

1

His gaze remained fixed on his computer screen, fingers frozen on the keyboard. An hour had passed, and the page was still blank. Nothing had come to him except a dull throb behind his eyes. He had not thought of, nor written, a single word.

A persistent knock at his door distracted him.

He looked toward the hallway through the lingering haze of smoke. The air in the room was warm and stale, and his face crinkled with displeasure. "There's no one home," he yelled.

"I am here to see a Mr. Sebastian Drake," a man said.

"Do you have an appointment?"

The door opened, and Drake heard the man snicker then step across the threshold and walk down the hallway toward him. Drake looked up and watched the man walk into the open room of his loft and up to his desk.

"I'm not interested," Drake said.

"Good day, Mr. Drake. My name is Engel, Thomas Engel."

The stranger standing before him was older, maybe fifty, Drake guessed, tall and thin with a slender face and a pencil-thin mustache. He wore a dark gray overcoat and a matching fedora. In his hand was a long umbrella. He

firmly held the curved, wooden handle and bounced the metal tip on the wood floor.

What the hell?

The man did not belong in the neighborhood he was visiting, that much was certain. Drake thought he looked like he would be more comfortable walking the streets of downtown London and wondered how he had made it through the neighborhood without being assaulted.

Drake didn't have the patience or the time for the interruption. He had a book to write. "You must have the wrong address. You can let yourself out."

"I have a writing project for you, Mr. Drake."

"Is that right?" His interest was piqued, just a bit, but he remained cautious. He pointed to the chair opposite him. "Have a seat."

Engel hooked his umbrella on the back of the chair then removed his hat and set it on the desk in front of him.

"Nice hat," Drake said, an edge of sarcasm in his voice.

Engel removed his overcoat, exposing a perfectly tailored, three-piece, bespoke suit.

Drake noticed, raised his eyebrows.

Engel laid the coat over the back of the chair and sat down. He made eye contact with Drake. Neither of them said a word.

Drake broke the ice. "Can I offer you a drink?" He pulled a glass and a bottle of bourbon from the left desk drawer. He filled the glass a quarter of the way full and slid it across the desk, leaving it in front of Engel.

Engel looked at his watch.

Drake poured himself another three fingers and lit

a cigarette. He tilted his head back and blew a large plume of smoke into the air then leaned back in his chair and waited.

“It so happens that I know quite a bit about you, Mr. Drake.”

“Really,” Drake said. “You’re not one of my crazed fans, are you?”

Engel snickered again. “Mr. Drake, let me get to the point.”

“Please do.”

“If I could be so blunt—you are a bit of a loser.”

Drake thought about reaching across the desk to grab the intruder by the throat, but he was enjoying his cigarette and didn’t feel much like moving. He took a drink instead.

“That’s one opinion.”

“It is.”

“Anyway, is that how you express your gratitude—as a fan?” Drake asked.

“Acceptance is the first step to recovery.” He waited for a reaction but didn’t get one. “I have been following your writing career for some time, Mr. Drake. You had a promising and successful career as a journalist but gave it up to be *creative*.” Engel grinned. “You have written three novels over the last five years, and while you had some early sales success with each of your books—enough to keep your agent and publisher quite happy—I think your last royalty statement showed a total of four hundred and ninety-seven copies sold for the year. That is quite impressive,” he said with his own edge of sarcasm.

“I need a new publicist.”

“Your wife left you a year ago and has full custody of your children—your daughters—whom you get to see two weekends a month and on holidays. It seems she had given your

new writing career more than a chance to succeed, working full-time and taking care of the children while you locked yourself in your office and toiled over your writing—your craft, as you likely call it. You are six months behind on your rent and a month behind on your alimony and child support. I suspect your bank has closed your account for lack of activity. The bookstore you run down the street is a real winner, which allows you to live in this luxury.” Engel waved a hand around as if he were showing the loft to a prospective buyer.

