

# SILENTCIDE 2

## VENGEANCE

Kill or be killed while US senators die.

WITH 145  
ONLINE PHOTOS OF  
ACTION SCENES IN  
21 CITIES IN  
4 COUNTRIES

A SUSPENSE THRILLER BY

**RICHARD EBERT**



**ENCIRCLE BOOKS™**  
RICHARD EBERT NOVELS

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## 145 Online Photos for *Silentcide 2*

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145 online photos show *Silentcide 2* action scenes  
in 21 cities in 4 countries.

Each photo annotated by a footnote number in the book.  
All photos and descriptions by Richard Ebert.

### Three Ways to See Photos

**Author website:** [RichardEbert.com](http://RichardEbert.com). Look for *Silentcide 2* cover.  
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# ONE

## MONITORING QUÉBEC CITY, CANADA

### Friday

**D**eath was imminent. Watching would be divine.

Irene Shaw tingled with anticipation yet portrayed dispassionate elegance. Heaven forbid the hired help detect anything but her poised control over the pending termination of Chris Davis and Anna Monteiro. Their demise was long overdue yet rapidly approaching. The ambush promised to be splendid vengeance.

Irene's intense blue eyes focused on four large monitors suspended over an ornate marble fireplace. Each live video showed the view of a killer's bodycam or rifle-mounted camera. Two assassins had been stationed for over an hour at the north end of Terrasse Dufferin,<sup>1</sup> a quarter-mile promenade overlooking the Saint Lawrence River. The third had been conducting surveillance of Old Québec City<sup>2</sup> from a high-rise until recently ordered to reposition in the south. The fourth showed a ham sandwich being eaten at Tourny Fountain while the targets toured the adjacent Parliament Building.<sup>3</sup>

The trap was almost ready. Irene detested waiting. Yet perfection required patience.

A handsome young manservant approached her, paused to be acknowledged, then delivered a third dirty martini in a frosted Baccarat crystal glass. "Thank you, dear," Irene said with a suggestive smile. She ogled Pierre's retreat from the Ops Room of her

Philadelphia mansion while fondly recalling their last tryst. Then she placed a Sicilian stuffed olive on her tongue, withdrew the ivory cocktail skewer with her perfect teeth, bit down, and savored the zesty burst of gin, bitterness and blue cheese. Life's simple pleasures were often the best. Excessive wealth paid for every other indulgence.

While placing the stemware on the Louis XV period end table, Irene's bejeweled fingers spasmed. She cursed the sign of weakness. Arthritic hands were among a growing list of physical imperfections that had been accelerating since her sixtieth birthday twelve years earlier. Managing or masking her body's degeneration was increasingly time consuming and expensive. Yet aging was just another formidable adversary to defeat. Irene was accustomed to winning.

In subservient silence, an elderly Vietnamese manicurist used an embroidered washcloth to pat dry the splash of martini before it seeped into the table's rosewood inlay. The woman then retrieved a fresh towel for the top of the portable cosmetic workstation, gingerly lowered Irene's hand again and resumed airbrushing her fingernails. The illegal immigrant was a gifted artisan, nonjudgmental and discreet.

Irene Shaw stole a glance at the full-length dressing mirror. A few tufts of silver-white hair needed to be ushered back into the French bun. She admired the taut pink skin stretched over high cheekbones. Her authoritative eyes were accented by layered mascara, long lashes and dark microbladed eyebrows. Yet her neck needed a nip and tuck. She must remember to ask her assistant to make an appointment with the cosmetic surgeon. He was always booked months ahead. The doctor's scalpel was sheer genius.

Irene's thoughts shifted to Chris Davis, her protégé for the last twenty-eight years. Since he was orphaned at ten years old, she had meticulously honed his skills for silentcide, the art of undetected killing. Along with his younger sister, Michelle, they had become an outstanding team, far exceeding initial expectations. They had

rarely failed to execute a silentcide commission on time and without repercussions from police. Their near-flawless record was remarkable. Irene had envisioned the siblings becoming heirs to her murder enterprise ... until recently.

For some reason and without warning, Chris Davis had become rebellious. A simple disobedience would have been distasteful yet manageable. A bold resistance against her authority could have been dealt with harshly and then forgiven.

Yet his increasing acts of defiance were much deeper, reprehensible and unpardonable. Chris had refused to kill his assigned target, Anna Monteiro, because he had become infatuated with her. The police were also investigating his rogue actions in three cities. The needless body count was now at five. Worst of all was the avenging conspiracy: he had plotted to kill Irene.

His audacity was outrageous. The consequences would be severe. Soon, Chris Davis would lie in a pool of blood. Simultaneously, Anna Monteiro would die on this last day of the extended deadline as promised to the client. Two birds, one stone, and marvelous retribution. Plus, the spectacular slayings would be a stern warning to potential malcontents in her network of assassins. You don't screw with Irene Shaw.

"Ms. Shaw," came a booming voice from the computer screen on the nearby Baroque writing desk. Jürgen van Oorschot was the middle-aged head of Phonoï, the group named after the Greek personification of violent murder. His square chin, thin lips, bulbous nose, and narrow menacing eyes beneath a black crewcut created a fierce appearance.

"Yes, dear." Irene acknowledged the ruthless man.

The former mercenary replied, "The targets have left the Parliament Building and are heading toward the promontory."<sup>4</sup>

A glance at the wall monitors confirmed the news. Camera four – from the man discreetly tracking the couple – showed them strolling on the lawn at Plains of Abraham Park. Camera three was a shaking

view of Porte Saint-Louis<sup>5</sup> along the old city wall as a sniper hurried toward his newly assigned position. The noose was tightening.

