

CENTRAL PARK

by Guillaume MUSSO

Novel

**Sample translation (chapter 1) by HeatherAllen for submission
purposes only**

Part I

Bound

1

Alice

*I believe there is another man inside every man,
a stranger, a Conniving Man.*
Stephen KING

First, the sting on your cheek of an icy gust of wind.

Then the slight rustling of leaves, the murmur of a nearby brook, the quiet twittering of birds. The first rays of sunlight sensed through the temporary veil of unopened eyelids.

And the creaking of branches. The smell of damp earth and decaying leaves. The pungent woody notes of grey lichen.

Off in the distance, a vague droning sound, discordant and dreamlike.

Alice Schafer had trouble opening her eyes. The early morning light was blinding, her clothes were sticky with dew. She was drenched in cold sweat, shivering. Her throat was parched and there was an overpowering taste of ash in her mouth. Her joints were aching, her limbs stiff, her head heavy...

As she moved to sit up, she realized she was lying on a rough wooden bench. Then, dumbfounded, she felt the huge frame of a man curled up against her, leaning heavily into her back.

Alice stifled a cry, her heartbeat racing wildly. To extricate herself, she rolled to the ground and onto her feet in a single movement. At this point she discovered that her right hand was handcuffed to the stranger's left wrist. She jumped back instinctively, but the man didn't move.

Shit!

Her heart was pounding in her chest. She glanced at her watch: the face of her old Patek was scratched but the mechanism still worked. Its perpetual calendar read Tuesday, October the 8th, 8 A.M.

Where the hell am I? she wondered, wiping her sweat-stained face with the back of her sleeve.

Her eyes darted swiftly about to assess the situation. She was in the middle of a forest ablaze with the golden colors of fall, a cool, dense thicket with rich vegetation. Silent and untamed, the clearing was surrounded by tall oaks, impenetrable bushes and rocky outcroppings. There was no one in sight but, given the circumstances, maybe it was for the best.

Alice raised her eyes. The light was gorgeous, soft, almost unreal. She could make out glittering specks of light through the leaves of an enormous golden elm, its roots poking through a carpet of damp leaves.

Rambouillet? Fontainebleau? The Bois de Vincennes? she ventured in her mind. An Impressionist picture postcard in any case, the calm of which sharply offset the brutality of her surrealistic waking at the side of a perfect stranger.

Carefully, she leaned closer to get a better look at the man's face: between the ages of thirty-five and forty, tussled brown hair, a stubbly beard.

Was he dead?

Kneeling down and placing three fingers alongside his neck, to the right of the Adam's apple, she applied pressure to his carotid artery and felt a reassuring pulse. The guy was unconscious, not dead. She studied his features for a minute or so. Did she know him? Could he be some thug she had sent up the river? A childhood friend she no longer recognized? No, she his features were completely new to her.

Sweeping a lock of blond hair out of her eyes, Alice considered the pair of metal bracelets linking her to the strange man.

Double lock safety function, a standard model used by a good number of police and security forces the world over, very likely

her *own* pair. Alice dug around in the pockets of her jeans hoping to find the key.

It wasn't there. She did feel a gun, however, slipped into the inside pocket of her leather jacket. Relieved, she closed her fingers around the butt thinking it was her service weapon. It wasn't the Sig Sauer used by crime squad cops, however. It was a polymer-framed Glock 22. And she had no idea how it had got there. She wanted to check the charger but it wasn't easy with only one free hand. After a little wriggling, careful not to wake the stranger, she finally managed it. A bullet was visibly missing. Turning the pistol over, she noticed the butt was stained with dry blood. She pulled her jacket all the way open: the front of her blouse was also spattered with splotches of coagulated blood.

Fuck! What did I do?

Alice massaged her eyes with her only free hand. At present, a throbbing headache was pulsing through her temples as if an invisible clamp were squashing her skull. She breathed in deeply to quell her mounting fear and attempted to collect her thoughts.

She had gone out bar hopping on the Champs-Elysees the night before with three girlfriends. She had had a bit too much to drink, as they went from one cocktail bar to the next: Moonlight, The Thirteenth Floor, Londonderry... The four friends had parted company around midnight. Alice had gone back by herself to her car parked in the underground lot on Avenue Franklin-Roosevelt, and then...

A total blank. A veil of impenetrable cotton blotted out everything. Her brain was doing overtime trying to remember, but there was nothing. Her memory was paralyzed, frozen, stuck on that last closing shot.

Come on, dammit, try harder! What happened next?

She could clearly remember going to the automatic pay station then heading down the stairs to the third sublevel. She had definitely had too much to drink. She had staggered over to her small Audi, unlocked the door then got in the driver's seat...

And then nothing.

Try as she may, her memory had hit a wall of white brick, impossible to get past it. It might just as well have been Hadrian's Wall, or the entire Great Wall of China. She swallowed. Her panic level went up a notch: the forest, the blood on her shirt, the weapon that didn't belong to her... This wasn't just a hangover after a night on the town. She had no idea how she had ended up here, she must have been drugged. Some weirdo must have slipped her GHB! It was a definite possibility: as a cop she had worked in recent years on several cases involving date rape drugs. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind and began searching her pockets: her wallet

and police badge had disappeared. She had no ID, no money, no phone.

Now her fear was compounded by distress.

A branch snapped; a flock of warblers took flight. A reddish leaf or two danced in the air brushing past Alice's face. Using her left hand, she zipped her jacket up, holding the top of the garment in place with her chin. That's when she noticed a number in pale ink on the palm of her hand; a series of numbers taken down on the fly, like a schoolboy's cheat sheet written on the inside of his hand, at the risk of fading:

2125558900

What did the numbers mean? Was she the one who had written them?

Maybe. Not sure though, she thought, considering the numbers.

Bewildered and scared, she closed her eyes for a brief moment.

She wouldn't let herself lose courage. Evidently something serious had taken place the night before. And though she may have no memory of the episode in question, the man chained to her was about to give her a quick refresher course. Or so she hoped, at least.

Friend or foe?

In doubt, she put the magazine back into the Glock and cocked the semi-automatic. Then with her free hand she pointed the piece at her companion and gave him an unceremonious shake.

"Hey, you! Time to wake up!"

The man was having a hard time surfacing.

"Come on, buddy! Move it!" she barked with another shake of his shoulder.

He blinked his eyes, stifled a yawn then struggled to sit up. When his eyes opened for good, he recoiled at the shock of finding the barrel of a gun just a few inches from his forehead.

He stared at Alice in disbelief then looked all around, discovering to his amazement the wooded surroundings.

A few seconds of bewilderment later, he gulped then opened his mouth to ask in English:

"Who the hell are you? What are we doing here?"