Drake scanned the room and all its contents. His desk stood like an island in the open area of his loft, an area that served as his office, living room, and dining room, the last room description a bit of a stretch as there hadn’t been much dining happening at that unadorned table and set of chairs for some months now. It wasn’t perfect, but he didn’t think his place was so bad.

Engel said, “You have writer’s block of the worst and most detrimental sort, and your life could not be much worse. You drink too much, and at one time or another have likely considered suicide, but you know that your insurance policy will not pay after such a cowardly act. Your children would be out of luck.”

Drake reached for another cigarette but found the pack empty. He opened the top desk drawer to his right, saw his spare pack, and next to it was his snub-nosed, Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver from the old days, his backup gun and the one he could always rely on in a pinch. He looked at it like an old friend, pondered its weight and its history. He pulled out the pack of cigarettes and lit one, then he pushed in the

drawer, watching the gun disappear until the drawer closed completely.

He took a drag from his cigarette and contemplated his next move.

“You see, Mr. Drake, I am the only one who can help you, the only one who *will* help you.”

“Are you queer?” Drake asked.

“Oh no, quite the contrary.”

“So, how would you like to *help* me?”

“Mr. Drake, I would like to offer you a job, starting today. The job pays five thousand a week—cash—plus expenses, and promises to provide you with more than enough ideas for your next book—a successful book and a guaranteed best-seller.”

“And I get to keep my clothes on?”

Engel laughed. “I assure you, Mr. Drake, the wearing of clothing is a mandatory work requirement.”

Drake downed his drink, and he was surprised when Engel reached for his glass and swallowed the contents in one fluid motion. He had expected him to sip it like a fine brandy. Drake refilled both glasses then took a gulp from his own. Five thousand a week was a good sum of money, an exceptional sum given the circumstances. It was triple what he made in his best year as a journalist but short of his first year as a bestselling author, a year and a level of success that now seemed in the distant past. “Tell me more.”

“I must clarify that the job I am offering is not exactly a writing project, as I may have alluded to earlier.”

“Not exactly?”

“It is, more appropriately, a regular and well-paying job that will lead to a writing project.”

“I’m listening.”

Engel’s face was stolid and fixed, like a wax figure. He sat motionless and thought about his next words. “My sister was murdered ten years ago. Today is the anniversary.”

“I’m sorry,” Drake said through a mouthful of smoke.

“The murderer was never apprehended, and the case is cold—dead cold. The local authorities are pretending that the case does not exist.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s complicated,” Engel said.

“Of course it is.”

Engel reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a photograph. He looked at it and sighed. He set the photograph down on the desk and slid it over.

Drake picked up the photograph. He looked down at a picture of a woman. She was young, beautiful, and proper. It looked like a school picture, likely college. She wore a white blouse, buttoned at the neck, and a navy blazer. Her golden hair was straight and hung down over her shoulders; bangs draped across her forehead. She had large, blue eyes, a sleek and sculpted nose, and high cheekbones. Her face was slender and perfect, showed a fair complexion, and Drake thought her skin looked like it was made of fine porcelain. *So innocent.*

“She was taken from this world, much too soon, Mr. Drake.”

Drake leaned forward and slid the photograph back across the desk.

“Mr. Drake, I want you to look into the case and find the person who murdered my sister. I have the money, the contacts, and the political influence to make things happen.”

“How much money? How much political influence?”

“More than enough.”

Drake thought about what Engel had said. He thought about how he had felt just a few minutes ago and how the morning happened to take such a drastic turn. Engel had accurately assessed a good portion of his present situation, albeit a bit harshly, and Drake considered whether this proposal might be an opportunity to take a step in a different direction—the right direction, for a change. Maybe the proposal, this event, was an omen, one he should not disregard. However, he also knew from experience that opportunities in life did not come easy, and if it sounded too good to be true . . . He chewed his bottom lip. “Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“That is a reasonable question, Mr. Drake. The simple answer is that I cannot, for I am very well known in town.”

“I don’t know you.”

“Mr. Drake, I simply need someone to do the job *for* me.”