Irene looked down at the Vietnamese woman. "I'm afraid we'll need to suspend this for now, dear."

"Yes, ma'am," the nail technician said while pushing aside the cosmetic station. She graciously lifted one of Irene's feet, causing the *Garra rufa* fish that had been feasting on dead skin cells to dart wildly within the ichthyotherapy tank. After Irene's second foot had been dried, the manicurist helped her into designer slippers, bowed, and humbly left the room. The closing door echoed off the mahogany walls, crown molding and coffered ceiling.

Irene retrieved the martini, plodded across the Persian rug, sat down in the Chippendale desk chair and adjusted her floral silk dress. She took a sip, relished the harsh warmth sliding down her throat, then took another. The emerging buzz blended perfectly with rising endorphins.

On monitor four, Chris and Anna appeared to be admiring the western wall of La Citadelle de Québec<sup>6</sup> – a British fort built after the War of 1812 – until they abruptly stopped walking. Anna handed Chris a cell phone, stared for a moment, then curiously hustled away. Was she pissed? Had the lovebirds been arguing?

Irene asked into the computer screen, "Are you seeing this, Jürgen?"

"Yes, Ms. Shaw," the commander of the assassination team replied into the boom mic on his headset.

"Where's she going?"

"On her present course, there is only one way she can go," he said with a reassuring voice, "and that's directly into the kill zone. The boys will be waiting for her."

Irene insisted, "They shouldn't fire a single shot until she is reunited with Chris. Understood?"

"Understood," he said with a nod.

Perhaps Jürgen understood, but did those idiots behind the triggers?

Irene intently watched Chris talking on the phone. He was animated, perhaps agitated, while pacing back and forth. His free hand alternated between waving wildly and rubbing his short blond hair. The conversation was obviously intense. Each ticking minute was putting greater separation between Chris and Anna.

Equally bad, the sniper on camera three was finally in position and getting camouflaged, but the unassembled rifle was still in the backpack. He was hideously slow.

A queasy feeling emerged in Irene's stomach. The mission was cracking, maybe crumbling. She sensed another failure, similar to Monday's assassination attempt on Chris at his house in Saint Paul that had cost Irene two people. Continued failure was unacceptable. "Where's Monteiro?" she demanded to know.

Jürgen calmly replied, "She's jogging along Governors' Promenade."

"Do you have eyes on her?"

"Yes, we have cameras along her path."

"That wasn't a rhetorical question, damn it. Show me."

The top two monitors switched to views of the half-mile boardwalk<sup>7</sup> suspended between the massive citadel walls and a 330-foot drop-off. The narrow walkway was filled with meandering tourists. Anna was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is she?" Irene asked with escalating agitation.

"She should be appearing on monitor two just about ..." After a lengthy pause, Jürgen added, "Now."

Forty-one-year-old Anna Monteiro jogged by with an effortless stride. Her black pixie haircut, fresh delicate face, olive complexion and sturdy build were a disgusting display of youth. Irene resented how the entitled hussy had bewitched Chris and turned him into a traitor. Killing him meant the loss of an outstanding asset and the collapse of her succession plan. What a waste!



Irene's eyes narrowed to slits while staring at video feed four. Chris was still on the phone. Who the hell was he talking to?

The plan now seemed hopeless. To be successful, Chris and Anna needed to enter the trap together. Irene was ready to abort when Chris suddenly ended the call, pocketed the cell, and began running down Avenue du Cap-Diamant. Within fifteen seconds, he leaped onto a platform and disappeared down a ramp.

"Tell your man to follow him," Irene commanded.

"He is," Jürgen said as monitor four showed bouncing movement.

"Hell, I can go faster than that. Get his ass in gear."

Before the tracking assassin reached the entrance of Governors' Promenade, Chris was seen on monitor one dodging summer tourists as his pace on the elevated boardwalk intensified. His androgynous facial features were red with exertion and determination. A minute later, monitor two showed him sprinting along a straightway beneath the enormous base of the fort. The tracker was hopelessly behind as his labored breathing grew louder over the speakers of the Ops Room. The man would never catch the prey. And the sniper on camera three was still assembling his rifle. At this pace, he'd be unprepared for the first shot.

The incompetence outraged Irene. After gulping the rest of the martini, she hurled the stemware toward the fireplace. The shattering glass startled the Afghan hound sleeping on the camelback leather couch.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Brutus, my dear," Irene said with a comforting tone.

The fifty-five-pound purebred shook his long silky coat and circled twice before plopping down to resume his nap.

Irene aimed her wrath at Jürgen. "Your men three and four are bungling amateurs. Complete dolts! They're totally unfit for the high standards of Phonoï. I want them dealt with after this mission is over. Got that?"

"Yes, Ms. Shaw."

“Are your other two men ready?”

“Yes, Ms. Shaw.”

“For god’s sake,” she bristled, “stop saying ‘Yes, Ms. Shaw’ and show me what they’re seeing.”

“Yes, Ms. Shaw,” Jürgen habitually replied, flinched at his mistake, then switched the video feeds on monitors one and two.

Camera one was a bird’s-eye view of Terrasse Dufferin. The sniper was positioned within scaffolding along the main tower of Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, an iconic railway hotel and late nineteenth-century landmark. The entire 1400-foot length of the promenade was visible below him. Camera two was from a man on the ground at the Samuel de Champlain Monument.<sup>8</sup> He was pretending to watch a street performer while awaiting orders to advance to the flash point.

