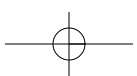
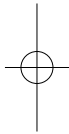
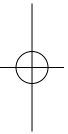
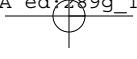


Read on for exclusive extra material, including the first chapter of Steve Berry's next thriller **THE PARIS VENDETTA**, which Hodder & Stoughton are publishing in 2010.



I

Copenhagen
Sunday, December 23, the present
12:40 a.m.

THE BULLET TORE INTO COTTON MALONE'S LEFT SHOULDER.

He fought to ignore the pain and focused on the plaza. People rushed in all directions. Horns blared. Tires squealed. Marines guarding the nearby American embassy reacted to the chaos, but were too far away to help. Bodies were strewn about. How many? Eight? Ten? No. More. A young man and woman lay at contorted angles on a nearby patch of oily asphalt, the man's eyes frozen open, alight with shock—the woman, facedown, gushing blood. Malone had spotted two gunmen and immediately shot them both, but never saw the third, who'd clipped him with a single round and was now trying to flee, using panicked bystanders for cover.

Dammit, the wound hurt. Fear struck his face like a wave of fire. His legs went limp as he fought to raise his right arm. The Beretta seemed to weigh tons, not ounces.

Pain jarred his senses. He sucked deep breaths of sulphur-laced air and finally forced his finger to work the trigger, which only squeaked, and did not fire.

Strange.

More squeaks could be heard as he tried to fire again.

Then the world dissolved to black.

★ ★ ★

Malone awoke, cleared the dream from his mind—one that had recurred many times over the past two years—and studied the bedside clock.

12:34 a.m.

He was lying atop the bed in his apartment, the nightstand's lamp still on from when he'd plopped down two hours ago.

Something had roused him. A sound. Part of the dream from Mexico City, yet not.

He heard it again.

Three squeaks in quick succession.

His building was 17th century, completely remodeled a few months ago. From the second to the third floor the new wooden risers now announced themselves in a precise order, like keys on a piano.

Which meant someone was there.

He reached beneath the bed and found the rucksack he always kept at the ready from his Magellan Billet days. Inside, his right hand gripped the Beretta, the same one from Mexico City, a round already chambered.

Another habit he was glad he hadn't shucked.

He crept from the bedroom.

His fourth-floor apartment was less than a thousand square feet. Besides the bedroom, there was a den, kitchen, bath, and several closets. Lights burned in the den, where a doorway opened to the stairway. His bookshop consumed the ground floor, and the second and third floors were used exclusively for storage and work space.

He found the doorway and hugged the inner jamb.

No sound had revealed his advance, as he'd kept his steps light and his shoes to the carpet runners. He still wore his clothes from yesterday. He'd worked late last night after a busy Saturday before Christmas. It was good to be

The Paris Vendetta

603

a bookseller again. That was supposedly his profession now. So why was he holding a gun in the middle of the night, every one of his senses telling him danger was nearby?

He risked a glance through the doorway. Stairs led to a landing, then angled downward. He'd switched off the lights earlier before climbing up for the night, and there were no three-way switches. He cursed himself for not including some during the remodeling. One thing that had been added was a metal banister lining the stair's outer edge.

He fled the apartment and slid down the slick brass rail to the next landing. No sense announcing his presence with more creaks from other wooden risers.

Carefully, he glanced down into the void.

Dark and quiet.

He slid to the next landing and worked his way around to where he could spy the third floor. Amber lights from Højbro Plads leaked in through the building's front windows and lit the space beyond the doorway with an orange halo. He kept his inventory there—books bought from people who, every day, lugged them in by the boxload. 'Buy for cents, sell for euros.' That was the used-book business. Do it enough and you made money. Even better, every once in a while a real treasure arrived inside one of the boxes. Those he kept on the second floor, in a locked room. So unless someone had forced that door, whoever was here had fled into the open third floor.

He slid down the last railing and assumed a position outside the third-floor doorway. The room beyond, maybe forty by twenty feet, was littered with boxes stacked several feet high.

'What do you want?' he asked, his back pressed to the outer wall.

He wondered if it had only been the dream that had

sparked his alert. Twelve years as a Justice Department agent had certainly stamped paranoia on his personality, and the last two weeks had taken a toll—one he hadn't bargained for but had accepted as the price of truth.

'Tell you what,' he said. 'I'm going back upstairs. Whoever you are, if you want something, come on up. If not, get the hell out of my shop.'

More silence.

He started for the stairs.

'I came to see you,' a male said from inside the storage room.

He stopped and noted the voice's nuances. Young. Late twenties, early thirties. American, with a trace of an accent. And calm. Just matter-of-fact.

'So you break into my shop?'

'I had to.'

The voice was close now, just on the other side of the doorway. He retreated from the wall and aimed the gun, waiting for the speaker to show himself.

A shadowy form appeared in the doorway.

Medium height, thin, wearing a waist-length coat. Short hair. Hands at his sides, both empty. The face blocked by the night.

He kept the gun aimed and said, 'I need a name.'

'Sam Collins.'

'What do you want?'

'Henrik Thorvaldsen is in trouble.'

'What else is new?'

'People are coming to kill him.'

'What people?'

'We have to get to Thorvaldsen.'

He kept the gun aimed, finger on the trigger. If Sam Collins so much as shuddered he'd cut him down. But he

The Paris Vendetta

605

had a feeling, the sort agents acquired through hard-fought experience, one that told him this young man was not lying.

‘What people?’ he asked again.

‘We need to go to him.’

He heard glass break from below.

‘Another thing.’ Sam Collins said. ‘Those people. They’re coming after me, too.’