

STEVE BERRY



THE ADMIRAL'S MARIK

The Admiral's Mark

Steve Berry



BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

The Admiral's Mark is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously . Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

A 2012 Ballantine Books eBook Original

Copyright © 2012 by Steve Berry
Excerpt from *The Columbus Affair* copyright © 2012 by Steve Berry

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

BALLANTINE and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

eISBN: 978-0-345-53440-8

www.ballantinebooks.com

Cover design: Marc J. Cohen and Scott Biel

v3.1

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Eight Years Ago](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Excerpt from The Columbus Affair](#)

Cotton Malone hated funerals. The only thing worse was a wedding. Both events involved an expected display of emotion, and both sparked memories better left forgotten. He'd attended only a handful of either since leaving the navy six years before and working full-time for the Justice Department. Today's funeral was further complicated by the fact that he hadn't particularly liked the man in the coffin.

Scott Brown had been married to Ginger, his wife, Pam's, sister. Scott had never held a real job, was always pitching some risky venture to investors, most of the schemes borderline illegal. Two years ago Malone had to intercede with Texas authorities and smooth over one that involved a few hundred thousand dollars and a lot of angry ranchers. Luckily, Scott still had the money and its return made everything go away.

This time things had turned out different.

Scott Brown was dead.

Killed in a diving accident off the coast of Haiti. What he was doing there was anybody's guess. Haitian officials could not have cared less. They fished him from the Caribbean, labeled the death accidental, and shipped him home for burial.

One less problem they had to worry about.

One more for Malone.

"You have to go to Haiti," his wife said to him. "Ginger is devastated."

Pam's sister was two years younger, ten years less mature, and liked the bad boys. Scott was her third husband. Of the crop, he was probably the cream, which wasn't saying much. Handsome, he'd been a talkative soul, never met a stranger, which had certainly helped with his cons. His problem came from not knowing, to quote the song, "when to hold 'em, when to fold 'em, and when to walk away." He just couldn't resist the lure of an easy buck. Thankfully, there were no children of the union, and Ginger worked a solid job that paid the bills.

"And why do I have to go to Haiti?" he asked. "Scott drowned. Case closed."

A report had accompanied the body. It explained everything the locals knew—which wasn't much—and was signed by a police inspector in Cap-Haïtien.

"Scott called Ginger a day before he died. He sounded like he was in trouble. He said people were after him."

"He's a pathological liar, and he was *always* in trouble."

He spotted the look on her face. The one that said, *You can argue all you want, but you're going down there to see what happened*. So he decided to try, "I'm off for the next week. I thought you wanted me home to spend more time with you and Gary?"

His son was eight and growing up fast. First the navy had kept him away, now it was his job with the Magellan Billet. He'd missed most of Gary's childhood, a sore spot between him and Pam.

Their marriage was in trouble. And they both knew it.

"I want you to do this," she said, her voice calm. "It'll help Ginger get over him."

"What am I looking for?"

"How would I know? You're the secret agent. Find out what happened to him."

There was no sense arguing any further. When Pam made up her mind, that was it.

The graveside service was ending, the few who'd attended paying their respects to Ginger.

"I should check out their apartment," he said.

The Browns lived on Atlanta's south side.

"I doubt your sister has been totally honest about what her husband was involved in. She knows how we feel."

Pam handed him a key from her purse. "I've lived with an agent long enough to know the drill. Go, while everyone is at our house after the funeral."

He was beginning to wonder how much planning she'd invested in this.

"I love my sister," she said. "But she's blind when it comes to men. There's no telling what's going on."

* * *

He found the apartment complex just off the interstate, one of hundreds that dotted the Atlanta metropolitan area. No gate barred access and the parking lot was devoid of cars, most of the residents at work on a Tuesday afternoon. The Browns lived on the second floor, and he used the key to gain access. Inside was spotless, everything in its place. Ginger, like her sister, appreciated order. Interesting how she waived that rule when it came to her love life. He'd visited here only a couple of times, as usually the Browns came to the Malone house on the other side of town.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for, but found a checkbook in a drawer, the account only in Ginger's name, with \$4,200 on deposit. A savings book showed another \$14,000. Good to know that his sister-in-law kept some money under her control.

A stack of mail caught his attention.

Then someone knocked on the door.

Which startled him.

Another knock.

He hadn't locked the knob after he'd entered. Why would he? Nobody was around. Family and friends were at the funeral.

The knob began to turn.

He retreated to the bedroom and slid under the bed. A frilly dust ruffle draped down on three sides and provided cover. He wasn't sure why hiding was necessary, but something didn't ring right.

"Is anyone home?" a male voice said.

A moment of silence.

"Check the rooms."

A gap of about half an inch provided a line of sight past the dust ruffle out into the bedroom. He pressed his cheek into the carpet and watched as two feet stepped to the bedroom door, hesitated a moment, then walked to the bathroom and closet, checking both.

"No one is here," another male voice said.

A burglary?

"They are still at the funeral, so we have some time. Make a search."

If so, apparently not an ordinary one.

He heard drawers open, items shuffled about.

"No need to look any further," the first voice said. "Here is what we want."

He gently raised the dust ruffle enough so that he could see more than shoes.

Past the bedroom doorway he spotted two men. One was maybe fifty, pale, with salt-and-pepper hair and a matching beard. The other man was younger, black-haired, dark-complexioned. The older man was holding the stack of mail. He tossed the letters aside and kept one, removing what was

inside a large brown envelope.

The older man shook his head. "Seems Herr Brown led us on a diversion. This is nothing."

"But the wife read it."

"It would mean nothing to her."

He watched as the letter was replaced in the envelope and tossed back on the table.

"There is no need to linger," the older man said. "Unfortunately, Herr Brown managed to get ahead of us. The answers we seek are not here, but we had to come for a look."

They both left, gently closing the door behind them.

He slid from beneath the bed and rushed to the window, watching as the two men exited the building toward a dark blue Honda.

They climbed inside and started to leave.

He darted to the table, grabbed the envelope, then raced downstairs, slowing his pace to a normal gait as he came to the bottom and walked toward his car.

The Honda was turning a corner, heading toward the exit gate.

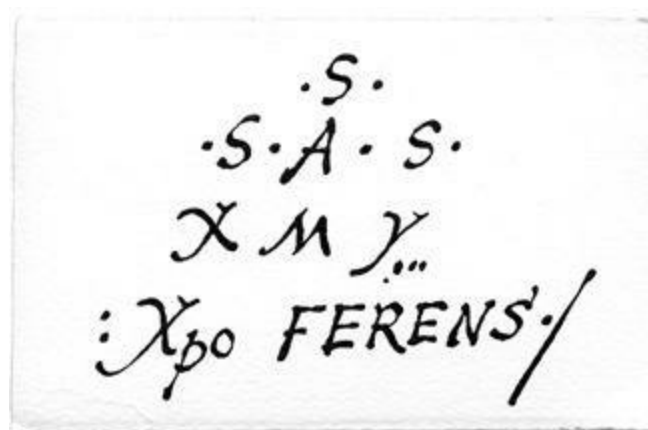
He jumped into his own vehicle and followed.

* * *

He switched off the car engine and watched as the two men parked the Honda. They'd driven from the apartment complex, found Interstate 85, then headed south to Fayette County and a small private airport. He'd first thought their destination to be Hartsfield-Jackson International, which could have proven a problem. Thankfully, they'd avoided Atlanta's main terminal. Several single-engine craft and two luxury turboprops waited near a large hangar. His targets entered a metal-sided administration building, stayed a couple of minutes, then climbed aboard one of the turboprops. A few minutes later engines whined and the plane taxied to the runway.

He'd opted not to confront them.

Instead, he should be able to learn what he needed without drawing any unnecessary attention. Before leaving the car he grabbed the envelope from the apartment, which displayed a handwritten return address for the Hotel Creole, Cap-Haïtien, Haiti. He slid out a single sheet of unfolded paper and studied what was there.



.S.
·S·A·S·
X M Y
:Xpo FERENS/

He had no idea what the combination of letters meant.

He tossed the envelope on the passenger's seat and stepped from the car. Inside the building he displayed his Justice Department badge. "Who were the two men who left in the plane just now?"

The person on duty, a short stump of a man, seemed not to want to answer.

“We can do this here, or back in Atlanta in a more formal setting. Your choice.”

Magellan Billet headquarters was located in Atlanta. Its head, Stephanie Nelle, had insisted on that as a condition of her employment, wanting the unit away from Washington and the Department of Justice, both physically and symbolically. Which worked. The Billet had developed a reputation for independence, utilized on the most sensitive of investigations, both domestic and international. Twelve agents worked under Stephanie’s exclusive control, selected by her and specially trained. Of course he was bluffing, since none of this had anything to do with Billet business. Still, something out of the ordinary was definitely happening.

“Older guy is Zachariah Simon. He showed an Austrian passport. The other guy was—”

He watched as the man tried to remember.

“Rócha. Yeah, that was it. Rócha.”

“He have another name.”

The guy shrugged. “Can’t remember. Didn’t know I had to. They flew in on a charter, paid their fees, bought some gas, and left.”

“And that car outside?”

“Mine. They rented it.”

“When did they get here?”