“Jürgen, give me a full zoom on camera one.” Within a millisecond, she added, “Do it now.” When his response was too slow, she took control.

She pushed the command button on the desktop, placed headphones on her coiffed hair, raised the mic to her scarlet lips, zoomed in on monitor one, and began issuing commands. “Number One, see that long staircase at the far end of the boardwalk? Anna Monteiro will be coming down any minute. Number Two, start moving now and be prepared to engage. Number Three, for god’s sake, stop screwing around. Lock and load your damn weapon. Number Four, move your sorry ass. Acknowledge.”

The word *copy* simultaneously boomed into her ears four times. The team knew who was now in charge and the penalty for disappointing her. They were no doubt hyped up.

“Brutus,” Irene cooed to the Afghan hound. “Come to Mama.” The aristocratic dog sprang off the couch, lumbered over, and placed his long snout on her lap. “Such a good boy,” she said while stroking the flowing hair on his ears. The love of her life always calmed her agitated temperament. “Mama will take you for a nice long walk

after this nasty business is done. I promise.” The animal’s chocolate-brown eyes sparkled with approval.

“Visual on target B,” came the announcement from the sniper on top of the hotel.

Irene concentrated on monitor one. Anna had passed the landing of a very tall staircase and was coming down the last flight of forty stairs. She was moving quickly. Was she trying to escape Chris? Or was this simply an obnoxious display of her daily obsession with running?

Regardless, she was jeopardizing the ideal point of attack in the center of Terrasse Dufferin unless Chris caught up soon. It was also essential that all four guns be in position for the deadly crossfire. But Chris was off camera and only one killer was in range and ready.

The pending debacle was infuriating. Anger pulsed across her forehead.

Irene watched as the crowded boardwalk modified Anna Monteiro’s pace, forcing her to weave among the throng of people. She was walking parallel to the second sniper, hidden in the brush behind a long wooden toboggan slide used during winter. Within thirty seconds, she appeared on his camera. Her back would soon become the perfect target for a .30-06 cartridge.

“Where the hell is Chris?” Irene bellowed at Jürgen while slamming her fist on the desk. With a startled whimper, the Afghan slinked away.

“Any second now, Ms. Shaw,” was his totally unsatisfactory answer.

The delay was excruciating. Rapid heartbeats echoed in her eardrums as she clenched her jaw. The rage was blazing until the sniper atop the hotel reported, “I’ve got eyes on target A.”

There, on monitor one, was Chris. He was bolting down the staircase, pushing people aside as he jumped down two stairs at a time.

The strategy was working. The mission was a go.

An intense calm swept over Irene. With composed authority, she confirmed the assignments. "Number One, your target is A. That's Chris Davis. Number Three, your target is B. That's Anna Monteiro. Number Two, you'll verify they're dead and finish them off if needed." She didn't bother giving instructions to Number Four. It was doubtful the fat sloth would arrive before the carnage was over. "Are my assignments clear?"

In her headset she heard, "One, affirmative. Two, affirmative. Three, affirmative."

"Good. Now hold your fire. I repeat, do not fire until my command."

Chris leaped onto the boardwalk, sprinted for fifty feet, appeared winded, stopped, cocked his head, searched the crowd, then began yelling something in desperation. If he was calling out for Anna, she either couldn't hear or was ignoring him.

Time to execute.

"On three, gentlemen," Irene announced while staring at Chris and Anna on the monitors. "One. Two."

An instant before Irene said, "Three," Chris doubled over with his hands on his knees as if gasping for breath from running. The bullet intended for him hit a teenager. Anna had suddenly turned around and was beginning to wave. The abrupt stop caused an elderly couple to bump into her. An old man spun violently from the velocity of a bullet before collapsing.

Chaos ensued. The crowd scattered. Screams of terror. Most people ran up a small hill lined with historic cannons. A few crouched or lay flat on the boardwalk. Some hid under benches. Anna plus two others took cover beneath a decorative cast-iron gazebo<sup>9</sup> overlooking the river.

Irene was inflamed by the incompetence. "Keep firing!"

Successive bullets slammed into the base of Anna's kiosk and ricocheted off a nearby ornamental fence. It was impossible to see if Anna had been hit.

Monitor one showed Chris climbing up the wooden slats of the toboggan slide<sup>10</sup> as chunks of debris exploded around him. He leaped into the foliage and disappeared. Immediately, the video feed of the sniper on the ground began gyrating. Sounds of a fight blasted in Irene's ears.

Then an eerie silence. Chris's furious face filled monitor three. "Hi there, Irene," he said with contempt. "Your time is coming soon, dear. Very, very soon."

Irene shrieked, "Number One, start firing into position three."

The hotel sniper said, "I don't have a visible target, Ms. Shaw."

"I don't give a damn. Empty your magazine. Now."

A series of bullets shattered trees, bushes and rocks as fast as the sniper could work the bolt, refocus and squeeze the trigger again. The sound was deafening.

Suddenly, his camera tumbled until coming to rest beneath a scaffolding platform. A splash of blood covered the lens. Now both snipers were down and presumed dead.

The bodycam of the killer from the north showed him racing down the boardwalk while approaching the kiosk. He had a two-handed grip on the company-issued SIG P229 pistol and was taking aim at Anna. As his index finger slipped into the trigger guard, he was blown backward. Chris had claimed another victim using the commandeered sniper rifle.

