



# Date with a Sheesha

A Russell Quant Mystery

Anthony Bidulka

winner of the Lambda Literary Award

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The dictionary definition of *support* includes the following descriptions:

1. keep something or somebody stable; 2. bear weight; 3. sustain somebody; 4. give active help and encouragement; 5. be in favour of something; 6. be present and give encouragement; 7. give assistance or comfort; 8. corroborate story.

I would like to add one more:

9. be Herb



This book, like all in the Russell Quant series, is inspired in part by my own travels. Specifically, in this case, a wondrous elopement, sailing around the Arabian Peninsula. I would like to recognize the many fine people I have met over the years, during the course of scores of voyages. Aboard ships and planes, on the backs of camels and elephants, enjoying beaches and sidewalk cafés, investigating the nooks and crannies and wonders of the world. Be you old friend, new acquaintance, met on a cruise ship or safari Jeep, be you travel guide, service provider, maître d' or airline steward, or a charming dinner companion, I thank you. For good humour, skilled service, expert cooking, intelligent observations, generous hospitality, and camaraderie: it makes a difference.

My editors often warn me against sentences that become lists. But the group of people to whom I am grateful for their kindnesses and influences on me, my books, and my career, are exactly that: one big long list, the end of which I never seem to reach. How lucky is that? I'd like to say thank you to: Doug Fahlgren of the John G. Diefenbaker International Airport for his helpful responses to my indelicate questions about the transportation of caskets; Pat N for teaching me a thing or two about texting lingo; Pat S for her attempts at battering Stonewall; everyone involved with the Bruno Cherry Festival; the Bloody Words gang in Ottawa for including me in the Mystery Café Reading Series; Ian Goodwillie for having me as a guest on the second episode of *Saskatoon Book Report*; all the interviewers and book reviewers who gave their valuable time in paying attention to these books; to Shelley and the EY gang for another awesome pre-party—you rocked those leis! For unfailingly continuing to show up at launches and signings with unbridled enthusiasm, sending me cards, flowers, gifts, and for filling my inbox with wonderful, inspiring messages every single day, I pronounce the Russell Quant readers to be the best in the world! From Toronto to Ann Arbor, Indianapolis to San Francisco, big hugs to my colleagues with whom I was lucky enough to share a reading stage this year—including Nairne Holtz, Neil Plakcy, Greg Herren, Mark Richard Zubro, Ellen Hart, Lee Patton, and Anne Laughlin.

Special thanks to Alison K and Laura L for visiting Russell's Prairie province for the first time—I hope you enjoyed the pool party! Thanks to Vicki D, Barbara F, Robin H, and Mary Jane M—my “O Canada” compatriots. Thank you Joan Hansen for inviting me to Orange County to be part of the tenth annual Men of Mystery extravaganza—it was an honour. And to my fellow board members of Crime Writers of Canada and Camp fYrefly Saskatchewan, it was a pleasure working with you this year. To my agent, Robert Lecker, here's to a successful collaboration. Continued thanks to Catherine Lake, without whom this series would not be a reality. And to my family, friends, and BNE—you are truly the best.

This past year saw the continuation of a sad trend. Many of my favourite bookstores, both in Canada and the United States, closed their doors for the final time. Some of these were places where, even back in the early days of the first Russell Quant books, I was graciously welcomed. Where those doors are now locked, thank you to the owners and staff for your dedication to this industry and your love of books. You will be missed. Where doors remain open, thank you for being there.

Thank you to Insomniac Press for bringing this book to life. Gillian, you regularly amaze (and confound) me with the plethora of unusual bits of fact and fancy bopping around in your head. Who else would know about mehndi, Benedict Arnold, the history of religion, and a few choice English witticisms? Thanks for your unflagging dedication to this project.

And Herb.



# Chapter 1

You are invited to the death of Nayan Gupta.

Those were the chilling words inscribed on the cold, white, cardstock invitation.

It was the last Monday in January. Blue Monday.

According to some government-subsidized scientist somewhere, the final Monday of the first month of the year is the most depressing day of the year. I think it has something to do with Christmas bills coming in, broken New Year's resolutions, and lousy weather. I could almost buy into all that. It made a certain sense. But an invitation to a death? That was going a bit far. My Blue Monday had suddenly turned into Menacing Monday.

I studied the invitation carefully. Below the cryptic request was the Date: Today; Time: 11:00 a.m.; Location: Saskatoon airport. I turned the card over. There was nothing more, just blank whiteness, not unlike the part of my brain that was scrambling to answer the question: What the hell?

I checked my watch. It was nearing ten-thirty.

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The envelope had been part of the normal weekday delivery of mail into my in-basket. Our ever cheery receptionist, Lilly, had brought it in only moments ago. No return address. Of course not. That would be too simple.

So, I turned to technology. My fingers tapped at my desktop's keyboard. Google found 250,000 hits matching "Nayan Gupta," and not many fewer matching "Nayan Gupta Saskatoon." I opened Facebook and typed the name into the "search" box. Thirty-one possibles. I liked those odds much better. I sipped my tall, double, non-fat latte and scanned the resulting list. In the top third, I came to a Nayan who listed "Saskatoon" as one of his networks. The picture on the left-hand side showed a handsome fellow, with dark eyes, curly black hair worn on the longish side, and a friendly smile. The photo had obviously been cropped. It looked like Nayan had his arm around someone who'd been unceremoniously chopped from view.

I clicked on the photo and was taken to a new page. I growled under my breath when I was presented with the standard greeting telling me to add Nayan as a friend if I wanted to know more. I had no idea if Facebook Nayan Gupta was the same Nayan Gupta whose death I was invited to, but I was curious enough to find out.

Okay, okay. My lack of previously booked engagements (read: I was bored) may have had something to do with it too.

According to my Day-timer, other than an afternoon coffee date with my friend Anthony, the day was devoid of appointments with clients clamouring for my services. As was the next day and the day after that. Business was slow. My brow creased, and I let out an audible humph. Maybe that Blue Monday scientist was on to something after all.

I jumped up and headed for the door. There was just enough time to make it to the airport.

Saskatoon's John G. Diefenbaker Airport is named for the thirteenth Prime Minister of Canada, who grew up in our city. He had many nicknames during his political career, my favourite being

“The Dief” (which I always thought would have made for a much snappier airport moniker. I can hear the pilot’s smooth tones now: We will soon be on our approach for a landing at The Dief.)

I pulled into the parking lot just after eleven. Eighteen months ago, my beloved and mucho sexy Mazda RX-7 convertible was pushed off the roof of a downtown parking garage. I was meant to be in it. Luckily, I managed to escape, just in time to see her splat on the ground three storeys below me. If this isn’t proof that life as a prairie private detective is nothing short of exhilarating, I don’t know what is. That sad day suddenly left me without any readily available means of transportation. Other than my own two feet, that is, which made it rather difficult to pursue fleeing criminals in speeding vehicles. And late-night surveillance with nowhere to sit but the snow bank across the street from the bad guy’s house just wasn’t working for me.

For many years, I’d resisted what I knew deep down to be true. A two-seater convertible, no matter how much of a man-magnet, is simply not a practical vehicle given the life of a private eye. In my line of work, I spend more time in my automobile than most. Add to that two dogs, a mother who’d needed the Jaws of Life to get in and out of the Mazda, and a boyfriend who has a daughter and two dogs of his own. The car was Impractical with a capital “I.” So, today, I am the owner of another Mazda. A *Mazda5* to be exact.

It’s a...gulp...minivan.

I know I made the right decision. A minivan is what I need. It’s good for me. Like fibre is good for me. And cod-liver oil. And regular appointments with John the dentist.

As I closed the door of the “Babamobile” (as I’d come to think of her) I heard the reassuring thunk of the heavy door with child-proof locks, and felt a good deal older than my spritely thirty-nine years. But I didn’t have time to feel sorry for myself. It was damn cold out and my ears were already feeling the burn. (I never wear a toque—messes the hair). So I made a hasty dash for the terminal, and my appointment with death.

Once inside, I loosened my scarf and unzipped my quilted jacket. I passed by the signs for Air Canada, Delta, Pronto,

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Transwest, United, and WestJet. There didn't immediately appear to be any check-in counter for "Nayan Gupta's death," and as I toddled along, I realized I didn't really know what I was looking for. Would there be banners and streamers and watered-down punch? Music? Maybe some speeches?

I had to admit to myself that I didn't really expect to find anything here. I'd come all this way because I had nothing better to do. It got me out of the office. After all, how seriously would anyone in their right mind take an invitation to death? The whole thing was a hoax. Someone's idea of a joke on Blue Monday. Kind of like pulling an April Fool's Day joke on a friend. I just happened to have the time to play along. On the way back to the office I'd pick up something fun for lunch. Maybe sushi. Not a bad morning, really.

Although I'm not a Tim Hortons fan (and therefore—according to some—not really a Canadian), I stopped next to the kiosk and debated ordering a cup of java. Steaming hot liquid in any form is always a good thing in wintertime Saskatchewan. Just as I was about to succumb to the opportunity to rrrrrrrroll up the rim to win, a crowd of about twenty people diverted my attention. They were standing on the far side of the food court, near the big windows that look out onto the tarmac. Although it wasn't exactly a commotion, they were definitely getting worked up about something.

I sauntered over to get a better view of what it was they were staring at. From what I could tell, they seemed particularly transfixed by a nearby Air Canada jet. It looked like the aircraft had been there for a while. Arriving passengers had already disembarked. A gas truck was refuelling the plane. Cargo was being unloaded. Nothing seemed amiss or particularly interesting about the airplane. I didn't get it.

Then came a collective intake of breath, followed by a stifled cry. Followed by several more cries.

What was going on?

My eyes searched the plane and the surrounding area all over again: Big metal tube. Two wings. Sitting on a wide, flat, frigid-looking expanse of runway. All looked standard to me.

But there had to be something...something...

Then I saw it. A new piece of cargo had just been unloaded from the plane's belly. From its size and shape, and the reaction of the assembled group, now flattened against the window, I knew it could only be one thing. A coffin.

I turned to examine the people. They were hugging one another, murmuring in voices thick with grief, pressed as close to the pane of glass or each other as they could be. Others in the food court were watching the public tumult too. They couldn't resist. It was as if we'd somehow been transported to a stranger's funeral. We were compelled to watch the sadness, witness the misery. At the same time, we were glad to be removed, glad it wasn't someone we loved in that solitary, cold-looking box. Even so, the emotions were so big, so raw, so real, a wave of sorrow radiated out from the mourners, washing over the rest of us. We couldn't help but be covered by the tide of loss.

Many of the women, and some of the men, were sobbing. The others did what they could to comfort them. Small children looked up at their parents, eyes wide, faces strained, unsure whether to cry or run away and hide.

One of the older women, nearly overcome with her sadness, began to collapse. The crowd rallied around her. She was helped to a nearby chair, and slumped into it. I noticed a colourful swath of fabric pool around her feet. Under her coat she was wearing a sari. I studied the group more closely and saw that all of the mourners were of South Asian descent. Gupta. Nayan. South Asian. The dark handsome features of the young man on Facebook... South Asian? Could it be?

Suddenly I felt ashamed for having taken the whole thing so lightly. Had I really been invited to the death...or at least the aftermath of the death...of Nayan Gupta? Were these people his family? Friends and relatives here to greet him at the end of his final voyage home from who knew where. Here to escort him to his final resting place.

Why was I here? Who would send me an invitation to this? Who would do such a thing? The whole idea was nothing short of ghoulish.



With the casket disappearing from view, the family began to regroup, recover, and move, en masse, toward the exit. I was only a bystander, an outsider, yet I felt wrung out by the ordeal. My heart had been frayed by the unexpected display of pain.

When the man broke off from the departing group and came toward me, I was not surprised. I was relieved. Here at last would be the answers to my questions. Here at last would be an explanation for my requested presence. I'd know what my part in all of this was meant to be. Deep down, even though I didn't know a soul amongst those gathered at the airport that day, I was filled with a desire to help them if I could.

The man who approached me was several inches shorter than I, heavy-set, with an egg-shaped face and expressive, intelligent eyes. Familiar eyes. I would have bet dollars to doughnuts this was Nayan Gupta's father.

Without a word, the man reached into his coat pocket, pulled out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to me.

"Mr. Gupta?" I asked.

"Mr. Quant," he answered. "Thank you for coming. Neil was my son."

"Neil?"

"Nayan. He called himself...most people called him Neil."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Gupta."

"Thank you. That is very kind. I'd like very much for you to come to our home now. Can you do that? I have something to tell you."

"Pranav," a woman from the departing crowd called out to the man.

His eyes remained on me. "I must go," he told me. "Will you come to my home? I will be there, at the address on the paper I just gave you. With my family."

I nodded. "Of course," I agreed. As I did, I wasn't quite sure why I was being so accommodating to this strange man with his strange request.

He reached down for my hand and pulled it into a brisk handshake. He gave me a smile that must have cost him dearly, given the circumstances. "I must go now."

And then he, along with the rest of Neil's family and friends, was gone.

A sombre-looking woman opened the door to the Gupta's sizeable Arbor Creek house. She nodded at me and stepped back to let me in. Although I couldn't see the rest of the clan, I could hear the hum and buzz of people in unhappy conversation not far off.

"My husband is waiting for you," she said.

"You're Mrs. Gupta?" I said, mostly because I had nothing else up my sleeve.

"Yes," she told me with pursed lips. "I am Unnati Gupta.

Unnati was wearing a stunning sari of rich turquoise, bright pink, and deep yellow. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face, bringing focus to eyes that were sharp and slightly narrowed, as if she was in a permanent state of suspicion. Her lips were painted bright red, matching her fingernails. A lovely collection of gold jewellery adorned her wrists, ears, and neck.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," I told her.

She nodded again, those eyes taking in every bit of me.

"And who is this, Unnati?" Another, older woman wearing an equally colourful and striking sari joined us.

"This is no one," she answered. "He's only here to see Pranav."

I must not have hidden my surprise at her brusque comment too well, because she quickly added: "I mean you aren't family. Everyone here today is family, you see."

I managed a wan smile.

"Well, he should eat anyway," the other woman said. Taking firm hold of my arm, she purposefully led me away from the front door. Unnati followed at a discreet distance, as if wanting to know where we were going but not wanting to be part of the trip.

My as yet unnamed companion handed me a plate and welcomed me to try one of everything. Although I could readily identify some of the dishes: pakoras, samosas, a lentil-based dal, chickpea masala, kebabs with sauces, mango chutney, and piles of freshly baked naan bread, there were many more I did not recog-

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nize. No problem. My hospitable escort was more than happy to introduce them, spooning healthy portions of each onto my plate.

When she was done—or rather when there was no room left—the woman pointed at the sweets. She made me promise to come back for dessert. In particular, she suggested the gulaab jamun. My mother would say the dish looked something like fried perogies in syrup. (And then she'd go home and try to make it herself—Ukrainian style.)

As soon as the old lady was gone, Unnati was at my side.

"My husband is waiting for you," she told me, with a pointed look at my overflowing plate. I could almost hear it groan from the strain, of both the overabundance of food and my chaperone's disapproving glare. "It's this way."

Following behind the departing woman, feeling a bit like Oliver Twist caught with too much porridge, I took the opportunity to inventory the sights along the way. From what I could see of the furnishings, the artworks, and the general splendour of the Guptas' house, I concluded that although maybe not *filthy* rich, the Guptas were getting plenty dirty on their way there. Undecided between modern-day contemporary and traditional Indian, they'd decided to go with both. Beautifully carved antique chests and doorway arches of dark brown woods mixed seamlessly with sleek leather divans and glass-topped coffee tables. Massive brass deities sat companionably next to postmodernist sculpture. Lush carpets covered slate tile, gold-framed art depicting humanized gods and celestial beings hung next to vivid oil originals by famed local artists such as Ernest Lindner, Dorothy Knowles, and Darrell Bell. The result was a wildly eclectic decor, but skilfully accomplished in a way that no single feature was highlighted at the expense of another.

"He's in here," Mrs. Gupta said, indicating a closed door at the end of a wide hallway. The quiet that surrounded us was a testament to sound construction, thick walls, and the size of the house.

Before I could say anything, she was gone. "Thanks," I said to the void, minding my manners.

It felt awkward standing there, in a stranger's home, not

knowing if I should knock on the door or simply walk in. Did I abandon my plate of crispy onion bhajis, chicken malai tikka, and saffron rice? Or hurriedly shovel it down before going in?

I decided. Rapping on the dark wood, I tried the knob. Finding it unlocked, I hesitantly pushed open the door.

"Mr. Quant, please come in," Pranav Gupta said with a surprising gusto when he saw it was me. "Thank you very much for coming."