“A few hours ago.”

“You get their passports?”

He knew the rules. Small airports like this were required to maintain copies of entry documents for Customs.

“Yeah, I got ’em.”

“I need them.” Now for what he really wanted to know. “Where are they headed?”

“These guys in trouble?”

“If they are, here’s the problem. They’re gone, and you’re still here.”

He hoped the message was clear.

“The charter pilot filed a flight plan for Cap-Haïtien.”

* * *

Cap-Haïtien was a town of 180,000 people on Haiti’s north coast. Its architecture reminded Malone of New Orleans, the same gingerbread-style houses lining its narrow streets, the same French feel throughout, though its overwhelming poverty spoiled any further comparisons. Streets, where they existed, suffered potholes and puddles, their gutters trickling with stinking sewage. Hundreds of tin-roofed shacks crumbling in the heat dominated bare mountain slopes. Two hundred years ago the harbor would have been filled with merchant ships, here to load coffee and sugar from French planters. Now the bay loomed empty save for a few small boats, its waters ruined by pollution. A strong odor of decay filled the humid afternoon air. Yesterday, after what had happened in the Browns’ apartment and at the airport south of Atlanta, he’d questioned his sister-in-law about the envelope.

“What were you doing in my apartment?” Ginger asked.

“I sent him,” Pam said. “I gave him my key and told him to look around.”

“What for?”

“Your husband’s dead. Don’t you want to know what happened?”

“Of course, but—”

“Do you have any idea what this means?” he asked her, showing her the sheet from the

envelope.

Ginger shook her head. "It came from Haiti a day or so after Scott died. He told me on the phone he sent me something. But he didn't tell me what it means."

"And you never mentioned this envelope to me," Pam said, with an irritation that he'd come to know.

"I didn't think it was important. Come on, Scott drowned."

"But he said someone was after him," Pam said.

"I know. But I have to confess, I didn't believe him."

Pam had continued to reprimand Ginger for not telling anyone about the letter, but all that brought was tears. For safety, she'd insisted Ginger stay at their house, though he doubted there'd be any more visits.

Whatever was going to happen, would happen here, in Haiti.

Before leaving Cap-Haïtien's airport, he located the private hangars and learned that the plane from Atlanta was there. Inside, \$50 U.S. bought him the name of the hotel where Zachariah Simon and Rócha were staying. Hotel Creole. The same one noted on the envelope Scott had sent. He could start with the police, or with the charter boat Scott had used, or with the two men who'd come to Atlanta. He decided that the charter boat seemed the best bet, so he bartered for a cab into the congested mess of central downtown.

Haiti filled the west half of an island Columbus discovered in 1492, which he named Hispaniola. Populated first by native Tainos, then the Spanish, then by slaves brought to work the cane fields, the island fell under the control of the French in 1697. Forty thousand colonists lorded over 500,000 Africans. By 1790 it was one of the richest places on earth—France's number one revenue source—thanks to immense profits from sugar, coffee, and indigo. It was also one of the most picturesque, with dense tropical forests, sparkling clear water, and towering mountains. Palm-shaded châteaux filled with Parisian furnishings were common. Its *Code Noir* established rigid social rules, making it one of the world's most efficient slave colonies. Eventually, though, freed mulattos, offspring of colonists, and female slaves combined forces with thousands of other slaves and expelled the French, establishing the only nation ever born of a black revolt.

Then the turmoil started.

After two hundred years Haiti was now the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, its forests gone, waters ruined, poverty an accepted way of life. He'd read an article recently about how the cruise ships had stopped coming—simply because passengers complained at how depressing the place could be.

The cabdriver dropped him at the waterfront, where crumbling docks jutted from a narrow mud beach. Tin-roofed wooden sheds stood at their base, a small crane at the end of one. A pale green sea, splashed with shades of blue, stretched to the horizon. Soft white waves lapped the shore. From the police report he knew the name of the owner who'd taken Scott out, and found him after asking around.

The boat was a twenty-footer, with a small cabin forward and a cluttered deck aft. The man moving about on board was short, thin, and walked with a hitch in his left knee. He had a broad nose, tense jaw, and dark eyes, his black hair cut close.

"Bonsoir. Are you Yann Dubois?"

The man glanced up at him with a faint smile. "You want to dive?"

"Looks like a calm day. Can you take me out?"

He saw that he'd now attracted interest. Here was money to be made, and Dubois seemed ready to

accommodate.

“Sure, I take you out. You have card?”

He shook his head. “Not on me. But I’m U.S. Navy certified. I can handle it.”

He assumed that requirements like diving certifications were not much of a problem in Haiti.

Dubois smiled. “U.S. Navy. That’s good, mon. Where you want to go?”

“Same place the guy drowned last week.”

Dubois’ pleasant attitude vanished. “You police? Here to bother me more? I don’t want that.”

“No police. A relative. The man who died was my brother-in-law. I need to find out what happened.”

“He drown. That what happened. Not my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was. I just want to see where it happened. Have a look around. I’ll pay double your usual rate.”

He watched as Dubois considered the offer, but the outcome was never in doubt.

“Let’s go, mon.”

* * *

Malone donned the air tank and buoyancy vest, fastening the belt around his waist and adjusting the shoulder straps. Not the newest of equipment, but it appeared in reasonable shape. The trip out from shore had been short, the stern engulfed in a boiling exhaust from overheating engines. They were anchored no more than three hundred yards from the beach, dark smudges in the turquoise water indicating a reef below. A wet wind blew steady from the west. He kept time with the deck’s jerking pitch, glad to know that his sea legs had not left him.

The navy had taught him how to dive ten years ago. He liked it but, unlike his father who’d been a submariner, he hadn’t wanted a career underwater. The sky appealed to him, so he learned to fly fighter jets. Ultimately, he was steered toward the law, where he found a home first as a JAG officer, now in the Justice Department.

“We go down thirty feet,” Dubois said as he adjusted his own harness. “Lots of current. Watch yourself. I show you where it happened.”

“Did you fish him out?”

“Yeah, mon. He not come up, so I go down.”

“Why didn’t you go down with him?”

Dubois eyed him with irritation. “ ’Cause Scotty say he don’t want me down there.”

None of which had been detailed in the police report. But the whole thing was more overview than report. Few details, even fewer conclusions. Just a simple statement of “diving accident.”

“Scotty?” he said. “You and him buddies?”

Dubois eyed him again with a cool stare. “I like him. He okay.”

Then Dubois rolled over the side into the water.

Malone followed.

A gray reef shark immediately greeted him. The air from his tank carried a dank, oily aftertaste, probably from a bad compressor. He hadn’t been underwater in five years, but he quickly acclimated himself, listening to the burbling sound of his exhaled breath.

Dubois led the way to the bottom.

He checked the depth gauge snaking from his regulator.

Twenty-five feet.

Shallow enough to have no decompression worries.

He stared around in the aquamarine sea and noticed only a few tropicals here and there, some wrasses and an angel, but nothing like the numbers one would expect. He knew Haiti's reefs had been decimated by overfishing and sedimentation. Most of the trees on the island were gone—cut down for fuel and shelter with few replantings—allowing rainwater to cascade from the mountains unimpeded, carrying along tons of mud that ended up on the seafloor. Not enough reef fish also meant fewer to keep the coral clean of algae. So the twisted limestone hulks loomed mostly lifeless, everything stained dark green.

Dubois motioned to a formation fifty feet away and indicated that Malone should lead the way.

He swam toward it.

A loud rasp from the regulator accompanied each of his breaths. He was trying to ignore the foul-tasting air and hoped nothing was toxic.

They came to a coral formation, this one, too, devoid of polyps. A few fish were gorging on the algae. The shark had drifted off. The water was warm and comforting, almost too much so, and he cautioned himself to stay alert. Rays of bright sunshine, fractured by the surface, danced to a quick beat. Dubois had been right. A steady current in their face made the going difficult.

They arrived at the limestone hulk, which rose ten feet toward the surface, stretching out many more yards toward the open sea. A darker hue in the water a few hundred feet away signaled greater depths, and he assumed that was where the shallow reef ended.

Dubois pointed to an opening in the rock, where chunks had fallen away to reveal a crack that spread for twenty feet. A small, cavelike opening led into the crevice. Dubois motioned with his hands, indicating that a storm had caused the damage.

Malone swam close and peered inside. He saw what appeared to be wood timbers on the bottom, encrusted with barnacles and algae. Other shapes lay embedded in the sand, thick with encrustation.

A wreck of some sort. Old, too. Hidden beneath this rock mound for a long time. He motioned—*Is this all?*—and Dubois nodded. He decided he'd seen enough. He'd need to return for a closer inspection, but first more information was called for.

He motioned for them to surface.

They drifted away from the limestone wall.

Scott had apparently found a shipwreck. But there were probably thousands of those in these waters, as Cap-Haïtien had been a bustling seaport. French, Spanish, British, and Portuguese ships had plied these waters, along with buccaneers. Probably hard even to count the number of ships that met the bottom.

What made this one so special?

He exhaled and turned his attention toward the surface, watching as the bubbles drifted upward.

His next breath drew nothing.

What?

He tried again, sucking harder.

No air came through the regulator.

He reached for the pressure gauge, which read zero.