Irene was stunned by the debacle.

The last functioning video displayed the surveillance tracker reaching the bottom of the staircase. He was wheezing and coughing as he held out his weapon.

She shouted, "Number Four. Team is dead. You're alone. Chris Davis is on the hill behind the toboggan slide. He's armed. Anna Monteiro is in the next kiosk. Make this happen!"

A successful outcome seemed doubtful.

Irene leaned within inches of the desktop computer screen and

berated Jürgen. “Your plan sucked. A real shitshow. We’ll discuss this later.”

Despite his attempt to remain stoic, Jürgen’s battle-hardened face turned ashen. “Yes, Ms. Shaw.”

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## Chapter One: Québec City, Canada

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Photos 1–10



# TWO

## QUÉBEC CITY, CANADA

**T**he boyish face of Chris Davis was contorted by angst and concentration. The firefight had lasted less than sixty seconds yet felt like an eternity in hell. The crosshairs of the sniper rifle were still focused on the third gunman lying face down on Terrasse Dufferin. Chris was prepared to deliver a final kill shot if needed. The man didn't twitch. A spreading puddle of crimson was seeping into the wooden slats.

Using the high-powered scope, Chris scanned for additional assailants. The boardwalk was mostly deserted. Only a few tourists still cowered with paralyzing fear. An elderly woman was sobbing over the fallen man who had taken the bullet meant for Anna.

At the far end of the promenade, near the hotel, two policemen had their sidearms drawn. They were on guard but not advancing, no doubt waiting for backup. A distant siren wailed. Another joined the chorus. Soon police and SWAT would surround the area.

The window was closing fast to find Anna and escape. Perhaps three minutes remained. Maybe less. He assumed she was still hiding beneath the kiosk. He prayed she had survived the onslaught.

Chris frisked the dead sniper next to him, found his pistol, checked the chamber of the SIG P229, and was preparing to leave the brush. He stopped. Strained breathing was advancing on the other side of the adjacent toboggan slide. It could be someone returning to the scene, but that was doubtful. Or perhaps it was the

teenager who had been shot. But a decade of survival training dictated the unseen person be treated as a potential combatant.

Chris waited until the footsteps passed in front of a small utility shack, then he slithered down a retaining wall. Fast reflexes caught a tumbling rock before it hit the ground. He paused. Listened. The cadence of the person's cautious pace had not changed. Safe to proceed. Chris ducked below the toboggan slide and approached the opposite side of the shack. His handgun led the way.

Nearby was a grossly out of shape man. His back stretched a hideous sport coat. Bulging arms held an outstretched pistol. Beads of sweat rolled off his glistening bald head. He was peering around the shack in search of an adversary, oblivious to the pending assault.

Chris removed the slack from the trigger until his finger met resistance. Additional pressure would release a 9mm round. He debated, then commanded, "Don't move."

The gunman flinched but obeyed the order.

Chris continued, "You can drop the gun and live, or you can die. So you have to ask yourself, is it really worth dying for Irene?"

With a shaky voice, the man said, "She'll have me killed if I surrender."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I'll kill you right now if you don't."

The assailant hesitated before lowering the gun to the ground and kicking it away.

"Good choice," Chris said. "How many on your team?"

"Four including me."

"Then you're the last man standing. Turn around." As he did, Chris waved at the man's bodycam and blew his nemesis a kiss. "You lost again, Irene." He then stared at the tense assailant and said, "Now run like hell back up those stairs. If you return, you're dead." After a second of indecision, the man scrambled over a trail of bloody footprints presumably left by the wounded teenager who had managed to flee.



Chris stuffed the sniper's pistol behind his shirttail. He picked up the man's weapon, released and pocketed the magazine, ejected the chambered round and threw the gun into the trees. He then bolted toward Victoria Kiosk. Anna was squeezed into the corner between a lamppost and the fence. She was huddled in a fetal position with arms covering her head. Two other people hid beneath benches. They were terrified but unhurt.

"Anna, thank god you're all right," he said while holding out his hand. They shared an impassioned embrace, grateful to be alive. He thought he had lost her. For over two weeks, he had fantasized about having a future with her. The feelings had been mutual. She was everything he had ever hoped for but never expected to find. Nor did he deserve. That pipe dream would soon be shattered. This was probably the last time she would ever hug him. He didn't want to let go. "Are you okay enough to leave?"

Anna protested with wide-eyed panic, "But what if it's not safe yet?"

"It's safe," he said, trying to remain calm while suppressing his worry of being caught. He draped her arm around his shoulder, held her waist and began leading her across the boardwalk.

The elderly woman begged for help. Chris debated, weighed the risks and chose the right versus the smart thing to do. He released Anna, knelt down and examined the old man's shoulder. The bullet appeared to have shattered the clavicle before exiting. Blood loss seemed minimal, yet his complexion was sickly gray, breathing was rapid and his bluish lips were quivering. Slipping into shock could be fatal.

"Your husband will be fine," Chris said for reassurance yet doubted the prognosis was accurate. "Press his jacket on the wound, elevate his feet with your purse, keep him calm, and medical help will be here soon. Sorry, but that's all I can do."

Anna looked concerned for the frightened couple as Chris jumped up, grabbed her hand and led her up a small set of stairs

through a crowd of gawkers. Moving briskly was critical but not too fast to attract attention. They had to disappear before the police sealed the perimeter. Multiple sirens were now approaching; two had already stopped. The lone gunman could also be circling back. Maybe it had been a mistake to spare his life, but Chris was tired of killing.