“You’re crazy,” Drake said. “I have no experience with this type of work.”

“Oh, on the contrary,” Engel said. “Your early work as a journalist, when you actually worked, required the exact investigative skills that I am looking for. And while you have done a fine job of covering up your past government service, I know enough about the skills you developed through that experience to make me comfortable that you are the right person for the job.”

“Then you know I could kill you, and no one would ever know.”

“Mr. Drake, all I am asking is that you find my sister’s murderer, and I will take care of the rest. It is a simple and straightforward proposal. I guarantee that your experience and the process will make a compelling story that you can write about.” He reached into the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a long, thick, white envelope. He set it on the desk, laid his hand on it for just a moment, and slid it across to Drake.

Drake looked down at the envelope then up at Engel, who was smiling. Drake emptied his glass again and refilled it. He raised the bottle and tipped it toward his guest.

“I am fine, thank you,” Engel said. “I only allow myself one glass of bourbon before lunch.”

One glass of bourbon before lunch. Drake thought what Engel said sounded like a reasonable mantra, maybe one he himself could take on as his own—tomorrow, or next week, or the week after that—when the time was right. He leaned forward, picked up the envelope, and opened it, revealing a respectable stack of what appeared to be newly printed money, clean and crisp. He riffled through the stack of bills with his thumb—all hundreds. *Looks like five grand.*

“There are fifty, one-hundred-dollar bills,” Engel said. “Feel free to count them.”

Drake opened the drawer with the gun in it, closed the envelope, and tossed it in, covering up the gun. He closed the drawer. “Tell me about your sister.”

Engel slid a business card across the desk. “I have a place across town. Take today off, as I am sure you think you have

earned it, but please come by tomorrow evening at seven o'clock. We will talk then. And please, clean yourself up."

Drake sat back in his chair again. He looked himself over and did not see anything particularly wrong. "Do I offend you?"

Engel stood up. "Mr. Drake, you are drunk and you smell of vomit, and it is not even lunch time."

"I assure you that I can hold my liquor."

"Well, you smell of liquor, then, and smoke."

Drake nodded, conceding to the facts.

"Mr. Drake, I could lubricate my BMW with the oil slick in your hair. You are a mess, and I will not work with you in this condition." Engel reached for his coat and draped it over his arm while staring at Drake.

This guy sure can exaggerate. Drake reclined further in his chair and blew three perfect smoke rings toward the ceiling.

Engel put on his hat and grabbed his umbrella. He walked toward the door.

Drake said, "If I'm such a degenerate, such a loser, why hire me?"

Engel stopped and turned back. "Mr. Drake, you used to be a good writer, a very good writer, and could be again." He paused, straightened his posture, and with a calm but serious tone said, "And I need your help."

"What if I decide it's not my kind of project, not my cup of tea?"

"Mr. Drake, open your right-hand desk drawer."

Drake considered the request then opened the drawer. The envelope had shifted, and it rested gently against his

gun. He chewed his bottom lip again then looked back up at Engel.

“Mr. Drake, you decide what is best for you.” Engel walked to the doorway, seemed to pause at the threshold, then he turned and walked down the corridor to the elevator.

Drake leaned over, looked down the hallway, and saw the door wide open. “Close the door!”

There was no response, and he didn’t expect one. Drake closed the desk drawer and finished his drink. He took one last drag from his cigarette and snubbed it out in the ashtray. He walked over to the door and slammed it closed then turned back around and walked to the bathroom.

Drake returned to his desk and stared at the blank page on his computer screen for another half hour. Then he typed two lines.

A SOON-TO-BE-NAMED NOVEL

By Sebastian Drake

He stared at the screen, sighed, and considered his progress. *It was something.* Then he became distracted. *Thomas Engel. Sister. Murder. Ten years ago. A job. Five grand.* Yes, he was distracted, and his creative well was bone dry. He decided to take the rest of the day off, as Mr. Engel had suggested. Maybe he *had* earned it.