He whirled around, searching for Dubois, who was only a few feet away watching through his mask. The tiny bit of air in his lungs was about gone, no way to ditch his weight belt and make it twenty-five feet up before he blacked out. He slashed his right hand across his throat, the universal sign for no air, and kicked toward Dubois.

The Haitian handed over his regulator.

Malone drew a deep breath.

Then another.

Two more were required before his nerves stabilized.

He shared the air, then watched as Dubois reached around him. He felt something being turned, then noticed the air gauge move from zero to more than 2,000 pounds.

The son of a bitch had turned the valve off at the tank.

He replaced his regulator in his mouth, and Dubois motioned for them to surface. They made it to the boat and Malone climbed aboard first, quickly releasing his waist belt and dropping the tank to the deck. Dubois came up and, before he could do a thing, Malone pounced, slamming the Haitian to the deck. Dubois remained still—as if he'd expected an attack—calmly releasing his own belt and freeing himself from the harness.

“What in the hell just happened?” Malone yelled.

Dubois stood. “Scotty not drown. He be killed. Just like I show you.”

It was true, he'd never felt his air valve being closed. Never seen it coming. If Dubois hadn't been there, he'd be dead.

“That's what I tell police.”

“He was down there alone. Who the hell killed him?”

“The other man.”

“The police report said nothing about another man.”

“I tell them. They don't want to hear. I know something wrong with that policeman. Something wrong with all of them here.”

Which was one reason why United Nations peacekeepers were all over the country. Corruption had long been a way of Haitian life.

“I don't mean to kill you,” Dubois said. “But I want you to know truth. You said Scotty your relative. So you need to know. The other man kill Scotty.”

“Was he on this boat?”

Dubois shook his head. “He come in another, anchor over there.” He pointed east. “Not far away. Diver go down. I don't think much. Lots of divers around here every day. Next thing I know he comes up and boat leaves. But Scotty never comes up. So I go down.”

“You get a look at the other guy?”

Dubois nodded. “Good one.”

Playing a hunch, he stepped over to his travel bag and found the copies of the two passports he'd obtained in Atlanta. He showed them to Dubois.

“That's him,” Dubois said, pointing at Rócha.

“Sure?”

“Real sure.”

Murder changed everything.

“Scotty was good to me,” Dubois said. “I bring him here several times. He pay me good, always nice to me. He come to my house and eat with my wife and children. I like him.”

That had been Scott. A liar. A thief. But a friendly soul.

“What was Scott after?”

“He tell me he find *Santa María*.”

That shocked him.

He knew the tale.

On his first voyage Columbus anchored somewhere in these waters. But on Christmas Day, 1492, his flagship, the *Santa María*, lodged on a reef. With no way to free the keel, the ship was

dismantled, its timbers and cargo hauled ashore and used to construct a settlement. Three weeks later Columbus sailed away in the *Niña*, leaving 39 of his crew behind in what he called La Navidad, the first settlement of Western Europeans in the New World. He charged those men with exploring the island and finding gold. But when he returned in November 1493 with 17 ships and 1,200 men on his second voyage, La Navidad lay in ashes. All 39 crew members were dead, slaughtered by the Tainos. What remained of the *Santa María* settled on the sea bottom and had been sought by archaeologists for decades.

And Scott had found it?

“He tell me it is there,” Dubois said. “In that rock. He dive several times. Always alone. Until last time.”

“You could have just told me this. You didn’t have to try to kill me.”

“You look like man who can handle things. Not like Scotty.”

He caught something in the man’s voice. “You don’t like what happened to him?”

Dubois shook his head. “He not deserve that. But there be nothing I can do. Police have the power here.”

He’d heard enough. “Take me back to shore.”

“You going after man in picture?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you need help. That man is here, in Cap-Haïtien. I know where. I have car. You need to get around. I owe that man.” Dubois paused. “For Scotty.”

* * *

He found the Hotel Creole just off the Place d’Armes, near the Cathedral Notre-Dame, a striking Victorian building, its entrance separated from the street by a leafy courtyard, an iron gate manned by security. When he appeared, bag in hand, saying he was there to check in, he was welcomed inside. Dubois had driven him from the docks. This was the hotel the man at the airport had said Simon and Rócha were staying at, the same one noted on the envelope sent to Ginger by Scott, the same one Dubois had identified, too. He was still leery of his new ally, but he’d many times enlisted aid from locals. All part of the job. So were deceit and betrayal, so he stayed on guard. In his favor was the fact that Simon and Rócha had no idea he existed, and he planned to use that anonymity to his advantage.

The hotel’s lobby seemed straight out of the 18th century, with a vaulted ceiling and lots of stone and wood that opened to an inner courtyard. Behind the front desk he noticed numbered slots on a wall, one for each room. Not something one saw much anymore. So he decided to try an old trick. He approached and said he wanted to leave a message for Zachariah Simon. He pretended to scribble something on a pad, folded the page over several times, then handed it to the clerk, along with a \$10 bill. The man smiled, thanked him, then turned and inserted the note in a slot marked 25.

“And I’d like a room.”

* * *

He tossed his bag on the bed.

His room was on the third floor, spacious, clean, the design minimalist with little furniture. Thankfully, the doors were also antiques, fitted with simple tumbler locks and no dead bolts. He left the room and descended to the second floor, finding the door marked 25.

He listened outside, heard nothing, then knocked.

Another try.

No answer.

He found the small diamond pick he kept in his wallet and tripped the tumblers in less than five seconds, a handy trick learned during his first few months on the job with the Justice Department.

The room inside was similar to his own. Two travel bags lay against one wall. He gave each a quick inspection and saw nothing that caught his attention. What did interest him were the papers on the desk. One was a report on Scott Brown, a background investigation that was surprisingly detailed. He scanned the paragraphs and learned things about his brother-in-law that he'd never known: where he'd been born and raised, the number of aliases he used, the multiple Social Security numbers associated with his several identities, and a bank account in the Cayman Islands with nearly \$600,000 on deposit. From all he knew the Browns lived paycheck-to-paycheck—hers. Typical of Scott, though, to squirrel away money and never tell his wife. Most likely the stash was either seed money for the next con or living expenses between marriages.

One thing, though, became clear. The two men who occupied this room were intently interested in Scott.

Unfortunately, Herr Brown managed to get ahead of us. The answers are not here.

That's what the older man, Simon, had said in Atlanta.

Something else caught his eye.

A printed catalog for a local auction to be held at another hotel, La Villa St-Louis, tonight. He thumbed through. Mostly antiques. Some jewelry. Furniture. All from an estate being liquidated. Contrary to popular misconception, there was wealth in Haiti.

He noticed blue ink on one of the pages.

Numbers. 5,000. 7,000. 10,000.

Above the writing was an item for sale.

Small volume (215 × 130mm), 62 leaves with hand printing in dark ink, another 12 blank. Fine original leather over wood binding. Significant soiling and browning, occasional spotting and staining. Dutch vellum, gilt edges, extremities rubbed. Provenance still in question, but verified to mid- to early-16th-century origin.

A color photo displayed the book. He'd seen many like it before. Books were a love of his. He collected them by the hundreds, all encased in plastic sheaths, lined on metal shelves in his basement back in Atlanta. Pam hated them, as they took up a lot of room, not to mention the money he spent on them. But he was a hopeless bibliophile. A dream that he allowed himself to sometimes enjoy was to one day own a rare-book shop.

He wondered what it was about this book that was so interesting.

The brochure noted that the auction began at 6:00 P.M. His watch read a little after two. He decided that his anonymity could be stretched a little further, so he'd be there to see what happened.

He left the room, relocked the door, and made his way downstairs to the lobby. He needed to find Dubois. His ally had said he'd wait outside the main gates, on the street. People streamed back and forth through the hotel from the courtyard, two restaurants, and a bar that was doing a brisk business for the middle of the afternoon. He turned for the main doors and was immediately flanked by a man on either side. Both were young, clean-shaven, with short hair, dressed casually, their shirttails out.

"Mr. Malone," one of them said.

So much for being anonymous. He said nothing and waited for them to make the next move.

“You need to come with us.”

He stopped walking. “I hope you have a better reason than that.”

“Like I said. You *need* to come with us.”

He could take them both. No problem. So he held his ground. “I don’t need to do anything.”

The other man reached into his back pocket and produced a leather wallet. He opened it and displayed an identification.

One he’d seen before.

HaMossad leModi’in uleTafkidim Meyuchadim.

Institute for Intelligence and Operations.

Israeli.

“What’s the Mossad’s interest in Haiti?” he asked.

“We need to talk. But not here.”

* * *

He stepped from the car, the two agents also exiting. He’d ridden with them a few miles outside of Cap-Haïtien to a spot he’d read about but never visited.

Sans-Souci Palace.

Henri Christophe, or King Henri I as he’d labeled himself—tall, strong, smart, and unruly—built it in the early part of the 19th century, part of his plan to show Europe and America the power of the black race. Eventually, scattered around the island, were six châteaux, eight palaces, and the massive *citadelle*, but none compared to Sans-Souci. An earthquake toppled much of the building in 1842, the ruins never rebuilt. Once the equivalent of Versailles, with fifty rooms, a Baroque staircase, and stepped gardens, home to a grandiloquent court of dukes and duchesses, centuries of neglect had allowed nature to again take control. But though gutted by flames, roofless, exposed to tropical wind and rain, the shell seemed in harmony with its surroundings.

