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THE
BLUE
RING



The Blue Ring (v2.0)

by *A. J. Quinnell*

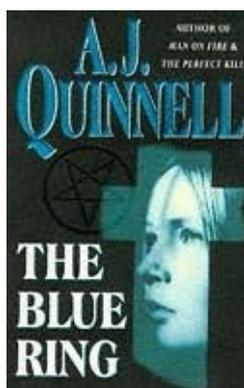


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Prologue

Hanne Andersen opened her eyes not knowing where she was. Very quickly she became aware of things: the dull ache in the centre of her head, the dry sour taste in her mouth, the fact that she could not move her arms or legs, the cracked, dirty ceiling above her.

Painfully she turned her head, first to one side, then to the other. She was in a small box-like room with no windows, just a grey heavy metal door. Her wrists and ankles were tied to the four corners of the bed. She was clad in the same flame-red dress that she had put on the night before. Cold terror paralysed her as she tried to remember what had happened.

She recalled Philippe picking her up from her hotel, the noisy restaurant and the myriad drinks starting with wine and moving on to tequila-slams. It became vague after that, a couple of bars and then a very sleazy nightclub in the Rue Saint Sans. She remembered laughing a lot and Philippe also laughing as they watched the sex-show which both nauseated her and aroused her. After that everything was a blank.

An hour passed before she heard the turning of the lock in the metal door. Philippe came in and stood by the bed, looking down at her. He was dressed in the same dark blue suit, white silk shirt and maroon tie that he had worn the night before, but the suit was rumpled and the knot of the tie pulled down. His sharply handsome face was covered in black stubble.

Her voice came out as a croak. "Where am I, Philippe? What happened?"

His eyes no longer held the spark of laughter, his smile no longer lit his face; it was a sneer. His gaze travelled down her body and he reached down and pulled up the red dress. She wore the wispiest white lace knickers. He looked at them, muttered something in French and although she had only been learning the language for two months she understood the words.

"A pity...a great pity...but orders are orders." He sneered again. "But a little something will not hurt."

He reached down and slid a hand under the waistband of her knickers and onto her crotch. She tried to close her legs but they were bound tightly apart. She screamed.

He said, "Make all the noise you want. No one can hear you."

As he tried to push a finger inside her she gave an involuntary spasm and her bladder gave out. With an expression of disgust he pulled his hand away, straightened up and left the room. He returned five minutes carrying a small metal tray. On it was a syringe, some cotton wool and a bottle containing a colourless liquid. He put the tray down beside her head and sat down next to her. Quickly he pulled up the sleeve of her dress, opened the bottle and put some of the liquid onto the cotton wool. He rubbed the cotton wool vigorously against the inside of her arm, then he held up the syringe.

"Look at this," he said in a coarse whisper. "This is your friend. It will make you feel good...very good. It will take away your fear and your headache. Your friend will visit you many times in the coming

days."

Her body jerked as the needle entered her vein. She screamed again. He sneered again. Within minutes her body and mind began to glow. Her headache and her fear disappeared. She heard his voice as if it was floating near the ceiling.

"Soon a woman will come and clean you up. She will bring you some hot soup. Later I will come again...with your friend."

Jens Jensen's office was also very small, without windows, and in need of a coat of paint. As a young detective in the Missing Persons Bureau of the Copenhagen police force he did not merit anything grander. Short, florid of face and somewhat plump, he looked more like a banker than a policeman. He was dressed in a conservative grey suit, a cream shirt and blue tie and black alligator-skin shoes.

He sighed in exasperation as he finished reading the report which had arrived that morning from the Marseille police. Then a wave of anger swept over him. He closed the folder, stood up, went out of his office and marched down the corridor.

Chief Superintendent Lars Pedersen's office was spacious, carpeted, and had wonderful views over the Tivoli Gardens. He was thin with grey hair, sharp-faced and looked very much like a policeman. He looked up as Jens Jensen swept into the room and noted the expression on his subordinate's face.

"What now?" he asked.

Without a word, Jensen laid the folder in front of him and then walked away and gazed out over the view.

Pedersen had recently taken a course in speed-reading and it only took him four minutes to get the guts of the detailed report. "So?" he asked.

Jensen turned to face him. Harshly he said, "So she's the fourth this year. Two in Spain, one on the French Riviera and one in Rome. And it's still only mid-May. The Swedes have lost three and the Norwegians two...all in southern Mediterranean holiday countries...not one found." His voice was tight with anger.

"It follows the same pattern: single Scandinavian girls, either on holiday or studying in those countries." He pointed at the folder. "Hanne Andersen, nineteen years old, very attractive, studying French at a private institute in Marseille. Last seen leaving her small hotel at ten p.m. on the fourth of September and getting into a black Renault driven by a young man who looked French, whatever that means. That's all we know."

Pedersen mused. "And all the others were attractive or beautiful, including the Swedes and Norwegians?"

"They were," Jensen affirmed. "You've seen my report and the photographs...and you've also read my recommendations."

Pedersen sighed and pushed the folder away from him as if to dismiss it. "Yes, yes. You want to set up a special unit. ~~You have this theory of an organised ring engaged in a modern white slave trade.~~"

Jens Jensen was thirty-five years old. Were it not for the short fuse of his temper and his inability to show unbridled respect to his seniors he might well have progressed further in the force. He consoled himself with the love of exotic beers and a fascination for sea ferries. But now his anger erupted.

"Theory!" he snarled. "I've spent four years in Missing Persons. I've liaised with Stockholm and Oslo. I've travelled to Paris, Rome and Madrid on a lousy fucking expense account." He moved around the front of the Chief Superintendent's desk as his anger mounted. "I'm the poor bastard who has to tell the parents of these girls that there's fuck all we can do." He slammed the side of his hand onto the folder.

"This afternoon Mr and Mrs Andersen are coming to my lousy little office to sit in front of my lousy fifty-year-old desk and listen to me tell them that their daughter has disappeared and by now probably a forced junkie and selling her body for the benefit of some spic pimps."

