AN HENRI POINCARÉ MYSTERY

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THE TENTH WITNESS

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I still believe in man in spite of man.

—Elie Wiesel, *Open Heart*

PART I

one

Every Christmas, for thirty years, my friend and former business partner sends me a basket of pears. With each delivery comes a note and the same unspoken question, posed in a teasing, left-leaning script: "Say the word, Henri. Your desk is waiting. Best, A. C."

I'm flattered to think Alec would have me back after all this time. For most of my career I could have used the money, and I could have done without the long stretches away from home and the violence and anxiety that attend police work. But I never was much of a businessman. During those first years, I turned down jobs that offended me. I took on clients who could barely make their rent, let alone pay us. Alec and I argued. In the end I'm convinced our venture would have collapsed due to what he rightly called my aggressive naïveté.

Once he suggested I quit business to join the priesthood. I might have, had I believed in God at the time. Now that I do, I'm too old—which is fortunate because these days I know how damaged we are and think it deluded, even dangerous, to hold to my former Sunday school view of the world. I would have made a bad priest, too.

Still, it worked out, my leaving Poincaré & Chin Consulting Engineers for Interpol. I got out in time to keep both a dear friend and the illusion that Alec and I could have prospered together. Better still, each December I sit with Claire at our farmer's table to enjoy good fruit out of season. It's a miracle of the modern age, eating an Anjou pear in December. I take one bite and there I go: off to an orchard in the shadow of the Andes, where these little jewels are grown.

It's Christmas Eve and my grandsons are asleep, finally. Claire dozes by the fire. Moments ago, she stirred and said, "Love, come to bed." We kissed and I laid a quilt across her lap. She drifted off again.

Outside, a thin crust of snow blankets the vineyards. With Alec's teasing note before me, I'll consider once more his question in good faith. Which is to say, I'll review the events of that summer and ask: Did I choose well? Have I chosen well since? I must answer in all honesty. And if the answer is *no*, I will write my friend and ask him to dust off my chair.

He would do it, too.

I begin, therefore, as I have for thirty years: with the body of a man floating face down in the slack water of Terschelling Island. I can see him fighting the flood tide that runs off the North Sea. That tide is a relentless, galloping thing. The man knows it's coming and he can't outrun it. The water rises to his waist, his neck, his lips. Surely, he accepts his death. Why, then, the struggle? He swims until he can't, then sinks. His eyes bulge, the neck muscles strain, and here it comes: his first submerged breath. The brine freezes his larynx. His trachea collapses to protect his lungs. He's alive, yet. Starved for oxygen, his brain forces a second breath. More, but weaker, laryngospasms. Water leaks into his lungs. By the fifth cycle it's over.

And the world is well rid of him.

two

In June 1977, Lloyd's of London, the insurer, issued a request for proposals to design and operate a floating dive platform in the North Sea. Its aim: to recover lost treasure from HMS *Lutine*, the storied frigate that sank in a gale off the Dutch coast with a thousand bars of gold. Lloyd's took ownership of the wreck when it paid on the insurance claim in 1799. A hundred eighty years later, new technologies like side scan sonar gave the directors confidence that this salvage would fare better than earlier ones. Curiously, though the ship sank in only six meters of water, not more than a tenth of the gold, valued in 1977 at £10,750,000, had been recovered.

Longing to get out from behind our desks, Alec and I underbid the job and won the contract. We were young but respected, two newly minted engineers ecstatic to find work out of doors, on a treasure hunt no less.

We ended up retrofitting an old coal barge in Rotterdam and, in late May 1978, hauled it into position over the *Lutine* where it would float for the summer season. The workload had been crushing. On the day before the salvage began, our first real day off in months, I tried shaking Alec loose from his desk to go hiking with me onto the bed of the Wadden Sea.

