

One

Thursday 22nd April 2010 – Manhattan, NY

The view over the Hudson River had never looked better to Chrissie Fersen. The Upper West Manhattan apartment was leased to her fiancé but owned by her father's company, and the trappings of success in the marine engineering business were now giving her some personal fulfillment. Clad only in a towel, she stood gazing out of a huge picture window looking down over the 79th Street Boat Basin, the panorama before her gradually fading as the lights from the marina fought vainly back against the looming dusk. Chrissie held a glass to her lips and savoured the bubbly aroma beneath her nose.

"I can't believe it. It's amazing! No, really amazing!"

"So are you. Now drop that towel and get your ass in this tub."

The voice from behind made her giggle, and she finally turned her back on the sparkling luminosity that bedecked the river frontage. Robert was sitting up

to his chest in warm soapy water surrounded by candles, mirrored tiles and Etruscan marble. He raised an eyebrow as a further reminder that he expected his P.A. to do as he had asked.

“Is that my boss speaking, or the father of my child?”

Chrissie put one hand on her hip and sashayed toward the bath, pursing her lips in a pout that she hoped looked seductive. Then she squealed in surprise as Robert reached up and pulled the towel right off.

“Both! Now do as you’re told!”

But Chrissie was in playful mood, and instead of complying with her lover’s demands, she screamed with laughter and ran over to the couch to grab two cushions.

“No you don’t, mister! How dare you take advantage of a poor, naked lady?”

Robert was grinning broadly as he climbed out of the tub, and padded across the room toward her, without any concern for the trail of soapy water that his feet made on the thick carpet.

“Oh, yeah? Well if you’ll drop those cushions I’ll be pleased to show you...”

Chrissie threw one of the cushions aside, but clamped the other firmly over her stomach as she reclined theatrically on the couch.

“But Mister Carnegie, can’t you see that I’m pregnant?” The accent was a fairly poor representation of Marilyn Monroe, but it didn’t go unnoticed.

“Now that you mention it... ” He squatted down next to her and brought his face closer to hers. “I can’t honestly say that it’s that noticeable.”

As he closed in for the kiss, his hand took hold of the cushion and firmly but gently removed it from her grasp. Dropping it onto the floor, he placed his hand lightly onto her stomach, and traced a random pattern there with his fingertips. Chrissie squirmed with pleasure at his touch, and broke the kiss.

“So has it finally hit home yet?”

“What? That I’m going to be a father?”

“No. That you’ve got a girl into trouble, and you’re gonna be paying for it for the rest of your life!”

Robert laughed. “Oh, I think you’re right there, m’dear! Although I think it was you who got *me* into trouble, and if I can’t persuade you to start behaving yourself and join me in that tub over there, then I’m going to have to treat this very, very seriously.”

Recognising that her fiancé had now fully entered into the spirit of the game, Chrissie raised her eyebrows in anticipation of his next move.

“How serious?”

“This serious.”

He put his arm out to the side of the couch and retrieved the open bottle of champagne from the ice bucket that still sat there. Chrissie moved far too late to avoid the remaining contents of the bottle, as they poured over her warm skin in a torrent of pale but icy revenge.

Thirty six thousand feet above the Atlantic, Michael Fersen was struggling to cope with the economies of Tourist Class. A sheaf of papers had slipped onto the cabin floor under one of the seats, and the frustrated businessman discovered that he could not get his head into a position where he could see to pick them up again. It took several attempts by touch alone to recover all the documents, and for a moment he had considered calling over one of the cabin crew to check if there were any more out of his reach. Satisfied that all the pages were complete, he put his head back and exhaled in frustration. *Give me a break!* Have I really been so dense? Should I have seen this coming? He had been forced by a freak of nature to snatch the only available seats, and in Economy too – all because he'd made one simple mistake.

Sat in the middle seat in a row of three, it would have been exceptionally cramped for any other passengers either side of Michael Fersen. At around two hundred and thirty pounds, he didn't so much sit back in his seat as defeat it by occupation. Not a man to be defied lightly, it could only have been the hand of God that won supremacy by making a volcano erupt in Iceland. It had been his birthday three days ago, but it had not been celebrated. At fifty seven years of age Fersen now shrugged aside an event that had lost its appeal for more than thirty years. He sighed heavily as he closed his notebook and looked through the aircraft window into the void of his life. Moonlight painted silver streaks along the front edge of the wing, but the sad man in 38B saw nothing of beauty. The world was

no longer at his feet. Recent events had scared the hell out of him, so it was time to regroup.