Pedersen sighed again, and in a patient voice said, "Jens, you know the problem. It comes right down to money. We have over four hundred missing persons reports a year in Copenhagen alone. Our budget is limited and gets more limited year by year. The special unit that you want to set up has been costed out as something over ten million kroner a year. The finance committee will not approve. It's just not cost-effective. Not just for a dozen girls a year...forget it."

Jens Jensen turned and headed for the door, saying over his shoulder, "So I'll send Mr and Mrs Andersen to see the finance committee."

At the door he turned and looked at his boss. "Perhaps they can explain to them about budgets...and about 'The Blue Ring'."

Chapter 01

It was a hot late September evening on the small Mediterranean island of Gozo when Father Manu Zerafa drove his old battered Ford to the house on the ridge. It was a very old, converted farmhouse which commanded superb views over the island and across the sea to the tiny island of Comino and the big island of Malta. He was sweating slightly as he pulled the old metal bell-handle set into a wall of stone. After a minute the door opened. A big man stood there.

He had close-cropped grey hair above a well-travelled square face; a long scar down one cheek, another on the chin, another on the right side of his forehead. The man was dressed only in a swimsuit. His body was large and tight and deeply tanned. It also bore scars; one from the right knee almost to the groin, another from the right shoulder to the waist. Father Zerafa knew the man well; knew that on his back were other scars. The little finger of his left hand was missing. Father Zerafa knew how the man had come by some of those scars. Mentally, Father Zerafa crossed himself.

He said, "Hello, Creasy. It's bloody hot and I need a cold beer."

The man stood back and gestured a welcome.

They sat under a bamboo canopy covered by vines and mimosa, the swimming pool was in front

them, looking blue, cool and inviting. Beyond it was the panoramic view. Father Zerafa decided that he sat there for a hundred years he would never tire of that view.

The big man brought two ice-cold beers and then looked a question at the priest. They were very old friends and, although the priest often dropped by for a cold beer on a hot day, the man knew that this visit was not just a courtesy call.

"It's about Michael," the priest started.

"What about Michael?"

The priest took a sip of beer and said, "It's Thursday and I know he's in Malta today with George Zammit. What time will he be back?"

Creasy looked at his watch. "He should have caught the seven o'clock ferry, so he'll be back in half an hour. What is it?"

"It's about his mother."

Creasy looked astonished. "His mother!"

The priest sighed and then said firmly, "Yes, his mother. She's in St Luke's hospital, dying of cancer. Apparently she only has a few days to live."

"So what?"

In an even firmer voice the priest replied, "So she wants to see Michael before she dies."

"Why?"

The priest shrugged. "I got a call from Father Galea who ministers to the sick and dying at St Luke's. She asked him about her son. She asked him if he was still in the orphanage. She told him she wanted to see his face before she died."

Creasy's voice was as cold as a glacier. "She hardly saw his face when he was born. She abandoned him...You know how she did that. You told me."

"Yes, I told you."

"Tell me again."

The priest sighed.

"Tell me again, Father!"

The priest looked at him and said, "The doorbell rang at night at the orphanage of the Augustinian sisters in Malta. One of the sisters opened it. There was a basket on the doorstep covered with a cloth. A car was pulling away. In the car the sister saw the face of a woman and the face of a man...obviously the face of Michael's natural mother and the face of her pimp."

There was a long silence while the two men gazed out over the view, then the priest said quietly "Understand, Creasy. I have to tell Michael that she wants to see him. That's my duty."

Harshly, Creasy replied, "Your duty is to Michael. You raised him in the orphanage until I adopted him. He never knew his mother but you and I both know that he hated the thought of her. His mother was a whore, more interested in making money than in her own flesh and blood. You also know that Michael has been through hell. Why make it worse?"

Another silence. The priest's glass was empty. He looked up at the man and said, "Go and get me another cold beer. When you come back I'll tell you."

He spoke in a tone of voice that few people would ever use, or dare to use, to Creasy. For a long time Creasy looked at him through narrowed, slate-grey eyes. Then he shrugged, stood up and went into the kitchen.

With a fresh beer in front of him the priest talked quietly. He reminded Creasy of the time two years before when they had sat together on the church steps and watched a game of football between the orphanage and the village of Sannat. Michael had been seventeen then and was the most talented and co-ordinated player on the field.

Father Zerafa ran the orphanage and coached the football team. Creasy had watched the game intently and enquired about Michael. Enquired in detail. The priest had explained that Michael's mother had been a prostitute in the Maltese red-light district of Gzira. Michael had been fathered by one of her clients, almost certainly an Arab, which gave Michael his dark looks. She had abandoned the child at birth and he had been raised at the orphanage in Gozo. Two adoption attempts had failed, then Creasy had watched him play football.

Father Zerafa had been astonished at the adoption, for Creasy's wife and four-year-old daughter had been killed only a few months previously, on the terrorist bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie.

Creasy was a retired, legendary mercenary. The priest knew that his adoption of Michael had been a cynical arrangement to bind a young man to him and train him in his own image. To do so he had entered into a contract of marriage with a failed English actress, who had been subsequently killed by terrorists. He and Michael had gone on to exact their own personal vengeance and in doing so had forged a bond as close as two human beings could ever accomplish.

The priest reminded Creasy of all this and of his own complicity in arranging the adoption, knowing what was behind it. He had watched Michael as Creasy had turned him into a finely tuned killing machine; waited while they went to the Middle East and exacted their vengeance. He had seen their return to Gozo and noted the extraordinary bond between them.

"Michael is a man," the priest said quietly. "You made him so. He must make his own decision. I made decisions for him in his childhood and you made decisions for him in his youth. This decision he must make for himself."

Chapter 02

"I know you," Michael said. "You are the woman on the wall."

She smiled. A smile on the face of a skull. He knew that she was only thirty-eight years old, but he was looking at an old woman.

