

PROLOGUE

Thursday, January 1, 1981, 4:00 AM—Bern, Switzerland

THE STREETS OF BERN WERE deserted, but for a few clusters of people huddling against the frosty wind, still wearing their New Year's hats. Frantically trying to wave down an occasional cab, their heads turned as the ambulance whizzed past, sirens wailing and blue lights flashing. It came to a screeching halt in front of the Bern University Hospital's emergency entrance. Two paramedics helped the waiting staff to transfer the two patients onto stretchers. A third passenger followed behind. He was asked to sit in the waiting room. He phoned to tell his wife what had happened to their friend, and then settled down with a strong, hot cup of coffee. Every so often, he would see a doctor rushing by, so he finally stood up and stopped one of them long enough to ask: "Any news yet about Mr. Stevens?"

"Nothing yet, Mr. Ritter, I'm afraid. He's still in the operating room. We'll let you know as soon as we have something to report."

Finally, as the light of a new dawn revealed snow-capped mountains in the distance, he made another call to his wife.

"Hi Nina, Dan was just wheeled out of the operating room. He's being taken to the intensive care unit.

His wife sounded shocked. "What happened, Phil? Is he going to be all right?"

"The surgeon said that it's too early to give me a prognosis. I'll fill you in on the details when I get back."

"Thank God that at least he's alive. Take good care, Phil. You must be exhausted, and the roads are treacherous. See you soon."

As he left the building, Phil noticed the other patient who'd been in the ambulance with them being wheeled out, handcuffed, and rolled up a ramp into a waiting police ambulance.

Later that morning, in the ICU unit of the Bern University Hospital, Dan Stevens opened his eyes slowly as if waking up from a deep sleep. His mouth and throat felt as parched as desert earth, and his head was throbbing. Somewhere to the right of the bed a door opened, casting a shadowy beam of light into the pitch black room. He struggled to sit up as three figures entered the room. "Damn!" he cried out, as a searing pain shot through his chest, making him gasp. "What the hell is going on?"

Someone pulled the drapes aside and opened the wooden shutters. Light filtered in through an early morning haze. Dan's eyes moved quickly around the space where he was confined, but everything was out of focus. He could just barely make out a jovial-looking little bald man standing by his bed, wearing a stethoscope around his neck and holding his chart in his hand.

“Guten morgen, Herr Stevens.” Good morning Mr. Stevens,.” I see here that you are American. I am Doctor Baer. How are we feeling this morning?”

“Rotten,” he replied, trying to laugh. It ended in a scowl as another stabbing pain shot through his upper body.

Dr. Baer introduced the other two figures. “This is my assistant, Dr. Wormann, and this is the ICU head nurse, Elsa.”

He reviewed Dan’s chart, shook his head, and loudly proclaimed, “You, sir, are very lucky to be alive. The operation was successful but . . .”

“Operation?” Dan interrupted. “I had an operation?”

“Yes. You have been involved in a shooting. I was able to remove the bullet since it was still in your body, up against the rib, like this—” He pointed to the location of the rib. “The bullet entered your right chest cavity between the fourth and fifth rib, puncturing the lung but miraculously missing both the bronchial tube and the heart. It then lodged itself against one of the ribs near the spine, causing a slight fracture.

Dan tried to focus on Dr. Baer who was talking about the operation, which took nearly four hours—“and your head is not in such good shape either.”

Dan was thoroughly confused. “Doc, I don’t remember much. What happened to me?”

The doctor nodded. He studied Dan closely, obviously trying to decide how much to disclose at this stage. Finally, he pulled up a chair and sat down.

“First, you are in the Intensive Care Unit of the Bern University Hospital. You were brought in by ambulance yesterday, early in the morning, badly bruised and with a bullet wound. You may also have a concussion, which can cause some temporary loss of memory. It’s too early to promise you anything, good or bad, but it’s encouraging that the CT scan and the X-rays taken after the operation show no complications.”

“So what’s the bad news?”

Dan listened carefully as Doctor Baer explained that the X-rays confirmed his fears—that there was a fairly serious fracture at the base of his skull, in the occipital lobe area, probably caused by some sort of blow. The CT scan showed some bleeding in the area between the fracture and the brain.

“That explains,” the doctor went on, “why your sight is blurry and you have some loss of memory. We will have to keep you here for a while under observation, and may have to operate again after we do another brain scan tomorrow.”

“Sounds pretty bad, huh?”