He was standing behind the biggest desk I'd ever seen. Even though the room itself was large, the desk was an overpowering presence. Here again old East met new West. The desk was a piece of art, intricately carved and detailed, with complex patterns highlighted by gilt and multicoloured hues of rich stain. Atop the desk there was room for a laptop, a high-speed printer, and even a small plasma TV screen. The floors were thick with carpet and the walls obscured by bookshelves and wall hangings and draperies. The overall effect was like entering the inner sanctum of a maharaja, who also happened to be a modern-day entrepreneur.

Gupta stepped from behind the behemoth and grasped my hand in a solid handshake. "I see you are trying some of my mother's cooking. What do you think?"

I gave him an appreciative nod. "Your mother is an excellent cook." I hadn't tried any yet. But I've always found you can never go wrong complimenting a mother's food.

The man beamed. "Which is your favourite?"

Argh!

Using my fork I indicated one of the lumps on my plate.

"Oh, but have you tried the rogan josh? It's lamb with yoghurt." He pointed at another specimen. "Or the jeera aloo? It's potato, you know. Please, try it."

When I realized he was serious, and was waiting for me to sample the food, I readily complied.

Oh my.

I was reminded—as I too often am—how much I love food, and how it had the power to transport me to faraway, exotic places.

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Making sounds more appropriate to the boudoir, and under Pranav Gupta's watchful eye, I forked in a few more mouthfuls. The distinct flavours—sharp, sweet, spicy, and everything in between—began a party in my mouth. The tangy spices of the rogan josh played with the cumin in the jeera aloo, pungent saffron danced around the creamy mellowness of the yoghurt. It was truly a divine experience.

But I was here to work.

Resolutely, lest I be distracted by the charms of its aromas, I set the dish aside on a nearby table.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. My mother will be pleased."

"My pleasure completely. Thank you. And pass my compliments to your mother."

Culinary business complete, Mr. Gupta grasped my hand, and pulled me across the room to a bureau featuring what looked to me to be a mini shrine in honour of his dead son. He picked up the largest photo—one of about a dozen—an 8x10 in a gold frame and handed it to me. I was surprised at how heavy it was. This was no \$7.95 Walmart special.

"This is my son. My only son. This is Nayan. Neil to those outside our family."

I studied the picture. The face that stared back at me was the same one I'd found on Facebook.

"Again, Mr. Gupta, I'm sorry for your loss. But I'm afraid I don't know why I'm here, why you *invited* me here."

"Ah, yes, the invitation," he said with a chuffing noise, taking back the photograph and returning it to its place of honour on the bureau. "Let me begin by apologizing for such a melodramatic action, and for the short notice of the invitation. This is not how I normally carry out business, you understand. But I needed to have your attention. I was afraid if I gave you too much time to consider the request, you might turn it down."

He was probably right. My head bobbed ever so slightly. I needed to move this along. "If you're looking to hire me, a visit to my office would have sufficed," I told him. "I have to tell you, Mr. Gupta, I'm feeling a little uncomfortable being here. Obviously this is a very sad day for your family. Why don't we make an

appointment to meet in a few days? We can discuss whatever it is you want to discuss then."

"No," he responded quickly. "No, I want you to be here. I need you to be here. To feel this grief. To understand the depth of our sadness. To know how much my son's death has affected our family. I want you to develop the same burning need that I have—that we all have—to find out the truth about Neil's death."

I must have looked doubtful; once more, he picked up his son's picture and thrust it toward me. I looked but did not take it.

"My son is dead," he proclaimed, as if this were fresh news. "Today we witnessed his body coming home. This should never have happened. He should not have died..."

"I can sympathi..."

"I want more than sympathy, Mr. Quant," the grieving father informed me, his voice forceful and the picture frame in his hands shaking with his vehemence. "I want your passion. I am a person who believes that in all a man does—be it in his business, his personal life, his religious beliefs—success comes from passion. I need *your* passion, Mr. Quant. Because, you see, I am about to ask a very great deal of you."

Uh oh. "What exactly *are* you asking me to do?"

"I want you to find my son's murderer."

Although I knew nothing about Neil Gupta's death, I'd been expecting this exchange would turn into something along these lines. So, as shocking as murder always is, I was ready for this. "Are you sure you want to discuss the details of this today?" I asked again, my head slightly inclined toward the den door and the houseful of guests on the other side of it.

"I am." He reverently returned the photo of his lost son to its setting. "Emotions are high today. We are very sad, as you've no doubt witnessed. I want you to take this in. I want you to use it as the fuel for your passion when you search for the one who ended my son's life." He paused, and then added, "You will need it."

Now he was making me nervous. "What happened to your son, Mr. Gupta?"

"Please," he said, indicating a chic sofa of dark chestnut leather. "Sit with me awhile."

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We sat next to one another on the couch, he slightly closer to me than I would have liked. Mr. Gupta's sense of personal space was a little less expansive than my own.

"My son was working in the Middle East," he began earnestly, "based out of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates. He was there under the auspices of the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Antiquities, of which my wife is the head."

Before I could think it, Gupta added, "His stepmother played no favourites in making this decision. Neil deserved this position. He is very young, that is true. But he is also a knowledgeable researcher and a very talented lecturer."

I nodded my acceptance of his assertions and asked, "What was it he was researching and lecturing about?"

"Carpets." It was an answer I was not expecting. From the look on the man's face, I could see he knew it and was enjoying my surprise. "My son's specialty is the antique carpet trade. Not many people are aware that this is a long and distinguished area of study, with great historical significance. Most people, when they think of carpets, think of pile rugs, welcome mats, or, at best, oriental carpets."

I know I did.

"But there is a plethora of magnificent and breathtaking carpets from all over the globe. Carpets from Afghanistan, China, Iraq, Morocco, and Turkey and..." Gupta stopped there. He sat back and let out a chuckle. "Oh my, listen to me. Speaking of all this, as if I know something, when in reality I know so little. I am a structural engineer, not a specialist in antique carpets. Yet here I am lecturing about all this to you. Forgive me. It is simply an acquired enthusiasm, borrowed from my wife and son, and born from many, many hours listening to their conversations and arguments."

I gave him a nod with a gentle smile of understanding. From personal experience, I myself knew way too much about clothing and opera from spending time with my menswear-store-owning, *La-Bohème*-loving friend, Anthony Gatt. "I see. So your wife sent Neil to Dubai to learn more about carpets?"

His head shook. "Quite the opposite, really. During his six



months there, he was to be guest lecturer at several Middle Eastern universities. *He* was going to teach *them*. But his main reason for going was something of greater importance. Last year, the University of Saskatchewan announced funding for a permanent display of antique carpets, to be housed at the Department of Antiquities. Perhaps you recall the press conference, the stories in the newspaper?"

I gave the man a look that I hoped conveyed I was vaguely aware, when really, I wasn't at all.

"This is a very important move by the university. This collection will be the first of its kind amongst universities in western Canada. Unnati, as had many department heads before her, lobbied and politicked for this for a very long time. It is an exhilarating accomplishment for her. This will be the legacy of her tenure with the Department of Antiquities. And the university, the city, and the province too, will each reap significant benefits from this. Not only in terms of research and education, but tourism dollars. People will come from all over the world to visit what is sure to become a world-class attraction."

Rugs as a world-class attraction? Who knew?

"And it all begins very soon."

"Oh?"

"I was about to tell you Neil's greater purpose in the Middle East. He was to travel the area, assessing and making the final acquisition decisions on the most important of the carpets intended for the U of S collection. The climax of his trip was to be his return, two weeks from today. He and the final carpets were to arrive just in time for the World Antique Carpet Symposium being held here in Saskatoon."

WACS? Except for the name, this *did* sound impressive.

"It is the first time the symposium has been held in Canada," Gupta told me. His animated face turned dark. "It was to have been a triumphant return for Neil. But instead of bathed in glory, my son came back to us in a casket."

I was about to say how sorry I was, but I'd said it so often already the sentiment had lost its meaning. And I still didn't know how Neil Gupta had died. "Tell me what happened to your



son, Mr. Gupta."

"The *official* word is that he was attacked by hoodlums in a souk near Dubai Creek. Are you by any chance familiar with Dubai, Mr. Quant?" He eyed me carefully.

"No, I'm sorry."

"No problem, no problem," he hurriedly assured me.

"I take it you don't quite believe the official word?"

He shook his head. "I do not."

"Tell me why."

"My son was in the souk for a party. A surprise farewell party held in his honour, arranged by his colleagues. It does not make sense that he would be in an unsafe area where he could be attacked by criminals."

"Accidents happen," I suggested as gently as I could. "Perhaps your son got lost, or wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time." I'd been in a souk in Tunis a few years earlier. I had first-hand knowledge of what utterly confusing and bewildering places they can be. And dangerous.

He shook his head, resolute in his belief.

"What exactly did the authorities say?"

"That he was stabbed repeatedly, to death, by villains as yet unknown to them. Their doctors confirmed this manner of death. I had a third party, whom I trust, perform a second examination. They concur. But what they cannot confirm, Mr. Quant, is that this stabbing was a simple act of violence performed by miscellaneous thugs. This is unbelievable to me. As you may know, Dubai prides itself on its very modern police force. This is a city with a reputation for being practically crime-free."

I found this hard to believe—not to mention, lousy news for people in my particular line of work—but I let the comment go by uncontested.

"Again, Mr. Gupta, although I can understand how hard it must be for you to believe that this happened to you, to your son, these things *do* happen. People travel to foreign countries every day. Some never return. Murder, I'm sorry to say, can happen anywhere. And, I'm sorrier to say, sometimes it happens without reason or provocation." I feared Neil's father was suffering from the

old “it can’t happen to me” syndrome.

And then he dropped his bombshell. “But you see, Mr. Quant, there *was* a reason.”

I wanted to suggest he might have started with that line, but held my tongue.

“And that is why I especially wanted you here today.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

“You see, Mr. Quant, like you, my son was gay.”

I almost winced at the sound of the word, which Mr. Gupta had pronounced with a harsh, hard-sounding “g.”

“Homosexual practices are illegal in all the Peninsula countries, including the United Arab Emirates. In some, under sharia law, it is even punishable by death.”

“Is that what you believe, Mr. Gupta? Do you believe your son was killed for being gay?”

He nodded. “That is exactly what I believe.”

Although I was aware of the stance on homosexuality in the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, if this were true, it was shocking beyond belief. I’d heard of punishment ranging from flogging and imprisonment to deportation. Those were bad enough. But was it possible that someone would be killed for being gay? Especially in Dubai, the glitziest, most over-the-top, over-exposed, most modern, most western emirate of the UAE. The very idea raised my ire.

“Now you understand,” Gupta said to me, moving a little closer on the couch. “You understand why I need your help.”

But I didn’t. Not really. “What do you want me to do for you, Mr. Gupta?”

“I want you to go to Dubai. I want you to find out if I am right in my suspicion. I want you to find out why my son died—the real reason. I deserve to know. My family deserves to know. Until we do, we cannot find peace.”

I heard the door to the office swing open, and with it an unexpected accusation: “Do not believe what he says, Mr. Quant,” the voice said. “My husband is lying to you.”

# Chapter 2

“Unnati!” Pranav Gupta howled. He stood to confront his wife.

I stood too. Unnati Gupta approached us, her dark eyes sparkling like coal left out in the rain.

“He wants vengeance, Mr. Quant, not peace.”

“Unnati, please,” Gupta pleaded.

“Isn’t it the truth, Pranav?”

We both looked at the man. His gaze jumped from me to his wife, then back to me.

“I cannot deny this. I’m sorry, but it’s true. I do experience moments of wanting revenge against my son’s killer. Can you blame me, Mr. Quant?”

I couldn’t. But that still didn’t make vengeance a good reason to hire a private detective. “Mr. Gupta, I am not a thug, nor a mercenary. I do not hire myself out to be an instrument of revenge.” I was feeling rather virtuous about this.

He nodded wildly. “I completely understand this. As *you* must understand that my wife is perhaps being overly theatrical. Of

course I am vengeful. Another man took my son's life. It is only natural. But what I said before is still important, still true. I need justice. I need truth. If these...these bastards have stolen my son from me, just because he is gay, I deserve to know it. And they deserve to suffer."

"And if the truth is just as the police reported?" Unnati asked her husband.

Once again, his head bobbed up and down, his face sad. "I will accept that."

"You trust this man can find this out for you? And you will believe what he tells you?"

I suddenly felt as if I was in the room only as a topic of conversation. It was rather disconcerting.

"I will. He is a gay man too, Unnati, like Nayan. He will be able to investigate our son's life better than anyone else because of this."

Ah, the old gay detective thing again. I didn't mind actually. In this market, I could use any leg up over the competition I could get. Not that Saskatoon was crawling with gumshoes ready to take my place, but a competitive edge never hurts.

"How exactly do you see this working?" I asked the husband and wife.

"These were to be his final two weeks in the East. Although Neil had some last responsibilities at the University, most of his time was to be spent finalizing the details of major purchases for our collection. This was to include arranging for their transport back to Saskatoon in time for the symposium," Unnati told me in an officious voice. "Despite Neil's death, both the University of Dubai and the University of Saskatchewan still expect these duties to be fulfilled. Time is of the essence. Opening night of the symposium is in less than two weeks. They are insisting a replacement be found immediately."

"As the head of the Department of Antiquities at the U of S," Gupta said, "my wife will make the final decision. And my...our choice, is you."

To say the idea was both daunting and outrageous was an understatement. I'm a smart guy, and a pretty quick study. But

there was no way I could learn enough about old carpets in a few hours to bluff my way through the next two weeks as Neil's substitute. My only qualification to be an antique carpet expert is my propensity toward carpet burn when on a date. I didn't say as much, but the Guptas could see the uncertainty on my face.

"We don't expect you to actually perform any of Neil's duties," Unnati told me. "Most of his scheduled lectures have already been delivered. The remaining ones were cancelled after his death."

"But what about this carpet buying business? Do I just get a credit card and go to town?" Although that could be fun, I doubted the answer would be yes.

"Wait here for a moment," Pranav Gupta said with a reassuring tap on my arm.

With that he left the room, leaving Mrs. Gupta and me eye to eye.

"You don't agree with your husband's decision to hire a private investigator to dig into your stepson's death, do you?" This was perhaps stating the obvious. But it was far preferable to the uncomfortable silence I knew was coming.

"What I think doesn't matter, Mr. Quant. My husband has lost his only son. I understand how he cannot let this pass. He must be fully convinced that he has done all things possible to determine the cause of this horrible event. I love my husband. And so, I support his decision."

This was surprising. Although her words said one thing, very little in her manner since I'd first met Unnati Gupta hinted that she approved of her husband's plan. I had to wonder myself: was this just the foolish whim of a grieving father who simply could not accept his son's tragic death? Or was he onto something? Did a father's intuition count for anything?

"Mr. Quant," Gupta said as he re-entered the room, a slight young woman at his side. "I'd like you to meet Hema. She is my brother's daughter. Neil's cousin."

I held out my hand, which the girl took with hesitation. I noticed her hands were extra soft, with petite fingers and slender wrists. She wore several rings, one with a rather sizeable, sharp-

cut diamond (not on her I-thee-wed finger.) She was pretty in her traditional sari, with eyes, large as saucers, staring out at me from her fine-featured face like two chocolate yolks. "Nice to meet you, Hema."

She only nodded, and then looked quickly away at her aunt.

"Hema will accompany you to the Middle East," Unnati Gupta said. "She is just as accomplished as her cousin. Had she not been a woman, she would likely have taken the position in Dubai instead of Neil."

"Oh," I said. The statement raised countless questions in my head. I asked the foremost: "So what makes it possible for Hema to come with me now?"

"Desperation, Mr. Quant. The same reason they will accept you without too many questions, without wondering too loudly about why the 'esteemed' Russell Quant seems to have published nothing in his own discipline. Hema has more than enough qualifications for both of you. You see, the universities have a vested interest in having Neil's duties successfully completed in time for the symposium here in Saskatoon. They know time is running out." She gave me an assessing gaze. Something told me I'd only *just* passed muster. "I can make it appear that you are not who you truly are, at least in their eyes. For the next two weeks, you will cease to be Russell Quant, private detective. Instead you will be known as Russell Quant, respected authority on carpet antiquities. With my commendation, and because they want it to be so, they will easily accept you as an expert in these matters. And with so much to do in so little time, they cannot reasonably deny you an assistant."

"What they won't know," Mr. Gupta added helpfully, "is that Hema will be the one making all the decisions in terms of the necessary carpet acquisitions. While you will be busy looking into the death of my son."

Could it really be as easy as it sounded?

I doubted it.

The last thing I needed was to travel to the Middle East and have someone discover that Russell Quant, esteemed authority on carpet antiquities, was actually Russell Quant, *gay* private detec-

tive. If Pranav Gupta's suspicions about the cause of his son's death were even close to being accurate, I could knowingly be placing my own head on the same chopping block. Why would I do that?

"My dear," Gupta, somehow sensing my hesitation, addressed his wife while gently urging the two women toward the office door. "Perhaps you and Hema could give Mr. Quant and me a few minutes alone."