He followed his minders toward the ruin across a carpet of green grass. He recalled that *sans souci* translated to “without care,” which did not accurately describe the current state of his emotions. Though the Israelis were allies, he’d never liked dealing with them. The fact that they were here, watching him, and he hadn’t known, made things worse.

What in the world had Scott involved himself in?

A man waited for him at the base of the crumbling château. Interesting that Christophe had built the palace to advance African supremacy, but everything here screamed European monarchical prestige. Few other people were around, odd considering that this one of the region’s main attractions.

“Mr. Malone, I appreciate your coming here,” the man said. He was mid-fifties, thin, fit, with a full head of brown hair. He, too, was dressed casually, and was clearly in charge. The two young men from the hotel withdrew to a discreet distance, keeping an eye on things, but not close enough to hear.

“You have a name?”

The man smiled. “Matt Schwartz.”

“And why is Israeli intelligence here in Haiti, watching me?”

“You’re a man to be watched. Quite a reputation. An agent with the famed Magellan Billet. One of Stephanie Nelle’s hand-chosen twelve. In fact, from what I’ve been told, you’re her prized agent, the one she sends on the toughest jobs.”

“You can’t believe everything my publicist says.”

Schwartz chuckled. “No, you can’t. What were you doing in Zachariah Simon’s room?”

“My mistake. Went into the wrong one. That hotel is like a maze.”

“I was hoping you might offer something more creative.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Professional courtesy?”

Now he smiled. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re here?”

“Simon is someone we’ve kept an eye on for a while. You know anything about him?”

He shook his head.

“Billionaire. Lives in Austria. His family is a big supporter of Israel. They survived the Holocaust, even prospered after the war. His father and grandfather helped form our state. But this third generation is not nearly as benevolent. In fact, Zachariah Simon is a problem.”

“Terrorism?”

Schwartz shook his head. “If so, not the garden variety.”

He wasn’t getting much more than what a department summary might reveal, available to anyone with even a minor security clearance. This man was doing his job, keeping things close, offering just enough so his listener might reciprocate. So he offered, “I’m not here on official business.”

“Really? You just decided to take a little trip down to Haiti?”

“My brother-in-law, Scott Brown, drowned here last week. I came to find out what happened.”

“Scott Brown.” Schwartz shook his head. “*That* man was a problem, too.”

* * *

Malone was taken aback by the comment. Now he wondered if the Israelis had been part of what had happened, so he asked, “What did Scott do?”

“He nearly wrecked a year’s worth of effort. He was working some sort of con on Simon. But he had no idea who he was dealing with.”

Now he was getting angry. “So you let them kill him?”

“We didn’t let anything happen. It just did. Our surveillance on Simon is loose. We can’t spook him. He has no idea we’re watching. I want to keep it that way.”

“But you knew Scott was in danger?”

“With his background we figured he could take care of himself.”

“You figured wrong.”

Schwartz caught the message, but seemed undeterred. “You know the rules of this game.”

Yes, he did. But that didn’t mean he either liked or approved of them. One day, maybe, he’d get out, and then he could play by his own rules.

“My brother-in-law took a lot of chances. But he never played for keeps. His marks were the nonviolent type. *He* didn’t know the rules of this game.”

“But he took something Simon wants back.”

Herr Brown managed to get ahead of us.

“Unfortunately, we don’t know what that is.”

“And you want me to find out?”

“We were hoping you might help.”

He was still pissed about the cavalier attitude toward Scott’s death. He may not have liked Scott Brown, but the man was Ginger’s husband and she was family, and that counted for something.

And another reality hit home.

Seemed not only Scott had stumbled into a mess. So had he.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Not until I say you can.”

“I don’t work for you.”

“But if you’re not going to cooperate, you’re going to leave this island. I can’t risk any more interference.”

He’d already assessed the situation and concluded that the two young men who’d brought him were all the army Schwartz had, at least here. Only a handful of others wandered through the ruins, none raising any alarm. He assumed Schwartz was armed, so the first play was obvious.

He shook his head and grinned. “You don’t give up, do you?”

Schwartz pointed both palms skyward, shrugged, and said, “It’s my nature.”

“Look,” he said, casually stepping closer, as if he wanted to say something in private, “I’ll leave —”

His right arm swung out and clamped Schwartz’s neck in a vise as he brought the man toward him. The move caught his opponent off guard, and he was able to reach beneath the hanging shirttail and find the gun he knew was there. With weapon in hand he kneed Schwartz in the groin, doubling the man over.

An elbow to the nape of the neck sent the Israeli to the ground.

He whirled and caught the other two problems reaching for their own weapons. He fired at both, sending them scattering for cover among the crumbling stones.

He darted right, seeking refuge behind a standing column. Making his escape would require a sprint of fifty yards, back down the grassy path to the parking lot. Schwartz was still on the ground, barely moving, the other two agents somewhere to his left. The next patch of safety lay twenty feet away. He leaped, hit the ground, and rolled toward it.

Bullets came his way, but missed.

He sprang to his feet behind a clump of stone infested with lichens and caught sight of Twittily Dee and Dittily Doo trying to make their way to Schwartz. He used that moment of distraction to race ahead and hop a waist-high stone wall that separated the grassy path from the rocks beyond.

Crouching low, he kept heading forward until he turned a bend and was out of the line of fire. He leaped back over the wall, onto the grass, and raced to the parking lot.

Now what?

The car he’d come in waited to his right.

No way were the keys in it, but he checked to be sure.

Three more cars were there and he checked those too.

No keys, either.

He’d have to keep moving.

The growl of an engine could be heard from the steep switchback road that led back to the highway.

A vehicle appeared around the last bend.

One he recognized.

Dubois.

The engine rattled and strained, but sounded to him like a fine orchestra. His ally wheeled to a stop. He jumped into the passenger’s side and said, “Good timing.”

“I follow from hotel. They don’t look like good men.”

“They’re not. Let’s get out of here.”

Then something occurred to him.

“Wait.”

He popped open the door, stood, and fired one round into the Israeli's car, flattening a rear tire.

* * *

They drove back toward Cap-Haïtien, the tires wobbling, the wretched road more holes than pavement. No one had followed, and Dubois decided to take them to his house.

"Scotty come there a lot. He like it."

The dwelling was another shanty, tin-sided, tin-roofed, a few hundred square feet. It sat among a cluster of several hundred, east of town, not far from the airport, the rough land succumbing to weeds. Goats milled around in the front and on the sides, and a group of children played. The stench was overpowering, but he'd become accustomed to the pall. Then again, who was he to judge? Dubois seemed like a hardworking, decent man who'd genuinely liked Scott Brown. Life was tough here, but he was making the best of it.

Besides, he owed him one.

Two of the children rushed over. The boy maybe nine or ten, the girl a bit younger. Both hugged Dubois.

"These be mine. Violine is my precious girl, but Alain is future man of house."

Malone nodded to them both.

"This be Cotton Malone. He was close to Scotty," Dubois told them.

"Are you a secret agent, too?" Alain asked.

He threw Dubois a curious look.

"Scotty told them he be an agent for the Americans. Worked for the Billet."

He decided not to burst anyone's bubble. "I think it's called the Magellan Billet."

"That's what Scotty say. Very secret thing."

"Scotty say anything else?"

Dubois shook his head. "Only that he be here on a mission. He need help. I give it, like I do with you."

The children ran back to their friends. A woman appeared in the shanty's door. She was thin, long-haired, with bright eyes and a fresh face.

"This be Elise. My wife."

Malone shook the woman's hand, and she threw him a warm smile.

"You were Scotty's relative?" she asked.

He nodded. "He was married to my wife's sister."

"We liked him a lot. He was a good man."

Her English was cleaner than Dubois' and carried no accent, each syllable perfectly pronounced.

"Elise teaches school," her husband said with pride in his voice. "She be real good at that."

The auction would begin in three hours. In the meantime he'd decided to talk with Stephanie Nelle. Though this trip hadn't started off as Magellan Billet business, things had changed. His boss had to know about the Israelis.

"I need to make a call," he said. "I'll step out over there where I can talk in private."

"Take your time," Dubois said. "Elise make the food. We eat."

He nodded at the hospitality and found the phone in his pocket. It was state-of-the-art, Magellan Billet issue, satellite-rated. The smallest unit on the market, produced solely for U.S. intelligence. But he wondered how long it would be before everyone's phone was similarly capable.

Stephanie was in her office and answered the call.

"I thought you were on vacation," she said.

“So did I.”

He told her what had happened, omitting nothing.

“Schwartz is right,” she said. “Zachariah Simon is a fanatic who just recently crept onto our radar. We’re not sure what he’s after, but we passed what we had along to the Israelis and they became awfully interested.”

He knew his boss. “So you ran a full check?”

“Of course. Simon is wealthy, reclusive, a religious zealot. But he keeps his fingerprints off everything. He also openly stays out of politics and never talks to the press.”

“In other words he’s careful.”

“Too much so, in my opinion.”