Dr. Baer shrugged. “The important thing now is for you to move your head as little as possible and try to be patient.” He paused and sighed. “I am afraid that’s all I know. Perhaps the police will be able to tell you more.” He got up. “I will be back later to see you later.”

When the doctor left the room, Elsa prepared a syringe. She searched for an open space between the bandages, and gave him a quick and painless jab. “This will alleviate some of the pain. Now try to sleep, Herr Stevens.” She pulled the drapes shut, switched off the lights and left the room.

Dan lay there staring up at the ceiling. He had so many questions that needed answers. But he felt too exhausted to ponder them, so he shut his eyes and let his mind drift. It was quiet in the room except for the steady beep . . . beep . . . beep coming from a panel of instruments.

Hundreds of images from his past were racing through his mind. Dan thought about his arrival in Geneva and about everything that had happened to him since then. And then Michelle broke into his thoughts. His eyes opened up wide. A flash of memory penetrated his aching brain. He remembered opening a door. Inside, facing him, stood a big, brawny guy pointing a gun at Michelle, who had her back against the wall, her lovely face, contorted by fear. *Oh God, someone was trying to kill Michelle That's what happened.* He desperately wanted to get out of bed—out of the hospital. But he couldn't move. He couldn't do a damn thing. . . . The injection began to take effect. As Dan's eyes closed again, an image of Michelle appeared against the black screen of his shuttered eyelids—Michelle's face exactly as she looked the night they met—at that instant when their eyes locked and she gave him that dazzling smile of hers . . . that dazzling smile . . . The image faded away and there was only silence and darkness around him as he fell into a deep sleep.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

ALMOST TWO YEARS EARLIER, AS winter was coming to an end in London., Dan Stevens stared blankly out the window of his apartment, hardly noticing that winter was at last coming to an end in London. Across the street, the trees in Belgrave Square were turning a pale green in the bright sunshine. It should have been a pleasurable moment, full of hope and promise.

But as Dan stood there in the empty living room, all he could focus on was the devastating truth that his life had broken apart, and like it or not, he had to pick up the shattered pieces for the sake of his sons.

The cab pulled in front of the door, Dan's gaze lingered one last time on the house that had been their home for nearly ten years, and then he, his two boys and Genna, their nanny, piled in.

"To Heathrow Airport please—Terminal 2," he told the driver. They were on their way to Geneva, where Dan would settle into a new apartment and a new job.

On the way to the airport, everyone was silent. Dan sighed. He looked at his sons and at Genna. There was palpable tension in the air. Jack, his fifteen-year-old, would soon be going back to England. His boarding school would have to provide him with his only real sense of security and belonging. Genna, he thought, was probably looking forward to a trip abroad, but since the post was temporary, it meant that she would soon be out of a job. Even Mike, his eight-

year-old—who normally talked nonstop—was quiet. Dan wondered if his son was aware of the momentous changes about to take place in his life.

As he watched the traffic crawl on the A4, Dan reflected on his own new realities—divorce, new responsibilities, and the daunting task of being a single dad. *To lose my job, and then my wife to another man is enough to knock the hell out of anyone's ego. Perhaps, he thought hopefully, the move to Geneva will help boost up my self-esteem.*

“Hey Dad, isn't this exciting?” Mike was beaming at him. Jolted out of his reverie, Dan gave him a big smile. “It certainly is, Mike. Wait till all of you see Geneva. You'll love it.” He tried to say the words with conviction, as much to convince himself as his sons.

Dan Stevens and Michelle Sardou met rather unexpectedly the day that he moved into his new apartment in Geneva. It was a typical rainy April day, and Dan Stevens peered in between the splashing windshield wipers, trying to read the street names as he drove up the hill.

Reaching the top, Dan turned right onto a large tree-lined plaza overlooking a racetrack, and then took the driveway leading to the main parking area of the apartment house. In front of him rose the tall and sleek modern building which would be his new home. Dan stopped momentarily to admire it, reading its name—**RÉSIDENCE DU LAC**—inscribed in gold lettering at each of the main entrances. He was told that finding a decent rental apartment in Geneva was like panning for gold in a mountain creek. So when a contact at the American Consulate called to tell him that one of their consuls was looking for someone to take over the lease to his apartment, Dan couldn't believe his luck. He'd be quartered in one of the most prestigious buildings in the city, which was even equipped with an indoor swimming pool.

