these tiny earbuds any time we are in the field." Jonathon held out his hand to show the pea-sized items. "These units were built by Larry and are quite extraordinary. I think you'll like them much better than the military comms you are accustomed to using.

"Now, the mission. I have very good reason to believe that terrorists based in Afghanistan are in the late stages of planning a major attack against the US. I think it will come in the form of taking action to close the ports of Houston, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. How this will happen, and what form it will take, is still an unknown. However, if the attack is successful, it will have catastrophic financial impact worldwide. I further believe that there are people aware of this attack who may be financially motivated. Here I am speculating, as we do not have a source of comprehensive intelligence yet. One of my short-term goals is to develop a source on this subject by following the money trail. Nothing is free, and an attack of this type will be expensive to execute. So on a macro scale, that is what we are doing. On a micro scale, there will be a meeting in this hotel tomorrow between two financiers I believe are involved in this plot. We need to find out what they are doing. To that end, we're going to bug their rooms. The concierge has already told me which rooms they will have, and I can get in both rooms today. With any luck, we'll have ringside seats to their discussion.

"As for the remainder of today, Sophia and I will get the rooms bugged. Larry, I suggest that you and Liz go explore Paris. The concierge will get you a limo—tell him you want a Bentley—and VIP passes for the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. You can't possibly do justice to the Louvre in an afternoon, but you can gain an appreciation for its significance. Two of our new friends will go with you. Toby and Bruce, I want you to take the Audi to the airport and park it in the hangar we're using. You'll return in the van that the other two of our new friends will be driving. You are all then free for the rest of the day, so have a little fun. But remember nobody ever goes anywhere alone. Are we good?"

Everyone nodded.

“Excellent,” said Jonathon. “Let’s meet back here at 1800 hours.”

* * *

He was just leaving his office when the phone rang. “Hello,” he said. “Have you learned anything?”

The voice on the other end sounded distinctly nervous. “No, sir. I’ve heard nothing and can’t find either of the two men.”

“What the hell do you mean? These guys can’t just disappear off the face of the earth. You know, this Price guy is very wealthy. Could he have just bought off your men?”

“Anything’s possible, I guess. But I would be very surprised.”

“And I’m very surprised about how totally ineffective you’ve been. This is really not a particularly difficult job. Or at least it shouldn’t be. Kidnapping a young guy and his bimbo girlfriend is not the stuff of great intrigue and derring-do. Look, I’ve got a lot to do, and this really isn’t very high on the list until he does something unusual. So just keep an eye on him and report back if you see anything worth reporting. By the way, you came with great references, but you’ve been a complete disappointment to me. This I will remember. Good-bye.”

The man on the other end of the call was seriously pissed off. He simply couldn’t figure out what was going on with this Jonathon character. It looked to him like Jonathon was just a rich playboy out having some fun. His girlfriend was apparently quite the looker. But the longer he thought about it, the more angry he got, particularly because he was very anxious to make a good impression on this client. *It’s time to get serious*, he thought. He knew two guys who were ex-French Foreign Legion troops, and they were very good. Mean as snakes and always looking for a job. He decided to call them and complete this assignment to his client’s satisfaction.

* * *

Jonathon heard someone fumbling at the door at about 0300. He immediately got Sophia out of her bed and whispered the news to Toby. As the door opened, two men walked quietly into the room. Sophia shot the second man in the head just as Jonathon jumped the first man, slamming him in the head with the butt of his gun. The man went down and Jonathon quickly tied his hands and feet with cable ties. Toby and Bruce came in and dragged the man Sophia had killed into the bathroom, while Jonathon and Sophia dropped the unconscious man on the bed and then

gagged him with a hand towel. It wouldn't do to have him screaming bloody murder in the Ritz Hotel.

Jonathon nodded at Sophia. "Please do the honors and wake this guy up," he said.

Sophia took the long needle from her purse and gently inserted it. The prisoner jerked, his eyes opened in a panic, and he screamed, with little audible effect.

"That's just for starters, my friend. To make it stop, just tell me who hired you. I've got all night if you don't want to talk, but you're just getting warmed up on the pain meter. So again, who hired you?"

Jonathon moved the gag.

"Go to hell! I'm not talking," he gasped.

"No problem," said Jonathon, shoving the gag back in place. He nodded at Sophia, and she again slid the needle in, but somewhat deeper.

This time the pain was so intense and the stress so great that the blood vessels in the man's right eye burst, further increasing his agony. Jonathon again removed the gag and Sophia pulled the needle partway out. "Who hired you?" he asked again. Tell us, and the pain will stop."

His eyes were wild and he was gasping for breath. "All right, all right," he said. "His name is Rolf Hoffmann."

Jonathon had an unusual ability to mimic people's voices and accents, which he used now. He frisked the man, retrieved a phone, and checked the last call. It was the same number he had found in the phone in Zurich and the two phones he had liberated the day before. He dialed the number, and a deep, raspy voice answered.

"Do you have them?" he asked.

"Yes," Jonathon answered, mimicking his prisoner's voice.

