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PARIS, JANUARY 2, 2004

Dad,

I don't owe you or anybody an explanation, but I think you'll appreciate the irony of a suicide note coming from a person who has abhorred tradition all of her life. I met a young girl on the street the other day who looked into my eyes and told me that Jesus was waiting for me in heaven. She was fourteen or so, selling flowers on the Street of Flowers, and had the look of a young Madonna. The red roses I bought from her were the last thing I saw before pulling the trigger.

If, as you read this, I am actually with Jesus in heaven, I will be one shocked woman. I doubt it, though. Megan Nolan is no more. Go and have yourself another daughter. It's not too late, and the odds are very good that she will turn out better than I did. If I were famous, I would be joining the long line of suicides known to history. But as it is, in a matter of days, if not hours, my life and death will be as anonymous and as forgotten as a stray breeze.

Megan

P.S. You know how I feel about being buried. Please, no service and a quick cremation. Don't let me down.

Pat Nolan read the note for the first time sitting in the cramped office of Assistant Chief Inspector Geneviève LeGrand at the Seventh Arrondissement Police Prefecture on Rue Fabert. When he was finished, he looked over at Madame LeGrand, sitting across from him at her cluttered desk.

“One less hegemonic, imperialist American pig to worry about,” he said. “Pardon?”

Pat shook his head, and then watched as the bored look on the middle-aged inspector’s face—she was perhaps fifty or fifty-five—was replaced, in quick succession, by a widening of the eyes in surprise, their narrowing in concentration, and finally a slight smile.

“You are perhaps weary from your traveling, Monsieur Nolan,” she said, looking at him with what seemed to be a bit more interest than when he first entered her office and accepted her invitation to sit.

Pat was, in fact, jet-lagged. He had arrived in Paris from New York the morning before, slept as if drugged all day, and then, when he went out looking for a late dinner, got caught up in a walkabout involving thousands of beautifully dressed Parisians celebrating the New Year. His inner clock reversed, he had managed to fall asleep at seven AM for an hour before having to get up for his nine o’clock meeting with Inspector LeGrand.

“I must be.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“I am sorry for your loss.”

Pat nodded his head, keeping his acknowledgment of this declaration as perfunctory as its delivery.

“I will not keep you long.”

“You have a job to do.”

“Yes, I do. The note is in your daughter’s hand?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know she was ill, Monsieur Nolan?”

“No.”

“She had last stage ovarian cancer. She would have been dead in another few weeks. You did not know this?”

The police building, which looked to Nolan like a church, was a three-story affair located about a block from the Seine. Assistant Chief Inspector LeGrand’s corner office was on the third floor. Through the window

behind her, Pat could see one of the bridges that crossed the river. It also looked like a church, or rather the type of bridge that a church would have if it needed one. Next to the bridge on the near bank stood a large tree. Settled on its numerous leafless branches were, he estimated, two hundred crows or black birds of some sort. Some watched a barge pass slowly under the bridge, others seemed to be staring directly at him. Megan had decided as a teenager that the crow—arrogant, malicious, intelligent, cunning—was her totem. He wondered, collecting his thoughts, remembering his only child, if she was sitting in that tree. If she was, was she looking at the barge or at him?

“No, I didn’t.”

“Autopsies are required in France for all cases that are possible homicides. You understand it had to be done quickly in case the entry wound was inconsistent with suicide. We would want to start searching for the killer as soon as possible.”

“I understand.”

“There appears to be no doubt that she *was* a suicide. Our investigation is almost complete. I have only to ask you one or two questions.”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you know why she came to France?”

“She was a writer. She could work anywhere. She loved Paris.”

“Did you know she was living in Morocco?”

“No.” Though he had spoken to Megan on Christmas day, prior to that he had not seen or spoken to her since the Christmas before. They were in Rome at the time, and she had told him then that she was thinking of heading to Sicily and possibly North Africa. “I take it she was.”

“She had a Moroccan diplomatic visa.”

“What is that, exactly?”

“It is issued by their minister of Foreign Affairs. It allows a person to stay indefinitely in Morocco. It appears that she was there for some four months. Did she know people there?”

“Not that I know of.”

“She must have known someone very important to have secured such a visa. They are rarely issued to anyone outside the highest diplomatic circles.”

“Have you made inquiries in Rabat?”

Pat watched Inspector LeGrand's eyes narrow again. He could almost hear her thoughts: *A semi-intelligent question coming from this American cowboy? Did he actually know that Rabat was Morocco's capital?* Under different circumstances, it might have bothered him that he was perceived as a caricature by the haughty and bored Frenchwoman sitting across from him. As it was, he just wanted to get to the end of the interview as quickly as possible, to get the identification of Megan's body over with, and to figure out privately how it was he was supposed to grieve.