As he maneuvered the car into his assigned space in the underground garage, he noticed another car was pulling into the adjacent spot. It was a black Opel station wagon with what appeared to be diplomatic plates. A tall man, wearing a Dick Tracy-style trench coat and hat, emerged from it, looked Dan's way for an instant, and then headed toward the elevator. Dan followed. When he reached the elevator, ‘Tracy’ muttered something in French like “what-a-day,” with an unmistakable American accent.

“It certainly is,” Dan replied in English. “Are you American?”

“Yeah, is my accent that bad?”

“Not at all. I just had a hunch,” he answered, smiling while he studied him more closely. He had a pleasant face, warm and friendly eyes, and he was big. Not fat, just big. Even in his trench coat you could sense the broad shoulders and muscles underneath. When he talked to Dan, he had to look down at him . . . *And I'm six-feet tall!* Dan thought.

“Can I help you?” ‘Tracy’ asked. “Are you looking for someone?”

“No thanks, I'm actually moving in. By the way, my name is Dan Stevens.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Hank Thomson.” They shook hands.

“You must be moving into 601.” It was more a statement than a question.

“Yes,” Dan replied, as they stepped into the elevator.

Thomson pressed the sixth floor button as he said, “I'm in 604, right across from you.” He extended his arm and they shook hands. “Welcome to your new home.”

“Thank you,” Dan replied. “I’m sure I’ll love living here.”

As they left the elevator together, Hank turned to Dan once more.

“Listen, you don’t want to worry about dinner on your first evening in your new home. Why not relax a while and then join us for a meal—say at seven? I’m sure that Patty, my wife, would love to meet you before we’re off tomorrow for a short vacation. What do you say?”

“That’d be really nice. Thanks. See you later then.”

Dan watched his new neighbor heading to his apartment. He seemed like a friendly, gregarious guy, he thought. Their chance meeting cut through his feelings of loneliness. He turned, took out his new set of keys, and walked across the hall to number 601.

During the previous two weeks, at the Hotel Voltaire, with his two sons and the nanny, Dan took them sightseeing, bought new clothes for the boys, and treated them to some good meals, while locating a place to set up his new regional office

When the movers arrived, the four of them spent the weekend unpacking and moving furniture, while Jack and Mike argued over which bedroom they wanted during weekends or vacations.

When they were finally settled in the new place, it was time for the boys to return to school, and for Dan to begin his new career in earnest. Jack and Genna were taken to the airport for their flight to London. Then Dan drove Mike to his new boarding school, the Alpine International School, high up in the Swiss Alps.

As he drove back alone—winding his way down the mountain road to Geneva—Dan was struck by the deafening silence in the car, and was suddenly overwhelmed by a sharp pang of loneliness and desertion—like someone left behind on an empty track after the train has pulled out.. He realized that it was the first time in many years that he’d be living alone. He gave a long sigh of resignation, as he turned on the radio, searching the dial for a station playing soft, soothing music.

Almost as soon as Dan knocked at the door of number 604, he heard Hank’s deep bass voice: “Hey, love, would you get the door?” The door opened wide and he was greeted by a small, plump woman with a pleasant face and an aquiline nose. At her feet, a small, pudgy dog with bulging eyes, toad face, and a wagging stump of a tail looked him over as if to decide if he was friend or foe.

“Hi, you must be Dan. I’m Patty and this is Oscar . . . come on in.”

She gave him a broad, welcoming smile, which instantly made her face look radiant.

“Hello, Patty. Nice to meet you . . . and you too, Oscar. Thanks for the invitation.”

Dan walked in, and Oscar—hearing his name called—ran off and reappeared with a small rubber ball which he dropped at Dan’s feet. He obviously expected him to throw it across the room, but then, quickly losing patience, he picked it up again, and growling, disappeared with it into another room. They laughed, and Patty led him into the living room. Hank appeared with flutes of champagne. As the conversation began with the usual small talk, Patty was listening, nodding her head, and smiling, while she appeared to be sizing him up with her sharp, piercing eyes.

The Geneva Affair

“Let me guess, Dan. You must be from Boston or thereabouts.”

“Right on.” Dan laughed, and looking at Hank, said, “She’s pretty good, eh?”

“Yes, Patty is quite a student of language—and accents. She doesn’t miss a thing.” He smiled with evident pride in his wife’s qualities.

Hank talked generally about his various assignments with the U.S. Foreign Service over the last thirty years, and then about his last one with the American Embassy in Brussels. At this point, Patty, who had been listening to the conversation, said, “Yes, that was Hank’s last assignment before we moved to Geneva.” She sighed, “I miss Brussels.”