I was about to learn the answer to my question.

"He offered you how much?" This from Anthony, in a rare moment of near speechlessness. When it came to anything having to do with large sums of money, my friend was apt to be verbose. But when I revealed to him the amount of the retainer and final sum, promised to me by Pranav Gupta, for travelling to Dubai and points beyond to investigate his son's death, he was left to pick up his chiselled jaw off the floor.

Our visit that afternoon was supposed to be over coffee. I should have known better. In Anthony's world, coffee is best served hot, first thing in the morning. Any time after noon was an occasion appropriate for liquids of a more entertaining nature. Today we hadn't even gotten as far as the front door of his high-end menswear boutique, *gatt*, when a better idea struck him.

"Oh, just look at it out there," he'd said, Rupert Everett at his most petulant, as he searched the sales racks for a suitable overcoat to wear outdoors. "Why must January always be so bloody awful in this country?"

Although I love the vivid change in seasons and theatrical weather patterns we enjoy in Saskatchewan, I must agree that January and February can be a challenge. Despite the cold, it is often overwhelmingly sunny, but on days without that cheery orb in the sky, Prairie mid-winter can be a bit of a downer. Like today.

"Tell you what, Puppy, what say we stay in? I've the perfect spot and the perfect libation to make it all bearable."

And that was how we found ourselves in *gatt*'s second storey window display—per Anthony: Out of sight and out of mind of

local liquor licence enforcers—overlooking downtown’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and its parade of shops and warmly dressed shoppers. As luck would have it, *gatt* was promoting cruise wear and resort casuals for the ongoing winter vacation season. The window bay was handily outfitted with a bistro table set for two, in front of a faux Tuscany-inspired mural, next to three rather sexy-looking mannequins who appeared to be having more fun than inanimate, plastic, manmade men have a right to be having.

After instructing the staff—a crew of broad-shouldered, slim-waisted sales clones whose names were always Derek—to watch the floor, Anthony had led me to the glassed-in holiday spot. From somewhere—I don’t know how he does it—he produced a bottle of Nipozzano Marchesi de Frescobaldi Chianti.

“Italian. A two thousand and five,” he uttered as he did the stick-your-nose-deep-in-the-glass-sip-swirl-make-a-face thing. He gave me one of his trademark one-eyebrow-up-with-quirky-smile looks, and asked, “Shall I tell you?”

That’s one of the many things I like about Anthony. Although he sounds posher than the Queen, looks like Robert Redford, and has sophistication oozing from every pore, every so often he remembers not to take himself too seriously.

I nodded my approval.

“Red fruit,” he happily announced with another luxurious whiff of the wine. “Spicy. A little violet on the nose.”

“What? No geranium?”

He ignored that, instead choosing to take another assessing sip from the wine glass with its impressively rotund circumference. “Bitter cherry. Nutty at the mid, chocolate on the finish. Not quite up to the previous vintage, but it’ll do. I think you’ll like it.”

“I better,” I warned as I downed my first sip.

My gosh.

I actually *could* smell violet. I really could. Maybe years of quaffing from my friend’s private cellar was actually teaching me a thing or two.

Anthony sat back in his chair, his slim-fit, V-neck, eggplant cashmere sweater revealing an admirably taut belly for a fifty-nine-year-old. “You must tell me,” he began, “what is it like to be



for sale?"

"Oh, ha ha," I responded with little true jocularity.

"But it's true, isn't it?" he asked. "You said so yourself. You were thinking of turning down this assignment until you heard the gold coins jingling in Mr. Gupta's purse. What he is willing to pay to send you to Dubai is a king's ransom." He hesitated, thought better of it, then adjusted his comment: "Or at least a minor European princess's lady-in-waiting's cousin's ransom."

"I was unsure to begin with," I admitted, wishing that instead of having this conversation, I could simply sit back, enjoy my fake vacation, the classical music wafting through the store's high-tech sound system, the expensive-cologne-scented air, and a glass or two of this very good wine with its chocolate finish. I love me some chocolate.

"Well, you shouldn't have been," Anthony informed me.

I was surprised. I was expecting a lecture on how dangerous it would be for me to travel in a part of the world infamous for its abysmal treatment of gay people.

"If people stopped going places they weren't wanted," Anthony told me with a tone of approval, "I dare say some of the greatest social and political achievements of the last several decades would not be ours to enjoy today. And I'm not just talking about gay people: I'm talking about people of all races, colours, and lifestyles. This is how we free ourselves, Russell. We take baby steps. Some are less safe than others. Some are judged to be not the most intelligent thing to do at the time. Some even appear to have no effect at all. But they do, Puppy, they do.

"And you, my dear Russell, are one of the most intelligent people I know. You understand precautionary measures. You know how to keep yourself out of trouble...no wait...that's someone else—"

That counted for a smirk.

"You know what I mean, Russell. Of course I'll be worried for you when you're there, but no more than I worry about any of my loved ones when they travel to unfamiliar foreign countries. It's only natural.

"All that aside, my boy," he expounded with a wave, as if to

shoo away any unpleasantness, “what a fantastic opportunity for you to see a part of the world that is nothing short of extraordinary. Some of the most significant civilizations of antiquity rose and fell in the Middle East, you know. It’s the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, Islam. And the cities. Oh my. What magnificent cities, surrounded by those splendid sand dunes. And, Russell, what of that achingly handsome Peter O’Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*? Don’t you love him? My god, the crush I had on that man.”

I smiled at my friend’s enthusiasm. “Does Jared know about your thing with Peter?”

Jared is Anthony’s husband. Together, they are what you call “men about town.” Everyone knows them and they know everyone. No event on Saskatoon’s social calendar is complete without them, and the coolest people fight for invitations to the gorgeous, extravagant parties they host in their own fabulous penthouse. Jared was once a successful international model. Now, along with my boyfriend, Ethan Ash, he runs Ash House, a care home for the swinging senior set.

“He does,” Anthony admitted. “But he deals with it.”

“Have either of you been to Dubai?” Between stock buying trips for Anthony’s stores and Jared’s former career, the two have been almost everywhere. “I could use some tips on what to expect.”

“Expect the unexpected,” he said and sipped. “Expect glitz, glam, glorious architecture. Dubai is truly over the top. I think of it as the Middle East version of Las Vegas-slash-Disneyland—of course without the gambling and drinking and that pesky mouse.”

“No drinking?” Alarming.

“Of course you can drink.”

Phew.

“You can do pretty much whatever you want. Just not officially, and not outside the tourist zones. But in Dubai, almost everywhere is a tourist zone.

“If you’re looking for an authentic cultural experience, however, I must warn you, this is not the place to go. Dubai is manu-

factured culture. I imagine Sheikh Mohammed—or Sheikh Mo as he's come to be known—woke up one day, wondered what to do with all his ka-billions in oil profits, dreamt up what a fairy-tale Arabian city would look like, and then built it. It's exaggerated, drop dead gorgeous, flamboyant, must-be-seen, but in the end, it's as made up as Dolly Parton.

"More importantly, the shopping. Puppy, it is simply indescribable. Ever hear of DSF?"

I shook my head.

"The Dubai Shopping Festival. Yes, they actually have a festival for shopping. How can you not adore a city with a shopping festival? Outrageous and wonderful all at once."

Anthony was right. This was not quite what I expected. Like everyone else, I'd seen the pictures distributed through mass Internet mailings and on YouTube: the tallest building in the world; the residential islands that look like giant palm trees or replicas of the world; the exquisite hotels. But certainly, that wasn't the real Dubai, the modern-day Middle East. Or was it?

"And if all that doesn't convince you to jump on the next plane heading east," Anthony added after a genteel tipple of his drink, "you do remember that Sereena is in Egypt, don't you?"

I jolted upright in my bistro chair. My knees knocked the table, nearly sending the half-full Chianti bottle into my lap. I'd forgotten. In the same way as Anthony and Jared are men-about-town, my next door neighbour, Sereena Orion Smith, is a woman-of-the-world. She's someone who wears mystery like perfume. Her past is elusive and fantastical, filled with tales of madcap adventures that just might be true. Her greatest feat is to have survived. Just barely. Now somewhere north of middle age, Sereena continues to trek into the worldly wilds of the rich and famous every now and again, but in between she seems quite content to live a quiet life in Saskatoon. Well, quiet in an indisputably Sereena way. It was fitting that she was in Egypt. I had no difficulty imagining her as a modern-day Cleopatra. Except without the lands to rule. And fewer asps.

"Where exactly is she?" I asked, trying to recall my high school geography lessons concerning a part of the world I knew shamefully little about.

"Near Luxor, I believe," Anthony told me. "No doubt redecorating one of those dusty old temples. Some of them have fallen into shameful states of disrepair, I've heard tell."

I chuckled. "Well, if memory serves, that's on a whole other continent."

"True," Anthony agreed. "But close enough. You know, just in case you need a cup of sugar or some such thing."

"Sad as I am to leave this lovely resort," I said, "I really need to get back to the office, do some travel research." I tossed back the last of my wine.

"Of course," Anthony said, pushing back from the table. "I'll see you to the door. I have a few things I've put together for you to take home."

I gave my friend a look. I'd long since stopped resisting his never-ending ambition to get me to dress like "any self-respecting gay detective should." It was because of Anthony that my closet at home was filled with the current fashion season's best designer wear. Much of it was black, and to me, looked pretty much like last season's best designer wear. One black shirt and one black sweater looked just like the next. One particular pair of black pants however, I must admit, had no match.

My wonderpants. Black. A bit stretchy. Made my ass look great. Always fit, no matter how many slices of pizza I'd shovelled down my pie-hole the night before. And they never went out of style. It didn't matter what Anthony sent home with me in his eagerness to get me to wear something other than my WPs. When push came to shove, and I was in a bind, they were my official pant of choice.

As we descended the grand staircase that led to the store's ground floor, Anthony surveyed his kingdom. He seemed pleased. Indeed, the Dereks were busy, either entertaining customers or attending to primping and fluffing and re-folding the merchandise to its best advantage.

"Anthony," I asked, as he yanked a pearly white sweater off a

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display shelf, mumbling something about my “absolutely needing” it. “Do you know anything about a young man named Neil Gupta? You might also know him as Nayan Gupta.” Although no one had ever given him a crown or anything, Anthony is the undisputed King of Gays in Saskatoon. If anyone could find out about my client’s deceased gay son, and in a hurry, it would be him.

“Hmmm, sounds vaguely familiar,” he murmured, as he helped me on with my coat, and thrust two bags of clothing into my kid-gloved hands. “Let me do some shoulder-tapping.” He kissed both my cheeks in farewell. “I’ll get back to you.”

And then I re-entered the deep freeze we affectionately call outside.

Not far from *gatt*, just out of downtown on Spadina Crescent, is my office. Russell Quant, Private Investigator, does business from a small space on the second floor of an old character house overlooking Riverside Park, and beyond it, the South Saskatchewan River. The building’s owner, Errall Strane, runs her one-lawyer practice out of the largest suite on the main floor, the balance of which is rented to Beverly Chaney, a psychiatrist. Two smaller offices on the second floor belong to Alberta Lougheed, a psychic, and me. A varied group of tenants to say the least.

I parked the Babamobile in the back parking lot next to a fancy sports car—Errall’s—a mellow family car—Beverly’s—and a jaunty-looking junker—Alberta’s. Entering through the back door took me right into the kitchen where I knew I could score fresh coffee (to clear my red-wine-head) and, if I was lucky, a scone or muffin. I poured myself a cup of caffeine and mentally assessed the status of my jeans’ waistband while eying up today’s selection of Beverly’s homemade pastry.

“Russell, I knew I’d find you in here.”

Ta Da! The amazing Alberta, everyone!

Our resident psychic did not wear clothes. She wore costumes. Normal, everyday work outfits were just too dull for her, I guess. I stood back and shielded my eyes as I was confronted with a yel-

low jumpsuit so bright even Tweety Bird would have returned it for something a little less garish. Beneath the jumpsuit Alberta had chosen a comparatively sedate silk shirt dotted with lemons, cherries, oranges, and apples. It was the slot machine of blouses. Her heels were pink patent leather, matching the band around the fire-engine red fedora perched at a sprightly angle over her left eye. She certainly knew how to brighten a dull winter day.

"Do you know if there's a difference between a muffin and a cupcake?" she asked as she selected a Black Bottom cupcake (or muffin).

"Is that why you were looking for me?"

"In part. Where are you off to?"

I must admit to some skepticism about the whole psychic thing. Yet time and again, Alberta astounds me by knowing things she really shouldn't. Errall insists that psychics are simply people who've made it their profession to become experts at reading other people, assessing body language, zeroing in on non-verbal cues, that sort of thing. I looked down at myself to see if I was displaying any I'm-going-to-the-Middle-East-type, telltale signs. Was there camel hair on my coat lapel? Coucous on my breath? Fear of being kidnapped by Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves in my eyes?

"Actually, I did just accept an out-of-town assignment."

"And you're planning on asking Errall to take care of Barbra and Brutus while you're away?"

Barbra and Brutus are my dogs, two of the best-looking schnauzers in all of dogdom.

"I always ask Errall to look after them when I'm away for more than a day or two." Otherwise I ask Sereena to look in on them. She's right next door, so it's convenient. But any longer than forty-eight hours just doesn't work for her and her ever-changing schedule.

"I've wondered, Russell..."

Duck!

"...why you never ask me to look after Barbra and Brutus?"

Suddenly it had gotten very hot. I put down my coffee and slipped off my jacket. Good stalling technique while I considered

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my answer. I certainly couldn't tell her that to do so would cause me to fear for my pet's lives. Not that Alberta would abuse them or forget to feed them or intentionally cause them pain in any way. It's just that no one—man or beast—could spend any large amount of time with Alberta without somehow being altered. For instance, how long could you stare at her bright yellow outfit without starting to see those little bursts of light like when a camera flashes in your face? And Barbra and Brutus need exercise, something which Alberta is resolutely against. The only part of the body that requires exercise, she maintains, is the brain. Instead, I could imagine her reading their fortunes and auras, while teaching them yoga and how to chant, doggie style. Oh no no no. I just didn't want any of this for my pooches. I liked them just the way they were.

"Well, I'd love to," I started out, keeping a careful eye on the length of my nose. "Thanks for the offer. But if you remember, Brutus used to live with Errall once upon a time. He knows her house and likes it there. I like to keep him and his sister together in one place when I'm away. Besides, I know she doesn't show it, but I think Errall enjoys the company."

Alberta stared at me. Suddenly I remembered the time my mother asked me if I'd eaten the saskatoon berry pie she'd left to cool in the basement pantry. My head shook no, while my purple tongue said, oh yeah, of course I did. Would Alberta see my purple tongue? Could one successfully lie to a psychic? But this wasn't a complete lie. The part about Errall was all true. I had a chance here.

"That makes sense," Alberta said, turning away.

Pent-up air escaped my lips.

"But you should know," her voice sailed back into the kitchen over her retreating yellow shoulder. "Yoga is very healthy for dogs."

# Chapter 3

One day, about a year and a half ago, should have been the best day of my life. I was in Hawaii. The weather was fine. The mai tais were flowing. And the man I was in love with proposed to me. The only problem was, Alex Canyon was one of *two* men I was falling for. The other wee complication was that the other man, Ethan Ash, didn't know how I felt. Suddenly I was put in the position of having to decide how to spend the rest of my life. Married? Pining after a man I didn't have? Quite a bit to ask out of a sultry evening on Waikiki Beach.

I said yes.

I shouldn't have.

A couple of weeks later I was single again. But single with prospects. I'd finally had the *cojones* to come clean with Ethan. I loved him. I loved him more than Alex. Which was weird, because I didn't even really know him all that well. I knew he was a good, kind man. I knew he had a great sense of humour. I knew he was a devoted father to his daughter. I knew he could be puppy dog



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cute or drop-dead, Great Dane handsome, depending on the circumstance. I knew he was a hard worker, dedicated to the elderly residents of Ash House, all of whom he treated like family. And I knew he made my knees weak, my heart flutter, my brain go to mush. Barbra and Brutus and my mother heartily approved. When I thought about what my perfect future might look like, he fit the picture.

We'd spent the last eighteen months figuring things out. It wasn't always easy, or simple, but we moved forward, step by step. Our first kiss was an unfortunate incident while I was inebriated and still engaged, neither being a good time to smooch somebody other than your intended. But our first *real* kiss, on our first *real* date, was something special. And this time, it was all Ethan's doing. About halfway through our candlelight dinner at Calories, he suddenly leaned across the table, stared into my eyes, and growled in a deep, sexy voice, "I can't wait until we're alone so I can kiss you."