His attention shifted to the small video screen set into the seat in front of him. Another reminder of the chaos that had just entered his life: a representation of the northern hemisphere, framed in a touch screen box, gave a course across the Atlantic for all one hundred and eighty two passengers presently in Economy Class. Alternating with an on-screen message of welcome from Continental Airlines was a reminder of the miscellany of entertainment channels awaiting the passengers aboard Flight CO17. Fersen shook his head in resignation and raised his hand in front of him, idly considering if he should simply turn the damn thing off altogether.

But then the picture on screen changed as if part way through a movie, the image now displaying a city street with elegant Georgian buildings, proudly flanked at ground level by iron railings. Into view in the foreground came a plodding horse shackled to a two-wheeled cart, with a man and a young lad of about fourteen at the traces. Their clothing was old-fashioned: simple work-shirts and trousers with heavy boots, while the young lad also appeared to be wearing an apron. At the back of the cart sat several large metal churns, a couple of wooden crates, and some enamel jugs. Fersen watched in fascination as the lad leapt off the cart, grabbed a heavy jug off the back, and climbed the steps to ring the bell of a stone-fronted building with a heavy front door. The screen in front of him was too small for much detail, but he

thought he could just make out the number 17 etched in gold leaf onto a glazed panel above the door.

Then it felt as if turbulence had hit his ribcage. The city street scene was clearly depicted on all three monitors in front of him: a triple image that brought shock recognition of the house Fersen had left in anger just a few hours ago.

Beads of sweat now leaked from every pore. He sat transfixed while the focus gradually shifted past the cart, past the boy as he stood waiting patiently on the steps, and on to the handle of the door itself. Now oblivious to the detritus of the twenty first century that surrounded him, Fersen was totally absorbed by a parallel world of long ago – yet still so familiar. He caught his breath as the door swung open, and witnessed the look of surprise on the milk-boy's face. Framed in the doorway stood the corpse-like image of an old man: a stooped figure in a black coat, waistcoat and winged collar. The face filled the screen, cold black eyes that looked directly into Fersen's heart while the thin lips moved silently. He stared back, his own mouth moving in a similar pattern. A spasm of pain surged through his upper body and his hands clutched the left side of his chest. He squeezed his eyelids together in a vain attempt to shut out the images on screen. But then his mouth was forced to open wider as his lungs made a futile bid to function without oxygen.

A cabin steward looked over at the passenger in seat 38B as she picked up a plastic cup from the aisle. She knew a heart attack when she saw one, and

reacted instinctively. Stabbing the help button above her head, she waved urgently to her colleague further up the aisle before throwing herself into the seat next to the struggling businessman. Placing an oxygen mask over his mouth, she eased him back into his seat. Funny thing to say though. He had managed to utter just one word before the mask went on – “apron”. Or at least, that was what it sounded like.

Two

The Glasgow flight that morning had been one of the first lucky ones to travel as the weather patterns shifted the recent ash cloud sufficiently to create a flying window for transatlantic passengers. Rain fell steadily at Newark Liberty International Airport, and at the Continental Airlines base a harassed administration assistant did his best to ease the situation at ground level for Fersen Marine Enterprises Senior Executive, Robert Carnegie.

“Yes, Mister Carnegie – that’s all we know. Mr Fersen has asked for you to pick him up in person... No, suh... I sure couldn’t say, suh. I appreciate what you’re saying, but that’s all we’ve been told... I have an ETA of 08.28... That’s correct, suh... Sure, we’ll tell him... I got that. Thank you very much, suh... Have a ni-... Shit.” Donald Hewy put the phone back on its rest. He was a big man with seven years’ experience in customer service on two airlines. Today some of Carnegie’s more choice expressions had made him feel both small and insignificant.

“Lois!” he yelled over his shoulder to a pretty Jamaican girl on the far side of the office he shared with three others. “You sure we got our ETA right for Seventeen outta Glasgow? This Carnegie guy’s gonna have my balls on toast if he shows up and has to wait just one second!”