The Wadden sits between the Dutch mainland and several barrier islands, one of which is Terschelling, nearest our platform. Twice a day at low tide, the Wadden empties into the North Sea and leaves behind a vast muddy flat, indeed the largest tidal flat in the world. Crossing the seabed from the mainland to any of the islands is something of a Dutch national sport. Thousands undertake the

trek each summer, often families ranging from grandpa to grandchild, and I wanted to join them.

"At low tide there's no danger," I told Alec, "not if you go with one of the registered guides. They use walkie-talkies, ship-to-shore radios. They've even got a helicopter on call. It's absolutely safe."

He crossed his arms.

"It's a walk," I continued. "Mud, maybe some knee-high water here and there. And then, after five or six hours, we'll reach Terschelling." I handed him a brochure with photos of dunes and wide, white beaches. I described the starter hike I'd taken the day before, but still he showed no interest.

"It will be fun," I said. "Do you remember what fun is?"

We were standing in our temporary office, a fourth-floor attic in Harlingen on the Dutch mainland. The town felt more like a sixteenth-century fishing village than a modern shipping hub. There were masts in the harbor, steep tiled roofs, and working windmills.

"*Fun*," said Chin, "is a three-letter word for *lazy*."

Our lone window was crusty as a cataract, and I could just make out a group gathered along the wharf and our guide. She was tall, holding a pole longer than a walking stick, shorter than a fishing rod, the better to save "the weak and lame" as she'd put it the day before on my starter hike. That had gone well enough to invite her for lunch and a stroll through town; and that had gone well enough for me to sign up for a second, more strenuous hike.

Alec walked to the door and opened it. "We're expected on the platform at 5:45. That's A.M."

I grinned. "Here's my last, best offer: I'll buy you one of those inflatable tubes—the ones that go around your waist, with a duck on the front. You'll hit the flats looking like a Viking ship."

"Five forty-five, Henri. The launch leaves the dock a half-hour before."

"Learn to swim," I said.

three

By the time I climbed from the mud flats onto dry land, I looked and felt like a creature emerging from the primordial ooze. Exhausted, mud-spattered and, after a misstep in a tidal channel, half drowned, I sat heavily into a chair in a café by Terschelling harbor.

Liesel Kraus, my guide, approached from behind and clapped me on the shoulder. "I rescued you. On the Wadden Sea, that means you buy the beer." Without waiting for an invitation, she sat opposite me, called the waitress by name, and held up two fingers. "So," she said. "You're alive. Congratulations."

I made a show of checking my head to see if it was still attached.

"I warned you. It's not an easy trek."

"You said it would be a *challenge*, not a death march."

I was wet and cold, trending toward miserable. My plan was to pay for the beer, drink quickly, and find a shower and a bed where I could be left alone to sleep or die, whichever came first.

Liesel had earned that beer by shepherding a dozen tourists through to Terschelling with the efficiency of a border collie. Out on the flats she was all business. If she talked with one hiker, she'd keep an eye on the others. Every few minutes, she'd scan the horizon or check her maps and compass. She maintained regular radio contact with a lighthouse keeper. She was focused, skilled, and smart. She was also long-limbed with auburn hair.

I found myself staring.

I paid with a sopping ten guilder note, making a little show of squeezing water from it. Liesel and the waitress laughed, and I offered a toast: "To my Moses of the mud flats. Cheers!" This

time when she laughed, I saw a woman transformed. With no one to save any longer, a beer in hand, and a young man—me!—for company, she blossomed.

"If I'm Moses, then Terschelling is the Promised Land. I doubt it."

"Hold that thought," I said.

I rummaged through my pack for a camera, the one object I'd secured in a proper waterproof sack, and mumbled something about my children needing to know who saved me. I propped an elbow on the table and framed the shot. I was losing myself in the fine, bright weather and in my new companion.

"Children?"

"Future children."