“Did you like living there more than in Geneva?” Dan asked her.

Patty gazed out the window, which faced the lake, as if to make up her mind about how to answer. “Well,” she said, “of course Geneva is beautiful, and Hank’s work here is very important, but I became very attached to Brussels, its history and architecture. I loved the Flemish influence. The buildings look as if they’re cut out of papier-mâché, you know what I mean?” She gave Dan a wistful, melancholy smile

“But honey,” Hank interjected, touching her hand, “you have to remember that you made lots of friends there.” He turned to Dan. “We’re only now beginning to make some friends here, but we find it more difficult with the Swiss. Of course it takes time. We’ve been in Geneva only a little over a year.”

While the Thomsons were talking, Dan sat back, sipped his champagne, and scrutinized them. Patty was wearing a pair of blue jeans that did nothing to diminish her rotundness. A lilac-colored cardigan and a pair of magenta sneakers completed her ensemble. Hank had changed into boots, tight jeans held up by a Texas-style wide leather belt with a studded buckle, and a green corduroy shirt. He looked as if he’d just hitched his stallion up to a post. He wore. *Hank and Patty are fun to watch*, Dan thought. Side by side they reminded him of Miss Piggy and Big Bird. He took an instant liking to them, and felt relaxed and comfortable in their company.

It was time to eat. Patty ushered Dan into the dining room, and asked Hank to give her a hand with the plates. Dan was hungry and welcomed the sight of a large bowl of spaghetti and meat balls that had just been set at the center of the table.

At that moment the telephone rang. Patty got up and went into the kitchen to pick up the phone. A few minutes later she reappeared. Turning to Dan, she said, “I hope you don’t mind, but our French professor wants to show us something she bought, and I invited her to join us for coffee and dessert. I think you’ll enjoy meeting her.”

Dan nodded. “Of course, I’d be pleased to meet her.”

Once the food was dished out and the wine poured, the conversation resumed easily.

Dan talked about his move to Geneva, the new regional office he was setting up for American Ballistics International, and about his responsibilities.

“What does American Ballistics International do?” asked Hank.

“American Ballistics manufactures state-of-the-art weapons systems used in military aircraft and ships. ABI, American Ballistics International, is their worldwide sales and marketing arm,” Dan explained.

“How interesting! Hank exclaimed. “And what is your job?”

“Well, as I mentioned, the office I’m setting up for ABI is a new regional office covering Europe, the Middle East and Africa . . . not including the Iron Curtain countries, of course. And I’m responsible for the sales of all ABI equipment within this region.”

Patty, who’s been listening with interest to the conversation, exclaimed: “That’s quite a responsibility, Dan! These weapons must be worth a great deal of money.”

“You’re right, Patty. Each potential order is worth millions of dollars.”

I suppose then that you’ll be covering NATO in Brussels,” Hank interjected.

“Yes—absolutely. In fact NATO will be one of my most important contacts because it involves the navies and air forces of all the NATO member countries.”

“I see. Well, you must say hello to Captain Ted Bryant for me next time you’re there.”

“Sure, I’ll be glad to. Who is Captain Bryant?” Dan asked.

“He’s chief of the U.S. Naval Delegation to NATO, and a friend of mine. I’m sure you’ll run into him.”

“Well, Dan,” Patty interjected, “let me know if you want some tips on where to eat in Brussels. They have such wonderful little bistros there, you’ll love the food.” Dan smiled and assured Patty that he would be sure to check with her before taking his first trip there.

After Hank filled their wine glasses and they took second helpings of the pasta, Hank talked about the couple’s past. The Thomsons were both from Florida. Hank attended Georgetown University, where he supported himself by working as a clerk at the State Department.

“So you see,” Patty added, looking very pleased, “we’re now planning our retirement.”

“Retirement?” Dan looked at her, astonished, “But you’re both so young.”

“That’s right, Danny boy,” Hank grinned, “You see, with the federal government, I’m entitled to retirement after thirty years of service, and since I began working with the government, as I mentioned, during my university days, before I was twenty, I’m nearing my thirty years of service..”

“So, do you have any plans for your retirement?”

“Sure,” said Hank, “we’ll be young enough to start new careers. You know, get involved in things we really want to do.”

Hank talked about their project, which to Dan sounded rather farfetched at first, until it became apparent that they’d already started putting the plan in motion.

