

The Winner Stands Alone



First Chapter

3.17 a.m.

The Beretta Px4 compact pistol is slightly larger than a mobile phone, weighs around 700 grams and can fire ten shots. Small, light, invisible when carried in a pocket, its small calibre has one enormous advantage: instead of passing through the victim's body, the bullet hits bones and smashes everything in its path.

Obviously the chances of surviving a shot of that calibre are fairly high; there are thousands of cases in which no vital artery was severed and the victim had time to react and disarm his attacker. However, if the person firing the pistol is experienced enough, he can opt either for a quick death – by aiming at the point between the eyes or at the heart – or a slower one - by placing the barrel at a certain angle close to the ribs and squeezing the trigger. The person shot takes a while to realise that he has been mortally wounded and tries to fight back, run away or call for help. The great advantage of this is that the victim has time to see his killer's face, while his strength ebbs slowly away and he falls to the ground, with little external loss of blood, still not fully understanding why this is happening to him.

It is far from being the ideal weapon for experts. 'Nice and light – in a lady's handbag. No stopping power though,' someone in the British Secret Service tells James Bond in the first film in the series, meanwhile confiscating Bond's old pistol and handing him a new model. However, that advice applied only to professionals, and for what he now had in mind it was perfect.

He had bought the Beretta on the black market so that it would be impossible to trace. There are five bullets in the magazine, although he intends to use only one, the tip of which he has marked with an 'X', using a nail file. That way, when it's fired and hits something solid, it will break into four pieces.

He will only use the Beretta as a last resort. There are other ways of extinguishing a world, of destroying a universe, and she will probably understand the message as soon as the first victim is found. She will know that he did it in the name of love, and that he feels no resentment, but will take her back and ask no questions about her life during these past two years.

He hopes that six months of careful planning will produce results, but he will only know for sure tomorrow morning. His plan is to allow the Furies, those ancient figures from Greek mythology, to descend on their black wings to that blue-and-white landscape full of diamonds, botox and high-speed cars of no use to anyone because they carry only two passengers. With the little artifacts he has brought with him, all those dreams of power, success, fame and money could be punctured in an instant.

He could have gone up to his room because the scene he had been waiting to witness occurred at 11.11 p.m., although he would have been prepared to wait for even longer. The man and his beautiful companion arrived - both of them in full evening dress - for yet another of those gala events that take place each night after every important supper, and which attracted more people than any film première at the Festival.

Igor ignored the woman. He shielded his face behind a French newspaper (a Russian newspaper would have aroused suspicions) so that she wouldn't see him. An unnecessary precaution: like all women who feel themselves to be queen of the world, she never looked at anyone else. Such women are there in order to shine and always avoid looking at what other people are wearing because, even if their own clothes and accessories have cost them a fortune, the number of diamonds or a particularly exclusive outfit worn by someone else might make them feel depressed or bad-tempered or inferior.

Her elegant, silver-haired companion went over to the bar and ordered champagne, a necessary aperitif for a night that promised new contacts, good music and a fine view of the beach and the yachts moored in the harbour.

He noticed how extremely polite the man was, thanking the waitress when she brought their drinks and giving her a large tip.

The three of them knew each other. Igor felt a great wave of happiness as the adrenaline began to mingle with his blood. The following day he would make her fully aware of his presence there and, at some point, they would meet.

God alone knew what would come of that meeting. Igor, an orthodox Catholic, had made a promise and sworn an oath in a church in Moscow before the relics of St Mary Magdalene (which were in the Russian capital for a week, so that the faithful could worship them). He had queued for nearly five hours and, when he finally saw them, had felt sure that the whole thing was something dreamed up by the priests. He did not, however, want to run the risk of breaking his word, and so he had asked for her protection and help in achieving his goal without too much sacrifice. And he had promised, too, that when it was all over and he could at last return to his native land, he would commission a golden icon from a well-known artist who lived in a monastery in Novosibirsk.

At three in the morning, the bar of the Hotel Martinez smells of cigarettes and sweat. By then, Jimmy (who always wears different coloured shoes) has stopped playing the piano, and the waitress is exhausted, but the people who are still there refuse to leave. They want to stay in that lobby for at least another hour or even all night until something happens!

They're already four days into the Cannes Film Festival and still nothing has happened. Every guest at every table is interested in but one thing: meeting the people with Power. Pretty women are waiting for a producer to fall in love with them and give them a major role in their next movie. A few actors are talking amongst themselves, laughing and pretending that the whole business is a matter of complete indifference to them - but they always keep one eye on the door.

Someone is about to arrive. Someone must arrive. Young directors, full of ideas and with CVs listing the videos they made at university, and who have read everything ever written about photography and scriptwriting, are hoping for a stroke of luck; perhaps meeting someone just back from a party who is looking for an empty table where he'll order a coffee and light a cigarette, someone who's tired of going to the same old places all the time and feels ready for a new adventure.

How naïve!

If that did happen, the last thing such a person would want to hear about is some 'really fresh angle' on a hackneyed subject; but despair can deceive the desperate. The people with power who do occasionally enter merely glance around, then go up to their rooms. They're not worried. They have nothing to fear. The Superclass does not forgive betrayals and they know their limitations – whatever the legend may say, they didn't get where they are by trampling on others. On the other hand, if there is some important new discovery to be made – be it in the

world of cinema, music or fashion – it will emerge only after much research and not in some hotel bar.

The Superclass are now making love to the girl who managed to gatecrash the party and who is game for anything. They're taking off their make-up, studying the lines on their faces and thinking that it's time for more plastic surgery. They're looking at the on-line news to see if the announcement they made earlier that day has been picked up by the media. They're taking the inevitable sleeping pill and drinking the tea that promises easy weight-loss. They're ticking the boxes on the menu for their room service breakfast and hanging it on the door handle along with the sign saying 'Do not disturb'. The Superclass are closing their eyes and thinking: 'I hope I get to sleep quickly. I've got a meeting tomorrow at ten.'

Paulo Coelho

Welcome to Share with Friends - Free Texts for a Free Internet

[Read Previous Chapters of The Winner Stands Alone](#)

[Leave a Comment / Read all Comments for this Chapter](#)

Release dates : March : UK, Lebanon and Middle East

April : France, Greece, Holland, Russia and USA

May : Australia, Iran, Bulgaria and Poland

Pre-Order this book : [US](#) - [UK](#) - [France](#) - [Russia](#)

[Get a Wallpaper](#)