The girl gave him a flash of perfect white teeth as she removed her headset and pushed her chair back.

“Doncha worry, hun. She just started her descent. Your boy’s got less than sixty minutes.”

Chrissie sat up in bed and stared at the face of the man who had just brought her a coffee with a slice of bad news.

“Search me why I’ve got to pick him up personally, but like the guy said, he insisted.”

“Robert, this is ridiculous. He said it was an angina attack? He’s had those before. Why the hell has he got to spoil our first day off together in two months? You should have told him to shove it! If I’d taken the call...” She broke off as she considered what she might have said. Would it have made any difference? Once again her father had managed to thwart her plans to do things her way. She ignored the coffee and made her way to the john. Her fiancé followed her, attempting to calm Chrissie’s mood as he had done on so many previous occasions.

“I don’t think there’s any choice. Sandy is taking his mother upstate somewhere for treatment, so your dad doesn’t technically have a driver available today. He wouldn’t have known that, I’m sure. It’s just my lucky day, I guess.”

Chrissie was still seething. “There’s got to be other drivers. Why you? And why has it got to be now, just when we had something to celebrate? What’s the old bastard up to now?” She pressed the flush button

angrily, and Robert winced at the ferocity of her emotions, but shook his head in reply.

“I honestly wouldn’t know.” He glanced at his wristwatch and took a last sip of his own drink. “Look, I’ll have to go. We’ll soon know what it’s about, I’m sure. You want to keep the bed warm?”

Her brown eyes met his blue ones, and he caught the flash of anxiety there.

“You won’t tell him, will you?”

“About what?”

Chrissie crooked her finger in a summons of her own, and Robert bent down obediently. Reaching for his tie, she gently pulled him toward her and eased her back against the door of the refrigerator as their lips melted together in an all-too-brief moment of passion. Robert was the first to break, adjusting his tie automatically while still savouring the kiss.

“Don’t fool with me, Mister Carnegie...” her voice was slightly husky. “You know very well what I’m talking about. Hey – I’m serious! He mustn’t know I’m pregnant. That’s for me to tell him, not you.”

Robert looked into her eyes, sensing the painful emotions behind them. Relations between father and daughter had always seemed strained, and he was well aware that Chrissie’s pregnancy was going to be a sensitive subject to handle. He glanced at his watch again, increasingly conscious of a need to be on his way to the airport.

“Okay, okay. You’re the boss – and so is he! What’s a poor wee Scot to do?”

She watched him retreat to the apartment door, a sense of foreboding deepening the frown on her face.

“Robert!” He looked round. “Take care.”

Then he blew her a kiss and reached for his car keys. As the door closed behind him Chrissie walked over to the large picture window and looked out over the river toward New Jersey. Somewhere out there was the man who always found a way to pull her down. She had constantly lived in her father’s shadow. *Well, not any more, mister.* I’m going to have a family of my own, and this time you don’t have any say in the matter.

For possibly the first time since kindergarten, Michael Fersen was letting someone push him around. On this occasion it could be argued that he had little choice, occupying a hospitality wheel-chair belonging to Continental Airlines, and with a sweating Donald Hewy steering him gratefully into the VIP Suite. But the patient was not in the best of health, and his breathing was still causing concern to the airport doctor walking briskly at his side.

“Mr Fersen, I insist you let us take you to hospital for a proper examination. We need to perform an angiogram as soon as possible.”

The occupant of the wheel-chair inhaled heavily from the hand-held oxygen mask given him by the flight crew, and tried to shout down the medical man’s argument.

“Fuck you! You’re not taking me... anywhere.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Fersen, but I’m really not convinced this is common angina until we’ve done a CT scan. Your breathing is still poor, and the nitro-glycerine does not appear to be –”

“Beta blockers... always work for me.” Fersen tried to turn his head, and lifted the portable cylinder in Hewy’s direction. “You!... Wass yer name?”

“Hewy, suh! Don Hewy.”

“Get me Carnegie, Hewy. Someone phone Carnegie?”

The airline official was conscious of a necklace of sweat forming around the collar of his shirt as he glanced at the doctor before replying.