We were all but strangers, Liesel Kraus and I, yet she settled her dark eyes on mine and searched the lens as if we'd long been intimate. Without the Minolta between us, I doubt we could have held the moment. A breeze lifted a strand of hair. It fluttered across her cheek. I waited, then clicked.

"Tell me," she said. "Yesterday, you mentioned you work on the *Lutine*. It's been lost forever, you know. The shoals out there form, disappear, form again. These are treacherous waters. How did you find it?"

Everyone loves a treasure hunt, but I had been working so long and hard on the *Lutine* platform that I'd steered our conversation in other directions. I didn't want to hear another word about the wreck. Yet I was eager enough to talk this time, for unless I was mistaken, she had taken an interest in me.

"We expect it's the *Lutine*," I said. I explained how the summer before, divers working for Lloyd's had found a ballast pile: rocks on the seabed laid out in a line at roughly the same latitude and longitude noted in the logs of previous salvage attempts. Liesel was right, these were difficult waters. Storms covered the wreck with sand in some years and uncovered it in others, which explained why the water's depth changed from one salvage to the next. Our divers were reasonably confident in naming the wreck, but not at all clear on how much sand we'd need to remove to get at her. We would know more when we started hauling up gold. Or not.

I had set the camera aside, but she continued watching me.

"Isn't the world strange? My brother Anselm and I grew up dreaming about the *Lutine*. It's one of the great stories of the island, you know. Papa brought us out here for summers when we were children, and we spent half our time digging up the beach, searching for treasure. There's a mass grave for the *Lutine*'s sailors on the island. And now you turn up, an honest-to-god treasure hunter. Anselm's going to love this."

As Liesel and I talked, the flood tide was creeping over the mud flats. In thirty minutes, the seabed would be covered. In two hours, the Wadden would be deep enough for ferries to haul passengers and provisions from the mainland. The café was a tiny place with a dozen tables and large terra cotta planters overflowing with geraniums and impatiens. By a spigot outside the kitchen, two Norwegians howled as they hosed caked mud off each other. At the table beside us, one of the trekkers, three beers gone, began to croak a folk tune.

"What do you do?" I asked. She avoided the topic the day before with as much determination as I had avoided the *Lutine*.

I waited. She offered nothing, and she must have realized I wouldn't be filling in any blanks to make it easy on her. Finally, she spoke. "I help my brother with a company our father started after the war. Our parents died when I was young. Anselm's fourteen years older. He raised me. When I completed school, I joined the family business."

It was her turn to wait and watch. I talked about work, how Alec was the more natural manager and how I traveled in search of new contracts—and in fact would be leaving for Hong Kong in a few days.

Out of the blue, she interrupted me. "Come to a party with me tonight."

I sat up.

"It's Anselm's birthday, and he's hosting . . . an event. Some people are coming. I bought him a sweater, like I usually do. But you're working on the *Lutine*! The two of you must meet, and I've been figuring a way. You'd make a much better present than a sweater."

The color rose in her cheeks when I asked if she wanted me to wear a bathing suit and jump from a cake.

"No, it's not like that," she said. "You'd be my date. I'm afraid Anselm invited one of his friends. I've met this one a few times in Vienna, and I don't much care for the man. But my brother's persistent. He's trying to marry me off to an über-industrialist. German, if possible. One after the next he brings them home. He says it's time. You'd be—"

"Your excuse!" I slapped the table, grinning. "Better still, your *French* excuse. I'll do my best to uphold the honor of my nation." I thought it would be great, good fun. "I accept!"

But that very instant my spirits sank as I recalled Alec's parting instructions: *five forty-five*. I couldn't not show for the first dive on the wreck. I told her, and never have I regretted two words—*I can't*—more. She looked disappointed, too, as if my company that evening might have meant something to her. "I can't," I added, "unless you can get me onto the dive platform at daybreak."

Liesel stood. "My brother or I will motor you over. You'll sleep at the house tonight. We're back in business, Henri! I'll introduce you as my French experiment." She smiled and held out a hand to close the deal.