A woman with no hair after weeks of chemotherapy treatment. A woman whose yellow cheeks had vanished into a face of skin stretched over bones. But he could recognise the face that he had seen almost every week of his younger life. A then beautiful face, framed by long black lustrous hair. When he was very young it had been the face of a young woman, almost a girl. Over the years as he grew up the face had aged imperceptibly, but had always remained beautiful. Now it was the face of death.

"You sat on the wall," he said, bemused. "Every Sunday. When we went to church at eleven o'clock in the morning you were always sitting on the wall across the road from the orphanage; and when we came back from church an hour later you were still sitting there. We used to watch you from inside the orphanage, wondering who you were. You always left at exactly twelve-thirty and walked down the hill to the harbour."

She smiled again. "Yes, to catch the one o'clock ferry."

"Why?"

"I came to watch my son...to watch him grow up."

"Why didn't you talk to me?"

"I could not. I had given you to the priests. I could not take you back."

"Why did you give me to the priests?"

"I had no choice. No choice at all."

He pulled his chair closer to the dying woman. His voice became hard. "Tell me why you had no choice!"

Chapter 03

There were two prostitutes, the old, stooped priest and Michael by the side of the grave. The two grave-diggers wearing denim shorts and dirty white T-shirts lowered the coffin into the grave.

The prostitutes crossed themselves, the priest intoned prayers and Michael threw a lump of earth on the coffin. Then they went away; the prostitutes to Gzira, the priest to his church and Michael to Goz.

"Count me out," Creasy said.

They were sitting under the vines and mimosa, eating a hot lamb curry. Creasy had cooked it two days before and it had matured into a rich, tangy example of the quintessential Indian speciality. There was a wide variety of side dishes and, of course, popadums. Creasy prided himself on his curries. Michael was an enthusiastic consumer.

Michael crunched a popadum and then forked some banana into his mouth to take away the heat of the curry. He said, "I thought we were a team."

"Your natural mother was a whore," Creasy said. "Face up to it. She abandoned you the day after giving birth. Any woman who can do that is no human being in my eyes."

"She had no choice."

"That's what they all say."

Michael took a sip of cold beer. He was not frightened of Creasy, nor was he in awe of him, even though Creasy was the hardest man he had ever known or would probably ever know.

"You taught me about vengeance," he said. "You taught me about justice."

Creasy sighed. "OK, so she told you she was forced into prostitution. Forced into being a drug addict and forced to give you up. That was twenty years ago and even if it's true and I doubt it what can you do? By nature prostitutes are notorious liars."

Michael was looking down at his plate. Quietly he asked, "Is Blondie a notorious liar?"

Creasy sighed again and shook his head. "No, Blondie always tells the truth. If you talk to Blondie she will tell you to forget the whole stupid idea."

Michael finished the last of the curry and said off-handedly, "By the way, my father was an Arab. He was the one who made my mother an addict and sold her off to prostitution."

"She told you that?"

"Yes, and much more." The young man looked up. His eyes were defiant. "She came to see me every week...every Sunday. She sat on the wall near the orphanage and watched me go to church and watched me coming back." Emotion crept into his voice. "It must have broken her heart not to be able to talk to me."

"She was a whore."

Emotion left Michael's voice and it took on the edge of a razor blade. "Blondie was a whore and she owns a whorehouse; but Blondie is a great friend of yours and you admire her."

"Blondie is different."

Michael stood up and stretched his frame and then began stacking plates. "Maybe so," he said. "But tomorrow I go to Brussels to talk to her. She's been around a long time, maybe she knows something. Maybe she can point me in the right direction."

"Maybe she'll tell you not to be a stupid idiot. Maybe she'll tell you that there are whores and different whores...and that a whore who discards her child the day after its birth deserves no thought or compassion from that child nineteen years later."

Michael gave him a belligerent look. A look that made Creasy realise that he was not talking to a child; he was talking to a nineteen-year-old man, made wiser far beyond his years. Creasy also realised that he could not let Michael just blast off alone on some crazy path of vengeance. It also entered his head that he himself had used Michael, and in a sense created Michael as an instrument for his own vengeance. He took a decision.

"OK, Michael. You want to be an idiot and expurgate this so-called duty...then I go with you and hold your hand."

Michael reacted very quietly. "I don't need you," he said. "You trained me well. I can do it myself."

Creasy looked down at the rough wooden surface of the table. His face was sombre, and that mood was reflected in his voice. "Michael in a way I feel a great guilt. You had no childhood. I plucked you from an orphanage and made you a soldier. You were seventeen. You should have been able to live like any other teenager, but you never had the chance. Now you're nineteen years old and seem like you're forty...So that's past...Nothing to be done. But maybe you'd let me help on this stupid thing you're doing? Anyway it will be good to see Blondie again, and Maxie and Nicole...and I guess I need to be a chaperone between you and Christine."

Michael smiled at him with an edge of affection.

"Somehow I don't see you in the role of a chaperone. Yes, come with me...but Creasy, understand that this is my show."

Creasy sighed and nodded.

They landed at Brussels airport at eight p.m. They only had hand luggage and within fifteen minutes were striding out of customs.

Michael looked infinitely older than his nineteen years: six feet tall, jet-black hair, cropped short; long, lean face above a long, lean body. He wore black jeans, a cream open-necked shirt and a black leather bomber jacket. Beside him Creasy moved along with his curious walk; the outsides of his feet coming into contact with the ground first. A bear of a man with his cropped, grey hair and scarred face the colour of pale mahogany. He wore dark blue slacks, a light oxford cotton shirt, a black cashmere sweater and a tweed jacket. An observer looking only at his clothes would have deduced that he was an English or Scottish country gentleman; but one look at the face would have dispelled such thoughts. This was a hard man in a bad mood.

As they came out towards the line of taxis Creasy suddenly stopped with a sharp grunt. Michael turned to look at him and saw the pain on his face. It was not the first time. Over the past months that sharp pain had recurred several times. Each time Creasy had brushed it aside, muttering something about indigestion.

"Are you all right?" Michael asked.

"Sure, let's go."