"Yes," she replied. "The Moroccan official who vouched for her diplomatic status is out of the country. Did she ever mention any Moroccan friends or acquaintances?"

"No, never."

"When did you speak to her last?"

"On Christmas Day."

"Where was she?"

"She said she was in Paris."

"Where in Paris?"

"She didn't say."

"And she didn't tell you she was ill?"

"No."

"Do you find that unusual?"

Through the window behind LeGrand, Pat could see the crows beginning to stir. One of them had taken flight and then circled back and attacked another one on one of the top branches. They left the tree and continued their fight, if that's what it was, in the air, while the rest raised their wings and lifted their beaks, no doubt to express their contempt—or glee—at the spectacle above them.

"No," Pat answered. "I don't."

"Were you estranged from your daughter, Monsieur Nolan?"

"Yes and no." Pat had been avoiding asking himself this question for twelve years. His answer surprised him in that it wasn't a definite yes.

"I see. Well . . . She arrived in Spain from Morocco on May 16. She checked into her hotel in Paris on December 24. She must have traveled by rail or bus because her name does not appear on any airline manifests from Spain or anywhere else. We do not know where she was from May 17 to December 24."

“What about her credit cards?”

“The last charge was at a hotel in Casablanca on May 15. There is no record after that.”

“So she might have been in Spain?”

“The EU’s borders are open now, Monsieur Nolan. She might have gone anywhere in those seven months.”

“Have you checked the hospitals, clinics?”

“Yes. There is no record we can find of her receiving treatment for her cancer. She killed herself on December 30. Her concierge says she had one visitor, a woman who arrived on the thirtieth and stayed for a half hour. Do you know who that might be?”

“No,” he answered.

“She came to Paris often. Who were her friends here? Her associates?”

“I don’t know. I thought you were certain it was suicide.”

LeGrand looked down at her paperwork before answering and Pat took the opportunity to study her. *Were you estranged from your daughter, Monsieur Nolan? The EU’s borders are open now, Monsieur Nolan.* Her voice not quite neutral, not quite professional. To the pain of Megan’s death was now added the pain—the dishonor—of having to expose their failed relationship to the contemptuous eye of Inspector Geneviève LeGrand. *French Inspector Geneviève LeGrand.* He would not, at least, give her the pleasure of showing in the slightest how he felt.

“I am,” the inspector said finally. “But it is a curious suicide. Your daughter did not live an ordinary life, Monsieur Nolan. Her passport has dozens of entries in Europe and North Africa over the past ten years. She never returned to America. Was she ever married?”

“No.”

“Are there other next of kin? Her mother? Siblings?”

“No. Her mother died giving birth to her. I’ve had no other children. Are we done? I’d like to bury my daughter.”

“Bury? Her note talks of cremation.”

Megan, who held strong opinions on many subjects, had never mentioned any squeamishness about being buried. But there it was, in her neat cursive hand, and he would abide by it.

“That’s what I meant.”

“The body is at the morgue at the Hospital of All Souls, not far from

here on the river. I have arranged for one of my officers to take you there to officially identify it.”

“Can I have the note?” Pat asked.

“I will give you a photocopy. The original must stay in the official file.”

“I would like to visit her room.”

“Mademoiselle Laurence will take you there.”

“Mademoiselle . . . ?”

“She is the officer who will accompany you to the morgue. She must be present at the identification.”

“I see. Are there any male police officers in Paris?”

“They are busy hunting hegemonic imperialists.”

Pat Nolan was careless about his looks. Some would say he could afford to be. A lifetime spent outdoors had kept his six-foot-three, two-hundred-twenty-pound body trim and supple, and burnished his naturally high color to a reddish gold, a perfect setting for his clear, forthright, and often piercing eyes. The lines around these eyes and on his brow when it knitted in thought added a depth and interest lacking in the faces of men who are young or who haven’t lived much. His thick black hair, swept away from his forehead and carelessly long, framed a face that was handsome in a wry, laconic way. His feelings, more often than not, went unexpressed. Much more often than not. But Inspector LeGrand had turned human for a second and so, despite his predilection to dislike her—to caricaturize her—he smiled. He could see her features soften for a brief moment when he did.

“Yours is not an easy job,” he said, rising and extending his hand to Inspector LeGrand, who also rose. For a second, they made eye contact. *You have been touched—physically and sentimentally—by the prototypical American bête noire*, Pat thought. *Have no fear, you will survive.*

“Where are you staying, Monsieur Nolan?”