“What’s he doing in Haiti?”

“An excellent question. I’m sorry about what happened to your brother-in-law, but he was in way over his head.”

“That much is obvious. What isn’t is why the Mossad wants us out of the way.”

“I’d like to know what they’re up to.”

He’d thought she might, and he had a way to find out. “I can do that, but I’ll need some help from your end. I want to go to the auction and buy that book. Simon wants it. My guess is the Israelis are interested, too. If nothing else, it’s our ante into the game.”

“I agree. Do it. I’ll set up a line of credit. But, Cotton, keep the price reasonable. Okay?”

“Don’t I always?”

* * *

He walked back toward the house and could hear people all around him, some within their own dwellings, others out in the bright afternoon. Inside, he discovered that Elise Dubois was making rice and beans, along with a soup of potatoes, tomatoes, and meat, all simmering on a small electric stove. The house contained four rooms, sparsely furnished, everything clean and orderly.

He sat at the table with Dubois and the two children.

“What do you do?” his host asked.

He decided again not to burst Scott’s bubble. “I work with the same people Scott does.”

“You’re a secret agent?” Violine said, the young girl’s face alight with anticipation.

“Not like Scotty. He was higher up than me. But I do work for the same people.”

“Scotty taught us things,” Alain said. “Secret-agent things.”

The boy pushed back from the table and rushed from the room.

“They get excited,” Dubois said. “We not meet people like Scotty all the time.”

Elise brought the meal to the table.

Dubois squeezed his wife’s arm with affection. “She good teacher and good cook.”

Alain returned with some papers, which he eagerly displayed.

“Mr. Malone has no time for that,” the boy’s mother said. “Sit and eat your food.”

Malone smiled. “He’s fine.”

Alain pointed. “Can you read the messages?”

The three pieces of paper were all blank.

He shook his head. “Why don’t you read them for me.”

“It’s easy.”

The boy jumped up on his chair and held one of the blank sheets to the overhead light. Slowly, brown letters appeared on the paper.

HELLO ALAIN.

Then he knew. Lemon juice. Reacting to the heat of the bulb. “That is an old spy trick. Scotty should not have revealed that to you.”

“It’s a secret?” Violine asked.

“You use it, too?” Alain said as he hopped down. “Scotty said secret agents use this all the time.”

“He was right. We do. All the time. But you can’t tell anyone.”

“Scotty was a good man,” Elise said. “He spent a lot of time with the children. We were so sad when he died.”

He saw that she meant it. Obviously, Scott had forged an ally in Dubois and his family, cementing that with the right words, said at the right time, coupled, most likely, with a liberal sprinkling of money. The Magellan Billet? Interesting Scott had used that as his cover. What kind of con had his brother-in-law been working?

He doubted these people knew.

So he kept his mouth shut and allowed them to continue to think the best.

* * *

Malone entered La Villa St-Louis, the hotel located outside Cap-Haïtien, on the coast, inside a stunning building with Spanish and French influences. More upscale than where he was staying, its lush grounds fenced and guarded. The auction was held in a paneled hall that could accommodate a few hundred comfortably. He estimated that fewer than seventy-five were there, many already seated and awaiting the first item. To his right and near the front sat Zachariah Simon. The other man, Rócha, was not in sight. Malone grabbed a chair to the left of the center podium, at the end of an aisle of eight seats.

A copy of the day’s *International Herald Tribune* lay on the next chair. To make himself less conspicuous, he grabbed the paper and scanned the front page, noticing an article about a *Los Angeles Times* reporter whose name he knew. Tom Sagan. Caught falsifying a story from the Middle East. Interesting. After an internal investigation, the *Times* had fired Sagan and apologized for the scandal. Too bad. He’d never thought Sagan the type to lie. His eyes drifted from the newspaper, keeping a watch on what was happening.

More people drifted in.

The auction began and four items were sold, three paintings and a beautiful piece of mahogany furniture, all from the same estate being liquidated. According to the catalog the 16th-century book would be the fifth offering, and it was brought in by a white-gloved attendant, who laid it before the auctioneer.

Bids were called for. Simon wasted no time.

“Five thousand.”

Malone waited to see if anyone else planned to make a bid. Seeing none, he offered his own.

“Six thousand.”

The auctioneer’s eyes raked the crowd and waited.

“Seven thousand” came Simon’s reply.

“Eight,” Malone quickly added.

“Ten.”

A new voice.

From behind.

He turned to see Matt Schwartz, standing, his arm raised to identify himself.

Simon spotted the newcomer, too, then said, "Twelve."

Malone decided to see how bad the Austrian, and the Israelis, wanted the book. "Fifty thousand."

Auctioneers were usually noted for their poker faces, but he'd clearly caught this one off guard.

The surprise showed, but was quickly suppressed before he asked, "Any more bids?"

"Seventy-five thousand," Schwartz said.

"One hundred thousand," Simon countered.

Apparently they both wanted the book. *Okay, let's make it really interesting* . "One hundred fifty thousand."

Silence.

Neither Schwartz nor Simon countered.

The auctioneer waited thirty seconds before asking for any further bids.

No reply.

"Sold."

* * *

Malone accepted the book, nestled safely inside a clear plastic bag, wrapped in brown paper. The \$150,000 had been transferred into the auction company's account, thanks to an online account he'd accessed with the password Stephanie had provided.

She was going to kill him.

He'd just dropped a chunk of public money on a questionable purchase.

But at least he had everyone's attention.

He exited the hall and, before leaving the hotel, detoured to the bathroom. There he entered one of the stalls, carefully opened the package, and passed the plastic-encased book beneath the divider. A hand grabbed the offering, then another book appeared—a French novel bought before arriving—which Malone stuffed into the brown wrapping. He left the stall and the bathroom. Dubois would wait five minutes then do the same, heading home with their prize.

He knew it would not be long and, just as he exited the hotel and followed a lighted path toward the street, someone called out.

"You paid far too much for that."

He stopped and turned. "And you are?"

"The man you outbid. Zachariah Simon."

The older man stepped closer but offered no hand to shake. Good. He'd prefer to wring the SOB's neck.

Simon motioned to the package. "What's your interest?"

He shrugged. "I collect books."

"Why that one?"

"You already know the answer to that question."

"Yet why do I feel that you do not? Which is interesting."

"Enlighten me."

Simon pointed out beyond the palms, toward the ocean and an ever-darkening sky. "Not far from here was the first place Europeans settled in their New World."

"La Navidad."

"Ah, I see you are not wholly ignorant. Thirty-nine men left by Columbus to search for gold and make a colony. But none survived a year. Slaughtered by the Tainos for their cruelty toward the natives."

“A rare victory for the good guys.”

Being a bibliophile also meant he was a reader. He'd read plenty about Columbus and the century after his discovery. Cultures that had existed for many millennia were violently extinguished—hundreds of thousands died—all in the name of religion and fueled by greed.

“Who are you?” Simon asked.

“Harold Earl Malone. But everyone calls me Cotton.”

“Interesting nickname. How did you—”

“Long story.” He motioned with the package. “Why did you want this?”

“What do you know of Christopher Columbus?”

A strange answer to his question. “In 1492 he sailed the ocean blue?”

Simon grimaced. “I am not particularly fond of humor. From your accent, I would say you are from the American South.”

“Georgia boy. Born and raised.”

“That line you quoted,” Simon said. “It is from a poem written to commemorate Columbus Day, which for some reason Americans feel the need to celebrate.”

“I think it's just an excuse to take a day off from work.”

“That actually might be correct, but the poem is fiction. Nearly nothing in it is true. Yet it has been used for decades as a teaching tool.”

“You don't sound like a Columbus fan.”

“We know nothing of Christopher Columbus.”

This man clearly wanted to talk, which bothered Malone. He'd expected more action. And where were the Israelis? Nearby? He hoped so. For once he was counting on them.

“His birthplace, his parents, where he was raised, educated. His early life. All of that is unknown,” Simon said. “We don't even know what Columbus looks like. Every portrait that exists was painted long after he was dead by people who never saw him. If you read many books on him, as I have, you would see that every account conflicts with the others. Columbus himself only added to the mystery, as he barely spoke of himself during his lifetime and the few mentions he did make were not consistent.”

“Maybe he had a reason to keep things confused.”

“That he did, Herr Malone. Truly, he did. But that reason is not important to our present situation. What is relevant is the book.”

He decided to stop playing games. “Why did you kill Scott Brown?”

“I suspected there was a connection. I appreciate your directness, so I will answer your question. Mr. Brown stole from me.”

“And what did he steal?”

“The book you bought. I had it in my possession, then Mr. Brown decided to take it, collecting the finder's fee offered by its owner for its return.”

“So you stole it first?”

“The way of the world, as I am sure you understand. I had employed Herr Brown's services as an intermediary, to secure the book, but he decided on another course.”

“Not out of character.”

“Indeed. But fatal this time.”

“So you killed him. Or, should I say, your associate killed him.”

“There are consequences to risks taken. I was aware of Herr Brown's past. I do not do business with people I do not know. But I thought the fee being paid to him for his services would be enough.”

Sadly, I was wrong.”

“He had a wife.”

“Then she should thank me. Being married to someone so inherently dishonest could not have been pleasant.”

