

The Virginia Beach Job

By Lewis Woodson

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Part One

The Job

IN SOUTHERN FRANCE—in Marseille, on a street south of the new port and east of the old—the American stood with his hair feathering at his brow and his hat tumbling away from him in the wind. He turned and stepped leeward when it slowed under a Renault and stopped when it arched around the wheel and continued down the street sliding and rolling, bumped over a curb and came to a halt under a man who knocked it against his leg and flashed it overhead for the owner to see. The American turned into the wind and shuttered at its cold, pulled his jacket closed against it. He spun his watch about his wrist and started north.

In a window, *pain au chocolat*, and he moved his hand over his mid-section, felt his gut, just begun to overhang his trousers in the last year. He was tall, wore wire glasses, a check pattern shirt under his long jacket, and age spots that worked their way up his arms from the backs of his pale hands. She would never eat something that he brought to her.

An early spring mistral swept food wrappers and other refuse of the preoccupied through the streets. Plastic bags flagged violently on light poles and a soda can rocked restlessly in an alley he passed. He stopped at a fruit stand to buy a tangerine, *La Provence* flipping in the wind threatening to fly and telling that Marseille and Lille had drawn, and he thought about her eyes. The wind masked what the vendor had said, he shouted back in French and continued north past grocers and textile shops and graffiti and men speaking French and Arabic and not noticing him. He had half an hour.

Further up the street, a noise from behind, a passenger on a motorbike pushed him; the two young men sped by in a streak of red and white, behind them a waft of soap and cologne thin in the wind. He had backed to a storefront, fingertips on glass, and watched them weave down the sidewalk missing people and bollards and small cars half parked on the street. The passenger

turned and looked back before his head swung out into the road and behind an old bus and was gone.

North into the cold, he stopped only occasionally, bonjouring on entry, smiling apologetically when leaving. Baskets of cheeses, bundled fragrant lavender from fields up north, the tricolor emblazoned on mugs and stiffly hung on small brass flag poles. Decorative spoons.

He entered a small corner shop and saw on a high shelf behind the counter several small figurines of different sizes and shapes that the shopkeeper said were crystal. He asked for the bird, was handed another, and the owner leaned on the counter and looked away. He held it up, the facets reflecting the different colors of the shop, and the light of the windows. It was smaller than his thumb and probably a fox, though its hindquarters were misshapen and more resembled that of a horse. Lines on his face gathered into a frown. Were her French any better he would have an easier time getting to know the young woman—she seemed to have been in the country less than a year—and what she did say was restricted to short utterances with facial expressions that at once made his heart race and made him want to leave the room to not return.

He called himself Jean and she Marie, and when he had left with her the previous day she hugged herself against the cold and he ushered her down the windy alley, half-turned and reassuring her minder with a raised hand. The Frenchman leaned against a wall and watched them eat. The nearby alley sandwich shop was just two plastic chairs and one small table that rocked on asphalt, the traffic an echo between five story towers where most roll-up doors stayed shuttered and covered with spray paint and the walls spotted with weathered decals. She looked under the table and held its leg down with her foot, and ate hunched over her food and protecting its crumbs from the wind. When the Frenchman over her shoulder shouted out she looked back and bounced her leg on the ball of her foot and shifted the table, and the American smiled at her.

The Frenchman blew smoke into the swirling air above him and called out “*cinq minutes*,” and her eyes moved up toward the American and away. Dark, perceptive eyes. At “*trois*” her leg shook and her eyes rested on his hand, and he turned it upright. At “*deux*” she looked behind her again, then stopped chewing and lowered her sandwich to look past the American and down the alley, with her narrow fingers curled before her mouth. The American turned and looked, too. He moved to take her hand, but she refused his touch, and her leg moved again. He looked down at the asphalt, then leaned back into his chair and tapped the table with the tips of his fingers, and urged her to eat with a nod.

When the Frenchman said “*un*,” she straightened her back and said that they should go, the expression that seemed of stone on her face, and she put her hand on top of his and told him thank you in English, and they rose and walked back to where the Frenchman stood stabbing his cigarette into the wall.

The American twisted up the figurine in three small sheets of tissue paper and tied it off with string and walked with head low into the wind. When he reached her establishment the attendant stood with his hand high on the door, told him in French, “She's not here anymore.”

“*Où est-elle?*”

“She's not here. Go away.”

“When will she be back?”

“She's gone. Maybe took vacation in Canada—who knows? Go away. Don't come back.”

The American left the figurine on the window where a girl in an apron sat staring out at the alley with her arms crossed before her. She looked down at the gift then back at the American who turned and walked away. When he returned the following day, a man he did not know grabbed him by the collar, slapped and shoved him. He tripped on a bollard, stumbled and fell

against the wall on the other side of the alley. The large man told him he had no reason to ever return.

He slipped when righting himself, his feet kicking aside a plastic bottle and creased shopping bag. In his fall he had broken a downspout from the gutter above but was unable to rejoin the two halves. Someone in an apartment overhead not far away closed their shutters. He braced himself against the dumpster to his side, wiped its rust from his hand and cleaned off his glasses. He brushed his jacket off and left, continuing north.