They climbed into a taxi and Michael told the driver, "The Pappagal, Rue d'Argens."

The driver twisted his head in surprise. "You know what that place is?"

"Yes, a high-class brothel."

The driver engaged first gear and pulled away, saying over his shoulder, "You don't waste much time."

Michael grinned at Creasy, then turned to look out the window, taking in the scenery, remembering the last time he had been in Brussels, almost two years ago, sitting in a taxi on the same route. At that time he had been with Creasy and Leonie. The memory of Leonie brought a sick jolt to the pit of his stomach. He had loved her as a mother. He remembered the tears he had shed when she had been killed. He remembered Creasy tossing him a handkerchief in the room at Guido's pensione in Naples and telling him in that flat voice, "Dry your tears. You're a man now. It's time for vengeance."

Half an hour later Michael pressed the doorbell of a discreet building in a discreet side-street only a few blocks from the EC headquarters. They heard the click of the tiny shutter set into the door and knew they were being examined from the inside. A few seconds later the door opened. It was Raoul, tall, skeletal and with a face dark enough to frighten strong men. He moved past them and looked carefully down both sides of the street, then nodded. They strode into the plush, carpeted hallway, dropped their bags and shook the tall man's hand.

"How long will you stay?" Raoul asked.

"A couple of days," Michael answered.

Raoul picked up their bags. "Blondie's in the bar. I'll take your things upstairs."

They walked down the corridor, opened a door and went through. It was an opulent room: deep-pile maroon carpet, crystal chandeliers, velvet walls, a small mahogany bar, deep leather settees and armchairs. There were four very beautiful and elegantly dressed young women sitting in the armchairs. Sitting at the bar was something entirely different. An old woman in an ankle-length gothic brocade gown. She had ebony black hair, a face thick with pancake makeup and a red slash for a mouth. She had blue-white diamonds at her ears, around her neck and around both wrists and on every one of her fingers. Her age was indeterminate, but Michael and Creasy knew that she was in her mid-seventies.

The red of her mouth widened as she saw them. She slid off the bar-stool as though she were an eighteen-year-old coquette; her arms opened. First embracing Creasy and then Michael, who could feel the stiffness of her corset. She held Michael at arm's length, looking up at his face, and brushed her hand down his cheek, saying in her heavily Italian-accented English, "You have become beautiful...Before you were...just handsome."

Creasy chuckled. Michael smiled and felt slightly embarrassed under the interested gaze of the four beautiful young women.

"Business seems slack," Creasy commented.

Blondie's smile waned.

"It's not great," she answered. "But the night is young. What will you have to drink?"

As they eased themselves onto the bar-stools Creasy again gasped and his left hand moved to the centre of his chest. Blondie and Michael glanced at each other.

"What is it?" the old woman asked sharply.

Creasy was shaking his head dismissively. She looked at Michael who shrugged and said, "He's been getting those pains over the last few weeks...Says it's nothing, but they're getting more frequent."

The atmosphere changed immediately. Blondie's face had turned very serious. She spoke to Creasy rapidly in French. He nodded reluctantly. Michael could not understand the language but he saw the genuine anger and concern on her face. Abruptly she turned to Michael and spoke to him in English.

"It has happened before with this fool who would be your father. He has so much metal in him it could be recycled into enough tin cans to supply a baked bean factory. Sometimes that metal moves."

Suddenly she became a mother, mistress, manager and cyclone all in one. She snapped her fingers and Raoul passed her the phone. She dialled a number and spoke rapidly into it. Creasy tried to remonstrate but she cut him short with a look that would have withered an oak tree. Michael looked on in amazement. Blondie hung up the phone, turned to Michael and gave him his instructions.

"An ambulance will be here within a few minutes. You are to make sure that Creasy gets into the ambulance together with pyjamas and whatever else he may need in hospital. A top surgeon is waiting for him at a private hospital...It is comfortable with pretty nurses. That surgeon will take out the piece of shrapnel that is working its way to that idiot's heart." She gave Creasy another laser-sharp look. "I can never understand how a man of your intelligence and knowledge of wounds can be so stupid when it comes to your own body."

Creasy coughed irritably and said, "You know I hate hospitals."

Blondie smiled. "I told you...this one is exclusive, and the nurses are cute." She turned back to Michael and her voice was tight with authority. "So you get him there, Michael. And instruct the surgeon to X-ray Creasy from his toenails to the top of his head. If he finds any metal in there which needs to be taken out, he should do it now."

Creasy coughed again, looked at Blondie and said, "You're sure this guy knows what he's doing?"

She smiled at him sweetly. "They say he's one of the best in Europe."

"Must cost a bomb," Creasy muttered.

She smiled and shook her head. "His wife died five years ago. He compensates his grief by hard work. He does not contemplate replacing his wife, but he is a virile man. He comes here usually once a week. All my girls love him." She gave a very Italian shrug. "And in his way he loves them too...His name is Bernard."

Bernard Roche was a good surgeon. He had been ten years in the French army and had done his apprenticeship in Algeria during the war of independence. He recognised Creasy.

He looked at his face, straightened in his chair and said, "First REP...I set a broken arm for you about two weeks before you guys blew up your barracks and marched out of Zeralda, singing Edith Piaf's *ne regrette rien*."

Creasy looked at him with suspicion and said, "You must have been in nappies."

The surgeon smiled. "Just out of them. I was twenty-three years old. You were a legend. When I put that plaster on you my hands were shaking. You had a friend then...an Italian called Guido something...He told me if I didn't put you back into perfect condition he'd bury me neck deep in the desert and train a camel to piss on my face every day for the next thousand years."

Creasy smiled at him. "The arm turned out fine. I'm getting pain from an old wound."

The surgeon stood up. He said to Michael, "Go away and have a drink and come back in an hour."

Michael drank half a bottle of red wine in a small bistro across the road from the hospital that looked no more than a large private house. On his return, the surgeon's face was sombre.

"It was close," he said. "The legend could have died within the next week or so. Why is it that such hard men are so frightened of hospitals and doctors?"