I don't know what I'd said or done to convince him this was something he really wanted to do, but I nearly choked on my Saskatchewan elk with pumpkin dumplings as I began waving wildly for the server to bring our cheque. Ethan grinned and pulled down my hand. He convinced me it was better to "bask in the anticipation." I tried to eat and engage in normal first-date conversation, but from that point on my mind could focus on nothing more than imagining the feeling of his lips on mine. It was a veeeeeeery long meal. But in the end, he was right. It was like waiting to leave for an exciting vacation you'd been planning for months. The anticipation was half the fun. The eventual reality was explosive.

Then came our first time sleeping together—which did not happen that same night, but not long after. It was a spectacular event that spanned an entire weekend and resulted in a pulled muscle and impressive carpet burn. Time passed and things continued to go well. Very well. Eventually, we decided it was time to tell Simon that her dad and I were officially a couple. Who were we kidding? She'd figured it out long before we did.

Next came getting the approval of friends. That came easily

too. My friends loved Ethan, and a guy like Ethan has pretty cool friends, who were pretty cool about me. They all just wanted us—Simon included—to be happy.

Then came the nail-biter. Meeting the parents.

Both of us just have mothers left. Ethan's mom is a busy woman who spends a lot of time on the golf course, wintering in Palm Desert where she golfs a lot, and aboard cruise ships visiting golf destinations. She was "delighted" to meet me. Ethan didn't say much, but I got the sense that she was "delighted" to meet pretty much anyone.

At first, my mom's reaction was a little tougher to read. She was quite confused about what had happened to Alex. Explaining the situation to a woman like my mom was not easy, so I left out quite a few details. I might have even thrown in a white lie or two. But given time, and how endearing Ethan is, never mind his penchant for older people—he'd made a career out of it, after all—Mom warmed up very nicely.

As more months slipped by, almost without being aware of doing it, we found ways to make our lives fit together. We had careers to consider, shopping habits, eating habits, taste in movies. Would we wear each other's clothes? (T-shirts—yes; shoes—no). Where would we spend the nights? How often? And about a million other things.

That was just the beginning. It had been many years since I'd dived into a serious relationship. And as we became more serious about one another, so did the issues that followed. When I let my mind wander, it used to be about things like: Can I afford that doggie (read: clothing, shoes, trip, miscellaneous sparkly tchotchke) in the window? Can I get away with not working out today? If I eat a bag of Doritos without anyone seeing me do it, will I gain weight? But now, sometimes, while I'm supposed to be goofing off on the couch on rainy Saturday afternoons or lolling about in bed on Sunday mornings, I find myself asking: Where is this going? Is he the one? Should we move in together? What about marriage? Children?

This was hard stuff. But, oh, it was fun too.

I needed to talk to Errall about taking Barbra and Brutus while I was away, but Lilly told me she was on a conference call. No doubt with some high-powered, highfalutin, high-priced lawyer she was doing battle with in court. And she'd be loving every second of it. I'd once witnessed Errall on such a call. I'm no slouch when it comes to confrontation and fighting for what I believe in, but this conversation—or at least Errall's side of it—was really something to hear. Accusations, recriminations, and barely veiled threats flew from her mouth like silver bullets from a pistol. Her aim was uncannily precise and deadly. When she'd hung up, I thought she'd either collapse from her efforts or wield her weaponry in my direction and clear the field. Instead, she let out a big sigh, then smiled like a schoolgirl who'd landed her first kiss with the football team's captain (or, in her case, the head cheerleader). Her face was flushed, her eyes glittery with excitement. I think she might have orgasmed if I'd not been in the room.

While I waited in my own office for a call from Lilly to tell me Errall was free, I decided to start on some research for my upcoming trip. It was time to find out what I was really getting myself into.

The first websites I found told the typical touristy stories, focussing on the glitz and glam of Dubai that Anthony had talked about. On the surface, there seemed little new to discover. Dubai is one of seven emirates on the Persian Gulf, ruled by a sheikh, predominantly populated by immigrants. Tallest building in the world, biggest this, greatest that, paralyzing traffic, lots of sand, lots of shopping, lots of tourists, lots of excess.

The one bit of surprising news: although the United Arab Emirates is famous for its large oil reserves, rumours were swirling that these big, fat, underground vats of oil were starting to dry up. Specialists were predicting the oil would last only another century or so. All together now: awwwwwwwwwwww. That explained the rush to attract big tourism dollars.

Given my background, and the violent events that were taking me there in the first place, I decided to check out the crime situation in Dubai. I tapped away and carefully studied the informa-

tion presented. It seemed Pranav Gupta was right. According to the statistics I dug up, the place had a reputation for being practically crime free. Uh, but what about the dead guy found in the souk? Where did that fit into the statistics? Maybe it didn't count because he was Canadian?

And then, for the best news of all, I confirmed that under sharia (Islamic) law, in some Peninsula countries, homosexuality is a crime considered so grievous it incurs the death penalty. At the very least, every country in the region considers homosexual practices illegal.

Eek.

I'd had just about enough of that bit of frightening news. I was about to switch gears and delve into the world of antique rugs when my phone rang. It was time to head downstairs to visit Errall. Come to think of it, things might not be getting any better, I realized, as I stepped away from my desk. Dealing with Errall Strane, bless her wizened little heart, could sometimes be as frightening as marching in a Gay Pride Day parade in Yemen.

"Are you crazy?"

Unlike Anthony, our resident legal eagle wasted no time even pretending to consider the positive aspects of time spent visiting the Middle East.

I was sitting in the stark, cool confines of Errall's large office. The space was dominated by stainless steel, icy glass, chunky granite, and row upon row of metal bookshelves weighed down by heavy, lawyerly tomes. If the room were a photograph, it would be matte, rather than glossy, illustrative rather than artistic. It suited Errall to a T. She sat behind her desk, a familiar frown sitting comfortably on her cut-glass face, sharp, pale edges underscored by dark features. She was Cruella de Vil's pretty sister.

Part friend, part enemy, part legal advisor, part landlord, part pain-in-the-ass, Errall Strane has been in my life since she began dating my high school friend Kelly. That was many years ago. A lot had happened since then. Including Kelly's death from cancer a couple of years ago, and my adopting their dog, Brutus, to live

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with Brutus's sister, Barbra, and me. I like to tell people that the only reason I hang around with Errall is because it's always a good idea to kiss up to your landlord—especially given the recent explosion in the local economy and real estate market values, which has made offices like mine a treasure. But, in reality, I suppose I kinda like her. She's smart, challenging, interesting, quick-witted, and reliable. Unless she's grumpy. Then she's none of those things and we don't talk.

"You know what?" she said, hunching forward onto her desk and brushing aside a swath of recently snipped black bangs. "I don't even want to know. Don't tell me. I don't really care. All I want to know is: have you made arrangements for Brutus and Barbra's future if you don't make it back?"

"You're overreacting," I assured her. "This is Dubai I'm going to, not the front lines of Iraq or Afghanistan. Check it out online. You'll see."

Her eyes narrowed in a way that made me nervous. "My god, you're doing it again, aren't you?"

"Wha...?"

"You idiot."

Part of me was saying inside my head: Damn! Caught again. How did she know? But then I realized I had no idea what she was talking about. I was innocent.

"You're running away," she announced it as if it were a sentence. "What happened? Did he walk too slowly in front of a jewelry store? Did he leave an empty container of milk in the fridge? Did he invade your precious personal space for too long? What did it, huh? What's got you so scared that you're running away to a frigging war zone?"

"Errall, no..."

"Russell, I know you. You've been skirting around getting into a serious relationship for so long, you don't even know you're doing it."

I was? I don't?

"I was beginning to think I was wrong about you. How long has it been for you and Ethan? A year? A little more? Let's see, that's about how long you were with Alex before you decided to kick his ass to the curb too, wasn't it?"

This was distressingly true.

"As soon as he brings out a ring and wants to marry you, you decide the relationship is not right for you. So you hook up with a guy who already has a boyfriend. You finally convince Ethan to give you a chance. And now...tell, me, what was it? Did he propose to you last night? Is that why you're suddenly on your way to the goddamned Middle East for crying out loud, you stupid jerk?"

Years ago I would have snarled back like a cornered lion (I am a Leo, after all) and stormed out of her office. A few days later we'd make up. Not by saying "I'm sorry" or anything like that, but by a simple, wordless ceasefire. Today I knew better. I would still snarl, but it was much more fun to stick with it and go a few rounds to see where things went.

"This has nothing to do with my relationship with Ethan. We are very happy. I happen to have a case, a very lucrative case, a case which requires me to travel to Dubai," I answered calmly.

"What is it with you? Is there no one left willing to hire you right here in Saskatchewan?"

There are. Plenty of people. Like the Saskatchewan Charolais Association, for instance, which hired me to investigate some irregularities in their Semen Directory registration system. Then there was Marianna Renchuk, a Ukrainian dance instructor who wanted me to find out if the Elaine O'Grady School of Irish Dance was pilfering her best students by promising free lessons. Admittedly, in a city the size of Saskatoon, at just over a quarter of a million, the flashy, dramatic, *Law-and-Order*-worthy crimes are not a dime a dozen. There likely will never be a *CSI: Saskatoon*. Still, the city has its fair share of interesting happenings for a professional snoop like me. The fact that some of them take me out of town to further my investigation is simply circumstantial (and my good luck).

"It's a potential murder case," I informed her. "The death occurred in Dubai."

"Uh huh. So there's been no talk of marriage between you and Ethan?"

Normally at this point in the conversation I'd attempt some

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skillful deflection and say something like: What about you? Why haven't you been dating anyone? Will you be taking your nun's vows soon? Instead, I was silent. Errall wasn't totally off base.

"Hah! I knew it."

"It's not that," I quickly said. "I mean we have talked about that, in a far-off, conceptual-only kind of way. But..."

"Yeeeeeeeeessss?"

"He thinks we should move in together. He thinks that's the next logical step."

"And you think...what?"

I nodded. "He's right, he's absolutely right..."

"That sentence has a bigger but than you do."

"How do we decide who will move in with who? It's...it's...it's bloody impossible." I could feel pent-up frustration bubbling to the surface. I wasn't running away from my relationship with Ethan Ash. I truly did love him and wanted to be with him. What I was stuck on was how to make it work. For both of us. And Simon.

"What's the problem? Just pick a place. Why are you sweating the small stuff?"

Like her office, to Errall, much of the world was black and white. Me? I lived in a world of many vivid colours. (I am half-Ukrainian after all.) The problem was, they didn't always quite go together.

"It's not that simple," I told her. "Ash House is brand new. It's not only where Ethan works, it's also his and Simon's home. It would be crazy for me to ask him to leave it. And even with Jared as his partner in the business, a big part of its success is the fact that this isn't just another care institution for the elderly. It's a home. Those people are like family to Ethan. They treat Simon like she's their own grandchild. If Ethan and Simon moved in with me, things would never be the same. Not for the residents. Not for Ethan. Living elsewhere was never part of his dream for the business. Being there is part of it. And part of who he is."

"Okay, I get that. So then you move into Ash House."

I felt the subtle but unmistakable turn of my stomach whenever the topic of leaving my house came up. Just as Ethan was indu-



bitably tied to Ash House, I was tied to my own home. It is my castle, my private getaway on a little travelled street in a quiet corner of my prairie city. It's the house I bought with the money left me by my much-loved Uncle Lawrence. That house is the only solid piece of him I have left. It is a home perfectly fashioned—inside and out—to suit all my needs and moods and wants. I love my house. Barbra and Brutus love it. And right next door: Sereena Orion Smith. Now there's something I could never replace. The walls, the floors, the surrounding landscape, every room, and every piece of it oozes with memories. How could I ever leave it?

"I can't, Errall. I just can't," I spit out the miserable truth.

Instead of mocking me, as I expected her to do, she sat quiet, staring at me in tacit, silent agreement. She got it.

This was one of those rare moments where, without question, I fully understood my friendship with this woman. And, truth be told, she'd been part of more than a few of the memories that made my house so important to me.

"It's been so perfect up to now," I told her. "We've been treating my place as our 'city' pad, and Ash House as our 'country estate'."

"Oh puh-lease." Evil Errall was back. That didn't take long. "That is so gay. Ash House is less than ten minutes out of town. Country estate? Give me a break."

"But it works," I told her, ignoring her jibes. "If we're out late on the town, or if we want some privacy, we stay at my place. As long as Jared is available to stay over to babysit Simon and the oldsters. Otherwise, we stay at Ash House. That's where we sleep, more often than not, actually." I shifted in my seat, and wondered why my hand was fidgeting on my lap. "Jared's been really good about giving us a night off here and there. But I know it's important to give Simon a stable environment. One that includes her dad, her own bed, her own room with her things in it, all under the same roof. She has a lot of built-in babysitters, but Ethan prefers to be the one who tucks her in at night. I get that. And if we need some space, some alone time, we can each stay at our



own place." I hesitated, then added: "It's good. It really is."

"But it sounds like maybe it isn't anymore?"

I sighed. "Maybe not," I admitted. "I like being on my own. Always have. It's the introvert in me, I guess. But introverts get married or move in with other people all the time. I wonder if having separate homes has become a crutch, an excuse not to take the next step. It's just too easy when we're having a spat, or I'm too tired to deal with a house full of octogenarians, or Ethan doesn't want the hassle of my two dogs and his two dogs, or whatever, for us to say, hey, why don't we just stay at our own places tonight."

"Is there a problem with 'too easy'?"

I gave her a look of uncertainty. I'd asked myself the same question over the past months. My answer was always: of course not. But now, I wasn't so sure. "We're not building a life together. We're building two lives that criss-cross every now and then."

She nodded. She probably already knew this but wanted to see if I did.

"We need to move forward. I know it. So we've started talking about moving in together. We're both adults. We're accommodating guys, flexible in most things. But this one thing—who moves in with who—I'm scared that it's starting to tear us apart."

She shrugged her shoulders. A silent Errall was not a good sign. She regularly had an opinion about everything. If the answer to this question eluded even her, I knew I was in deep trouble.

"By the way, the answer is no," she told me.

"Huh?"

"As much as I'd love to look after Barbra and Brutus, as you've already been told, but have obviously forgotten, I'm leaving for a week of sun and fun in Zihuatanejo. I can't look after the dogs."

There was only one option left for a babysitter. Now I really was in deep trouble.

It was a blind man's night as I made my way from the nearest parking lot to the College Building on the university campus. At the end of January, the sun sets well before six p.m., and the invis-

ible new moon had dropped not long after that. Colin Cardinale, the man overseeing the antique carpet symposium— being held in Saskatoon, and soon-to-be curator for the permanent display of antique carpets to be housed at the U of S's Department of Antiquities, had agreed to meet with me that evening to discuss Neil's itinerary in the Middle East.

The College Building, a national historic site, is one of six buildings surrounding a popular campus green area known as The Bowl. I remember many warm spring afternoons, sitting on the verdant, sun-dappled lawn of The Bowl with friends, waiting until the last possible minute before going inside to write a final exam. The buildings are stunners, transporting students, professors, and visitors back to another time and place. Designed in 1909 by Montreal architects Brown and Vallance, they were constructed in the classic Elizabethan E-shape in Collegiate Gothic style. Just being surrounded by those buildings made us feel important. These same kinds of buildings could be found at Cambridge, Oxford, and Princeton. Sadly, for a number of years, the College Building had been closed and sealed off from the life's breath of students, condemned due to structural issues. It sat at one end of The Bowl, a lone, empty sentinel. But eventually, with the exception of the exterior stone walls, two main corridors, and two stairwells, the balance of the building, including the roof, had been demolished and rebuilt. It was one of the largest heritage restoration projects in Canada, re-opening in 2005.

It had been many years since I'd been a student at the U of S. In the intervening years, there had been many additions to the ever-expanding university real estate. Fortunately, this was one part of campus I could still navigate, even in the dark of a winter night, without getting hopelessly lost. I easily found the main entrance of the College Building, down a gentle slope in the landscaping that opened into what is called Student Central. Yet, despite its lofty name, the place was deserted, and only barely lit. I was guessing, at this time of night, most of the students were back in their dorms, hitting the books or getting something to eat before resuming their studies.

Cardinale had asked me to meet him at the Museum of

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Antiquities. I was reluctant to admit that I hadn't even known there was such a place in Saskatoon, and agreed without asking for directions. How hard could it be? I had anticipated finding scores of students milling around whom I could ask for help. But finding none, I was on my own. After loosening the scarf from around my neck and unzipping my jacket, I ventured into the bowels of the building, following signs that beckoned me forward.

It seemed the further I went, the darker it became. Although I applauded the university's eco-friendly lighting policy, come on already! No wonder no one knew about this museum. It was impossible to find without a flashlight.

As I progressed, hallway to hallway, the sparkly newness of Student Central slowly but surely gave way to grittier, older architecture, no doubt a remnant of the original construction. Stark, clean walls of lumber and plasterboard gave way to cement, tile, and marble, some surfaces boasting intricate stone carvings and miniature murals, the historic significance of which utterly escaped me.