“On his way, suh. Spoke to him myself.” Hewy raised his eyebrows to his frustrated neighbour as they negotiated the doors to an elevator, and then pressed the button for the lower concourse. He spoke quietly as the doors closed with a pneumatic hum. “No use arguing, mister. He won’t have it any other way.”

An angry whisper came right back. “He hasn’t signed his release papers yet!”

But with another deep breath the big man twisted his head to look the medic straight in the eye before holding out a hand for his clipboard.

“Gimme the fucking papers!”

The rain was easing when Robert pulled up his Porsche in front of the VIP area as instructed. He slid the window down and called over one of the blue-liveried attendants.

“Robert Carnegie for Mr Michael Fersen. He here yet?”

The attendant looked over his shoulder just as the glazed panel doors hissed open to reveal the VIP entourage almost sprinting toward him. Donald Hewy was sweating even more heavily, while the concerned doctor’s previously sour expression appeared a shade more content. The occupant of the wheel-chair took one more helping of oxygen, and then thrust the mask and cylinder to one side. Robert ran round to help as he saw his boss struggling to get out of the chair, but was beaten to it by Hewy and the attendant. The medic looked a little more concerned.

“Mr Fersen – you can’t do that! You need to keep yourself – “

“Shove it, Frankenstein. Carnegie... you gotta get me home.” He seemed genuinely grateful for Robert’s assistance as they began the tricky transfer from wheel-chair to passenger seat.

“Okay sir. I got you. How bad is it?” But there was no response from his boss as they struggled with Fersen’s bulk and the confined restrictions of a Porsche 911 passenger door. “Easy! Easy does it... Mind your head, sir... Okay, that’s good.”

The doctor saw his opportunity and grabbed Robert’s arm as the door finally closed.

“Listen – the guy had some kind of seizure in flight. The crew suspected a heart attack at first, but then he recovered a little and said he had a history of angina.”

“That’s true,” said Robert as he took Fersen’s valise off Hewy.

“Thing is – the crew administered a tablet of nitroglycerine, which should ease most symptoms within five minutes, okay? But his breathing is still not good.” The medic consulted his watch and his clipboard. “First dose administered one hour and a half ago. Two more doses five minutes apart. That man is still in a helluva lot of pain, though he’s trying to hide it.” He now had Robert’s full attention, so he pressed on. “This is probably what we call an unstable angina, and that almost certainly means a heart attack is imminent. You follow me? Get Mr Fersen to a hospital – quick.” The doctor slapped Robert on the shoulder and then hurried back into the building relieved of his burden.

Donald Hewy was also hastily retreating to the sanctuary of his dry and cosy office on the upper concourse, and Robert found himself alone for a moment at the side of his car. An angry roar of jet engines came from almost directly overhead, reminding him of the aggressive master he still had to serve. Yet there was still this new problem to face. Robert shrugged off the advice he had been given, opened his door and threw the valise on to the back seat.

Easing his way toward the busier traffic of the Interstate 78 Expressway, Robert glanced at his passenger. The big man had his eyes closed, but appeared to be breathing easily, if a little heavily. He tried to concentrate on his route to Michael Fersen’s home in Maplewood, but he couldn’t wrench his mind completely away from his earlier conversation with Chrissie.

Ironically, it had been Fersen himself who had made the introduction twelve years earlier, when his own father's engineering business in Scotland had been bought out by the larger American company. Chrissie had come over to Glasgow too, but it had been obvious to him then that her presence had been out of respectful duty rather than filial affection. Robert remembered his initial impression of a sulky yet beautiful face, and her almost complete indifference to the mechanics of the takeover.

The expansion of Fersen Marine had been a lucky break for Robert, who had subsequently been promoted to his present executive position in the Manhattan office. And it had seemed an even luckier break when Michael Fersen later appointed his own daughter to be Robert's personal assistant. Chrissie had once confided in him that the ultimate reason for her father's hand in deciding her career had been his anger when she dropped out of college. That didn't entirely ring true, so Robert suspected there was more behind the family saga than either of the Fersens was prepared to tell him.

The traffic was now fairly light on the Interstate, but the rain strengthened as they headed west for the quieter urban districts of New Jersey. The big man's eyes blinked open as a single word barked out from his lips:

"Christina!"