Michael shrugged. "Have you operated?"

Bernard shook his head. "No, in about two hours. Come and have a look."

They walked over to a wall which held a series of back-lit X-rays. Bernard pointed to the first one. Pointed to a small, dark shadow. "A grenade fragment," he said, "collected at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam in the early fifties. It spent three decades working its way through muscle to the heart. We've caught it just in time." He pointed at the next X-ray and another dark shadow. "The fragment of a bullet...Apparently received in the Congo...very close to the spleen...I'll take that out as well." He pointed at the next X-ray. Another dark shadow. "That's a steel pin which some Italian doctor used to connect a small bone in his shoulder to his collar bone...That was in Laos. That pin should have been taken out about six months later but somehow it got forgotten...I may as well do it now...I may have to replace the pin, but I won't know until I see how the two bones have fused."

Michael had been listening carefully. He asked, "Maybe leave that one well alone?"

Bernard shook his head. "It will give him terrible arthritis later in life. Better it comes out now."

Michael smiled as though to himself and then said, "I agree. Do it all at one time. How long will I have to stay in hospital?"

Bernard thought for a moment and then said, "At least ten days."

Michael nodded in satisfaction. "That's perfect."

"Do nothing until I'm out of here." Creasy's voice was emphatic.

Michael shrugged. "Well," he said, "I'll just make some enquiries and sort of mosey around. I mean you're going to be out of it for at least ten days and there's no point in my sitting on my ass doing nothing."

Creasy gave him a very narrow look. He said, "Put the mother situation on hold for a while...at least until I get out of this place. But try to find out what's bothering Blondie."

"Blondie?" Michael asked curiously.

Creasy nodded.

"Yes. Something's worrying her. I've known her many years and I can tell. I don't think she'll talk to me about it. She likes to be independent...But something's wrong. Hang your ears out and try to get some kind of message."

Blondie smiled at Michael across the kitchen table and said, "So Creasy is locked up in hospital for a few days...It's about time." She leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "So tell me. Where are you here?"

He took a sip of his wine and answered, "I came to ask for your advice and perhaps your help."

"Tell me."

So he told her. She knew the bare bones of the story and had been part of it, but he fleshed it out and went all the way back to the beginning: his adoption by Creasy and the dead English actress, Leonie, whom she had met and liked. Their revenge against the terrorists who had planted the bomb on Pan Am 103; his inbuilt hatred of the unknown natural mother who had abandoned him only one day after his birth. He explained about Father Manuel Zerafa telling him about that natural mother who was dying of cancer and wanted to see his face. He told her of his decision to see her. Told her of the woman with the ravaged bald-headed face lying on the hospital bed. Told her of the woman who had sat on the wall every Sunday during his childhood. Finally he told her of the reason why the woman on the wall had no choice but to abandon him the day after he was born. Then he told her what he planned to do, and again asked her advice and possibly her help.

She lowered her head in thought for a long time, then looked up at him and quietly said, "Those people that you seek. Those people who forced your mother to abandon you. Those people who are the dread of the earth. They have been around a long time. Many decades. They are very powerful and well connected, both politically and financially, in several countries."

"You know these people, Blondie?"

"I know of them. They have tried to do business with me in the past, but I don't deal with that filth. I don't need to. My girls work for me because they want to. I look after them. I take care of their money."

and when the time comes I make sure they leave the business in a better condition than when they joined it."

He smiled and asked, "Like Nicole?"

She nodded solemnly. "Exactly like Nicole. You will see her, of course...and Maxie." She smiled. "And that young sister of hers."

Michael smiled in return.

"Of course. I'll go there for dinner tomorrow night. Why not come with me?"

Sadly she shook her head.

"It's not a good time for me to be away from the Pappagal."

"You have problems?"

"Only small ones, but I have to be here."

"Anything I can do?"

She shook her head, reached out and touched his cheek. "You have problems of your own. These people you seek are dangerous. They kill without thought and they protect their interests with cunning and ferocity."

"Who are they, Blondie?"

"They come and go. Different faces but from the same area. They work in southern Europe, the Middle East and northern Africa. I've heard a name, but I'm not sure whether it means anything."

"What name?"

"I have heard that they are called 'The Blue Ring'."

"Are they Mafia?"

She shook her head. "They are worse than Mafia."

Michael swirled the wine in his glass. "Where would I start to look?"

She considered the question for a long time, then stood up and said, "Wait."

She came back five minutes later, holding a white business card. She put it on the table between them saying, "About six months ago a man came here and hired one of my girls. It turned out that he did not want to make love. He wanted to talk. Such things happen, even at three hundred dollars a session. Some want to talk about their fantasies without doing anything, some want to talk about themselves."

She tapped the card. "This man did not want to talk about any of those things. He wanted to a

questions. He was curious about the modern white slave trade. My girl thought he was a nice man and sympathetic. He told her he was a writer researching a book. At the end of his hour she suggested he talk to me. We talked in the bar for a couple of hours and we became friendly. During the conversation he mentioned 'The Blue Ring'. At the end he admitted he was not a writer." She tapped the card again. "Perhaps you and Creasy should start by talking to this man."

Michael picked up the card and read, "Jens Jensen, CID (Missing Persons Bureau) Copenhagen Denmark."

Chapter 04

Michael was woken just after midnight by a gentle tap on the door. He pulled himself out of bed, padded across, unlocked the door and opened it. Raoul stood there with a silver tray in his hand. On it was a bottle of Hennessy Extra brandy and two glasses.

He said, "I thought we might have a drink. I hope I didn't wake you."

Michael yawned, smiled and said, "You did, but let's have a drink anyway."

He was puzzled because Raoul was a taciturn man, not given to conversation, conviviality or socialising. They sat at the small table and Raoul poured two large measures. Michael studied him. He was a man in his mid-forties, blessed with a face to frighten small children, old ladies and clients who got out of line. He had worked for Blondie for over ten years and was a combination of bartender, bouncer, handyman and silent companion. Blondie was the only person in his life that meant anything to him. He opened the conversation. "How is Creasy?"