“Le Tourville. Do you know it?”

“Yes. Officer Laurence will collect you there. Say at noon? She will have your daughter’s effects and a copy of the note.”

“Thank you.”

“*De rien* . . . Monsieur Nolan.”

“Yes?”

“I am quite sorry for your loss.”

* * *

Inspector LeGrand's words echoed in Pat Nolan's head as he stepped outside of the police building and turned right toward the river. *Your loss.* For almost thirty years, Lorrie, his twenty-year-old bride, had been his loss. In the summer of 1974, he had married Lorraine Ryan—impossibly young and beautiful—impregnated her, and dragged her to Paraguay where he had been offered a job operating an earth mover at the site of what was to become one of the official Seven Wonders of the Modern World, the Itaipu Dam. Six months later, Lorrie was dead of eclampsia and Megan—the name Lorrie had chosen for a girl baby—was lying in an incubator across the border in Montevideo, Uruguay. Two months premature, sticklike, she clung tenaciously to life, oblivious to Pat's weekend visits and haggard look. *If she lives and if it is your wish, we will help you place her for adoption,* one of the sisters at the hospital had told him, her face grim, as if she had read his angry, tortured thoughts. In the end, he had not given Megan away. But he had come close. He and a crew of five hundred had merely been in the midst of shifting the course of the Paraná River—the seventh largest in the world—around the eventual construction site. A one-point-three-mile long, three-hundred-foot-deep, five-hundred-foot-wide diversion. He would never get work like that again, not with a child to care for. That was his second loss. Or was it his first? The intervening years had blended the loss of Lorrie and of his big dreams into one, and then blurred them and worn them down until they were no longer separate and no longer hurt. They were long years, in which his sticklike girl baby had grown up and run away. Loss on top of loss.

Megan, who had left Bennington at the beginning of her freshman year and gone directly to Europe, claiming that America was so bourgeois she could not take another minute of it, had since then made her living writing and, not to put too fine a point on it, seducing men. The writing, mostly for women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour*, she could do from anywhere, which facilitated her lifelong urge to move from place to place, which in turn afforded ample venues for meeting men willing—gladly willing—to pay for having her on their arms and in their beds. Pat had met one or two of these victims early on and quickly got the picture. There would be

no son-in-law or grandchildren in his future. No Sunday dinners with the family in rural Connecticut or Westchester when he got old, with a fire burning in the fireplace and football on the television. This wound also healed over in time.

Instead of getting a civil engineering degree and designing megaprojects around the world, he went into business with his older brother, Frank, building homes, strip malls, and car dealerships in the tristate area. When Frank had retired last year, Pat sold Nolan Brothers. He wanted no part of the office work that Frank had handled for thirty years. Since then he had been entertaining offers to manage projects, large and small, near and far, from companies and architects he had met in the course of a long career of completing jobs on time and at or under budget. He had brought a folder of these offers with him, and started looking for a not too pretentious café where he could sip coffee and read through it to kill time until twelve o'clock.

He found a place on a corner across from the Pont de la Concorde. It was nearly empty and its outdoor tables were set up to take advantage of the surprisingly balmy weather: fifty degrees Fahrenheit or so under a cloudless pale blue sky diffused even in the dead of winter with Paris's famous silky light. Pat expected the waiter to sniff at him, and he did, his large Gallic nose rising higher with each step as he made his way from the front door to the table Pat had chosen in the full sun near the sidewalk. In his jeans, worn-out workboots, and thick black sweater, his Americanness was obvious.

Parisian condescension was not new to Pat. He had spent Christmas with Megan in Europe, usually Paris, for the past twelve years. In between they talked on the phone a few times and occasionally she sent him a short letter or a cryptic postcard. The Christmas just past had been the first one since she left home that they had not spent together. And neither had he heard from her since he left her in Rome the year before. She had finally called on Christmas day.

A few days later she killed herself.

Pat sat now, and instead of looking at his folder, which he carried in a canvas knapsack slung over his shoulder, he sipped his coffee and reviewed that last conversation.

"Dad, hi."

"Hello."

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Where are you?"

"Paris."

Pause.

"Where have you been?"

"Traveling. No place special."

Pause.

"How are you?" (Megan).

"I'm okay."

Pause.

"I'm sorry, Dad."

"For what?"

"That Lorrie died and not me."

"Is that why you haven't called?"

"I'm calling now."

"How long will you be there?"

"I'll probably leave tomorrow or the next day."

"Where to?"

"I'm not sure exactly."

"Megan . . ."

"You're angry, I know. I've had a hard year."

"A hard year?"

"It's almost over. My birthday's coming up. You can bring me a present."