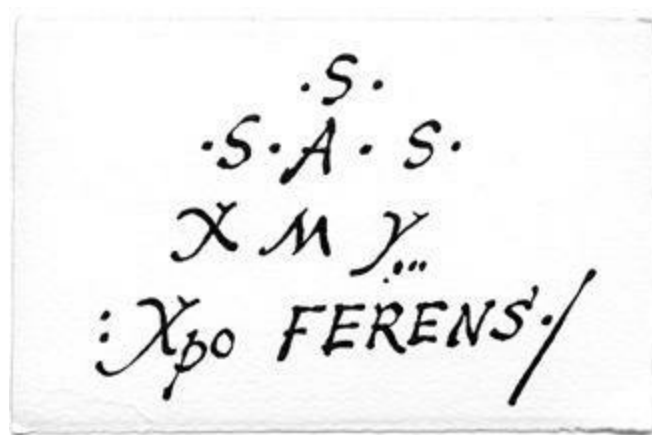
He agreed, but Ginger had loved the idiot. And this arrogant ass’s indifference was, like Schwartz’s earlier, pissing him off.

“I have spent the better part of my adult life studying Christopher Columbus,” Simon said. “I consider myself well versed in his peculiarities—”

“And the purpose of such a seemingly worthwhile endeavor?”

He saw Simon did not appreciate the rebuke. “Again, not something that is relevant to our current dealings.”

Simon stepped to the edge of the walk, near one of the low-voltage lights, and bent down. Malone watched as something was drawn in the soft sand.



The same strange letter combination from Scott’s letter to Ginger.

“This is the mark of the Admiral,” Simon said. “The way Columbus would sometimes sign his name. Odd, wouldn’t you say?”

To say the least.

Simon stood. “Interesting that the man would not use his given, Christian name.”

He wondered why that would matter.

“Instead he sketches out these letters. To this day, no one knows what he meant by it. There are many interpretations, none of them persuasive. Some say it’s a combination of Greek and Latin. Others say Hebrew. One thing we do know: He wished his heirs, after his death, to continue to use this triangular arrangement of letters as *their* signature.”

“What does this have to do with anything?”

“Everything. The book you bought contains the mark of the Admiral. Open your package and I will show you.”

That he could not do, since the book was long gone.

Simon stared at him. “Your trick in the bathroom fooled no one.”

He wasn’t going to be bluffed that easily.

Simon raised a hand and gestured. The man called Rócha appeared down the path and walked their way.

Holding the book from the auction.

A way of alarm swept through Malone.

Simon seemed to enjoy the moment and said, “I have Yann Dubois.” Rócha handed the book to

Simon. "He is my prisoner, and will remain there until you do something for me."

Simon opened the old volume. "By and large these words are worthless. But there is one page that is not." He seemed to find what he was looking for. "Here."

Malone saw a smooth cut at the edge nearest the binding, where a page had been surgically removed.

"On this missing folio was the mark of the Admiral and a message from Columbus. When I first found the book I saw it, but was not afforded the opportunity to translate the page. The writing is in Old Castilian, a language that only a few today can adequately understand. Unfortunately, Herr Brown knew all that. I wondered why he returned the book. Now I know. He removed the most important page, pocketed the reward money from the owner, then wanted to sell the page back to me."

"But you don't buy from people who steal from you."

"Sends the wrong message. Don't you agree?"

Malone gestured at Rócha. "So your lapdog killed Scott."

"As he will Yann Dubois if you do not bring me that page."

"What if I don't have it?"

"I am betting you do. I suspected that Brown was not working alone. Your appearance here seems to confirm that."

"If that is true, why would I buy the book?"

"I don't know. But I am sure that you and Herr Brown are connected. Bring me that page."

Interesting, this man who thought himself so careful made mistakes, too. But things were happening too fast for the right prep work. He was improvising, snatching Dubois the fastest way to generate a reaction.

"Tomorrow, Herr Malone. Bring me the page and Dubois will be unharmed. I have no argument with him. But, if not, then he will never be seen again."

He thought of Elise and the two children. No way he could allow that to happen, so he asked, "Where and when?"

"I assume you want a public place. One with limited access. Preferably one way in and out."

"I see you've done this before."

Simon smiled. "More of that delightful southern America wit."

"It's a gift."

Simon pointed south. "The Citadelle Laferrière."

He knew the spot, had seen it from the air earlier before his flight landed. The fortress sat atop a mountain, built by Henri Christophe two hundred years ago.

"Ten ^{AM}," Simon said. "That should give you plenty of time."

No point arguing. He had no choice.

"*Bitte*, Herr Malone," Simon said.

The two men started to walk off.

"Oh," Simon said. "I nearly forgot."

Something was tossed his way, which he caught.

Keys.

"To Herr Dubois' vehicle. I assume you will need it to make your way around. He, of course, will not be using it."

Simon and Rócha left.

Now he had a big problem.

* * *

Malone stepped from the car. His watch read 8:30 pm. He'd managed to find Yann Dubois' house, recalling the route from earlier. The door to the shanty opened and Elise appeared, surely expecting her husband.

Instead all she saw was the stranger who'd shared their dinner.

He stepped to the lighted doorway.

She spotted the concern on his face.

Her eyes watered, but no tears came. "Yann is in trouble?"

He nodded. "The same men who killed Scotty have him."

"And what do you plan to do about it?"

Interesting that she made no mention of police or anyone in authority. Only what *he* planned to do. He assumed people here had long ago abandoned any trust in government.

"I'll get him back."

"How can you promise such a thing?"

He couldn't, but she did not need to hear that.

"You are the real secret agent, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"Scotty was a joyful man. Much like a child. He showed the children many tricks, winning their favor. But he was not what he wanted us to believe."

"And you said nothing?"

"Why? He was harmless. In him, I sensed only opportunism. In you, I see resolve. You may actually be able to get my Yann back."

This was an intuitive woman.

"I need to stay here tonight."

She sensed his reason, and he saw the realization in her eyes. "Will they come here? After us?"

Matt Schwartz's gun was nestled beneath his shirt.

"I doubt it. But to be sure, I'd like to stay."

* * *

Malone stared up at the Citadelle Laferrière.

The night had passed uneventfully and he'd managed a few hours of light rest, remaining alert. He'd driven Dubois' car fifteen miles south of town, into the mountains, to Bonnet de l'Évêque—the Bishop's Miter—which rose 3,000 feet into a clear morning sky. A twisting road led to a parking lot just below the impressive fortress.

A cobblestoned track wound from the lot upward and could be either walked or ridden on horseback. He was thirty minutes early for the 10:00 rendezvous. No need to come any sooner, since he assumed that was precisely what Simon had done. Instead, he was counting on something else as his failsafe.

He stopped and studied a placard that told him about the locale, long designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Walls 130 feet high, 20 feet thick. *Built to outlast the ages*. No foundation, instead the gray grim stones rested only on rock, the heights held together by a mortar of limestone, molasses, and cow's blood. Two and a half acres of enclosed space, once home to several thousand soldiers and enough food and water to sustain five thousand people for a year. Henri Christophe intended the fortress to be his last redoubt. If the French returned and invaded the north coast, he and his people

would have burned Cap-Haïtien and the surrounding land, then retreated to the mountains and used the few passes as choke points, surviving at any cost, the idea to never again be slaves. Of course the French never returned, but the *citadelle* became a symbol of their will to fight for freedom, and it remained Haiti's most revered monument. Unfortunately, that pride was marred by the fact that Christophe used 20,000 slave laborers to build it, many of whom died in the process.

He began his walk upward to the entrance.

He knew what had happened here in March 1811.

Faced with a revolt, come to extinguish Haiti's first monarchy, Christophe, instead of fighting, killed himself inside the Sans-Souci Palace with a silver bullet fired into his heart. His wife and children dragged the body up the mountain to the *citadelle*, where it was flung into a vat of quicklime, depriving the mob of its prize.

His climb lasted about twenty minutes.

Sheer cliffs protected on three sides, the only entrance subject to unimpeded cannon fire from above. He stepped through the gates, still on their hinges, and wondered if the legend that Christophe, to test the mettle of his men, marched a company over the tower's parapet was true.

And the other tale.

How the king had buried gold somewhere within the walls.

The ramps and steps loomed dim and damp. He exited the cool interior into a sunny courtyard. Most of the building roofs were gone, save a few that were red-tiled. Amazing that a man who could not read or write, who'd worked as a dishwasher and waiter, could create something so impressive.

Settled in slavery, liberated in agony.

That was Haiti.

The unimpeded view for miles was of green slopes and rolling mountains. Terraces defined the fortress, creating several levels from which an attack could be repelled. Cannon were everywhere, some still on their carriages, most strewn about. Nearly four hundred of them, that was what the placard below had said. And a million cannonballs, stacked in pyramids, still awaited use. He spotted the mound in the center—solidified lime—where Christophe's body had been dumped, and where it remained.

Then saw Simon.

To the right of the mound.

Maybe another fifty people milled about, admiring the grandeur left to crumble. Schwartz's gun rested in Malone's back pocket, shielded by his shirttail. The morning was warm and humid, his brow damp with sweat. He'd never been much of a gambler for money, not liking the house odds, but it seemed every day as a Magellan Billet agent was a gamble. Of late, he'd found himself tiring of the risks. Like now. Yann Dubois' life depended on the bluff he was about to make, and the ante he hoped would come.