"Aren't we going to the hotel?" Anna asked, pointing to the valet entrance a short distance away.

Chris held her shoulders. Anna's expression was numb. Her gorgeous brown eyes darted with anxiety. She needed a haven soon to decompress from the ordeal. That wasn't going to happen. He was about to traumatize her further but wanted to delay the inevitable as long as possible. "No," he said. "Going to the hotel is risky. Shots were fired from there. Let's keep moving. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, I think so," she said with uncertainty.

They dashed along a footpath in Governors' Garden and hustled down Rue Haldimand until reaching Rue Saint-Louis,<sup>11</sup> one of the city's oldest streets. Instead of entering the intersection, he led them through the door of an underground parking lot.

"Where're we going?" she asked between gasps of continued fear.

"We're driving out of here."

"But why? I'm sure we're safe now."

"We're not. Trust me."

"How do you know?" she asked tentatively.

Chris scrambled for a plausible answer without adding to the litany of lies he had told her since their first discussion on the Caribbean cruise. The lies had to end sometime, yet he wasn't ready to divulge the truth. "Because I saw the face of one of the gunmen. He could be coming after me."

"Do you think he followed us?"

"I don't know, but let's not stand around to find out."

As he led her down a row of parked cars, they kept vigilant for a

possible attacker. When they reached his late-model Ford Explorer, he slid between the adjacent car, opened the passenger door and said, "Hop in." He was surprised she didn't. He turned to face her.

Anna was in shocked disbelief. "Chris, is that a gun beneath your shirt?"

"Yes," he reluctantly admitted.

She started inching away from the SUV. "Were you one of the shooters?"

"At the bad guys, yes."

With hesitation, as if hoping for any acceptable explanation, she asked, "Are you some kind of undercover cop or agent?"

He considered saying yes. It was the easy answer. He opted for the truth. "No."

Anna turned to run.

He grabbed her arm, just hard enough to detain her without being aggressive, then immediately released the grip. With a tone meant to sound soothing, he said, "Anna, I know you're scared. I'm scared, too. But our lives are in danger until we leave the city. So please, just get in."

"No, no, no, no, no," she repeated with outstretched palms. "Get away from me."

"If I do that, I can't protect you. And that's all I'm honestly trying to do. You've got to trust me."

"I used to trust you implicitly," she said with eyes ablaze. "But not now. I don't know who the hell you are."

Struggling to defuse her distrust, he said, "You're right. You don't. But deep down, I'm still the guy you thought you knew. So please, let's go."

"No," she said with defiance.

Chris considered pulling out the pistol to coerce her. But even if he aimed the barrel at the ground, the abhorrent action would shatter any potential for renewing trust. Instead, he removed two small photos from his pants pocket. They were blurry surveillance

images of himself and Anna. Some of the handwritten letters on the words *Target A* and *Target B* were smeared with dried blood. “See these? We were the targets of that firestorm.”

Her mouth gaped. “Where did you find them?”

“In the backpack of one of the snipers.”

She dared to ask, “How did you get them?”

“After I stopped him from shooting at you.”

“Oh my god,” she exclaimed while stumbling backward. “You mean you ...”

“Yes, I killed him and two others. It was either them or us. But one is still out there. So you can either come with me or go back outside. But if you do” – he held up her bloodstained photo – “you’ll be dead within hours. These people will stop at nothing. Whatever you decide, I’m leaving now.”

Anna was motionless with distress and doubt.

Gaining her cooperation seemed hopeless. The longer the delay, the greater the chance of getting caught. Fleeing was paramount. He walked around the car, got in the driver’s seat and started the ignition. “Please close your door so I can pull out,” he said with a calm yet firm voice.

Ten seconds passed before she reluctantly got in the car.

“Good. Now keep your head down.”

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## Chapter Two: Québec City, Canada

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Photo 11



# THREE

## QUÉBEC CITY, CANADA

**A**nna immediately regretted getting into the SUV. Had the locking car doors sealed her fate? Was she trapped inside with a dangerous man who had conned her? For nearly three weeks, she had a growing infatuation for Chris, thinking maybe, just maybe, he was the one. Now, all illusions of romance, compatibility and trust were shattered. Chris Davis was a killer. Worse yet, she was the target of the bloodbath and apparently still in peril. But was the biggest threat outside the car or behind the wheel? The distress was suffocating.

When Chris spoke, she flinched. “Inside the glove box is a mesh bag,” he said. “Would you grab it for me, please?”

Her fingers struggled with the simple task of pulling up the latch, opening the compartment door and retrieving the bag. Inside were sunglasses, a short brown wig, and a lower-face mask consisting of oversized ears, sideburns and a well-trimmed beard. Chris put them on with practiced ease. The transformation was stark. He was unrecognizable. Wearing a disguise was clearly a uniform of his profession, whatever the hell that was.

She covered when he reached into the backseat and grabbed two shirts. One he wore. The other he offered to her with an apologetic expression. “I’m sorry, but please cover yourself with this and stay low, at least until we are out of the city. It’s for your protection.”

She complied, yet the request felt sinister. Equally ominous was the black handgun wedged next to the driver's seat.

As the car moved through the parking lot and up a ramp, Anna hoped to scream for help to the cashier at checkout. Unfortunately, there was no attendant. Chris used a credit card to pay before exiting.