"Megan . . ."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I have to go. I love you."

Click.

One of Megan's former lovers, a famous novelist, had described a beautiful, twenty-five-year-old female character as having the ability "to slip in and out of your psyche in a matter of a few hot and thrilling seconds, exposing the thing you loathe most about yourself while whispering a promise of joy to your secret heart. Afterward you wanted more, oblivious to the bruise on your soul." When the book came out, Megan sent Pat a copy of the page on which this passage appeared with a note on the margin that read, "Dad, I would sue this guy, but the writing's so bad I'd be too embarrassed." Pat knew the Megan the spurned writer was describing. The

heartless Megan. Megan the cynic. This knowledge was one of the few ties that he felt bound her to him. Other fathers felt more positive things of course, but this was *something*. Something to cling to. He did not know the Megan he talked to on Christmas day, the one planning to kill herself. Such a bitter thing not to know, invalidating as it were their tenuous bond, exposing it for the sham it was.

Pat walked along the river after finishing his coffee, then turned away from the water in the neighborhood of the Eiffel Tower, which was teeming with tourists, who, trancelike, were streaming to the giant structure like insects to the sacred seat of their queen. His hotel was in this neighborhood, as was the Rue des Fleurs, which he decided to visit before being “collected” by Officer Laurence. He knew from looking at his city map the night before that it ran only two blocks, from Rue de l’Université roughly southerly to Rue de Montessuy. When he made the turn from Rue de l’Université onto Rue des Fleurs, he saw a city worker in hip boots using a hose connected to a truck that followed him slowly as he methodically sprayed the sidewalk on Pat’s side. Rather than backing up, Pat stepped into a doorway that turned out to be the foyer of a small apartment house. There, squatting before him, was a woman arranging bouquets of flowers in two large wicker baskets.

“Would you like to buy a bouquet of flowers, Monsieur,” she said without looking up, apparently deducing from his shoes and jeans that he was a man. “For your daughter? Your wife?”

The woman’s hair was pitch-black, and at first Pat thought she was one of the gypsies who pestered the tourists in virtually all of Europe’s capitals. Then she stood and Pat saw that she was noxt a gypsy and not a woman, but rather a girl of thirteen or fourteen with large luminous eyes set in a pale face of immaculate complexion and indecipherable national origin. The foyer was small, only ten feet by ten feet, but its richly paneled walls reached up some twenty feet to meet in a darkly latticed cathedral ceiling. The floor beneath them was a pink-and-gray striated marble. The transom above the front door was made of stained glass of pale blues and greens, and the light spilling from it cast the girl’s face in an angelic glow. Outside, the street washer was passing. The girl, holding a bouquet of roses in one hand and wiping the other on her poorly cut cloth coat, smiled and said, “The street cleaner has sent you to me.”

Pat could not find his tongue for a second and then, without thinking, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and withdrew his wallet, a slender beat-up leather affair with little in it except some cash, his driver's license, two credit cards, and a picture of Megan. This he slid from its clear plastic cover and showed to the flower girl.

"This is my daughter," he said. "Do you know her?"

"*Oui, Monsieur,*" the girl answered. And then, switching back to her lilt-ing schoolgirl's English, "She told me you would come."

"She told you I'd come?"

"*Oui, Monsieur.*"

"When was that?"

"When she purchased flowers from me last week."

"What kind of flowers?"

"Roses. *Comme ça.*" She looked down at the bouquet in her hand and then back up at Pat.

"What else did she tell you?"

"*Rien, Monsieur,* just that you would be coming."

She's dead, Pat wanted to say. *I'm too late.* But he could not form the words. He heard them echoing in his head, but though he tried he could not get them to his lips. Then suddenly he was crying, holding his hands to his eyes to hide his tears. Embarrassed, he opened his wallet again and began fumbling in it for euro notes to pay for the bouquet. The girl, however, gently clasped her hands over his, forcing them to close the wallet and at the same time deftly placing the flowers into his right hand. There was more comfort in her touch than Pat had felt in years. He stood there mute, wondering at the sweetness of this child who was a head shorter than him but whose presence seemed to fill every corner of the small room.

"She was troubled, Monsieur."

"Troubled?"

"Yes, Monsieur. It is good that you have come. You must go to her."

There was no point in telling the girl that Megan was dead, that in a few minutes he would indeed be going to her, but only to her corpse.

"I am going to her now," he said.

"Have faith, Monsieur. You will be led to her."