"Creasy's just fine," Michael answered. "That surgeon really is good. He mined a great deal of metal from Creasy's body." Michael smiled at the recollection. "He also filled him full of morphine...It's our very happy Creasy lying in bed there, and he probably weighs half a kilo less."

"How long will he have to stay there?" Raoul asked.

Michael shrugged. "The doctor says ten days...but knowing Creasy he'll discharge himself the minute he can walk...I'd guess four to six days."

Raoul nodded solemnly and said. "Then I guess it has to wait a couple of weeks or more until he's fully recovered."

"What has to wait?"

"You don't know?"

"Know what?"

Raoul was looking puzzled. He asked, "You are here because Blondie called you?"

Michael shook his head.

"She never called us...What's happening?"

Raoul was confused. He rubbed the palms of his hands down his face, sighed and said, "Blondie has problems. I thought she might have written to Creasy. In fact I suggested it, but obviously she didn't."

"Not that I know of. Tell me about her problems."

Raoul thought for a moment and then said, "We don't have the Mafia here in Belgium, but we do have something similar. We call them 'Les Homines de la Nuit'. There are several gangs, but one has recently become predominant. It takes its name from their leader, Lamonte. They deal in drug prostitution, illegal gambling, protection rackets and coercion. Blondie has no affiliation with any criminal group or with any pimps. You know she treats her girls well."

Michael's voice indicated his interest. "So tell me."

Raoul's face went gloomy. "Recently, Lamonte's gang has been targeting up-market brothels for protection money. There are many such brothels in Brussels. They cater to the huge amount of civil servants who work for the EC and also for the businessmen who need those civil servants, and often invite them to places like Pappagal. Most of the brothel owners have buckled under and now pay protection money. But not Blondie. She refuses."

"So what have they done?"

Raoul shrugged. "They are very clever. They don't plant bombs or start fires or anything so obvious. But every night Lamonte has his men waiting on the street outside. They threaten our customers with blackmail and violence and, like common touts, they give them the cards of other brothels over which they have control."

"And the results?"

Raoul spread his hands. "Business is down by more than half. Blondie cannot even cover her costs. She is paying the girls minimum wages from her own pocket."

For more than a minute there was a silence while Michael thought. Then he said, "She should have told Creasy. She should have followed your advice."

Raoul nodded. "But she will not. She has her pride." His dark face turned apologetic and his voice took on a different tone. "You have to understand, Michael, I want to do something. Blondie is like a mother to me. But I am not like you or Creasy. Sure I look tough, and I can frighten people just by my look." He tapped his suit under the armpit. "And, yes, I carry a gun, but it has no bullets. It's a misunderstanding we have with the police. It's just to frighten unruly clients." He shrugged again. "I am no match for Lamonte or his 'soldiers'. So we must wait for Creasy to come out of hospital...I hope he will be in time."

Michael shook his head. "We will wait for nothing. I will have a gentle word with Lamonte myself."

Raoul looked slightly startled and murmured, "Maybe you should wait for Creasy."

Again, Michael shook his head. "I will do it myself...Don't worry, Raoul. I am capable."

Raoul looked into the young man's face and into his stone-cold eyes. "If you want, I will watch you"

back...I will get bullets for my gun and fuck the police."

Michael smiled and shook his head.

"I would be honoured for you to watch my back, but your place is here, watching over Blondie. And yes, do get bullets for your gun and fuck the police."

"So who will watch your back?"

Michael's smile widened. "Maxie MacDonald will watch my back. I'm having dinner at his bistro tomorrow night. He knows the city and will know all about Lamonte."

Raoul grinned back. "Yes," he said, "Maxie will enjoy the action. He's been out to pasture for too long...And Blondie will know nothing?"

"Blondie will know nothing. But later, when business returns to normal, she may guess."

Raoul smiled again. "Let her guess."

Chapter 05

Michael ate monies marinieres followed by coq au vin, and drank half a bottle of the house wine. While he ate, Maxie made several phone calls. After most of the other guests had left, Maxie brought over an old unmarked bottle of Cognac and two glasses. The square ex-mercenary explained that Jacques Lamonte was in his mid-forties.

He had muscled his way up to the top of the pile in the Belgian crime hierarchy. He was daring and ruthless. He was also gay, and owned several nightclubs which purveyed to the gay community in Brussels. He lived in a grand house in a prime suburb on the outskirts of the city. His home was extremely well-guarded and he never moved anywhere without very hard bodyguards, all well-armed. Diffidently Maxie suggested that Michael should wait until Creasy was out of hospital and fully fit.

Michael shook his head and explained. "Maxie, you know how close Creasy is to Blondie. I have a feeling he will get so mad that someone like that pimp is threatening her that he'll kill him. That could be complicated. So I'll just give the guy a hell of a fright and Creasy needn't know anything about it."

Maxie looked into the young man's eyes and said, "My sister-in-law loves you, but sometime Michael, you can be a prick. You want to do this for Blondie while Creasy is indisposed. You're being a macho young guy."

Michael started out on a retort, but Maxie held up a hand, smiled and said, "That's OK. It's no problem. I understand. You need to make your own moves and come out from under Creasy's shadow. I'm sure you can take care of it."

"I will take care of it. Where does Lamonte go at night?"

"He is almost always in one of his clubs, usually The Black Cat. It's on Rue Lafitte. He goes there to pick up young men."

Christine came and sat with them. She smiled at Michael and asked, "Are you going to take me out tonight?"

"Yes, with your sister's permission. I want to enjoy tonight, because tomorrow I'm going to become gay."

There were a few customers that always lingered late. At eleven o'clock Nicole saw the impatience in her sister's eyes and said, "Go on, then. Don't wake us up when you come home."

Christine smiled and said demurely, "I will not wake you up when I come home."

First they went to a small bar around the corner. They sat in a dimly-lit banquette. Michael ordered champagne and they drank it, holding hands.