At the next stop, she considered fleeing. The neighborhood must be swarming with police. But among them was another gunman. He probably also had her photo marked as Target B. If she jumped out now, could she be dead soon?

The SUV meandered through the clogged streets of Old Québec City while Anna's mind raced with indecision and dread. The eddy of conflicting scenarios vacillated between hope and doom.

*Is Chris really trying to protect me? Or is the plan to kill me, too? If so, why didn't he pull the trigger in the parking lot? That would've been fast and easy. Maybe he's not a threat. Didn't he risk his life to rescue me on the boardwalk? He even took time to help the old man who had been shot. So maybe he really is trying to keep me safe. Sure, that's got to be it. He couldn't have faked his emotions for me all this time, could he? Am I that bad at judging people? Is he that good of an actor? Think of all the times we were alone together. Was I vulnerable then too? Maybe. Oh my god, probably. Perhaps he's driving to a remote location to dump my body. Escape now before he gets onto the open road. It might be the only chance to survive.*

Anna mustered the courage to act. She expected her voice to be compelling but the words tumbled out with a babbling whimper. "Chris, I'm going to be sick. Pull over."

"Okay," he said with urgency. "But I'm on a busy street. Hang on a second."

"I can't. It's going to come. Hurry."

She lifted her head and squealed as Chris swerved onto a sidewalk, plowed over a flowerbed and bounced into a parking lot. She bolted. He pursued. The chase ended in seconds when her wobbly

legs betrayed her. Anna tumbled onto the lawn of a tree-covered park in front of Gare du Palais.<sup>12</sup> The historic, château-style train station seemed almost deserted.

Chris knelt down and asked with compassion, "Are you hurt?"

"No," she managed to say while fighting back tears, "but I'm scared. Petrified. Just let me go. Please."

"I will. Just give me ten minutes to explain. That's all I ask. Afterward, if you still want to leave, you're free to go. I promise. Okay?"

The question hung suspended. He didn't press for an answer. Instead, after a quick glance left and right as if searching for on-lookers or threats, he unexpectedly removed the disguise. The man she thought she knew reappeared. There was no obvious deceit in those once-charming aquamarine eyes. His expression seemed conciliatory, his tone was nonthreatening, he appeared unarmed, and the way he held her hand was oddly comforting. Plus, the safety of passing cars and a few pedestrians was less than fifty feet away. A single scream for help could save her. She decided to hear him out.

He sat down on the grass, took a breath as if collecting his thoughts and gnawed his lip before making eye contact. He seemed nervous. "Anna, listen, I understand your inclination to run. Hell, inclinations two through twenty will also be to run to the police when you hear what I have to say. But they can't protect you, at least not for long. You'll be dead soon because the people hunting for you are unrelenting. And today you saw only a fraction of their firepower."

The repeated prediction of her pending death was traumatizing. A flash of crippling anxiety exploded in her chest and brain. Anna struggled to speak. "Why? I don't understand."

"Because there's a contract out on your life. It's already been extended once. The second deadline was today."

"But I'm a nobody," Anna said, as if pleading for clemency. "I don't have enemies. Who'd want me dead?"

“George Henniker,” Chris said flatly.

George was the conceited owner of a hedge fund who Anna had regrettably dated a few times and slept with once. Six weeks ago, she suspected George was trolling for insider information on Longfellow BioSciences, a biotech company where she had been vice president of marketing until a few days ago. To test his ethics, Anna had cryptically misled him by claiming she would have something to celebrate on their next date. It seemed like a harmless ruse at the time, but the deception triggered retaliations.

First, George made drunken threats outside of her Boston brownstone and was thrown into the drunk tank overnight. Days later, he spray-painted “BITCH” on the front door and shot her dog, Blue, through the bay window. He was later arrested and awaiting trial. As terrifying as those assaults had been, they paled in comparison to the attack on the Terrasse Dufferin boardwalk about a half hour ago. Learning George had hired someone to kill her was incomprehensible. “I know George was pissed, but why would he want me dead?” Anna asked in bewilderment.

“Because your misleading statement prompted him to make a twenty million dollar bet that Longfellow was going to announce positive clinical trials for curing cancer. When the negative news went public, George lost over ninety-five percent within days.”

“But George ran a good-sized hedge fund,” Anna rationalized. “Surely he could absorb a single bad investment, right?”

“No, because his firm had made other bad investments. Lots of them. The portfolio was hemorrhaging. His richest clients were leaving in droves. He was facing bankruptcy. Your perceived insider tip was his last salvation. When it blew up, George blamed you. He wanted revenge. That’s when he arranged for a professional killer.”

“How do you know all of this?” she asked.

“Because I spent considerable time researching George.”

When she and Chris had first talked in the Dominican Republic, he had claimed to be a cybersecurity expert. Therefore, it seemed



plausible he could illegally access George Henniker's financial information. "You mean you hacked into his firm's computer system?"

"Yes, because I wanted to learn his motives for threatening you."

"Okay, so if George took out a hit on me, wouldn't the contract be canceled when he died last week?"

"That's what I thought too."

Anna detected something menacing in his statement. She wanted to be wrong but feared the worst. She resisted asking another question to learn the truth. She looked away.

Chris obviously sensed her dilemma. He gently lifted her chin, paused to study her anguish and appeared remorseful while saying, "If you're wondering if I shot George, the answer is yes."

"Oh my god," she said while inching away. "George was despicable. But still, how could you do such a terrible thing?"

"Because, at the time, it was the only way I could think of to protect you."

"So you learned about the contract on my life in his computer?"