“We spent our last vacation in Nice on the French Riviera, and fell in love with the area. I met a young man from London there who had moved to Nice to work as a diving instructor. He told me that the owner of the diving school was retiring and planned to sell the business. I used to give diving lessons in Florida,” Hank explained, “and the idea came to me to buy the school.”

“So you’re planning to move to France?”

“Actually, I’m already negotiating the purchase with the owner, so you see we’re very serious about this. In fact, we’re even taking French lessons. In fact, as Patty mentioned, you’ll meet our professor a little later.” He winked at Patty, who was getting up to clear the dishes. Dan noticed that Patty gave Hank a strange look and wondered if it had to do with jealousy. Then he decided that she wouldn’t be jealous of a French professor.

They were moving back to the living room for dessert and coffee, when Oscar suddenly

barged in and raced across the room nearly tripping Dan in the process. About the same time, the doorbell rang, and Patty, followed by Oscar went to open it. She came back into the living room, accompanied by a lovely young woman. “Well, Dan, speak of the devil, I’d like you to meet Michelle Sardou, our French professor. Michelle, this is Dan Stevens, our new neighbor across the hall. He’s also American.”

For a moment, Dan was speechless, and he couldn’t help staring at her. When he recovered, he got up, and taking her hand, he brought it to his lips. “Enchanté.”

She gave him a big smile, obviously charmed. “Moi aussi, monsieur.”

Without further formalities, Michelle sat herself down next to Patty, and pointed excitedly to her left ear. “Look, Patty—how do you like it?” She nodded her head as if she expected praise.

“Yes, it’s very nice, but why did you need two earrings?”

“You know that I belong to the MENSAs club. Next Saturday, we’re having a big dinner dance at the Hilton, so, I saw this earring in a shop window and I thought, I’ll buy it for that occasion.”

She got up and walked in front of Hank and Dan. “Look? Nice, no?” And, without waiting for a reaction, she continued, “So I came right over to show it to you.” Then, turning to Dan, she said, “Does monsieur speak French?”

“Yes, I do madame.”

She gave him a big smile. “It’s mademoiselle.”

Dan returned her smile. “Yes, I do mademoiselle.”

Tilting her head slightly, as if she found that strange, she added “but that is commendable, monsieur.”

“Well, maybe not exactly commendable. I might need a few lessons myself.”

She laughed good-naturedly. Patty brought in the coffee and a chocolate cream pie.

“A glass of champagne, Michelle?” said Hank, handing it to her. “I know you like your champagne. We’ve already toasted Dan’s arrival.”

“You’re very sweet, Hank, thank you,” she beamed, as if she’d been offered a diamond tiara. Then, turning to Dan again, “And here’s to the new neighbor.”

Patty directed Michelle to an easy chair across from Dan, and the three of them sat down. Michelle began chatting with Hank about acquaintances they had in common, and Dan sat back to watch her. *Petite, slim but shapely, and in her mid or late twenties*, he mused. She was wearing a strapless dress, bursting with floral patterns of flamingo and orchid pinks, sunflower yellows and gold. It came down to just above her knees. Her hair was jet-black, cut in the fashion of Joan of Arc, and her olive-colored eyes seemed to sparkle with excitement as she recounted an amusing incident to them. She now included Dan in her audience, and he smiled and nodded, but he absorbed nothing of what she was saying. He was thinking about her name. *Michelle. Such a nice name, Michelle.* Not at all what he imagined a French professor would act like or look like.

And then Michelle crossed her legs and he found himself staring at one shapely leg, balanced on the other, swinging up and down, up and down, like the pendulum of a clock. He bit into his piece of chocolate cream pie and tried to concentrate on the conversation, but his eyes had a mind of their own. When he looked up again, he caught Michelle watching him. Their eyes locked for an instant, and then she gave him a dazzling smile, a smile that would stay with him

long after he thanked the Thomsons for their hospitality and retired to his apartment.

Locking the door behind him, Dan stepped out onto the balcony. Staring out at the hills across the lake, illuminated here and there by the headlights of passing cars, all he could think about was Michelle. No woman had ever made him feel that way before. It was as if she had emitted some kind of electrical current or magnetic field that affected his whole being. It bothered him to have had such a reaction to someone he just met. *C'mon now, grow up*, he admonished himself. Still reeling from the recent changes in his life, a new romance was the last thing he needed. He promised himself to put Michelle out of his mind and resist any temptation if he ever ran into her again. And anyway, he reasoned, she was much too young to even notice someone his age. She was probably just being flirtatious. Dan felt more relaxed now. He shut the door to the balcony and went to bed.