"Do you want to go to a disco?" he asked.

She squeezed his hand and shook her head. "No."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go to a big warm bed. I want to stay in that bed the whole night and I want to watch your eyes open in the morning. I want to see the pleasure in them because the moment they open I will be doing something very beautiful to you."

The big bed was in a small luxury hotel just around another corner. A hotel that catered for such assignments. They had only made love once before, about a year earlier, but he remembered how physically sensitive she was.

Very slowly he undressed her as she stood by the bed. First the pale green mohair sweater then the white cotton blouse. She wore no bra.

Her breasts were small and high and made a triangle with the soft point of her chin. He loosened the belt of her black woollen skirt and it dropped to the carpet. She was left wearing only very brief white panties. He lifted her up and laid her on the bed.

She smiled up at him and asked quietly, "Do you remember?"

He nodded as he took off his clothes. He did remember. He remembered virtually every word she had spoken to him the first night he had made love to her.

In the beginning it had been a disaster. Like many young men he had assumed a woman took pleasure from the pure physical act of sex, and that the harder he went and the longer he went, so much the better. She had stopped him after five minutes, pulled herself away from him, and then whispered in his ear in a humorous voice, "Perhaps I'm not like your other girlfriends. Have you ever had a Belgian girlfriend?"

"No."

"Then maybe we are different. Maybe we are the aristocracy of girlfriends. We are nervous like race horses. However, there are ways to handle us." She had gone on to tell him in great detail how to handle her.

So he remembered. He made love to her very slowly, very carefully and very tenderly. At the end she lay with her head in the crook of his arm, her hand across his chest. In a voice as low as the purr of a cat she said, "I love you because of your memory. I love you because you think you are so tough and so mean and so hard...But you are just a little boy."

He stared up at the canopy of the four-poster bed and then asked, "Do you really see me as a boy?"

She moved up until her head rested against his shoulder and her lips were near to his ear. "Oh, yes. You think that your youth has passed you by. Everybody thinks that. My mother and Maxie say that you have the mind of a forty-year-old...It is not true."

"No?"

"No. You are nineteen years old, but for me you are even younger. I don't talk of your mind or your body. I only feel the essence of you in my arms...I feel a young boy." Both her arms had now circled him and pulled him close. She waited for an answer, but he was silent.

She lifted her head and in the dim light looked at his face and into his eyes. They were infinitely sad.

He murmured, "You must be the only one to see me as a boy. Sometimes I feel a thousand years old." His smile was half bitter and half humorous. He kissed her and said, "But you are so wise. I am a boy but I badly need to become a man. I need to stand alone."

He saw the concern in her eyes. She said, "That's why you go after Lamonte on your own?"

Slowly he nodded. "And more. I told you about 'The Blue Ring'...I will go after them myself when Creasy recovers. At least, I will start the journey and plot my course."

She wanted to tell him to be careful and to be cautious and to be patient, but she had the wisdom to kiss him and keep silent. She ran a hand down his body and felt the scar which she had not seen before.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Someone shot me."

"Did you kill him?"

"I don't remember."

She smiled and said, "That's what Maxie always says about his past." She moved and kissed the scar and then his lips. "Are you really going to go gay tomorrow?" she asked.

"Yes, but only temporarily."

She looked down at him, her blonde hair falling across his face.

"Afterwards," she murmured, "come back to me. I will straighten out your genes."

Chapter 06

The Black Cat was dark and dangerous, a mixture of discreet spotlights, chrome and black leather. The two bouncers at the door were gay and mean. Michael paid his fifty francs entrance fee and walked into the bar. He was wearing frayed denim jeans with a metal-studded belt, an olive green silk shirt and a gold earring in his left ear.

He ordered a creme de menthe frappe and studied the room. About sixty men, ranging in age from fifty to seventeen. Not a woman in sight. The bartender had a purple hair-do down to his shoulders.

Lamonte was sitting at a corner table with two men. Michael recognised him from Maxie's description. He was in his mid-forties, a tanned, handsome man wearing a sober business suit. Michael gazed into his eyes and then turned away and talked to the bartender about the weather. When he ordered his third creme de menthe frappe and tried to pay for it the bartender gave him the drink and waved away his money. With a wink he said, "It's on the boss," and gestured at Lamonte's table.

Five minutes later Lamonte eased himself onto the stool next to Michael, smiled disarmingly and said "I haven't seen you in here before."

Michael answered, "It must be Christmas."

They left an hour later. Lamonte had a Mercedes 600 complete with mini-bar, telephone and miniature TV. He and Michael sat in the back. One of the bodyguards drove, the other sat silently next to him. Lamonte opened the tiny fridge in the mini-bar, took out a bottle of Veuve Cliquot, popped the cork and poured two glasses. They toasted each other. With his free hand Lamonte felt for Michael's penis.

"It takes time," Michael said with a smile. "But when it stands up, it stays up."

Lamonte grinned, leaned across and kissed him on the mouth, his tongue probing. Michael played his part.

There were two other bodyguards waiting at the house. One at the main gate and one inside the front door, who let them in. They proceeded straight up the stairs to the bedroom, both carrying the glasses of champagne, and Lamonte carrying the half-empty bottle.

In the opulent bedroom with its huge bed and silk canopy, Michael's first words were, "First the money."

Lamonte took out his wallet and counted out five hundred francs.

Michael pushed the money into the back pocket of his jeans. With that action Lamonte took off his clothes and moved in, needing to use what he had purchased. He reached out his hand to move

Michael's face closer. Michael kissed him, and then the stiffened fingers of his right hand moved in a blur to a precise spot just below Lamonte's rib cage. As Lamonte went down to the deep-pile carpet Michael's right knee smashed into his face, breaking his nose and dislodging four front teeth.

Lamonte woke up five minutes later. He was lying on the vast bed, naked and in excruciating pain. His thumbs were tied together. He looked up into Michael's eyes. Black eyes, and very cold. In a strange way the eyes were disinterested, as though looking at a boring object. The voice when it came was conversational, perhaps that of a young man talking to an uncle. It was a voice without menace and under the circumstances, terrifying.