"No." Chris paused before adding, "I knew about the hit a week before the cruise."

"How could you? Unless ..." She stopped, suddenly terrified she knew the answer.

Chris closed his eyes and tightened his jaw. The question seemed tormenting. He started to say something, then stopped. The delay spiked her anxiety. After a long exhale, he said with a pained expression, "Anna, here's the horrible truth, the worst thing I have to tell you." He paused again. "I was ordered to fulfill the contract."

"You mean kill me?"

Chris's nod was almost imperceptible.

Anna was paralyzed, frozen in disbelief. A pounding pulse assaulted her ears. Every nerve misfired. Survival instinct screamed escape, yet her muscles were unresponsive. Her stomach convulsed. She gagged twice while gulping down waves of vile saliva but couldn't vomit. Her body shook as if having a seizure.

Chris gently touched her shoulder. “Breathe,” he said. “Deep breaths.”

She recoiled before trying to stand. When her legs refused to cooperate, she raised her knees, clenched them tightly, lowered her head and prayed to endure the trauma. Death seemed certain, either by Chris, an unknown gunman, or her body’s reaction to fear.

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### Chapter Three: Québec City, Canada

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Photo 12



# FOUR

## QUÉBEC CITY, CANADA

Chris was helpless watching Anna suffer. Telling her the truth was more devastating than he imagined, despite rehearsing this discussion countless times. But her reaction was totally predictable. Hoping for anything else was naïve. Frankly, it was surprising she hadn't already run off screaming. Judging by her crumpled posture on the park lawn, she was either too scared to move or was resigned to her fate. Probably both.

Perhaps he should let her go. She'd never feel safe with a former lover who was actually a deceiving, lying assassin assigned to kill her. That was an impossible expectation. Besides, the chances of saving her were minimal, probably nil. So why make her suffer the delusion of being protected? The situation was hopeless. The only solution was to give her a sense of freedom during the precious little time she had left.

"Anna," he said softly, "I know this will sound trite, but I apologize for everything. I'm truly sorry."

There was no response. She remained cowering.

"So I am going to leave you now." He dreaded having to say the final word. "Goodbye."

As he picked up the disguise and stood, she lifted her head. Hatred distorted her blanched complexion and swollen eyes. "You're a bastard, Chris, you know that?" she shouted. "I can't believe you slept with me while actually assigned to kill me!"

“Keep your voice down, will you?” he pleaded while looking around to see if anyone overheard.

“Or what? You’ll shoot me now?” she bristled.

How could he calm her down? “I have no intention of harming you, Anna. Just the opposite.” He sat down again and scooped close, hoping the proximity would lower her volume, before beginning his contrition. “But you’re right. What I did was despicable. I’m despicable. But I never had a choice.”

“That’s bullshit. How could you not have a choice to kill people?”

“I’m not sure you’d understand.”

“Try me. And this time, spare me your lies.”

Where could he start? How much could he reveal? He opted for a novel approach: the truth. “Well, I was coerced into this role at the age of ten.”

She scoffed. “You expect me to believe you were some kind of child prodigy at killing?”

“No,” he said, dismissing the biting retort. Her anger was well deserved, and it was doubtful an explanation would help, but it was worth a try. “My stepfather was a savage brute, probably in the Philly mob. One night in a drunken rage, he tried raping my little sister until my mom fought him off. While he was strangling Mom to death, I hit him with a baseball bat. They both died.”

“So your parents didn’t die in a car accident like you told me?”

“No,” he said with an apologetic tone. He waited a downbeat before continuing. “Anyway, that night, a defense attorney named Irene Shaw took total control of my life and my sister’s. She sheltered us in a foster home for two years before sending us to an Amish farm to become elite assassins. For a decade, we were brainwashed, browbeaten and constantly threatened into compliance. For the last sixteen years, Irene has maintained that iron grip on us.”

“So, I take it you and your sister are not estranged, right? That was just another lie. Instead, you work together to kill people?”

“Yes, but most of them are scumbags.”

“So that’s how you categorized me?” she asked with bitterness.

“God no. I’m the scumbag here. Everything about my life sucks. I hate it, and myself. So, when I got to know you during the cruise ... I don’t know, something snapped. For the first time, I decided to rebel by refusing to kill you. But that decision violated Irene’s number one rule: do exactly what she says or die.”

“So that’s why she sent those gunmen today?”

“Yes, but that’s only part of it. On Saturday when I flew to Pennsylvania, she threatened to kill me three times execution style before killing Lionel, my old childhood instructor. Then on Monday, two assassins attacked me at home in Saint Paul. I barely survived the shootout. Another assassin was assigned to kill my sister.”

Anna seemed to be reeling from the long list of violence. “Why would this Irene person want your sister dead?”

“Because we’re partners. In Irene’s eyes, if one of us betrayed her, we both did.”

A hint of sympathy crossed Anna’s face. She asked with hesitation, “Did your sister die?”

“No, but I thought she had until today when she warned me about the attack.”

“Was that the Michelle who called when we were standing at the fort?”

“Yes.”

“Thinking your sister was dead explains your somber mood all this week,” Anna said, almost to herself, then seemed scared again. “But you’re saying Irene won’t stop until all three of us are dead?”

“Yes, or until Michelle and I get to Irene first. Anna, you don’t need to be any part of our mission. I promise. But none of us are safe until Irene is gone. After that, you can resume your life.”

Sounding exasperated, Anna asked, “But why can’t you just report this woman to the police? Or is that too simple?”