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PARIS, JANUARY 2, 2004

Pat arrived at his hotel at a few minutes before noon, which gave him just enough time to put the roses into a vase with water and wash his face and hands before going down to the lobby to meet Officer Laurence. When he unwrapped the roses, a prayer card of some kind fell out; he put this in his pocket without thinking much about it. He told the desk clerk that he was expecting an Officer Laurence of the Paris police and pointed to a stuffed chair in a corner where he would be waiting for her. There he sat and began to ponder his strange meeting with the flower girl, but within seconds, or so it seemed, he was interrupted by a tall angular woman in her mid-thirties dressed in a chic dark blue suit over a white silk blouse. Her nose was on the large side and slightly bumpy, and would have dominated her face except that it was nicely in proportion to her high, wide cheekbones and full-lipped broad mouth. The eyes in this face, forthright eyes that met his squarely, were an arresting shade of gray-green that Pat had never seen before. Her gold bracelets jangled as she extended her hand to him and introduced herself with a half smile and a nod of her head.

“Do you speak French, Monsieur Nolan?”

“*Un peu.*”

“You prefer English?”

“Yes.”

“*Mais oui.* Of course. You seem surprised, Monsieur. I am not dressed to chase criminals today.”

“I was expecting someone in a uniform. Inspector LeGrand said you were an officer.”

"I am an officer of the judiciary police. In America I would be a detective."

Pat *was* surprised at Laurence's appearance, but it wasn't at the way she was dressed. Nor was it solely how lovely she was, although she was quite lovely to look at. It was, he realized, how interesting the look in her beautiful eyes was. There was no French arrogance in them, but its opposite, something akin to humility or a complicated, frustrating sadness not unlike his own. This look, whether imagined or real, and the thought it sparked in his overworked mind, took Pat for a moment—a very brief moment—out of himself, a process that on some wider level he observed with gratitude.

"Shall we go?" Laurence said softly, bringing him swiftly but gently back to the grim task at hand.

The ride to the hospital in Laurence's black Peugeot station wagon was short and quiet. Once there, Laurence spoke rapidly in French to a desk clerk, then shepherded Pat into an elevator which took them to the basement.

"Wait," she said when they exited the elevator; then, turning, she walked quickly down a long corridor, her high heels clicking on the tiled floor. She disappeared behind double swinging doors, reemerging a moment later and gesturing to Pat to come. It was a long walk for Pat, longer even than the one he had taken twenty-nine years ago to confirm for himself that his wife of eight months was dead. Laurence held open one of the swinging doors for him and he entered a squarish, harshly lit room with a wall of stainless steel body lockers at one end and an autopsy station at the other, where a lab technician in a white smock stood next to a gurney. Pat took this scene in for a moment and then felt Officer Laurence's hand on his left forearm. At the gurney, Laurence nodded to the technician, who pulled down gently on the pale green sheet. Pat's eyes went first to the shaved head, then to the crude sutures at the right temple, and then finally to the face, white and stony in death these last four days. It was not Megan. It was a woman generally of Megan's age and size and coloring, but it was not her.

"This is your daughter, Monsieur Nolan?"

Pat's mind had stopped working for a second, but it started again when he heard Officer Laurence's voice. Other voices then filled his head.

My birthday's coming up. You can bring me a present.

A quick cremation.

Have faith, Monsieur. You will be led to her.

Megan was alive but wanted the world to think she was dead. The world except for Pat and the flower girl on the Street of Flowers.

“Yes,” he answered, nodding, and at the same time reaching out and placing his right hand over the body’s left hand. He pressed through the sheet to feel for the heavy silver ring that he had bought for Lorrie on their honeymoon and then given to Megan when she turned sixteen. To the best of his knowledge, she had not taken it off since. He confirmed its absence, then stepped away from the gurney, keeping his eyes on the unknown woman who had visited Megan on December 30 and killed herself in furtherance of what dark and strange conspiracy—a conspiracy he had now joined—Pat could not fathom. *Why, Megan? And where are you?*

“She has lost weight from her cancer,” said Laurence.

“Yes.”

The detective nodded to the technician, who pulled the sheet up and began wheeling the gurney toward the lockers.

“Detective Laurence,” Pat said.

“Yes.”

“I would like to have my daughter cremated today if possible. Can you help me?”

“Yes. Upstairs we will sign papers to release the body. We will call a crematorium from my cell phone.”

“And her personal effects?”

“I have them in my car. I will take you to her room if you like.”

“Yes. I would.”

“Perhaps you would like something to eat first, a drink?”

Yes, I could use a drink, a long night of drinking, Pat thought, realizing, as Laurence stared intently at him that the stunned look on his face was not what she thought it was, sorry that he had had to lie to her.

“No,” he said, thanking her with his eyes for the sympathy in hers. “Let’s get it over with.”