When he reached his hotel that night he stamped his feet on the hard brown tile and shook the chill from his jacket and trousers, and the young man behind the desk admonished him for not having come earlier, asked about his face. The American waved at him, assured the younger man that he was still strong, and started toward the stairs. The night man reminded him about the coffee and croissants, but the American only smiled and climbed the stairs to go to his room.

The one called Jasper had been on the same flight, and at the baggage carousel stood opposite Bonny looking up at a television monitor and patting his leg with his cap. The photocopies she had studied on the flight were torn and in an envelope she held close to her side; the lining of the wood oven, cracked and falling away piece by piece, it could collapse entirely any day. Two people made manager in as many months. She got her bag first and discarded the envelope and walked out into the heat, a large white van parked to the left flashed its lights, and a hand reached up out of the driver's window and gestured for her to approach. She walked toward it and stopped and peered in under the shade of her hand. Two figures in the front with more behind. She recognized the driver as Ed. Inside were Martin, Sam, Will, and Julian.

She pulled her blouse from her chest and let it fall back while she and the other five—all fanning themselves—waited for Jasper to enter the van that would take them to the coast. Julian asked what perfume she was wearing, the man outside the van studied, with his hand on the roof. Bonny sat forward, told Ed to turn on the air conditioner. The man outside the van looked down the concourse each way then asked, “Where is he?”

“He already told you,” she said. “He's not coming.”

He looked at the youngest in the van, said to Will, “You didn't say anything about him not being here.”

“Also didn't say he would,” Ed told him. “And now we've got security interested and headed this way. We'll park, close. Talk about it. I need the numbers. You'll like hearing what I've got to say.”

Jasper stood up straight and turned in place, looking in all directions around him before he said, "It's been nice seeing you all again. Be good." He put his hand up, closed the door and stepped back to watch them leave.

Three hours later the van drove along the coast, cool sea air blowing through the windows driving along Atlantic Avenue, and half an hour after was parked in a structure in the city's downtown area. Bonny and the others walked in the shade of the buildings on the south side of Main to a nearby plaza at Main and Central Park, passed the larger fountain and chose a table away from the main entrance and under the shade of a young tree near the smaller fountain, its low hiss summoned a wave of somnolence in Bonny, and she sat upright and reached her arm out of the shade and into the sunlight.

Ed still standing, he told her and the others that coffee was on at the house, the gray that before had only just taken hold at his temples had advanced, and he had not shaved for days and rubbed his chin while he spoke to them about a ball game he caught on television last night. A pair of young businessmen at a nearby table talked loudly about their work for several minutes and when they left were replaced by a group of teenage girls who had brought ice cream from a shop up Central Park. Ed told the team about a hockey playoff game that had gone into double overtime. A breeze blew through the plaza, shaking the leaves overhead, the fountain shifted in pitch and Bonny thought she felt a drop of cool water on her arm. Martin reached up and brushed his cheek, interrupting a thoughtful scratch. Sam lifted his head, smelled something carried on the breeze, and Martin pointed out the source in a pizza shop across the street, on the corner. She thought each of them had in turn also noticed the grey van parked South of the plaza that now drove away. The girls finished their ice cream and left, and Ed asked what the others thought about Town Center.

A rush job that Will had found on a board recently, Ed told them about how the city had only been incorporated in 1963, and of the growth experienced since the recession. The downtown they were in had been a stand of trees just twenty years before, he told them about the buildings to go up in the empty lots they had passed, and how the company Paragon acted as developer, builder, and eventual property manager, and how the Petersen Company—the second target, to be hit later in the summer—had a similar role in development at the city’s oceanfront. He told them about all the businesses vying for locations in the coming buildings, and the letters of intent and the large deposits sometimes required to secure those locations. He couldn’t know the final take, but every deposit secured would be a month’s rent. Each declined when offered to take the van back to the capital.

She stepped from the van and crossed her arms behind her head and leaned back into a long stretch, before her a blue two story clapboard house with a three-car garage addition, and on the Lynnhaven River. A tall arch over a recessed entryway and a matching transom window above the door, and above both a gable whose bold white barge boards matched the white casings of the windows throughout. Over it all a slate roof and tall chimney at each corner on the front. There was a boat trailer in the grass to the side, between the house and a low stone wall that ran back to near the edge of the water—missing its boat. She stopped in the foyer and asked, “Do you think it's big enough?” and thought she heard an echo.