He stepped over to Simon and said, "I have it."

"Show me."

"Get real. If you want it, show me Dubois."

A tour group appeared from within one of the buildings, the guide spouting something in English about how people said Henri Christophe would magically fly from the Sans-Souci Palace to the *citadelle* and his spirit was still seen roaming at night, looking for his soldiers. About ten formed the group, and they ambled closer to the lime pit. Simon seemed to resent the intrusion and drifted away. He followed, keeping an eye on what surrounded him.

"Herr Malone," Simon said. "Do not take me for a fool. Herr Brown made that mistake. I would

hope you learned from his error.”

“I have the page and, you’re right, the mark of the Admiral is there. I recognized it last night when you drew it. I don’t give a damn about that. I just want Dubois and the \$600,000 in the Cayman Islands.”

Simon’s face lit with recognition. “Did Herr Brown cheat you?”

One of the advantages of an eidetic memory was the ability to recall exact details. Malone had been born with the gift, which had come in handy when he was a lawyer—and came in even handier in his current line of work.

“Account number 569328-78-9432. Bank of the Cayman Islands. I have a definite interest in that money.”

He’d thought about it last night and concluded that using what he’d learned from Simon’s own background check might work.

And it apparently had.

“I am aware of those funds,” Simon said, “and I have no claim to them. They are yours. I just want that missing page.”

“Then you’re wasting time.”

Simon seemed to know what was expected of him and pointed.

Malone turned to see Dubois standing a hundred feet away, across the courtyard, the man called Rócha beside him. Though he saw no gun, he knew Rócha was armed.

Okay, nearly all of the players were here.

He started toward Dubois.

“First, the page,” Simon called out.

He turned back. “After I make sure he’s okay.”

He held his ground, making clear that the point was non-negotiable. Simon hesitated, then nodded his consent.

He turned and kept walking.

If he’d read this right, Zachariah Simon was not a man prone to public displays. That was why he had Rócha. Not that Simon wasn’t a danger—it was only that the most direct threat lay in front of him, not behind.

His hand slipped into his back pocket and found the gun.

He leveled the weapon and fired at Rócha.

But his target had leaped to the left.

Dubois fled to the right. Hopefully, he’d get the hell out of here.

Malone huddled behind the limestone mound, taking refuge with Henri Christophe.

He turned back.

Simon had not moved.

People were scattering.

A few screaming.

A gunshot cracked and a bullet ricocheted off the stone a foot away from his face.

Rócha retaliating.

He’d seen no guards when he entered, but he assumed a place like this had to employ security. Gunshots and mayhem would draw attention.

So he needed to act fast.

He decided to draw Simon in. The Austrian continued to stand his ground, confident that Malone would not shoot him and that Rócha had the situation under control.

He whirled the gun, but before he could fire the earth around Simon erupted in explosive puffs. Three. Four. Five. Which finally caused a reaction as Simon realized someone other than Malone had him in their sights.

The shots came without a retort, which meant a sound-suppressed weapon was on the ramparts above them.

Simon fled to the safety of a nearby building.

Malone smiled.

The Israelis.

Finally.

He'd assumed they were watching. No contact had come last night, but that had not meant they were gone. He knew they would not risk exposure, using him to achieve whatever they were after. Since they were here he assumed they knew Simon possessed the book. But they would also know that a page was missing, and they would have to wonder.

Did the Americans have it?

His gaze raked the deserted courtyard, but he saw neither Rócha nor Simon. Above him all was quiet, too. He needed to leave. But where was Dubois?

He dropped the arm with the gun to his side and shielded the weapon with his thigh as he hustled out of the sunlight, back into the fortress. He heard people chattering in different languages, their voices raised and excited, all of them surely headed for the exit.

He made his way there and saw people racing down the cobbled path toward the parking lot. A quick glance behind and he saw no one else. So he followed, keeping a watch on his back until he rounded the first bend. High above the gate, on the parapet, he caught sight of Matt Schwartz.

A wave from the Israeli said, *You're welcome*.

He returned the gesture.

He knew the drill. The Israelis had flushed Simon out, but they would not risk anything more. Instead, they'd watch from their perch as everyone left. The lack of security or any law enforcement told him something else—the Haitian government had cooperated.

Diplomacy.

Ain't it grand?

He found the parking lot and still saw nothing of Simon or Rócha. He had to go back and find Dubois. But in the distance, still on the parapet high above the *citadelle*, Schwartz was gesturing for him to leave.

Why?

Then it occurred to him.

He walked over, opened the driver's door, and slipped behind the wheel of the car.

Dubois' face appeared in the rearview mirror, up from his hiding place.

"I see my car and wait for you."

"You okay?"

His friend nodded. "I good. Get going."

He agreed.

* * *

Malone drove straight to where Elise Dubois taught school to let her know everything was okay. She was glad to see her husband unharmed and thanked Malone with a hug and kiss.

"I knew you would do it."

He appreciated her confidence, since he hadn't been so sure. The problem now was the Israelis, as they would want payback. But just as with Simon, he had no missing page to offer them. He decided to leave Haiti and report back to Pam, Ginger, and Stephanie Nelle. At least he knew how and why Scott had died. He also had the account number for the \$600,000 on deposit in the Cayman Islands, which the Magellan Billet could easily obtain. Ginger deserved that money, and he'd make sure she received it.

They left the school and stopped by the Hotel Creole, where Malone learned that Simon had checked out earlier. Most likely, the Austrian was now headed to the airport, unsure of what had happened at the *citadelle* but glad to be away. He grabbed his bag from the room on the third floor and left, riding with Dubois to the docks and his boat. Along the way, he called and secured a seat on a flight out of Cap-Haïtien to Miami that left in six hours. From there he'd shuttle home to Atlanta.

"Sorry about getting you into all that danger," he told Dubois.

"I get myself into it. I want to help you."

"Fortunately, it's all over, and I appreciate what you did."

He sat on the aft deck, beneath a canvas canopy, out of the sun. Most of the other boats were gone, out earning a day's wage. He hadn't really noticed much about the boat on the first trip, except for its struggling engine.

"You need a mechanic," he said to Dubois.

"That be me. It makes a lot of noise and smoke, but works. Always has. Scotty help with that. He give me money for parts."

And he would, too, when Dubois dropped him at the airport.

The least he could do.

"He buy me GPS."

"Scott did?"

Dubois nodded. "He say we need it. He use it some, then leave it with me."

He stepped into the forward cabin. Above the wheel, mounted to the old timbers, was a new GPS, wires snaking a path to a power source.

He wanted to know. "What did Scott do with it?"

"That's how he found *Santa María*."

"But you don't know if that wreck is Columbus' flagship."

And nobody ever would. Most likely, Scott intended to use his find to work another con on somebody.

"He mark the site with GPS numbers. That's how I know where it is. He tell me that was secret-agent stuff. But I never believe he is an agent. Just a man who treat me good."

His mind swirled. Everything fit into place, except one thing. The paper Scott sent to Ginger. That had been bothering him for the past two days. Why do it? And why would Simon think it important enough to fly to Atlanta for a look?

Then it hit him.

How simple.

So simple that it had almost eluded him.

He stepped to the aft deck and found the brown envelope in his bag. He removed the page with the Admiral's mark written across its face and brought it back inside the forward cabin. He switched on the overhead bulb and held the sheet close as the filament heated.

Slowly, brown numbers materialized.

Dubois watched carefully and realized. "He use lemon juice."

Malone smiled. “That he did. Actually, not a bad way to send a message, if you don’t know it’s there.”

“I know those,” Dubois said. “They be for the wreck site.”

“Fire up the engine. I want to go back down.”

* * *

Malone kicked his fins and swam toward the massive hulk of rock with the crack and crevice. He’d come down alone, Dubois staying up top with Schwartz’s gun, keeping a lookout. No other boats had been around, and he wanted to keep it that way. The current today was weaker, but the same shark remained on patrol fifty yards away. The GPS numbers Scott had secretly sent to Ginger had led them straight back here.

He approached the opening and eased himself inside.

He examined the timbers in the sand and could see that they’d been hewn, man-made, now petrified by centuries in the water. A few other artifacts lay scattered. What looked like a cup, some nails, belt buckles. This was clearly a shipwreck. Whether it belonged to Christopher Columbus remained to be seen.

He fanned the sand and stirred up the bottom, revealing what lay a few inches beneath. The storm rose, then settled quickly, the warm water retaining its crystal clarity. A niche caught his eye, but he knew better than to stick his hand there. Some eel might decide a few fingers would make a great lunch.

Another niche to his right seemed more inviting.

Shallow, no more than a foot or so deep, the entire interior visible.

He fanned its sand.

And saw something.

Glass.

A little more stirring revealed more glass.

He reached down and freed the object.

A Coke bottle, the top stuffed with a cork and sealed with wax. Inside was a rolled piece of dirt-brown paper, similar in size and color to the other pages of the book he’d bought at the auction. A wax-sealed plastic bag provided an additional measure of protection.

He’d found the hiding place.