After several minutes of stumbling about, I finally found a helpful building directory. Adjusting my line of sight to make the best use of the dim lighting being offered me, I studied the diagram. Where the heck was I? Where the heck did I have to go? Eventually I figured out that I was on the wrong floor. As luck would have it, not far from the wall map were the doors of an aged elevator. An accompanying sign instructed me to take it up one floor to find the museum. I pushed the button and waited.

And waited.

The doors finally opened, like the yawn of a tired old man. I stepped inside and pushed the button to take me to the first floor. The elevator, albeit reluctantly, did its job. Several years later, it expelled me at my intended destination. A right turn and I was standing before a welcome sign announcing that I'd arrived at the Museum of Antiquities. An Hours of Operation notice told me the place had closed at four-thirty. But when I tried the door, it swung open easily. Cardinale must have left it unlocked for me.

I stepped inside and, for a moment, was astonished by what I

saw. Immediately before me were full-scale Greek and Roman sculptures, friezes of the Parthenon, and groupings of pottery and weapons and other interesting items that were completely unfamiliar to me. Although here too the university was saving money on its power bill, the subdued lighting only served to enhance the contents of the museum, making everything appear grander and augmenting the otherworldliness of the room's ambiance.

The museum was long and narrow. At one end were several impressively large, latticed windows overlooking the black outside. The floor was tiled in muted beige, and I saw now that the ambient lighting came from rows of overhead spotlights set on low. There is a smell that belongs only in museums, places that house things from the past, and I smelled it now. It made me think of musty buildings, rusted metals, and archaeological digs in ancient lands. Like anything different from what I was used to, the unfamiliarity of it gave me a quick, sharp thrill that tickled me deep down.

Breathing in happily, I walked further into the space, admiring the collection of busts and coins and pots and pans. Then I stopped short.

I'd found the last thing I'd ever expect to find in a museum.

I heard a noise behind me.

I jumped.

My eyes were temporarily blinded by a shining light.

My skin shifted when I heard a low, hollow voice utter two words you never want to hear coming at you from the dark: "Get him."

# Chapter 4

I must have looked like a cat on newly polished marble floor. Once I got all my limbs pointed in the same direction, I peeled out of there. What the hell was going on in that museum? My brain raced as fast as my feet, trying to come up with possible answers. But my desire to get away from the creepy disembodied voice overruled everything else. I didn't dare take the time to check over my shoulder, so I could only imagine what was back there.

I made a mad dash into the dark halls outside the museum. There were only two choices for escape: straight ahead or to the right. The proverbial fork in the road. Unfortunately, there was no time to assess my options. I didn't know what lay straight ahead; right was where I'd come from. I went right.

I scrambled down one hallway, then another and another, quickly losing my bearings but not my enthusiasm for escape. Behind me I could hear the clattering footfalls of at least two, maybe three, pursuers. I was coming up to a set of stairs and screeched to a halt, like Scooby-Doo.

Up or down?

Another decision.

No time.

Footsteps getting closer.

I kept running. I turned down hallway after hallway and into narrow passageways that could have been leading me to a campus library or straight to the centre of hell for all I knew. I had no idea and at that point, I didn't much care. Somehow, the unknown in front of me seemed much preferable to the unknown behind me.

After several minutes of this, I had to stop. I needed to catch my breath. Running around this crazy maze while still cocooned in my heavy winter coat and scarf was causing me to sweat profusely. I fell against a wall and desperately tried to regulate my breathing and internal thermostat. Only then did I realize something had changed.

I could no longer hear the footsteps I'd been fleeing.

Had I lost them?

I forced myself to hold my breath and focus my ears on the sounds around me. Nothing. Only the low buzzing and humming of a building at rest.

Slowly, and with relief, I sunk to the floor. My jangling nerves and pumping leg muscles began to relax. Now I could allow my brain the time to focus on something other than escape. Jeez Louise, what had just happened to me?

The thing that had caught me by surprise in the museum was an overhead projector. Now I know most people consider overhead projectors to be ancient technology, replaced by PowerPoint and the like, but to have one in a museum for antiquities? Seemed a bit desperate to me. They had to really be hurting for display items. Or maybe their acquisitions budget for the year had been particularly pitiful.

Then I'd taken a closer look. The projector wasn't a display item at all. It had been in use. Quite recently. Right there in the museum. The machine's *Wall•E*-type head was pointed at a wall. Hanging on the wall was a large fresco, about three metres wide and two metres high, painted a vivid red. But unlike every other

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piece in the museum, this one was incomplete. A work in progress. A replica. A—dare I say it—fake.

On a table next to the projector was a book, about the size of one you'd expect to see on a coffee table. It was opened to a page displaying a glossy picture of a frieze. And guess what? It was about three metres wide and two metres high, painted a vivid red. The book's frieze, however, was covered with symbols and designs carved into the surface. The one on the wall was still blank except for its red background. Apparently the forger had yet to complete the imposter fresco with the aid of the projector.

What was going on? What had I stumbled into? My mind ran the gamut of possibilities. Was the Museum of Antiquities pulling a fast one on the public, pretending to house great works of art but actually putting up cheap replicas created under the cover of night? Or worse, was someone in the museum's employ, perhaps the curator, replicating its collection, and then selling off the originals for personal profit? If so, what would they do now that I'd seen the proof?

Chase you down a dark series of hallways to start with, Quant, that's what.

But then what?

I heard a noise.

My head jerked up.

A young woman in tight jeans and a sweater had come to an abrupt halt in front of me. She was holding a stack of books against her chest.

"Oh, good," I said, pulling myself up off the floor. "I need your he—"

"He's over here!" she screamed. "He's over here!"

I stuck out my tongue at the traitor—a move I'm not proud of—and took off for...well, somewhere other than there.

I knew I had to get out of the building. Whoever was after me likely knew the place better than I did. Once outside, I hoped, I could make it to the Babamobile and skedaddle.

After a minute I found an elevator. Renewed sounds of scurrying footsteps behind me told me I didn't have enough time to wait for it. But wherever there's an elevator, there's gotta be a set

of stairs close by. I twisted my head, and voila, there it was, only a few metres away. I descended two steps at a time, once almost losing my footing, saving myself only by hanging onto the railing. Before long I was back on the ground floor where I'd first entered the building. I looked around for a familiar landmark, but found none.

"Downstairs!" I heard a voice echo down the stairwell.

Oh shit.

Zoom, zoom. I ran.

Exit? Exit! Where's a damn exit?

I raced by a series of doors and considered trying one. Maybe I could hide in a closet or under a desk until morning. But no. It was only mid evening. The thugs behind me had all night long to search every room before students and other university types started flooding the hallways for another day of higher learning. I had to get out. Out! I wanted out!

I heard new voices. Not gangster, I-wanna-kill-Russell-Quant voices. These were the lyrical tones of young students goofing off. I headed straight for them. Two hallways later I found them. A guy and two girls having an innocent laugh. Didn't they know there was a *Bourne-Identity*-quality chase going on here?

"Outside?" I breathlessly yelled the question at them as I skidded past their wide-eyed faces.

One of the girls pointed—while the other two continued to stare—and I decided to trust her and followed the finger.

And there it was. Bright red exit sign! Hallelujah!

I burst through the door as if I'd been caught in a locked freezer all night. But in reverse. The temperature outside must have plummeted several degrees since I'd arrived on campus.

I looked around. Now where the hell was I? There were hillocks and trees and a sidewalk winding through them. I followed the Yellow Brick Road, or in this case, the White Snowy Pathway. Although I was already winded, I continued to keep a jogging pace. After a minute or so, I was beginning to recognize a bush or two. Could the parking lot be near by? I never thought I'd be happy to see my big-ass van, but right about then, I could think of no more beautiful sight.



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What I got instead was something not so pretty at all.

Rounding a snow-topped bush, I ran face first into an expansive belly.

I felt a viselike claw tighten on my jacket collar. A voice said, "That's as far as you go, Mister."

Well, at least he called me mister. That was polite. Right?

I was unceremoniously dragged back into the building from which I had just escaped. Or so I'd thought. I debated yelling for help. Sounded like a good idea.

"Help!" I screeched.

That got me a fleshy mitt clamped over my face for the remainder of the trip back into Hades.

I must have been running in circles, for although it seemed to take me eons to find the door to outside, it took me and my escort only a few minutes and one eon-length elevator ride to get back to the museum.

When we arrived, Mr. Hamhock with the generous tummy tossed me into the room like a sack of detective. I barely stopped my stumbling, tumbling momentum in time to avoid toppling into a bust perched atop a Grecian-style column.

"Watch it, you idiot!" screeched a woman's voice. "Do you know how much Constantine cost?"

Unfair question. I had an advantage. I was betting the cost was a lot less than one might think. Given that it was probably a fake. Just like the in-progress frieze I'd spied earlier.

"Who are you?" the woman demanded, her head shaking with outrage, but her pixie cut (think Halle Berry in that James Bond flick) black hair not moving an inch.

"I'm Russell Quant. Who are you?"

"What were you trying to steal? Was it the coins? What made you think you could get away with this, anyway? The door was unlocked. You must have known someone was in here."

Steal? "I wasn't trying to steal anything."

She rolled her eyes, then turned away from me toward Mr. Potato Head behind me. He'd now been joined by his cousin, Mr. Pimply Face.

"Call the cops. And get him out of my museum," she ordered,

disgusted.

Cops? Uh, wait a sec. Wasn't I the one who should be calling the cops? Shouldn't she be worried I'd reveal her forgery scam to the world?

"Lucy, no." Another man entered the room.

"Colin, this man just tried to rip off the museum."

Colin. The new guy had to be Colin Cardinale. My date for the evening, and, I hoped, my knight in shining armour come to rescue me.

He was an impressive man. Six foot three, with dark features that could best be described as devilishly handsome. Dark eyes sparkled under heavy, arched eyebrows. His nose and chin and cheeks rivalled those of the statues of Greek gods he stood next to. And he smelled really good too.

The man smiled a master-of-all-things-evil smile at my captor, showing off a wide expanse of white Chiclets teeth and a dimple in the hollow of each cheek. All that was missing were nubs of horns, which might have been covered by his generous crop of glowing, charcoal hair. I know this sounds fiendish, but in a good way. Studying him, I realized he looked a bit like a male version of my friend, Mary Quail. I wondered if he too had some Cree blood in him.

"No, Lucy, he didn't. This is Russell Quant..." he looked at me for confirmation. I nodded. He continued. "He came here to meet me."

She gave me a suspicious look through narrowed eyes. I couldn't blame her. Even so, I gave her one right back.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Quant," Cardinale said, approaching me with a big hand held out in greeting.

I shook the hand, but remained mum. No apologies accepted yet.

"I asked you to meet me here because the route to the gallery is not clearly marked yet, and not easy to find on your own. And I knew Lucy would be working late as usual."

The woman and I exchanged further mistrustful glares.

"This is Lucy Wu," he said, "the curator here at the Museum of Antiquities."

"Oh," I said to Cardinale, "I thought you were the curator."

"No, that's incorrect," Lucy quickly informed all present. "Colin is the executive director of WACS. He'll be the curator of the university's soon-to-be revealed collection of antique carpets. But that collection will be housed in the Department of Antiquities."

"Uh, isn't that right here?"

"This is the Museum of Antiquities."

Okay, well that was clear.

"Lucy, can we send Stu and Jack back to their regular duties now?" Cardinale asked, throwing the security guards a contented cat smile.

But she wasn't ready to let go of her muscle—such as it was—just yet. "Why did you run?" she demanded. "If you didn't mean to steal anything, why did you run?"

Good point. I was guessing that the answer "If I'm being chased, I run;" wasn't going to suffice.

I threw a pointed look at the overhead projector, and the fake frieze on the wall in front of it.

Lucy's and Cardinale's eyes moved to the suspicious set-up. Then, in the instant before coming back to me, I caught them sharing an ever-so-quick smile. Lucy gave the guards a dismissive wave. As the two men left without so much as a "toodles," I fought the temptation to call them back. Even though I'd been running away from them only minutes ago, I was beginning to wonder if I would be better off with the goons present. As witnesses against these two curator types.

I assessed my potential foes. Even though Cardinale was big, and I was guessing Lucy Wu could hold her own in a fight, I was pretty certain I could take them down. Unless they had hidden weapons somewhere nearby.

After the boys left, Lucy stepped closer to the forged fresco. "It's going to be lovely, isn't it?" she asked, her voice growing gentler.

I eyed the woman closely. Was she the scariest of all criminals? The kind so confident in the success of their scheme, they gaze upon flies in their ointment (i.e. me) with apparent calm polite-

ness, a disguise for sneering contempt.

"Yes," I said slowly. "I suppose it will be. But a replica is never as lovely as what it pretends to be, is it?" I could do contemptuous too.

She gave me a strange look. "I disagree with you, Mr. Quant. Quite vehemently, in fact."

I shrugged. I looked at Cardinale, then back at Lucy. Okay, kids, show me what ya got. I'm ready for it. Is it guns? A knife? Or did they have their own band of thieving merry men ready to come out of the shadows and attack me?

Instead, Lucy kept talking. "If it wasn't for the pursuits of this museum, Mr. Quant, most of our students would never have had the opportunity to appreciate and study the artistic accomplishments of the world's major civilizations. You must know that examples of classical art are, quite simply, unavailable to us at the U of S, either because of their price or because they are priceless. This museum of replicas allows us visual encounters with ancient art that would otherwise be impossible without spending the vast sums of money and time that would be necessary to visit the originals in distant countries. If the originals even exist any longer."

"What?" I exclaimed, my eyes taking another trip around the room. Suddenly I saw things quite differently. The musty odour of ancient treasure I thought I was enjoying earlier was nothing more than the smell of plaster cast and glue, I now realized. "You mean all of this...*everything* in here is a replica?"

"Pretty much."

I don't often get to say this, but I think it is fair to say I was agog.

"This museum is unique in Canada..." Cardinale began.

I'll say.

"...in that it houses replicas of very carefully selected important works of ancient art. Many of the pieces were obtained from the *Atelier de Moulages*—the castings workshop—of the Louvre in Paris."

I had to admit that did sound remarkable.

Lucy carried on. "These are meticulous reproductions, cast from moulds of the originals. All the colours are the same. The

textures are identical. Our pieces were created by experts, replica and technical artists, who pride themselves on the fact that their work can withstand very close comparison with the originals. What we have here, Mr. Quant, quite simply put, is astounding. Not only are University of Saskatchewan students given the rare opportunity to study and research great works of art from the comfort, ease, and affordability of their own home city, but the general public too is afforded the chance to see famous and beautiful works of art, right here in their very own backyard."

I had to give Lucy Wu credit for her enthusiasm. Whoever hired her knew what they were doing.

"What you see in front of you," she held out a hand toward the red frieze, "is another of these incredible creations. You have the unique opportunity of seeing its genesis. Some day you will come to the museum, see the completed piece, and never know the difference from the photograph from which it is being copied. And you should know, even this, this reproduction, is not inexpensive, in terms of both time and money, Mr. Quant. We are very fortunate to finally have enough money in the budget for this particular piece. It will be a stunning addition when it is completed."

I stepped closer to the red fresco. Even in its incomplete state, it was already taking on a look of something artistically remarkable. They had me convinced. Apparently I hadn't stumbled upon some sort of elaborate art forgery scheme after all.

Drat. All my caper-worthy scampering about had been for nothing. They weren't chasing me because I'd caught them replicating art, they were chasing me because they thought I wanted to steal it.

This was not an episode I'd include in my memoirs, *The Great Adventures of Russell Quant, Prairie PI*.

I turned to face Cardinale. "And the rugs that Neil Gupta went to Dubai to buy, are they replicas too?"

He shot a quick glance at Lucy. I had no idea how much Lucy Wu did or did not know about Neil Gupta's death and his parents' plan to send me to Dubai to investigate it. But my question hadn't revealed anything someone in the employ of the university shouldn't reasonably know. Still, Cardinale was giving me a

subtle hint that I'd best not say too much in front of the museum's curator.

"No," Cardinale answered. "The carpets that will become part of our permanent display will be the real thing."

Lucy sniffed, as if a bit put out. "A benefactor of the Department of Antiquities, a former professor, is the only reason this has become even remotely financially possible. For the department to acquire an *original* collection," she added with a hint of generosity, "is quite a coup, for sure."

"But the rugs will be displayed somewhere other than here in the museum?" I asked.

Lucy Wu recognized my confusion and explained: "This museum is predominately used and supported by the Departments of Classics, History, and Art. All quite separate from the Department of Antiquities."

I didn't quite see the distinction, but whatever.

"The museum's collection was also born of the generosity of private benefactors, but this space belongs to the University of Saskatchewan in its entirety."

Cardinale continued. "The Department of Antiquities, however, has not had its own dedicated display area. Until now that is. It's rather exciting. Quite a major milestone for the department and the university. To have originals, obtained by U of S scholars, for a collection exclusive to the U of S, is an amazing luxury."

I made appropriate sounds.