"Do you have a religion?"

Lamonte could not find his voice. His face was a pool of agony, his body chilled by fear.

"If you do," the voice went on, "now is the time to pray to your God. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to consider your life."

Lamonte took a deep breath to scream for help. The sound never came. Michael's right hand smashed into his mouth again, dislodging three more teeth. When he came out of the waves of nauseous pain he was looking again into the cold, black eyes and hearing that conversational voice.

"Lamonte, don't think of your bodyguards. You would be dead before they got through that door. You think you're a tough, hard man, but you know nothing of that kind of world. I got you here as easy as picking a baby from a pram. I'm going to let you live but with one name in your memory. The name of a woman called Blondie. You threatened her. For sure I frighten you, but also be sure that you are lucky. There is another friend of Blondie's who would send you to hell in a basket of ice that would never melt. I will be a little generous. When you come out of hospital you'll go to the Rue d'Argenteuil and apologise to Blondie. Otherwise I will come again and I will not be generous."

He reached forward and put his left hand over the Belgian's mouth. The side of his right hand smashed down on Lamonte's left forearm, cracking the bone.

Chapter 07

The soft chimes of the doorbell at the Pappagal rang ten days later.

Raoul came out of the bar, moved down the corridor, opened the peephole and peered through. He recognised the man standing outside. He noted the jacket hung over the shoulders, saw the white plaster on the man's right arm. Raoul opened the door.

The man said in a quiet strangled voice, "I wish to speak to Madame Blondie."

"Wait here."

It was drizzling slightly. The man stood there, getting slowly wet. Raoul went back to the bar and said to Blondie, "Lamonte is outside. He wants to talk to you."

Her face hardened in anger. "I have nothing to say to him. Not now. Not ever!"

Raoul smiled and said, "You don't have to say a word to him. I think he wants to say something to you."

Chapter 08

Jens Jensen was a good policeman. He had all the right instincts.

He had a nose that smelled out everything. He knew when he was being followed. He could feel it at the nape of his wide neck, a tingling of the flesh. He carried his lunch bag across the park to a bench and sat in the sunshine. As he took the first bite of his salami sandwich a young, dark-skinned, dark-haired man sat down next to him.

"What do you want?" Jens asked.

"I want to talk to you about 'The Blue Ring'."

Chapter 09

Jens Jensen was apologetic as he ushered Michael through the door of his apartment in the Vesterbro district of Copenhagen.

"It's a bit small," he said. "We're not exactly overpaid in the Danish Police."

It was small, and very warm and cosy. Very much a home. Michael shook hands with Jens' wife Birgitte, a slender, attractive woman in her late twenties. Then he solemnly shook hands with Lisa, their six-year-old daughter.

If the apartment was small, the dinner was huge. They started with smoked salmon on toast. On top of the salmon was baked egg, asparagus and cress. Then they went on to the main course, which was glazed ham with vegetables and oven-baked potatoes. For dessert Birgitte had made a delicious sherbet mousse with hazelnuts and chocolate. Michael had hardly eaten since leaving Brussels, and he literally devoured the food, mostly in silence, while listening to a typical family conversation: Jens complaining about his boss; Birgitte, who was a school teacher, complaining about her students; and Lisa complaining about her teachers. But it was a conversation of good humour and Michael decided they were a comfortable and happy family.

After the meal Lisa went to bed and Birgitte cleared the table and went into the kitchen. Michael and Jens talked again about 'The Blue Ring'. Jens was quite sure that they worked out of three main centres: Marseille, Milan and Naples. He had heard that there was a strong Arab influence within the Ring and therefore thought that perhaps Marseille might be the main centre.

"That's where I'll start, then," Michael said. "I'll leave tomorrow. Do you have any contacts there?"

Jens nodded. "Yes, a good one. He's my counterpart there, a man called Serge Corelli...He's partially Arabic."

Michael smiled slightly. "So am I," he said.

Jens raised an enquiring eyebrow and on impulse Michael told him about his background, explaining in detail about being in the orphanage from his birth. By this time Birgitte had come back from the kitchen and sat down. Both she and Jens listened in fascination as Michael recounted his life. He felt strangely relaxed with these two people. He told them how Creasy had adopted him and very briefly about what he and Creasy had done in vengeance. He finally told them about listening to the story of his natural mother just before she died.

There was a long silence when he had finished, then Birgitte reached across the table and put her hand over his and said softly, "I understand how you feel."

Jens nodded. "And why you are looking for them. But it's been a long time and maybe they won't be the same people."

"It doesn't matter," Michael said coldly. "They come from the same pit. They practise the same filth."

Birgitte went to the kitchen to make coffee and, very gently, Jens said to Michael, "These are hard and dangerous people, Michael, and totally ruthless." He gestured as if in apology and went on, "You are a young man, with limited experience. This man Creasy you talked about. Will he not help you?"

"Of course. But right now Creasy is in hospital, all stitched up in three places and he'll need at least a week. Meanwhile I'll get in position and he can follow later."

"I hope so," Jens said. "After all, you are a young man and against a mob like that the odds are not very good."

Michael went very quiet. He was sitting across the table from Jens, his eyes still cold. "Did you have training in the police -small-arms, unarmed combat and so on?"

"Of course, and I was damn good at it, and still am." He touched his slight paunch and smiled. "Even though I'm not quite as fit as I should be."

Birgitte was just coming out of the kitchen carrying a tray when she heard Michael's words. She stopped abruptly, almost spilling the coffee, as Michael said, "Jens. You worry about my ability. If I wanted to I could kill you within three seconds. If there were three of you sitting around this table, all well-trained, I could kill you all within ten seconds."

Very quietly Jens asked, "You are carrying a gun?"

"No."

"A knife?"

"No."

"No weapon at all?"

Without speaking Michael held up his two hands. There was a silence and then Jens asked, "Have you ever killed before?"

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