It was a moment that has stood in sharp relief to the forgettable details of everyday life. I knew it even then. Her outstretched hand struck me like the blank signature line of a contract I hadn't thoroughly read. I was in the habit of being more careful than this. But there she was: smart, athletic, exotic (I'd never dated a German woman), taking a chance on me. And there I was, lightheaded from beer and, I admit, feeling the onset of an adolescent crush. My goal in setting out that morning had been to reverse the normal curve of my life, if only for a few hours, by acting more and thinking less. So I agreed and shook her hand. "These are my only clothes," I said.

She reached for her pack. "It's a fancier party than that, in any event. You can borrow one of my brother's tuxedoes. He's a bit taller, but I can hem the pants. Shall we go?"

Tuxedoes.

Two cars waited in the parking lot: one a rusted Citroën, an island junker, and the other a Mercedes roadster, top down with gleaming grillwork. I watched her approach the cars, betting which was hers.

I was wrong.

four

The convertible flew down the backbone of Terschelling headed east, past fields as green as any I had seen in Ireland. The wind roared. I counted windmills and farmhouses, but not sheep. There were too many to count, thousands dotting the pastures like woolly, fair weather clouds.

"So . . . what's the family business?" I yelled.

Again, hesitation.

"Steel."

Ten minutes earlier, as I helped Liesel stow our packs, she'd removed her guide's jacket with its many zippered compartments to reveal arms as long and pale as those of the marble nudes I pretended to study at the Louvre as a twelve-year-old. I tried not to stare.

I cut angles through the wind with my hands. I considered how the barbed wire framed the pastures as if they were paintings. I watched everything but Liesel because what I wanted most was to study the sweep of her neck to her bare shoulder and the hollow at her collarbone.

"You're shivering," she said. "I'll draw you a bath when we get home."

Draw me a bath? I added up what little I knew until I felt certain of my hunch and said, "Kraus Steel."

She did not deny it. Her auburn hair was flying.

"Do you know," I yelled over the noise, "that I used Kraus steel on the dive platform? I looked everywhere for marine-ready steel. You're *that* Kraus!"

She shrugged, then smiled.

Now I could look. What an excellent coincidence it was. Liesel explained that she ran the family foundation, and I guessed—correctly—that she gave away more money each year than I would make in several lifetimes. She talked about her work, then stopped and pulled the car off onto a modest rise, little more than a mound that brought us to all of twelve or fifteen meters above sea level. On an island as flat as Terschelling, that offered a sweeping view to the east.

I wondered why we stopped until, gaping, I looked beyond her. "No way!" I said.

It made perfect sense.

"My family's summer home."

In the distance rose an estate built on dunes rolling down to the North Sea, as strange in that setting as the Emerald City rising over a field of poppies. The main house formed a massive gull's wing, with a pair of two-story corridors angled east and west that met at a central, turreted tower: an arrowhead, essentially, fronted by a stone turret. I had seen this tower, an old lighthouse sitting atop a promontory formed by the letters K R A U S. It was the logo burned into every piece of steel I received while building the dive platform.

I counted seven fireplaces and, connected by a series of boardwalks to the main house, a dozen freestanding, single-story cottages cut into the dunes like satellites around a mother ship.

"*Löwenherz*," she said.

My German was passable: "Lionheart?"

She nodded. My eyes followed a long stone jetty to a dock, where I saw a boat that serviced three yachts moored offshore.

Liesel removed her sunglasses and turned toward me. "I want to tell you something and ask you something."

Before she began, she hit the hazard button with her fist and pointed. "This is what you're dealing with. I need to get it out in the open because I've been around too long not to know that my family's wealth screws things up. Half the men I meet see Löwenherz or my apartment in Munich and run because they'll never make as much money as I do. The other half think they've hit the

lottery, and I kick them out because I can't stand them getting fat on bonbons and calling the staff at two in the morning for sandwiches. And this is good German stock I'm talking about. Which sort of man are you?"