"A separate gallery, specifically for this collection, has been painstakingly designed and under construction for the past two years. I probably don't have to tell you, Russell, that it was this collection and its planned unveiling during the symposium that was the major winning point in the university's bid to host this year's WACS. Without it, I doubt the symposium would have ever come to Saskatoon. With this collection, the University of Saskatchewan, and Saskatoon itself, have finally earned a place on the map, as far as the world of carpet antiquities is concerned."

Cardinale bestowed a handsome smirk on his colleague. "But we've taken up enough of Lucy's time. I apologize for the confusion. I obviously should have told you about Russell's arrival."

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"Yes," she agreed. "You should have." After a short hesitation, she added, "But I must say, that was the most excitement we've had here at the museum in quite some time."

Cardinale smiled and placed a firm hand at my back, directing me toward the exit.

I said farewell to the Rosetta Stone, Venus de Milo, the panel from the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, and my favourite, the pudgy *Child and Goose*, and departed the Museum of Antiquities.

Colin Cardinale wordlessly led me down several dark, silent hallways (enough with the hallways, already). We eventually reached a stone archway, draped with what looked like an unused artist's canvas. He pulled it aside and motioned for me to enter before him. I did so, finding myself in yet another display space. But here the lighting was at full wattage. Although the room was massive, three times the size of the Museum of Antiquities, it was made smaller by a litter of boxes and crates, large tube-shaped items I took to be carpets rolled in heavy plastic, and an eclectic selection of metal and plastic contraptions that I guessed would some day become units used to display carpets to their best advantage.

Before leaving my office for my meeting with Colin Cardinale, I'd done some research on the guy. A detective can never have enough information. Prior to accepting the dual position of Executive Director of the WACS and curator for the permanent display of antique carpets soon arriving in Saskatoon, Colin Cardinale had had a distinguished career. He'd held numerous curator positions, moving through the ranks from local and provincial art galleries to national and world-class museums and exhibit spaces, and before that a charitable organization or two. When I first discovered his position as WACS ED was a two-year term, I have to admit, I'd shaken my head. Two years? Just to bring a few rolls of musty old carpet to town for a long weekend so a few musty old carpet enthusiasts could ooh and ahh over them? Seemed a touch excessive to me. But then again, what did I know? Nothing really. This was not my world. I was slowly coming to understand that this was a much bigger deal than I could



have imagined.

"What is all this stuff?" I asked, as Colin and I strolled companionably amongst the large containers and mishmash of museum rubble.

"The beginning of something extraordinary," he told me, his voice smooth as silk. "As you likely know, before his death, Neil Gupta had spent a good part of the last six months sourcing, negotiating for, and procuring items for our collection. Many of them are already here, most of them actually. But there are still a few pieces, important pieces, that he had yet to arrange for."

"Seems kind of tight, doesn't it? Isn't the symposium in less than two weeks?"

The man smiled his snake charmer smile. "Yes. You're very right, Russell. It is. But I long ago stopped working myself into a lather, worrying about it. In some cases, I've come to learn, this is simply how business is done in Arabia. The idea that the carpets would arrive only at the last minute is somehow a thrilling proposition for some of the merchants we are dealing with. It's too complicated to attempt a reasonable explanation in our short time together. Regardless," he said with a practiced sigh, "we'd accepted that there would be several carpets that would arrive only upon Neil's return to Saskatchewan, immediately prior to the conference, or, at best, only days before."

"I see. Frustrating, I'm sure."

"To say the least. Of course, the pressure is particularly high because we want these specific carpets in our possession and ready for viewing during the WACS. Fortunately, we'll be able to enjoy rather less anxiety and stress with our future buying excursions."

"There's more?" I asked, taking in the already impressive piles of materials for the new gallery. "Are there any carpets left out there?"

He laughed a light laugh. "Oh, more than a few. As you might have guessed, our focus for the inaugural opening of the collection during WACS will be Middle Eastern carpets. And even at that, we're very light in the area of Arabian camel carpets and Bedouin mats. Beyond that, there are incredible specimens in a



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great many parts of the world, Russell. American Indian rugs, Armenian, Baluch rugs, Caucasian rugs, Karakalpak rugs, Kurdish, Tibetan. The list is truly nearly inexhaustible.

"I don't know how educated you are about ancient and antique carpets, Russell. But if you're anything like me, you've likely felt woefully ignorant and intimidated by all there is to learn."

I gulped. If this guy was feeling inadequate about how much he knew about rugs, I was in what my Grandma Wistonchuk used to call "big kaka."

"I don't really know much about carpets at all, actually," I admitted with a wan smile, "other than that I can absolutely tell a Berber from a shag."

Cardinale's ever-present smile suddenly faded.

Uh oh.

I jumped for the second—or was it third—time that evening, when Colin Cardinale's fist crashed down atop the nearest wooden crate.

# Chapter 5

“Damn! I told both Unnati and Pranav that if they were going to go ahead with this hare-brained scheme, they needed to find someone who knows what he’s doing.”

I know what I’m doing.

Most of the time.

Even so, I knew this was a good time to stay silent and listen. I could defend myself later.

“Some of these carpet merchants may seem like they’re simply satisfied to sell their wares to the richest North American buyer at the table. But it’s not a game. Not at the level we’re playing at. These are serious negotiations. These are serious people. And believe me, we’re not the only ones in the market anxious to buy what they’re offering. If they get even the slightest sniff that you don’t know what you’re talking about, or they just don’t like you, they’ll think nothing of stiffing you and selling to a competitor.”

How could they not like me?

“This is about much more than buying and selling a few

pieces of carpet. It's about more than who is offering the most money. It's about sharing their culture, their art, and, through it, themselves with the rest of the world. These merchants must be treated with respect, and their carpets faithfully placed in the hands of someone they trust. Someone who will treat their works of art with as much care and reverence as they do. How on earth do you expect to do that, Mr. Quant?"

It was Mr. Quant again. He was not a happy curator.

"Do you even know what the Pazyryk Carpet is? What about the Fostat Carpet? Do you know about the Mori technique? The Persian knot? How to spot a tea wash?"

I stood there with no particular look on my face. I was waiting for Cardinale to let it all out. Besides, I really only understood every other word he said. To make things interesting while I waited, I found it rather curious to watch the changes in this man. So well put together and calm and collected earlier, he was beginning to unravel just a bit, like a wayward thread from a corner of the Pazyryk Carpet perhaps. There, at least I'd used it in a sentence.

"Well, do you?"

I guessed it was my turn. I shook my head. "Nope. I don't know a Persian knot from a sailor's knot. I promise you I'll be doing some studying over the next couple of days, and during the long flights east. But let me reassure you, Mr. Cardinale, I won't be alone in this. The Guptas have arranged for me to take along their niece, Hema, who is—"

Cardinale's face began to change, reverting to its composed, suave Satan status. "Oh. I wasn't made aware of this. I know Hema, of course. She is very knowledgeable. Not to speak ill of the dead, but perhaps more so than Neil in many ways. She will be accompanying you?"

"More than that," I told him. "Although I will be Neil's official replacement as far as the University of Dubai is concerned, Hema will be the one actually making all the decisions relating to the carpet negotiations and purchases. I will be busy enough looking into Neil's death."

"Hmmm," Cardinale let out a huff of breath. "It's not perfect, I suppose. But preferable to the alternative."

The alternative being carpet-dummy me running around Arabia with a blank cheque, buying up rugs for his precious collection. His reluctance was understandable, I suppose.

Cardinale pulled an envelope from his suit's breast pocket and handed it to me.

"Neil's itinerary for the next two weeks. You may ignore the references to lectures he was to deliver. Those have all been cancelled or assigned to other scholars."

I nodded, opening the envelope and studying its contents.

"I've also attached a list of names of carpet merchants and liaisons Neil was dealing with, or expected to deal with, in procuring the remaining pieces."

I found the listing, complete with names, dates, and locations of marketplaces. It all looked rather overwhelming at the outset. But I was sure it would make sense once I studied the documents more closely.

"Liaisons?" I questioned the term.

"Many of the latest deals Neil was brokering were at the initial bargaining stages only. Much of the important carpet trade in Arabia occurs by way of word-of-mouth, carried out by trusted liaisons. References as to your character, and the perceived seriousness of your intent as a purchaser, are passed on from one liaison to another. These people are often relatives or close business associates of the actual carpet owner. Often you won't even meet the owner, or see the carpet in question, until you've been properly vetted by the liaisons. This can take minutes, days, or weeks. For our sake, and yours, the former is preferable."

This sounded wonky to me. "How do you even know you want to buy a carpet if you haven't even seen it?"

Cardinale laughed. "By reputation. By rumour. By insinuation."

Oh good golly Miss Molly.

"Are you certain you're up to this, Russell?"

Russell again.

I nodded. "I'm up for anything."

"That's good," he said with arched brow. "Almost anything is exactly what you should expect."

It was late, cold, dark, Monday—yecch all around—when I steered the Babamobile into the back lane that leads to the garage at the back of my yard. Pulling up, I hit the button for the automatic door and noticed she'd arrived.

The babysitter.

The lights were on in the rooms above the garage. I used to think of them as extra storage rooms. But a few years ago they officially became "the granny suite." The "granny" in question being my mother, Kay Quant née Wistonchuk.

With my next door neighbour, Sereena, out of town, and Errall soon to be, I was reluctantly down to number three on the list of those who could take care of my pooches while I was away. It was only recently that Mom had become free and willing to do so, and then only during the winter months.

For most of her life, Mom was the proud keeper of a cornucopia of farm animals: chickens, pigs, cats, a dog, geese, a milk cow, and one very rude donkey. But we'd finally convinced her that, at almost seventy, she could probably forego the butchering, milking, and egg-collecting activities necessary to procure her daily meals from her own stock. Now the herd had been whittled down to the domestics—or nearly. And so, although in the summer she still insisted on tending her excessively huge yard and beautiful flower garden, in winter, with the help of a neighbour to check in on the dog and cats, she could spend time away from the farm. I'd made the phone call to Mom after being turned down by Errall. Although I wasn't leaving for a couple of days, she'd readily agreed and decided to drive down to Saskatoon immediately. I think she got a little bored in the winter, with no yard to care for and so few animals around. She'd never admit to it, but I think she looked forward to a few days in the big city every now and again. She'd scoff at the fancy stores and restaurants, question my choice of career and clothing, and wonder why I had wine and pâté and tiny jars of chutney and Kir-soaked cherries in my refrigerator rather than whole milk, bacon slabs, and bricks of butter. But deep down, I think the experience titillated her, and it gave

her good stories with which to entertain her less-well-travelled lady friends at home. My mother is a simple woman, but who doesn't want to play queen-of-the-manor every once in a while?

I knew that no matter how much I urged the Babamobile's motor to be quiet about it, when I pulled into the garage my mother would hear my arrival. And I know a good son would have gone straight up to say hello, but I was bagged. To relieve my pangs of guilt, I promised the universe that I'd take my mother out for lunch tomorrow and catch up then.

Before going inside, I rounded the house via a path the width of a snow shovel. I made my way into the front yard, then out the gate onto the street, where I knew Mom would have parked. For a moment I stood there, frozen to the spot, horrified by what I saw.

My mother and I were driving the same vehicle.

Her van sat there, mocking me, telling me and the world that the nearly identical van I'd just left behind in the garage was irrefutable proof that I was turning into my mother: a sixty-nine-year-old, Ukrainian farm woman.

Not that there's anything wrong with being a sixty-nine-year-old, Ukrainian farm woman. I just didn't want to be one.

I debated leaving the cruel van to freeze to its death. But that was no good. I'd be the one having to haul my mother around town if her own vehicle didn't start in the morning. Grudgingly, I found the van's block heater cord near the bottom of the grill, and plugged it into one end of the cord I'd brought with me. I then threaded the bright orange extension to an outlet at the front of the house. I returned to the van and cocked my head over the hood. I heard the telltale hum, letting me know the heater was running and protecting the engine from turning into a block of ice overnight.

That done, I raced around to the backyard and entered the house through the kitchen doors at the rear. At first I wondered why Barbra and Brutus were not there to greet me, as was their usual routine. But of course, why would they be? All I had to offer was water and dry kibble for their late supper. Mom had likely already fed them twice since arriving. At least one of those meals

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would have included something creamy, something meaty, and something warmed up in the oven. As far as Mom was concerned, my insistence on feeding my dogs a diet of high quality, heart-healthy, and freakily expensive dry dog food bordered on animal abuse. There was no confusion as to why, when Mom was in town, Barbra and Brutus barely noticed I was alive. They were like doggie junkies, each day growing more glassy-eyed and lethargic, antsy for their next dose of morsels from Mom's personal pantry of goodies she'd brought straight from the farm.

Was I insane? What was I thinking, leaving Mom to care for them while I was away for the next several days? Maybe I should reconsider Alberta's offer? What was worse? Leaving my schnauzers to be yoga trained and spiritually enhanced, or fed to the point of explosion?

I concluded it was best to go with the devil I knew. I didn't turn out so bad, despite my own cinnamon-bun-a-day-keeps-the-doctor-away childhood.

After shedding my coat, I put on the kettle and trudged into the bedroom. While hot water filled my oversize Jacuzzi tub, I stripped, snuggled into a thick, navy blue bathrobe, and brushed my teeth. I tossed some seaweed salts that came from the Dead Sea (a claim made on the bottle I'd decided to believe was true), and just a tad too much plumeria-scented bubble bath into the water. Back in the living room, I turned on the Old Time Standards satellite station, and pushed the right buttons so the music would stream through my bedroom speakers. By then, the kettle was whistling its insistent tune. I fixed myself a steaming mug of Darjeeling, spiked with a touch of honey, a shot of amber rum, and a dash of Cointreau.

Returning to the bedroom with my tea toddy, my bath was just about ready. I tossed aside my bathrobe and gave myself a quick once-over in the full-length.

Forty was still at bay (barely), and my body seemed to be holding up okay. After the scare with the matching vans, I was a little spooked. Maybe I'd physically turned into my mother too—short and stocky, a figure made for thick nylons and flowery aprons.

I ran my hand through thick hair, still pleasantly sandy, with just a hint of...not sandy. Thanks to good genes, I was betting I'd have a full head of it 'til my last day. Assessing my six-foot frame, I was pleased to see that the few pounds I'd recently lost were nowhere to be found. The loss, I swore, was the direct result of a regular and vigorous sex life. After a ridiculously energetic and enthusiastic first few months of new-couplehood lovemaking, Ethan and I had finally settled into a more sustainable routine of two or three times a week, with another two or three times on the weekend. Who needs a good diet when you have a good boyfriend?

Most of the weight seemed to have dropped from my face. The result was an extra tightness around my jaw, and a bit of a hollow at the cheeks, that gave me a more serious look. A regular gym routine, which I disliked but had come to accept—along with shaving, taking out the garbage, and paying taxes—gave me a firmly muscled physique that sometimes came in handy in my line of work. And, last but not least, I shifted around for a look at the caboose. Still in place, high and proud.

All physical attributes accounted for and assessed a passing grade, I retrieved my book—a Michael Thomas Ford hardcover—from the bedside table, turned on the tub's jets, and lowered myself into the bubbling water with an orgasmic sigh.

But before I could fully give in to my little bit of heaven, I had one last duty. Using a remote, I activated my telephone message manager. With a sip of tea, I put my head back, closed my eyes, and listened to the report.

"Hi, hon." Ethan. "Sorry I missed your call earlier, but Edda had one of her 'spells' today."

I knew what that meant. Every so often, Edda, a longtime resident of Ash House, proclaimed that she'd lost the use of her limbs. This necessitated a great deal of personal attention, hand-holding, and to-and-fro'ing with meals, hand mirrors, barrettes for her hair, books, and whatever else she simply couldn't do without that day. The doctors agreed there was absolutely nothing was wrong with her and she shouldn't be encouraged.

"Anyway, she's fine now," Ethan continued. "When she heard



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we were having crème caramel for dessert, she even made it down the stairs after dinner. She still doesn't trust the elevator. Are you staying in town tonight or coming out here?"

I grimaced and remembered Ethan hadn't been on my list of babysitters for Barbra and Brutus. Why? Because I hadn't yet told him I was going away. I needed time to come up with the right words. And I didn't want to do it over the phone. He'd be worried about me. He'd come around. And then of course he'd offer to take care of the dogs. But with it being winter, having a full house of residents, a teenaged daughter, and two dogs of his own to take care of, I would feel guilty giving him two more mouths to feed and look after. (Even though Barbra and Brutus were the best dogs in the world and really no problem at all.)

"Love you," his sweet voice chirped. "Hopefully I'll see you later tonight. If not, give me a call when you get in. Oh, Simon wanted me to tell you she aced her exam today. Bye, sweetheart."

Sigh. He's so dreamy.

The next two messages were quick hellos from friends: Jessica in Edmonton, Paul and Jan in Whitefish. Then came Anthony, who'd certainly wasted no time collecting information for me about Neil Gupta.