Shaking his head, Chris responded, “That won’t work, because Irene is one of the best criminal defense attorneys in Philadelphia.

She knows every trick in the book for concealing evidence and avoiding prosecution. Besides, that also risks exposing everyone in her network who, like us, have been coerced into this life.” Chris absently picked grass off his pant leg as he reckoned the stark reality. “And even if she went to prison – which seems highly unlikely – she’d keep pulling strings until she got her revenge. Nope, there is only one way to stop Irene Shaw.”

While wringing her hands, Anna asked, “But won’t your vengeance against Irene be risky?”

“Sure, but it’s riskier to just wait around until she strikes again like today. I’d rather manage the risk on our terms.”

Anna’s brows tightened, as if absorbing the severity of the dilemma. Both options were deplorable. Going on the offensive seemed to have slightly better odds. “I don’t mean to sound unappreciative, but why would you jeopardize your life, and your sister’s, to save mine?”

“The answer to that started when I began doing surveillance on you in Boston.”

“You mean you tracked me for days before we met?” she asked with an ingenuous tone. “Do you know how creepy and invasive that is?”

“Yes, but please just let me finish, okay?”

She remained quiet, struggling to contain her indignation.

The first part of what he was about to explain wasn’t the whole truth, but it was close enough. “I quickly sensed you were a good person, but I had to know for sure. That’s when I booked onto your cruise with the hopes of getting to know you.” The next part he could say with all sincerity. “During that first night we had wine together, I quickly began to admire you. Soon I believed in your passion to cure cancer. I concluded you deserved a future.”

With sardonic anger, she asked, “So that’s when you decided it was okay to sleep with me?”

“No, the first time wasn’t planned. It was totally unexpected.

Remember how standoffish I was? But when it happened, I admit, it was incredibly selfish.”

“You’re damn right it was,” Anna said with disgust.

“Yes, but every day afterward – on the ship, in your home, in San Francisco, and here in Québec City – my feelings for you deepened. You’re incredible. Our time together gave me a glimpse of how my life could have been. But I haven’t had a future since I was ten. So I decided I was willing to risk mine in order to save yours and the millions of cancer patients you’re dedicated to saving.”

Her stoic reaction was hard to read. She stared at him without blinking.

Explaining more would be fruitless. He could never justify what he had done, even to himself. Hopefully, he had revealed enough to warrant some modicum of trust about his intentions to save her life. “There you have it. You can hate me, condemn me and fear me. All of those feelings are justified.”

Anna remained stoneface.

After a tormented exhale, Chris struggled to continue. “So now you have two choices. One, you can walk away and call the police. With a full description, it won’t take them long to arrest me. But while I’m safe in prison someplace, you’ll be defenseless. Your second option is to come with me until this is over. But you can leave anytime. I’ll never try to stop you again.”

Instead of responding to the choices, she gave him an inquisitive glare. Whatever she was about to say or ask, he sensed it was pivotal to her final decision.

Anna blurted out, “Did you have anything to do with Jessica’s death?” Jessica was Anna’s friend who had been with her on the Caribbean cruise. Two days after their vacation, Jessica died of an overdose at her home in San Francisco by taking a Midol intended to kill Anna. The tablet had been tainted with carfentanil, a drug ten thousand times more potent than morphine.

“No,” Chris said with every technique he had been taught for

telling undetectable lies. This was one confession he could never divulge. Nor could he ever explain about the failed attempt to murder Anna during the cruise.

While studying him, she asked again, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. What happened to Jessica was tragic, but I had nothing to do with it."

She didn't say she believed him. But her intensity softened.

"Listen," he said. "I know you must have a ton of other questions. But right now, we've got to move. At least I do. I'm going back to the car. I'll sit there for five minutes. If you don't come back, I'll drive off. All I ask is you give me a head start before calling the police."

"Fine," she said softly with a noncommittal expression.

He stood up, gave her a quick look, returned to the SUV and set the timer on his watch. When he glanced back to where they had been sitting, Anna was gone. Because of the obstructed view – parked cars, bushes and trees – he couldn't tell if she had walked or run away. Regardless, he planned to give her the full five minutes.

The wait was interminable. A lot could happen in five minutes, and none of it good. Two minutes would have been better. One would have been best. When the timer beeped, he turned on the car. The gambit had failed. No doubt the police would be searching for him soon. Escaping was imperative.

Before backing up, he checked the rearview mirror. Anna was approaching the car. When she reached the driver side, she motioned to roll down the window. "If this is going to work," she said, "you've got to be honest with me going forward. No more lies. I mean it. If I detect one, or even suspect one, I'm gone."

"I hear you."

She scowled. "That's not an answer, Chris. Tell me you promise."

"I promise," he said, knowing he had immediately broken the pledge. Some secrets could never be revealed. But the volume of lies could be substantially reduced.

She assumed an authoritarian stance with hands on her hips.



“And things will be different between us from now on. You’re strictly my bodyguard, nothing more. Got that?”

“I understand,” he said, realizing any hope for an ongoing relationship as lovers was now impossible.

With a gasp of resignation, she proceeded to the passenger side and hesitated before getting in. “One more question before we go.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m assuming Chris Davis is not your real name.”

“You’re right. It’s Danny Ritchie. But no one – not even my sister – has called me that in over twenty-five years.”

“Okay,” she said, buckling her seat belt. “Let’s go. But take damn good care of me.”

“I plan to.”

“That’s not good enough. I’m counting on you to keep me alive.”