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The Double Eagle

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Extract

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ONE

Fifth Avenue, New York City
16th July – 11:30pm

Gracefully he fell, his body arcing in one smooth movement out from the side of the building and then back in, like a spider caught in a sudden gust of wind as it dropped on its thread, until with a final fizz of the rope through his gloved hand he landed on the balcony of the 17th floor.

Crouching, he unclipped the rope from his harness and flattened his back to the wall, his dark, lithe shape blending into the stained stone. He didn't move, his chest barely rising, the thin material of his black ski mask slick against his lips.

He had to be sure. He had to be certain that no one had seen him on the way down. So he waited, listening to the shallow breaths of the city slumbering fitfully below him, watching the Met's familiar bulk retreat into shadow as its floodlights were extinguished.

And all the while Central Park's dark lung, studded with the occasional lights of taxis making their way between East and West 86th Street, breathed a chilled, oxygenated air up the side of the building that made him shiver despite the heat. Air heavy with New York's distinctive scent, an intoxicating

cocktail of fear, sweat and greed that bubbled up from subway tunnels and steam vents.

And although a lone NYPD chopper, spotlight primed, circled ever closer and the muffled scream of sirens echoed up from distant streets through the warm air, he could tell they were not for him. They never were. Tom Kirk had never been caught.

Keeping below the level of the carved stone balustrade, he padded over to the large semi-circular window that opened onto the balcony, its armoured panes glinting like sheet steel. Inside, he could see that the room was dark and empty, as he knew it would be. As it was every weekend during the Summer.

A few taps on each of the hinges that ran down the side of the right-hand window and the bolts popped out into his hand. Then carefully, so as not to break the alarmed central magnetic contact, he levered the edge of the window away from the frame until there was a gap big enough for him to slip through.

Once inside, Tom swung his pack down off his shoulder. From the main compartment he took out what looked like a metal detector – a thin black plate attached to an aluminium rod. He flicked a switch on the top of the plate and a small green light on its smooth surface glowed into life. Keeping completely still, he gripped the rod in his right hand and began to sweep the plate over the arid emptiness of the floor in front of him. Almost immediately the light on the back of the plate flashed red and he paused.

Pressure pads. As predicted.

Moving the plate slowly over the spot where the light had changed colour, he quickly identified an area that he circled with white chalk. Repeating this procedure, he worked his way methodically across the room, moving in controlled, precise movements. Five minutes later and he had reached the far wall, a trail of small white circles in his wake.

The room was exactly as the photos had shown it and had the distinctive smell of new money and old furniture. A large Victorian partners' desk dominated, a masculine marriage of polished English oak and Italian leather that reminded him of the interior of a 1920s Rolls Royce. Behind the desk, the wall was lined with what looked like the remnants of a once substantial private library, now presumably scattered across the world according to auction lots.

The two sidewalls that ran up to the window were painted a sandy grey and symmetrically hung with a series of drawings and paintings, four down each wall. He did not have to look closely to recognise them – Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klimt. But Tom was not there for the paintings, nor for the decoy safe he knew lay behind the third picture on the left. He had learned not to be greedy.

Instead, he picked his way back through the chalk circles to the edge of the silk rug that filled the floor between the desk and the window, its colours shimmering in the pale moonlight. With his back to the window, he gripped one corner of the rug and threw it back. Underneath, the wood was slightly darker where it had been shielded from the bleaching sun.

Kneeling, he placed his gloved hands flat on the floor and slid them slowly across the dry wooden surface. About three feet in front of him, the tips of his fingers sensed a slight ridge in the wood. He moved his hands apart along the ridge, until he reached what felt like a corner on both sides. Placing his knuckles on these corners, he leant forward with all his weight. With a faint click, a two-foot square panel sank down and then sprang up about half an inch proud of the rest of the floor. It was hinged at the far end and he folded the panel back on itself so that it lay flat, revealing a gleaming floor safe.

The safe manufacturing and insurance industries cooperate

on the security ratings of safes. Manufacturers regularly submit their products to independent testing by the Underwriters Laboratory, or UL, who in return issue the safe with a Residential Security Container Label that allows the insurers to accurately determine the relevant insurance premium.

The safe that Tom had revealed had, according to its freshly affixed label, been rated TXTL – 60. In other words, it had been found to successfully resist entry for a net assault time of 60 minutes. It was one of the highest ratings that UL could give.

Even so, it took Tom just eight and a half seconds to open it.

Inside there was some cash, around fifty thousand dollars he guessed, jewellery and a 1920s Reverso wristwatch. But he ignored all these, turning his attention instead to a large wooden box, its dark mahogany lid inlaid with a golden double-headed eagle, an orb and sceptre firmly gripped in each of its talons. The Romanov Imperial crest.

He eased the box open, carefully lifting the precious object it contained out from the luxuriant embrace of its white silk lining.

He felt his pulse quicken. Even to him, who had seen myriad objects of breathtaking beauty, this was an exceptional piece. So much so that he took the unprecedented step – for him at least – of sliding his mask up off his face so he could see it properly. His uncharacteristic imprudence was almost immediately rewarded. As the moonlight caught its jewelled surface, the delicate object came alive in his hands, glowing like firelight through the hoarfrosted window of a remote wooden cabin.

The words on the roughly torn page from the Christie's catalogue that had been included with his briefing notes immediately came tumbling back into his head.

'The Winter Egg was made by Carl Fabergé for Tsar Nicholas II to give to his mother, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, for

Easter 1913. The Egg, cut from Siberian rock crystal, is encrusted with more than three thousand diamonds, with another one thousand three hundred diamonds adorning the base.

As with all Fabergé's Eggs it contains an Easter 'surprise', in this case a platinum Easter basket decorated with flowers made from gold, garnets and crystals. The basket symbolises the transition from winter to spring.'

Alone, he gazed at the Egg. Soon, he could hear nothing except the steady rise and fall of his own chest and the ticking of an unseen clock. And still he stared, the room melting away from the edge of his vision, the diamonds sparkling like icicles in a midday sun, until he was certain he could see right through the Egg, through his gloves and his fingers to the bones themselves.

Suddenly he was back in Geneva, standing at the foot of his father's coffin, candles sputtering on the altar, the priest's voice droning in the background. Some water had dropped off the circular wreath onto the coffin lid and was trickling off the side and onto the floor. He had stood there, fascinated, watching the red carpet change colour as the crystal drops shattered again and again on its soft pile.

Unexpected and unwanted, a thought had occurred to him then – or rather, a question. It had slipped into his head and tiptoed around the edges of his consciousness, taunting him.

'Is it time?'

Afterwards, he had dismissed it. Not given it much thought. Not wanted to, perhaps. But in the two months since the funeral, the question had returned again and again, each time with more urgency. It had haunted him, undermining his every action, investing his every word with doubt and uncertainty. Demanding to be answered.

And now he knew. It was so clear to him. Like winter turning to spring, it was inevitable. It was time. After this, he was going to walk away.

He slid his mask back on, packed the Egg up, shut the safe door and closed the wooden panel. Stealthily retreating across the room, he made his way back out through the window onto the balcony.

The sirens far below him seemed louder now, and he found that his heart was beating in time with the thumping blades of the police helicopter that was almost overhead, its spotlight raking over the trees and street below, clearly looking for someone or something. Crouching, he attached the rope to his harness and timed his jump for when the helicopter had made its next pass. In an instant he was gone.

Only an eyelash remained where it had fluttered down from his briefly unmasked face to the floor. It glinted black in the moonlight.