"Puppy, I hope you're free tomorrow morning. Neil Gupta's boyfriend, or maybe ex-boyfriend—that isn't quite clear to me—has agreed to see you then. His name is Darrell Good. You may recognize the name? His father is Darrell Good, Senior, the proprietor of Good Auto in the Auto Mall. Powerful man around town. Anyway, Darrell works there with his father. He says if you come by in the morning before it gets busy, say about ten, he'd be willing to talk with you. Seemed rather keen to do so actually. Hope this helps. Hugs."

The final call was from my client's wife, Unnati Gupta. "Mr. Quant? My husband tells me I should provide you with some study materials. I have two volumes on antique carpets. You should find them quite helpful. With preparations for the symposium, I have a very busy schedule in and out of my office these days. So it is no use for you to come to the university. Tomorrow I will be at Teachers Credit Union Place working on arrange-

ments. Is there a place we could meet downtown, perhaps during the lunch break? These are valuable books, and I'd prefer to hand them to you in person. Please call."

She left a phone number. It was too late to call her now. I'd do it in the morning.

I picked up the handset I'd brought with me, and dialled Ethan's number. He answered after three rings. He sounded a bit tired but happy to hear from me.

"Sounds like you had quite the day," I said.

"Edda had quite the day. My job was to help her through it, the poor dear."

"You spoil that woman."

"At ninety-three, she deserves every bit of it."

"Do you promise to do the same for me when I'm a doddering old coot, demanding you soften my crackers and give me sex in my wheelchair?"

I heard him guffaw at the other end of the line. "Oooo, I didn't know this was going to be that kind of phone call. Hold on while I slip off my pajama bottoms."

"As if you ever wear pajamas to bed."

"How do you know what I do when you're not here? For all you know, I could be lying here with cold cream on my face and curlers in my hair just so I can look nice for you."

"More like overnight bronzer and hair sparkles," I shot back.

We laughed.

"Speaking of being in bed, does this phone call mean you're not sharing mine tonight?"

Suddenly my tea and bath seemed much cooler. I wanted to be warm and cuddly next to Ethan.

"How about dinner tomorrow night at my place?" I offered. "Just you and me." And my mother over the garage.

"I can't wait," he murmured. "Now tell me, are you wearing pajama bottoms?"

The Saskatoon Auto Mall, on the southern outskirts of the city, is a relatively new, multi-dealership, one-stop shop for all things car,

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truck, or recreational vehicle. I headed out there Tuesday morning after a couple more hours online researching my upcoming travels. The day was bright and shiny. Powerful rays of sun ricocheted off hoods and roofs of all the new and used vehicles, sitting in their lots like row after row of metallic puppies, waiting patiently for a new owner.

I pulled up in the Babamobile, next to the gleaming Good Auto building on Brand Court. From what I could tell, they mostly handled Pontiac and Buick products, as well as the dramatically brutish yet handsome Hummers. I hopped out of the van, and was immediately approached by a salesperson. I had to give the guy credit, strolling the lot on a minus-twenty-five-degrees-Celsius day.

He patted the side of the van as if it were a trusty old steed. "Time to trade in the old girl?" he asked with a chummy smile.

I frowned. "Ah, no." Although I dearly wished I could answer in the affirmative. "I'm looking for Darrell Good."

"Oh sure," he said. "Both Darrells are inside. Where I'm going to be pretty soon," he added, rubbing his gloved hands together for warmth. "Just ask anybody; they can point the one you want out to you."

I walked into the showroom and fell in love. There, in the centre of the room, sunlight lovingly caressing its curves, was a jaunty, two-seater convertible. It was a rich, dark green, the kind I've always associated with MG roadsters racing through the English countryside. I was drawn to it like sand to ocean. Like gin to tonic. Like cheese to crackers.

"Gotta love that curvaceous body," came a man's voice behind me. I'd smelled his heavy Tom Ford cologne first. "A powerful front-mounted engine, rear-wheel drive, fully independent suspension, big wheels and tires, and a close-to-perfect weight balance. She's got a one-seven-seven-horsepower inline-four, zero to sixty in eight seconds."

None of that meant a thing to me. My relationship with cars has little to do with what's under the hood. Sure, I like something powerful and reliable, that sounds sexy when you turn the key. But my love came from somewhere more visceral. Every car has

something to say. And this one was screaming: dump the mini-van, take me home!

"When the top is dropped, the tunes are up, and you're on a twisty road, there is nothing like this car," the guy informed me. "Except maybe a Miata. But you're going to like the price of the Solstice much better. We've got it in Brazen—metallic orange—and Cool—metallic silver, too."

"What's this colour called?" I asked in a hypnotic monotone.

"Envious."

Green with envy. Cute.

"I like the green."

"It's my favourite, too."

How'd I know he'd say that? The spell was broken. I turned to face the salesperson. "Actually, I'm looking for Darrell Good, Junior."

"You found him. I'm Darrell." He held out his hand. "What can I do for you...?"

"Russell, Russell Quant," I told him as we shook.

"Oh, you're Anthony Gatt's friend. He told me you'd be stopping by." He glanced at the car. "I guess you're not really interested in the Solstice then?"

"Interested, yes," I answered. "In the market? Sadly no."

He glanced around the showroom as if looking for someone. "Listen," he said, holding out one hand in the direction of a glassed-in office at the far end of the room. "Why don't we talk in my office? Can I get you some coffee, or something else to drink?"

I declined and allowed myself to be herded into the man's office.

Darrell Good looked pleasant enough. He was exceedingly pale, a little on the too-thin side for my taste, with fine, near-blond hair modestly styled, trendy glasses, and an expensive suit. When we were seated around his office desk, he quickly checked something on his computer screen while I took off my coat and scarf. After he was finished with the computer, he took another gander around the sales floor before turning his full attention to me.

"I know you're a private detective, hired by Neil's father to look into his death," he said, getting right to business. "But that's

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about all I know. Anthony said you'd fill me in on the rest."

That wasn't exactly true. I had no intention of filling Darrell in on anything other than what I needed him to know in order to get him to talk to me. And that, it seemed, had already been accomplished. "Yes," I said with a nod. "I'm leaving for Dubai tomorrow. I understand from Anthony that you and Neil had been dating?"

"I guess you could call it that," he said with a head bob, a circumspect look on his face. "It's more than that, really. Or, it *was*, I guess I should say. We kinda broke up before he left Saskatoon."

"Kinda?"

"It's a long story."

I stayed silent.

Good's anxious eyes made another hurried search outside his office. Was he checking for unattended customers? Keeping an eye on staff? Or was it something else? "We'd been together a little over a year when Neil got the position in Dubai," he said when he was done. "I don't even think he really wanted it at first. But his stepmother pressured him into it. Anyway, after that, things started to go downhill for us. I mean, how could we realistically expect to keep up a relationship without seeing each other for six months? And it wasn't as if he was going to come home once a month or anything like that. Once he was there, he was staying. Any time off he had from his responsibilities at the university, he would be using to shop for these carpets they were all so gaga over. The only way we could possibly work was if I went with him. At least for a while. But that wasn't going to happen."

"Oh?" I expected Darrell Good to say he'd been scared off by the reputation of the Middle East as being considerably less than gay-friendly. Instead, I heard something quite different.

"No way. My dad would never let that happen."

I studied Darrell Good's face closer. Yup, I was right the first time. He was no longer a teenager. Far from it. If I were to guess, he had to be in his mid- to late-twenties. So why was he talking about his father as if he were twelve?

"The Middle East? As a gay man? Visiting another gay man? Are you kidding me? According to Dad, that was asking for trouble. No way he'd let me go. And, of course, the timing was bad

too. Dad and Mom head to Arizona every fall, until well after Christmas. If I went with Neil, there'd be no one left to look after the business. Dad and Neil even had a big fight about it. But, well, my dad's never met a fight he doesn't win—one way or another. So we broke up. Neil went without me."

"I'm sorry. That must have been very difficult for you." You big wuss.

"Yeah, it was. And now, after what's happened, Dad is really lording it over me. Him and Mom just got back a couple of weeks ago. He walks around here spending half his time telling me how right he was and all. He doesn't even care that Neil is dead. All he cares about is being right."

You must *really* need this job, I thought to myself. Why else would you put up with that kind of abuse?

"Your father and Neil didn't get along then?"

Good shrugged. "They didn't really know each other. I mean Neil came to a few family functions, but Dad never spent much time with him. It was just that kind of thing."

"I understand." I sort of did. "Darrell, do you know if Neil was at all concerned himself about going to the Middle East because he was gay?" If Pranav Gupta was right about the killing being motivated by homophobia, I wanted to assess if Neil's own view of the situation could have been a contributing factor.

"He wasn't scared," he answered without hesitation. "Not Neil. He was fearless. About most things. He was all excited to go...once the decision was made for him. Like I said, I don't think it was his idea at first. But he went along with it. He was a good sport that way. And, I suppose, he was interested in all that old historic stuff. He spent a lot of time at work, studying up about old rugs and shit. I didn't really get it." He tried a smile. "I don't even get involved in the pre-owned part of my dad's business. It's new cars for me, all the way."

I smiled back.

After a beat, Good said, "I didn't want him to go." Another pause, then, "I actually begged a little," he admitted. "We had a good thing. I really think I was starting to fall in love with the guy. We got along great. He was funny. Carefree. A great cook, too. All

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the things I'm not.

"I certainly couldn't go. But, y'know, I know now, Neil couldn't not go. It was complicated. There were so many things going on. It was all about furthering his career, his relationship with his step-mother, self-esteem issues, and lots of other stuff too. But I didn't think about all that. I was only thinking about us. About me. And I made a big mistake."

Yum. Admissions of mistakes are like candy to a detective. "Oh? What mistake was that?"

"I gave him an ultimatum. I told him it was me or the Middle East. That turned into this big dramatic scene. You can guess how it went. And, of course, he picked the Middle East. So we were done. And now he's dead."

I heard a catch in Good's voice. He was trying to be Mr. Tough Guy but not doing too good a job of it. He looked down, swallowed hard, then resumed. "I'm so pissed at him for going. And sad too. And mad that they made him go. It's crazy, y'know. I just...I just don't know what to feel. And ever since I heard about Neil, I haven't been able to sell a car to save my life."

I saw the other man's eyes travel to the windows at my back and freeze. This time I had a pretty good idea of what he was looking for: the watchful, disapproving eyes of his father. I turned in my seat. And there he was. Darrell Good, Senior. Although the colouring was the same—blond hair, pale skin—that's where the father-son resemblance ended. Whereas junior was thin and graceful, senior was big and bulky, like a Saskatchewan Roughriders football player. His nose looked a bit off-kilter, as if it might have been broken a time or two. He wore a pair of khakis and a golf shirt with the Good Auto logo emblazoned across his broad chest. Darrell Good, Senior was at the other side of the showroom, chatting with a customer, but his pale eyes reached into his son's office with little effort. The look didn't last long. It didn't need to. I turned around. Junior's face was stern and drained of what little colour had been there. The man may have been in his mid-twenties, but he was still a boy.

"When's the last time you saw or spoke to Neil?" I asked, hoping to pull the guy out of his preoccupation with what his father



was thinking.

"Saw? Well, I didn't even see him off at the airport when he left six months ago. The relationship was over, and the breakup was too fresh and raw for me to even say goodbye. Besides, I was needed here at the shop. We had a big promotion going on."

Ah, geez.

"But about two months into his stint over there, I got a call from Neil. We started talking again. Before I knew it, we were exchanging emails several times a week."

My ears were humming. This was good. "What did you talk about in these emails?"

"Oh, everything, nothing. You know how it goes. Neil was really enjoying his work over there. Things were going really well. I guess he was finding all these old carpets. That excited him. He was particularly excited about this one rug he'd found. He said it was going to shake up the world of rugs." Good chuckled at that. "Can you imagine anyone getting excited about some dirty old carpets? But I listened to it all. It was just nice to be in contact with him again. I'd missed him. We even talked about getting back together again. But I didn't know about that. He never told me so, but I suspected he was seeing someone over there. And hey, that was okay with me. We were broken up. I was kinda seeing someone at the time too."

"Neil had a boyfriend in Dubai?"

"Well, I don't know that for sure. He never wanted to admit to it, y'know. I don't know if it was because of the whole gay-hating environment he was in, or just that he thought it would hurt my feelings. But he mentioned this one guy quite a bit, especially in his emails."

"What was his name?"

"Fahd something or other."

I'd have to check when I got home, but I was pretty sure that was one of the liaison names on the itinerary I'd gotten from Colin Cardinale.

"I don't know if Fahd was his last name or first name."

"And you're sure this was the name of a boyfriend?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm not. You know how it is with





# Chapter 6

"You think Neil might have been scared of this Fahd person?" I asked Darrell Good.

"Maybe," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I mean, I don't even know why I just said that. It just came to me. It must be something about the way he talked about Fahd in his emails."

"Can you think of anything specific? Anything Neil might have written to you that made you think that?"

He slowly shook his head. "I'd have to think about that, look back at some of the emails."

I did my best to control my excitement. "You've saved your emails?"

"Well, not really. But the last several would still be in my program's deleted messages file."

"Could I see those emails?" I asked as calmly as I could. Seeing correspondence from Neil Gupta in the days leading up to his death could be very useful.

"Uh, I suppose so. I don't really have time to look for them

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right now. But I could maybe do it later today. Is this really important? These were personal emails. I don't want to just put them out there for everyone to see."

"Please, Mr. Good, don't worry about that. I will treat them with complete confidence and respect. I don't know if they'll help me find out anything about Neil's death, but it's worth a try, don't you think?" In his own way, Darrell Good did love Neil Gupta. I was counting on that to get his help.

He hesitated, then said, "I suppose. But I don't know if they'll do you any good. I mean I've read them. Nothing really weird jumped out at me."

And that, I wanted to say (but didn't), is why I am a detective, and you are not.

After a few more questions that revealed little else, I gave Good my email address so he could forward me the messages between him and Neil Gupta. Stepping out of the office, I felt the pale, grey eyes of Good, Senior land upon me. Like a hawk, that guy. As I hurried through the showroom, fastening my winter accoutrements, I shot the Envious green Solstice one last lingering look of lust. Outside, my matronly, burgundy minivan awaited me.

I was leaving for Dubai in less than forty-eight hours. I had much to do before I left, and too little time to do it in. So I decided to kill two birds with one stone. I'd arranged to meet Unnati Gupta at Colourful Mary's at eleven-thirty so she could deliver my "study" materials. She was going to be downtown anyway, dealing with arrangements for the symposium being held at the conference centre, Teachers Credit Union Place (sometimes known as TCUP—teacup—for short.) Then my mother was to join me at twelve for our welcome-to-town lunch.

Colourful Mary's is a restaurant-slash-bookstore owned by my friends Mary Quail and Marushka Yabadochka. Its well-earned reputation for fabulous food, much of it influenced by the Aboriginal and Ukrainian (respectively) heritage of the couple, is enhanced by the owners' predilection for redecoration. At

Christmastime the eatery becomes a yuletide wonderland. Hallowe'en might see the place transformed into a forbidding dungeon. During the annual Jazz Festival, it's a New Orleans speakeasy. Other times the decor simply reflects a particular season, culture, country, or whatever theme happens to strike Mary and Marushka's fancy. It was marketing genius, really. Each new creation brought with it hordes of new customers to see what all the fuss was about, and old customers returning to check out the redecoration. From there came even more publicity and never-to-be-underestimated word of mouth. More than once, their efforts have been showcased in the local press.

I hadn't been to Colourful Mary's since they'd pulled down their holiday baubles, so I was looking forward to seeing what they'd come up with for the rest of the winter. I found a parking spot only half a block away. As I walked the short distance to the front entrance, I saw that, once again, they'd outdone themselves. Somehow or other—no doubt thanks to lesbians with tools—the facade of the restaurant had been mocked up to look like a log cabin or rustic ski lodge. Stepping inside, the aromas of cinnamon, mulled wine, and hot chocolate battled for supremacy. Just perfect for an icy January day. Burly-looking wooden beams had been attached to the ceiling, from which were hung swags of pine branches and acorns. The walls were adorned with every type of wintertime sports equipment you could imagine: from skis to snowshoes, snowboards to ice skates. Draped over every free surface were thick, cozy blankets, colourful scarves, and heavy, hand-knitted sweaters. There were lovely groupings of candles in various shapes, sizes, and colours and several portable fireplaces crackled with flame-kissed logs. The effect was like coming in from the cold into a warm, welcoming hug.

Marnie, a hostess I knew, greeted me at the entrance, dressed as Bob McKenzie. She directed me to a table I favoured for its close proximity to the bookstore section of the place. I checked my watch and saw I had a few minutes' grace before I was expecting Unnati. I settled in and glanced about, wondering if I'd see Bob's brother, Doug, wandering around too. Instead, I saw another time-honoured character of the Great White North: my mother.