Risky as hell to leave it underwater, but Scott had never been noted for caution.

* * *

Malone stepped from the car at Cap-Haïtien’s main airport terminal. Dubois had driven him from the docks, and they’d made it here in plenty of time for his flight.

He shook his friend’s hand and thanked him again.

“No problem, mon. I glad you come. We solve everything.”

Not quite everything, but enough.

He handed Dubois \$500. “Fix that engine, okay?”

“Ah, mon. This be too much. Way too much.”

“It’s all I have or I’d give you more.”

They said their goodbyes and he entered the terminal, checking in for his flight.

Matt Schwartz waited for him just before the security checkpoint.

"I didn't think you'd let me leave without saying goodbye," he told the Israeli.

"Did you find the page?"

He nodded.

"I thought you might. We wondered why you went back out on the boat."

"What happened to Simon?"

"Went straight to the airport and is long gone."

"Probably thinking that I had help in the *citadelle*."

"That was the idea. Can I have the page?"

"I assume you're not going to let me leave with it?"

"Payment for the favor I did you with Dubois."

He reached into his back pocket and removed the curled page, still in its plastic bag. He'd broken the bottle to free it. The sheet was filled with nineteen lines of writing in faded black ink, along with the mark of the Admiral, just as Simon had described.

"Can we at least be provided with a copy?" he asked.

"I don't suppose you would take my word that none of this is important to anything related to America."

"It's not my nature."

"Then that copy you made on the way here should alleviate all of your government's fears."

He assumed Schwartz knew they'd stopped at the hotel on the way to the airport.

He handed the page over and said, "Any idea what this is? I speak several languages, but I can't read it. Simon said it was Old Castilian."

The Israeli shrugged. "Our people will translate it, as I'm sure will yours."

"Simon killed a man for it."

"I know. Which makes us all wonder. But people higher up than me will deal with this now."

He understood. "Being at the bottom of the pile does come with disadvantages."

Schwartz smiled. "I like you, Malone. Maybe we'll see each other again."

"Maybe so."

The Israeli gestured with the bag. "Something tells me we've not seen, or heard, the last of Zachariah Simon."

He agreed.

"All we can hope," Schwartz said, "is that next time he's someone else's problem."

"You got that right."

And he headed for home.

About the Author

Steve Berry is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Columbus Affair*, *The Jefferson Key*, *The Emperor's Tomb*, *The Paris Vendetta*, *The Charlemagne Pursuit*, *The Venetian Betrayal*, *The Alexandria Link*, *The Templar Legacy*, *The Third Secret*, *The Romanov Prophecy*, *The Amber Room*, and the short stories "The Balkan Escape" and "The Devil's Gold." His books have been translated into forty languages and sold in fifty-one countries. He lives in the historic city of St. Augustine, Florida. He and his wife, Elizabeth, have founded History Matters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving our heritage. To learn more about Steve Berry and the foundation, visit www.steveberry.org.

Read on for an excerpt from

THE COLUMBUS AFFAIR

by

STEVE BERRY

Published by Ballantine Books



TOM SAGAN GRIPPED THE GUN. HE'D THOUGHT about this moment for the past year, debating the pros and cons, finally deciding that one pro out-weighed all cons.

He simply did not want to live any longer.

He'd once been an investigative reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, knocking down a high six-figure salary, his byline generating one front-page, above-the-fold story after another. He'd worked all over the world—Sarajevo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Beijing, Belgrade, Moscow. His confidential files had been filled with sources who'd willingly fed him leads, knowing that he'd protect them at all costs. He'd once proved that when he spent eleven days in a D.C. jail for refusing to reveal his source on a story about a corrupt Pennsylvania congressman.

The congressman went to prison.

Sagan received his third Pulitzer nomination.

There were twenty-one awarded categories. One was for distinguished investigative reporting by an individual or team, reported as a single newspaper article or a series. Winners received a certificate, \$10,000, and the ability to add three precious words—Pulitzer Prize winner—to their name.

He won his.

But they took it back.

Which seemed the story of his life.

Everything had been taken back.

His career, his reputation, his credibility, even his self-respect. In the end he came to see himself as a failure in each of his roles—reporter, husband, father, son. A few weeks ago he'd charted that spiral on a pad, identifying that it all started when he was twenty-five, fresh out of the University of Florida, top third in his class, with a journalism degree.

And his father disowned him.

Abiram Sagan had been unrelenting. *"We all make choices. Good. Bad. Indifferent. You're a grown man and made yours. Now I have to make mine."*

And that he had.

On that same pad he'd jotted down the highs and lows that came after. His rise from a news assistant to staff reporter to senior international correspondent. The awards. Accolades. The respect from his peers. How had one observer described his style? *Wideranging and prescient reporting conducted at great personal risk.*

Then, his divorce.

The estrangement from his only child. Poor investment decisions. Even poorer life decisions.

Finally, his firing.

Eight years ago.

And since then—nothing.

Most of his friends had abandoned him, but that was as much his fault as theirs. As his depression deepened, he'd withdrawn into himself. Amazingly, he hadn't turned to alcohol or drugs, but neither had ever appealed to him. Self-pity was his intoxicant.

He stared around at the house's interior. He'd decided to die here, in his parents' home. Fitting, in some morbid way. Thick layers of dust and a musty smell evidenced the three years the rooms had sat empty. He'd kept the utilities on, paid the meager taxes, and had the lawn tended just enough so the neighbors wouldn't complain. Earlier, he'd noticed that the sprawling mulberry tree out front needed trimming and the picket fence painting. But he'd long ignored both chores, as he had the entire interior of the house, keeping it exactly as he'd found it, visiting only a few times.

He hated it here.

Too many ghosts.

He walked the rooms, conjuring a few childhood memories. In the kitchen he could still see jars of his mother's fruit and jam that once lined the windowsill. He should write a note, explain himself, blame somebody or something. But to whom? And for what? Nobody would believe him if he told them the truth.

And would anyone care when he was gone?

Certainly not his daughter. He'd not spoken to her in two years. His literary agent? Maybe. She'd made a lot of money off him. Ghostwriting novels paid bigtime. What had one critic said at the time of his downfall? *Sagan seems to have a promising career ahead of him writing fiction.*

Asshole.

But he'd actually taken the advice.

He wondered—how does one explain taking his own life? It's, by definition, an irrational act, which, by definition, defies rational explanation. Hopefully, somebody would bury him. He had plenty of money in the bank, more than enough for a respectable funeral.

What would it be like to be dead?

Are you aware? Can you hear? See? Smell? Or is it simply an eternal blackness? No thoughts. No feeling. Nothing at all.

He walked back toward the front of the house.

Outside was a glorious March day, the noontime sun bright. He stopped in the open archway and stared at the parlor. That was what his mother had always called the room. Here was where his parents had gathered on Shabbat. Where Abiram read from the Torah. The place where Yom Kippur and Holy Days had been celebrated. He stared at the pewter menorah on the far table and recalled it burning many times. His parents had been devout Jews. After his bar mitzvah he, too, had first read from the Torah, standing before the room's twelve-paned windows, framed by damask curtains his mother had taken months to sew. She'd been talented with her hands. What a lovely woman. He missed her. She died six years before Abiram, who'd now been gone for three.

Time to end the Sagan clan.

There were no more.

He'd been an only child.

He studied the gun, a pistol bought a few months before at an Orlando gun show. He sat on the sofa. Clouds of dust rose then settled. He recalled Abiram's lecture about the birds and the bees as he'd sat in the same spot. He'd been what—twelve? Thirty-three years ago, though somehow it seemed like last week. As usual, the explanations about sex had been short, brutish, and efficient.

"Do you understand?" Abiram asked him. "It's important that you do."

"I don't like girls."

“You will. So don’t forget what I said.”

Women. Another failure. He’d had precious few relationships as a young man, marrying the first girl who’d shown serious interest in him. There’d been a few since the divorce, and none past the downfall. Michele had taken a toll on him, in more ways than just financially.

“Maybe I’ll get to see her soon, too,” he muttered.

His ex-wife had died two years ago in a car crash.

Her funeral marked the last time he and his daughter had spoken, her rebuke still loud and clear.

Get out. She would not want you here.

And he’d left.

He stared again at the gun, his finger on the trigger. He steeled himself, grabbed a breath, and then nestled the barrel to his temple. He was left-handed, like nearly every Sagan. His uncle, a former professional baseball player, told him as a child that if he could learn to hurl a curveball he’d make a fortune in the major leagues. Left-handers were rare. But he’d failed at sports, too.

He felt the metal on his skin. Hard. Unbending.

Like Abiram.

And life.

He closed his eyes and tightened his finger on the trigger, imagining how his obituary would start.
Tuesday, March 5th, former investigative journalist Tom Sagan took his own life at his parents’ home in Mount Dora, Florida.

A little more pressure on the trigger and—

Rap. Rap. Rap.

He opened his eyes.

A man stood outside the front window, close enough to the panes for Tom to see the face—older than himself, clean-cut, distinguished—and the right hand.

Which held a photograph pressed to the glass.

He focused on the image of a young woman, bound and gagged, lying down, arms and feet extended as if tied.

He knew the face.

His daughter.

Alle.