A butcher block island-cum-table in the kitchen, properly oiled, but perhaps never sanded. It wore stains and scars from years of use by careless renters, and the range black with heavy cast iron grates, enamel nicked and chipped in places over the years. The door to the pantry could be heard opening and closing from most rooms, under its paint it bore irregular notches never filled

in that ran to shoulder height, and in the dining room a child's impression, his name, on the table. The iron bars at the center of the fireplace grate had been cooked away to wisps, and years of fires started with a closed damper had left the brickwork darkened with soot. She could follow the movements of people above with the squeaks of floorboards, and when she climbed the stairs to choose her room, the banister felt solid but moaned softly and stairs creaked. The doors were heavy and the walls thin, and in places it had a rich, musty woody smell that recalled old houses in other places, all laden with generations of constant change, forgotten triumphs and loss—long buried pets at rest out under trees they once patrolled, a playground now the domain of longing until those who hold the memories themselves move on; the old structure a mausoleum to ideas and loves, monument to dreams and lives and to the only truths. In the bathroom she saw a great uncle and an unfinished basement with a tall stack of board games. A tin of letters to the aunt she had never met, and monochrome picture in a white sweater, leaning against a post on a porch, somewhere and some time.

At the back of the house she found a large balcony overlooking the water with the river beyond mostly obscured by trees. There was a small dinghy left upturned at the water's edge, and a narrow wooden dock stretched out over the water with a white boat floating at its end. To the right a small tool shed with a padlock on the door tucked between two trees. A fire pit just beyond the patio.

She blew on her mug looking around the kitchen, rubbed her finger over a faint burn mark where a lit or still hot match had been dropped on the counter. Martin walked by and brushed against her shoulder and opened the refrigerator. He got a beer, and the others came into the kitchen and drank and they talked sports and movies and jobs in the news. A party in Dallas. Fifty thousand dollars of hobbyist telescopes gone when someone stole a truck and, posing as the

driver, drove up to the factory gate, hooked up to a loaded trailer inside and left. A thing with an online campaign to crowdfund an ambient heat engine, it had been written about in tech journals, and after twenty thousand had been raised the developer disappeared. The example in the online video and shown to journalists now suspected to have been powered via induction. Columbia had never heard of him. Martin said he would find something to lubricate the hinge. He no longer rubbed his ring finger with the thumb on that hand. Some fifteen pounds heavier and his skin taught, like her he'd put on weight for the job, and grew out his hair. Julian was hiding a limp, favored his right leg. Will was more mature, still rarely looked her in the eye. Ed quiet, pinched his lip with his thumb and index finger, and was the first to leave the room, telling the others to come into the living room when they were ready to continue.

When he finished it had gotten late. The sliding door at the back of the house stood open, and out in the coming night the sounds of crickets and birds, and the lights from houses far across the water already reflecting off its surface in ragged lines. A flurry of scratching noises out in the yard that Martin said was squirrels chasing each other.

Bonny picked up her beer, asked, "Most promising targets first? Those looking to lease a large space."

"I wish it were that cut and dried. There's a choice to be made. Some low value sure shots and some high value tough nuts—companies that weren't as far along in the process and might be a harder sell."

"You're lead. Make the decision."

Ed leaned forward in the chair, looked down at the rug and mouthed words to himself that none of the other five could hear. "Okay. We start small."

"Good."

“You'd have said that no matter what I said.”

“I'm just glad I don't have to make these calls.”

“And if someone has an old business card in their desk, an old email chain they reply to?”

“A good time to say thanks to Will for bringing this to our attention.”

“Will.”

“Good man.”

“I made it into Paragon as a reporter from a local student paper—”

“Before you knew we'd come?”

“I knew you'd come. I've got access to both their email servers and their phone lines. Targets will get new contact information, but I'm gonna set up my own server with Paragon's old server's address, tell mine to sit on any email for an hour before sending it along to the old server, which now has a new address. While you guys are out pretending to be from Paragon, I'll be back here to intercept anything from the targets. Phone calls from certain area codes will no longer make it to Paragon for a while starting that Wednesday. The caller'll be told the number's no longer in service, so he emails you for the new number. After wave one we monitor communications to see if anything is awry, and wait for the transfers. If after a week everything is looking good, we do it all over again. They'll get some mail while they're on their retreat that weekend, but if anyone support or back office stays behind I'll make sure they vacate the building.”

“With your toys?”

“And whatever happens, there's little chance wave two targets will know what's up. It'll take too long for Paragon to figure out what's happening.”

Ed continued, “A map of the city. Backup house out on the beach, here. We're here, on the Lynnhaven River, a tidal estuary off the Chesapeake Bay. Boat's fueled up and some supplies for

a quick egress if needed. Head north and once you're past the Lesner bridge you're in the bay. That goes a couple hundred miles north all the way to Baltimore. Pass the Lesner bridge and turn east, you're in the Atlantic Ocean in ten minutes and can head up or down the coast to wherever we need to go. Or we head out into the bay, west to Norfolk, and take the ICW anywhere down the coast. If you're in a car and need to lay low for a bit, there are a few good spots marked in blue. As with the boats, we don't anticipate needing these, but they're there. Maps on your walls, know this place like it's home, and these people like you've been in break rooms with them every day for years. In and out. Then you have to do it again a few hours later in a different office, maybe a different city. Then again. And again. You're gonna be exhausted and hate it, so it's got to be effortless. And remember rule three.”

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