"Bring them to the drop off: 26 Passage Bafour, in the back."

"We'll be there in an hour," said Jonathon. "It will take a little time to get them out of the hotel unobserved." He terminated the call.

Jonathon then went to the room phone and dialed the front desk. "Francois, I need a favor. Would you please have someone bring me an empty laundry cart? Thanks. I very much appreciate it."

Jonathon then took his prisoner to the bathroom, bent his head over the bathtub, and very coldly shot him.

“Guys,” he said to Toby and Bruce, “please dump these two in the cart and take them down the service elevator. Get them in the van, and then call me when you’re ready to go. We’re going to pay a little visit to Mr. Hoffmann.”

The cart arrived and Toby and Bruce left. “We’ll meet you out front,” said Jonathon.

Sophia and Jonathon got dressed and headed for the elevator. “Please remind me never to trust myself to your gentle hands if I know something you want to know. Geez, you’re quite the operator,” he said with the beginning of a smile.

When they got downstairs, Jonathon went to the front desk and discretely slipped Francois a one-hundred-dollar bill.

“Always glad to be of service, Mr. Price,” he said. He had learned long ago how to spot people that understood the basic idea that service is not free, regardless of the hotel’s reputation for service. Mr. Price clearly understood the program.

Jonathon and Sophia went out the door and climbed in the van. “Let’s find this place first and do some reconnaissance before we just knock on the door,” he said.

After driving for about twenty minutes, they found the designated drop off spot. It was a grimy, rundown building in a grimy, rundown neighborhood, and a man standing in the alley behind the building waved at them.

Seeing the man, Jonathon sighed. “So much for reconnaissance,” he grumbled.

Jonathon idled the van up to the spot where the man was standing. Toby and Bruce whipped open the sliding door on the side of the van, grabbed the man, and threw him into the vehicle. Bruce then tied his hands with cable ties while Toby gagged him. They drove for another thirty minutes to an industrial area north of Paris, found a dark empty lot, and stopped.

Hoffmann’s eyes were wide with terror as Jonathon and Sophia turned to face him. Jonathon spoke first.

“Good evening, Mr. Hoffmann. It’s nice to finally meet you. But I must say I, or rather we, find ourselves rather irritated by your efforts to kidnap us. Personally, I regard that as very poor form on your part.” Jonathon’s tone was pleasant and relaxed, much to the surprise of Sophia, Toby, and Bruce, all of whom had expected more in the way of fireworks.

Jonathon continued. "My irritation has of course been visited upon the men you sent to get us." He gestured at the bodies behind Hoffmann. "Now it is your turn, and we have several ways we might proceed. First, you could just tell us who hired you. Second, Sophia could talk to you and provide encouragement for you to tell us what we want to know." He gestured at Sophia, and she climbed in the back.

"Toby, please hold Mr. Hoffmann, and Bruce, please hold Mr. Hoffman's arm and place this towel underneath his hand."

Jonathon then produced a set of shears he had picked up in the hotel garden earlier in the day. "Now, Mr. Hoffman, if you refuse to tell us what we want to know, I'm going to start removing your fingers until you decide to comply with our request."

"Come on now, Price," said Hoffman. "I'm sure we can come to a more reasonable accommodation than cutting off body parts."

He was about to go on when Jonathon handed Sophia the shears. Jonathon grabbed Hoffman's index finger and Sophia sheared it off, holding the towel to the bleeding stump. Hoffman screamed with both terror and pain.

"All right, Hoffman, who hired you, and what do they want?"

"God, if I tell you and he finds out, he'll kill me."

Jonathon smiled. "Hell, Rolf, you shouldn't worry about that because I'm going to kill you anyway. All you have to figure out is how long it's going to take."

Hoffmann looked like he was going to faint. Jonathon's ice-cold look and the large, ugly scar running down his face convinced Hoffmann that he had no choice but to tell him what he wanted to know. "His name is Jerome Davies and he works at a branch of a foreign bank: ACQ of Singapore. He hired me to investigate you and find out what you know, if anything, about some deal he's put together. He also told me he didn't care how I did the job and that he was just interested in results. Finally, he said that I was not to discuss our arrangement with anyone, and if he found out that I had he would have one of his more violent clients deal with me. That's all I know—really."

The terrified look on his face and his general demeanor told Jonathon that Hoffmann was telling the truth. So Jonathon picked up the gun lying beside him and calmly shot him in the forehead, an act that created a nervous silence in the van. Everyone sitting there had taken many lives, but rarely, if ever, in such a cold-blooded manor. And the calm, unconcerned look on Jonathon's face scared them all a little. Why Jonathon had the reputation of being a ruthless killer was becoming clear to them in an unsettling fashion. But Jonathon had not yet finished.

“Let’s find a couple of Dumpsters and dispose of the two guys in the laundry cart,” he said. “Then we’re going to prepare a present for Mr. Davies.”

By 0600, the job was finished. The bodies were rotting in the slums of Paris, and a nicely wrapped package was waiting to be mailed to Mr. Davies.