"Yes?" Robert hesitated. His boss always used Chrissie's proper name, even though she never used it herself. "She's at... Well, she's at the office. Did you

want to speak to her?” His hand hovered by the cell phone in its cradle, but the response was not what he expected.

“No! Yes. Not now. Later.” His boss continued to stare vacantly ahead, his breathing growing heavier as he snatched large gulps of air. Robert grew more alarmed, partly because of the laboured breathing of his passenger, but mainly because of the indecision he had just displayed. In ten years of working closely with this man he had never seen him hesitate, not even over a menu.

“Should we head for the hospital?” he asked, glancing in his rear-view mirror for an opportunity to change lanes.

“No!” This time there was no hesitation. “Take me home... Then fetch Chrissie. I need to speak to her.” Fersen’s breathing slowed down, and he closed his eyes again as the tension in his body released, finally allowing him to relax into his seat.

Robert blinked in surprise at the use of the pet name, conscious that his passenger had more than his physical condition on his mind. One more glance to his right and he eased his foot back on to the accelerator. All the strain in the older man appeared to have left him for the moment, and Robert thought back again to his last conversation with Chrissie. He had challenged her on several occasions to sort out the family differences, and she had said that she would, but in her own time and on her own terms. She would not be pushed, and displayed the same stubborn values he

had seen from her father. Perhaps now was the best time after all.

Travelling just twenty yards behind Robert was fifty-three-year-old Jerry Stolz. He was alone in his truck, listening to the story of Crackling Rosie as sung by Neil Diamond, and nearly at his destination of Short Hills, NJ. He'd let the driver in front on to the Expressway back at the intersection for the airport, giving him a blast on the air horn purely because he had a hankering for a Porsche himself. Jerry had driven trucks for over twenty years, and made himself a tidy pile that was soon (in his mind) going to be spent on something high performance, low slung and sexy. The car in front fitted all those categories, so Jerry's attention that morning was partly focussed on what was occupying the lane right in front of him.

But it was not the streamlining of the bodywork that now caught the truck driver's eye, nor even the way the Porsche 911 was being driven. It was what he could see through the rear window of the sports car: the driver, his passenger – and a *third* occupant right behind them. Jerry Stolz knew there was no proper back seat in such a model, so could that really be a human figure sitting squarely in the middle?

Robert's eyes were firmly fixed in front of him as he took the plunge:

“Sir? I wonder if I ought to mention something about Chrissie?” Fersen opened his eyes reluctantly and lifted his head. “It’s just that I know she wants to speak privately to you too. And I wonder if you are strong enough to cope with seeing her right now?”

The dull eyes of Robert’s employer widened in suspicion, and he looked directly at his senior executive.

“Why should I need to be strong? I’ve a touch of angina – that’s all! Don’t you star- “

The noise from behind the two men didn’t sound like laughter at first. In the micro seconds that it took the two engineers to recognise the source of the regular high pitch tone, the Porsche seemed to take on a life of its own. Robert’s reaction to the human form only inches from his shoulder made the car speed forward, take a violent lunge to the right, then brake sharply and spin round almost to face the opposite direction. Luckily the lane was clear, but now Robert was helpless with shock, and his foot hit the accelerator once more. The Porsche leapt forward again, heading straight at Jerry’s truck.

Michael Fersen’s last view of anything was from another place, another time. He was staring once more into the blackest eyes he had ever seen. Eyes that were older than his – and crinkled up with cruel laughter at the horrified reactions of the Fersen Marine Emperor and his lackey, gathering speed toward an object far more solid than their own fragile shell.

Jerry Stolz's jaw dropped as he realised what was about to happen. He hit the airbrakes and felt the truck skid slightly to the left – but it was not enough. The collision, when it came, made a noise that sounded like an explosion. Vehicles on both sides of the Interstate had to take avoiding action or brake hard as the impact flung the shattered sports car into the air, bouncing off a four-wheel drive Chevrolet in the outer lane and rolling over three times under a bridge support. Jerry's truck jack-knifed and pushed two cars aside into the crash barrier before coming to a halt amid a screeching of brakes and tyres desperately scrambling for stability in a world of chaos.

*Sorry, but that is the end of this Preview of
The Murder Tree by Alan Veale.*

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