It's not a question often asked on a first date, and I didn't walk around with a ready answer in my pocket. What kind of man was I? My father was a civil servant, an analyst for French naval intelligence; my mother, a university biologist. Our family read books, attended the symphony, and camped most August holidays in the mountains or at the beach. I owned a twelve-year-old Peugeot with torn upholstery. I owned no summer home and never knew anyone who *named* their home, summer or otherwise.

I told her this and said, "Does poverty disqualify me?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Not unless money disqualifies me."

I worked out a math problem on the palm of my hand with an imaginary pencil. "I may be wrong," I said, looking up. "But if half the men in your life run and the other half get bounced, you're talking one hundred percent. This would mean there's no man in your life. Currently."

My hopes soared.

"My brother's getting nervous I'll die an old maid, if that's your question. Which explains Anselm's friend from Vienna. He comes from the family that owns Bayer Pharmaceuticals. You know, the aspirin people. Their summer home is larger than Löwenherz, and they call it a cottage." She rolled her eyes. "There's something else," she said.

I waited.

"My father ran a steel mill during the war. In the late forties, factory owners all over Germany were being tried and sent to prison for using slave labor. Not Otto, because he saved people's lives like that man Schindler. Ten witnesses came forward to vouch for him. They signed an affidavit, and he was never charged with war crimes. But he was a member of the Nazi party. Some people, some of the men I've met, can't get past that. You should know now."

I knew her father's story, more or less, the instant I learned she was a Kraus. A few years earlier, there had been a boycott in Paris of products from German companies that profited through business with the Third Reich. The action was meant to force the companies to examine their wartime dealings, publish accounts, apologize and—if warranted—compensate slave laborers. The biggest names were easy to recall: Krupp, Siemens, and the I.G. Farben subsidiaries, including Bayer, which splintered after Germany's defeat. Kraus Steel was mentioned, which I had reason to recall when ordering beams for the dive platform.

"Do you understand?" she said. "My father wore a swastika lapel pin."

How could I understand? My father fought in the French Resistance. I was born in 1950 and had no direct memories of the war, though I may as well have lived through it for all of the stories I'd heard about the occupation. So, no, I couldn't understand Liesel or the German view of things much beyond this: that as a child, when I asked my father what he did during those years, I got answers that made me proud. When Liesel asked, she got news of affidavits and proofs of innocence. She had inherited a heavy burden along with that mansion in the distance.

"I enjoy your company," she said. "You liked me well enough yesterday, when I was just a guide. And today, in town and on the flats. You liked me, didn't you?"

This was true.

"Well, then." She hitched a thumb over her shoulder, pointing to Löwenherz. "Perhaps you could like me, even with that. But I want to make sure you understand. Hitler shook my father's hand. My father held my hand as we walked on the beach or in the city. At the café, I shook your hand." She fell against the seat as if she'd pushed a boulder up a hill, fully expecting it to roll back down and crush her. "That's it. That's all my monsters. I'm thirty years old. I was born in 1948, three years after the war, and sometimes I feel like I'm running from *my* Nazi past. It isn't fair."

It wasn't.

"I'm no German industrialist," I said.

"Thank God."

"Your brother won't be pleased."

"Sure he will. You work on the *Lutine*. That trumps everything."

Yachts rode their moorings as the tide ran. Farther out to sea, sails leaned into the wind while under the platform, a lost ship waited to yield her secrets. The broad Terschelling sky held it all: Liesel's burden and Liesel's beauty, honest work for my young firm, and the memory of a war that would not let go.

"I do have a question," I said.

She turned, her eyes red.

"I know we're playacting tonight. But will I have to kiss you?"

The Tenth Witness is the second novel in the Henri Poincaré series, the award-winning ***All Cry Chaos*** preceding.

Recognition for *All Cry Chaos*

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