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What was she doing here, half an hour early?

A better question was: Why was I surprised? I shouldn't have been. Firstly, my mother is a cautious driver. I'd gone over the route from my house to Colourful Mary's with her before I'd run from the house that morning (chased out the door by a skillet of fried potatoes and sausage). She'd never been here before. Not fond of city driving, she wanted to know, turn by turn, exactly what to expect and how long it would take (so she could add on an extra ten minutes for every turn, fifteen for each stoplight). Secondly, she also preferred being ridiculously early to being even a minute late. Punctuality was next to godliness in her book.

Instead of jumping up to greet her, I enjoyed the rare opportunity to watch her without her knowing I was there. It was like being on a prairie safari, spotting the little-seen, and very rare, Ukrainian country baba, on the hunt in an area foreign to her species. I frowned when I saw that she was holding two or three books under her arm, along with her big, black, going-to-town purse. What on earth could my Harlequin-Romance-cookbook-reading mother find of interest in a bookstore stocked primarily with gay genre material?

Oh god.

I leaped from my chair, almost knocking it over. A young couple gave me matching divalicious sneers when I hip-checked their table on the way by, almost making them lose the marshmallows from the tops of their twin hot chocolates.

"Mom!" I yelped as I reached out for my mother, just as she was about to lay hands on a copy of *Big Beef*, a glossy magazine that had nothing to do with how to prepare a roast.

"*Sonsyou*," she smiled when she saw me. "I come a leettle bit early, uh-huh."

"So I see. Why don't you come back to the table with me? We can order you some coffee."

"No, no, you safe your money. I haf coffee at home, *Sonsyou*."

"Hot chocolate?" I suggested hopefully. "With marshmallows on top?"

"Vell, maybe coffee den. But first I pay for dese books. Goot for me to haf someting to read vwhile you go away."

"Ah, why don't you go sit down, and I'll pay for them?"

"No, no, you need your money for your treep. I pay."

"Can I see what you got there?" I asked, my cheeks turning red, sweat beginning to seep through my sweater.

She handed me the books. One was called *Upon a Midnight Clear*.

"Chreestmas stories," Mom let me know, in case the bare-chested Santa on the cover wasn't clue enough.

She'd obviously missed the subtitle: *Queer Christmas Tales*. By Greg Herren. Although I hadn't read this particular book, I knew Herren's work. He was talented. Funny. I enjoyed his mystery novels. But he also wrote erotica, and something about the fact that Santa was also wearing assless chaps made me think this book might be not quite right for Mama Quant. I glanced at the second title. It was a chapbook called *Hot Buns*.

"You know, Mom," I said through clenched teeth and a pasted-on smile, "I have these two books at home. You don't have to buy them. You can just read mine."

"*Tahk?*" she said. "Is that right? Deed you try de hot buns, den? Deed you like? Goot recipe?"

I almost choked getting out: "They were very, very good."

"Come, *Sonsyou*, ve get you some vater."

Thankfully back at the table, I ordered water from our server, who introduced himself as Domiwaitress.

"Vhy she dress like dat? She'd be very preetty girl if she dressed nicer," my mother decided.

The room had gotten very hot. I felt a bit dizzy. Whose bright idea was it to bring my mother here?

Apparently mine. She'd met both Mary and Marushka several times at various events over the years. Both women kept asking Mom when she was going to visit Colourful Mary's. I simply couldn't put it off any longer. Then again, in my version of how it went, I did not allow my mother to roam free. That was never a good idea, no matter where we were.

"Russell! Kay!" Mary had just spotted us.

Mom looked up with a hint of suspicion, not quite recognizing the new arrival.

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"Mom, you remember Mary? She's one of the owners here. You know how you've been wanting to come see the place."

"Oh, *tahk*," she agreed—though I think she was just being polite. "Hello, Mary. Very nice, very nice. You make *pehroheh* here den?"

Mary gave me a look.

Behind Mom's back, I mouthed the word: perogies.

"Oh, yes we do. Well, actually I don't. Marushka does."

"Oh, vell, dat's nice, uh huh."

"Would you like to say hello to Marushka? Maybe see what she's up to in the kitchen?"

Again, trying to communicate with the irritatingly oblivious Mary without Mom seeing, I madly shook my head. My mother never entered a kitchen without taking it over. Marushka herself was known to be rather protective of her cooking area. It was her private kingdom. I feared what would happen if the two kitchen monarchs came together. I think there was some kind of law of nature that would not allow them to occupy the same space without causing a cataclysmic event.

"Why don't you see if Marushka can just come out here to say hi?" I suggested helpfully.

Mary smirked. "How many times have you ever seen Marushka out on the floor, Russell?"

She was right. In all the years I'd been coming to Colourful Mary's, the closest I'd ever come to seeing Marushka out of the kitchen was when she'd shyly stick her nose out the order window to watch an old customer trying a new dish for the first time, or a new customer trying an old dish for the first time.

"I go see," Mom offered, as she lifted herself off her chair. She thrust her purse into my arms. "You vatch dis, okay den?"

"Okay, then," I said, feeling defeated, and shooting Mary a warning look.

"It'll be fine," she whispered as she escorted my mother to the swinging doors that led into Marushka's sanctum.

God help us all.

But I didn't have time to stew. I looked up just in time to see Marnie leading Unnati Gupta, along with Hema, to my table.

Without their saris, wearing sharply tailored winter coats, Unnati in black, Hema in winter white with a matching tam, they looked quite different from when I'd first met them.

I stood up to greet the women. "Thank you for meeting me here."

"Of course," Unnati said briskly.

"And Hema, good to see you again too. I didn't expect to see you today. I suppose this will give us a chance to get to know one another a little before we head off on our trip."

Hema gave me a look and maybe a slight nod, then looked away.

"Menu?" Domiwaitress had come up behind the women.

Unnati jumped. She stared at the server's peculiar drag getup, which was a rather disquieting combination of dominatrix and ski bunny.

"No," Unnati finally got out. "We can't stay for long." She turned away from the server who simply smiled politely and moved off. "I have brought these two books for you, Mr. Quant."

I took the tomes she offered, cringing a little inside. They were textbooks. They reminded me of cramming for university exams, an activity I liked less than throwing up and probably only a little more than getting crabs—another reminder of university.

"Although Hema will be with you throughout this...this trip, we cannot be sure there won't be times when you will be on your own, in the company of people who will expect you to know at least something about carpets. You understand?"

Of course I understood. "You mean stuff like the oldest knotted pile carpet ever found is the Pazyryk Carpet, dating from the fourth century B.C.? Or that the Xinjiang region of China holds an extremely rich collection of very old carpets? That Aubusson is a French design, flat weave rug, normally with a floral centre medallion and pastel colours? Or that Caucasian rugs were mainly woven in Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus region? I also know that Herati is a rosette surrounded by a pattern of fowl repeating throughout the field of the rug." I smiled. I may not have liked cramming, but I was usually pretty good at it.

"Fish," Unnati said flatly.



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"Fish?"

"A Herati rosette has a pattern of *fish* repeating throughout the field of the rug."

Fish. Fowl. I was close.

"Close is not good enough."

Jumping jellyfish! Could this woman read my mind?

"These people will be watching your every move. Listening to your every word. They will be suspicious. They will be extremely distrustful."

"I suppose I'd better stick pretty close to Hema, then." I looked over at the younger woman. No help there. She was surveying the wares of the bookstore, one eyebrow raised higher than the other. So far, Hema seemed to me to be a rather timid and reserved gal. Then again, it must have been difficult standing out from the substantial shadow cast by her aunt.

Unnati tapped the hard cover of the topmost textbook in my hands. "This one is best for beginners. Study it first when you are on the plane."

Why did I suddenly get the urge to sneak out the back way, bum a cigarette, and score some beer? I miss high school.

"You'll excuse us now? Hema and I must find some lunch before returning to work."

Uh, but you're in a restaurant. I didn't bother pointing that out. Colourful Mary's probably wasn't quite their cup of tea.

"I'll see you on the plane, I guess," I offered as a farewell to Hema.

She nodded and followed her aunt out of the restaurant.

I sat down and set the two books in front of me. One was: *The Bulfinch Guide to Carpets: How to Identify, Classify, and Evaluate Antique Carpets and Rugs*. The second: *Ancient Carpets through Time*. Oh joy.

"I hope you're hungry," Mary said as she dropped herself into the seat next to mine.

"Oh, no," I said, looking at her with fear in my eyes. "What happened in there?"

"Weeeeeelllllllllll."

"Mary, tell me."

"There was a slight disagreement as to how to make the best mushroom sauce. Then they had a spirited discussion about borscht. And, most surprising of all, your very Ukrainian mother had some rather strong opinions about my own very Cree mother's baked trout and cattail cakes recipes."

"Oh, Mary, I'm sorry. But I did try to warn you."

"Don't be sorry, Russell. I haven't seen Marushka this animated in the kitchen for months. She's eating it up, so to speak. But I have to tell you, there's good news and there's bad news."

I winced. "Good news first, please."

"They've challenged each other to a cook off. They're not really calling it that, but that's what it is."

"And the bad news?"

"You have to decide whose dish is better."

Once again I jumped up from my seat. I grabbed the jacket off the back of my chair, threw it on, kissed Mary on the cheek, handed her my mother's purse, and ran out of there while my life was still worth a plug nickel.

Half an hour later I was back in my office. I'd scored a tasty take-out sandwich from Souleio Foods, a natural food market and eatery relatively new to the south downtown landscape. While I opened up my Hotmail account, I made a quick call to Colourful Mary's. I asked Mary to explain to my mother that I had to rush away on urgent business and that I'd see her later at home. There was no way I was going to be the one to choose between the cooking of the chef at my favourite diner and my mother's. It was culinary hara-kari.

I pulled a diet cola from the small fridge that holds up one end of my desk, and unwrapped the sandwich: eggplant pesto with Pine View Farms organic mango chicken. I opened my email inbox and was thrilled to see a message with attachments from Darrell Good. It was the emails he'd exchanged with Neil Gupta.

For the next hour, I read and studied the messages with a fine-tooth comb. Some were just short, catch-up emails. Others were longer, and written like letters. Sometimes I got the sense the two

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men were simply corresponding as friends. Other times I got the sense there was something more building up between the lines.

Darrell had been right about Fahd. Neil mentioned the man many times. Without knowing Neil's character or being able to ask him questions, I had a difficult time figuring out if Fahd was a lover, just a friend, or a colleague. At first Neil seemed very fond of him. But in the more recent missives, fondness turned to annoyance and sometimes anger as Neil accused Fahd of "playing games as usual." But was it playing games with his business or with his heart? I couldn't be sure.

Several times, Neil referred to an upcoming trip to Saudi Arabia. He seemed excited, yet maybe a little anxious...or was it scared? Again, I was frustrated, knowing that words in writing could be misleading. I had to remind myself of this fact several times.

I spent most of my time on the final email:

*"sa is coming up soon," he wrote. By now I knew that by "sa" he was referring to Saudi Arabia. "im a little unsure about what will happen there im glad to finally be going but worried the big one still eludes me and I still havent found saffron i need saffron."*

Saffron is a spice derived from the dried stigmas of the saffron crocus, and I guessed he must have been searching for some authentic stuff to bring home as a gift. I knew that saffron had been an ingredient in a number of dishes I'd tasted in the Gupta home during Neil's memorial. I made a mental note to ask Hema about this.

The note finished off with: *"theyre throwing me a farewell party at the deira old souk before i go it's supposed to be a surprise but i found out now i guess i have to go lol"*

I found myself swallowing hard upon reading those last words written by Neil Gupta. Little did he know that death was the surprise waiting for him at that party.

I wondered how a joyous farewell celebration had turned so tragic. Who was with him? Who was Fahd? Lover? Friend? Colleague? Murderer? Why was Neil so anxious to get to Saudi Arabia? What was the *big one* he was after? Did he find it?

I was at the point that, in any investigation, I like the least. Too

many questions. Too few answers.

I arrived home a little earlier than normal. I had to pack. I wanted to spend some quality time with Barbra and Brutus. I had to make up for the aborted visit with my mother at lunchtime. I had to check on the salmon I'd been marinating in one part soya sauce to three parts maple syrup since early that morning for my dinner with Ethan. I would be crusting it with cracked black pepper just before it went on the grill. I was *that* good a boyfriend. A little bit of cleanup, and then I'd be ready for the evening.

When Ethan arrived just after eight, everything was done except for my shower. Perfect.

By nine we were sitting by a roaring fire in the living room, romantic hits from the seventies and eighties playing in the background, glasses of Australian Mollydooker Velvet Glove Shiraz in hand, waiting for the salmon to cook in its tinfoil tent. Mom was in her garage suite, happily watching the Season Four DVD of *Murder, She Wrote*. Barbra and Brutus had chosen to spend the night with us. The aroma of cooking may have had something to do with it. Maybe it was because they both had major crushes on Ethan. But I'd like to think they knew it was their second-to-last night with me for a while.

Ethan had one of his manly paws on my shoulder, gently massaging it as he spoke. "You look a little stressed, hon. Wanna tell me about your day?"

Uh, nope. I wasn't ready yet. But when? I had to give myself some kind of deadline. As the speakers poured out some smooth Sade, I made myself a deal. I'd spill my news as soon as I heard Barbra Streisand and Neil Diamond singing a duet. Or no...wait...as soon as something by the Bee Gees came on—as it inevitably would—then I'd come clean.

"Never mind that," I leaned in and gave him a peck behind the ear. I knew he liked that. "You've had a tougher day than me. You first."

He gave me a look. One of those that told me he wasn't quite buying what I was selling but was willing to play along—for a

while. I managed a Laura-Petrie-hiding-something-from-husband-Rob smile. Having someone who knew me so well definitely had its pros and cons.

"It was a good day," he began. "Jared is working with the accountant on putting together the year-end books. Thank God for Jared, because that's a task I'm very happy to be rid of. Frank and Hortense had a bit of a row, but I think it's all settled now. He's agreed to record *JAG* and watch it later because it's reruns anyway. That allows her to watch *Survivor*. You'd think this wouldn't be a problem because they each have a flat screen in their rooms. But they both insist their show isn't the same if they can't watch it on the big screen downstairs. And for some reason, Hortense believes that since it's reality TV, if you don't watch it when it's actually broadcast, you're missing something happening as it happens."

I nodded with an enthusiastic empathy that was probably overkill given the conversational content.

Ethan hesitated, eyeing me up. "Should I go on? I can tell you about Loretta's bunion operation."

No Bee Gees yet.

Why was I being so stupid about this? Why was I resisting telling Ethan about my trip to the Middle East? He'd never once, in the year and a half we'd been together, given me any reason to think I couldn't tell him about anything. So why so shy, Mr. Quant? Was there something different about this? Sure, this was the farthest and longest time I'd be away for work since we became a couple. Of course there was some danger. But more than usual? I couldn't say for sure. And even so, so what? Did my psyche know something my conscious mind was ignoring? Was there something about this case that was going to affect our relationship? How could that be? Maybe it was all the "should we move in together?" stuff that was unfairly giving me the jitters. Or maybe this was typical getting-to-be-a-long-term-relationship behaviour. After all, I was sorely out of practice. And this certainly wasn't like riding a bike. Things had changed since the last time I'd done this. Or maybe...I had changed?

Ethan laid aside his drink and moved off the couch. He posi-

tioned himself in front of me, sitting on the coffee table, our knees laced together like fingers. He placed a hand on each of my thighs, leaned in, and looked me deep in the eyes. "Russell, I know when something is bothering you."

"How? How do you know?" I really wanted to know. For future reference.

He grinned. "Lots of ways. But if you promise to tell me what's going on, I'll give up one of them."

I warily nodded. Was this some kind of boyfriend trick?

"Your ears," he said.

Huh? "What? What do you mean? Do they grow? Like Pinocchio's nose?"

"They turn red. Right at the tips."

I immediately felt the top of my ears. They did feel a little warm. But that was because of the fire. Wasn't it?

"Come on," he goaded me good-naturedly. "It's just you and me. No kid. No mother. No oldsters. Only two dogs, and they promise not to repeat a word of anything they hear. You're not going to find a better time to talk."

He was right. I couldn't wait any longer for "How Deep Is Your Love" or "If I Can't Have You." I took a deep breath, and dived in.

"I got a new case yesterday and they want me to investigate the death of their son in Dubai, so I'm leaving on Thursday and that's why Mom is here so she can take care of the dogs while I'm away, and I know you'd have done it but you're so busy with everything besides I think it does Mom good to get away from the farm during the winter. So did Loretta have both bunions done, or just one?" I sipped my wine, and wondered if it was too soon to check on the salmon.

Ethan and I looked at each other silently for a moment. Under different circumstances, I would have been using the time to admire his gentle, bear-brown eyes, his soft, poker-straight hair, still damp from our shower, or the way his skin glowed tan in the firelight. Instead, I was assessing his face for clues to his reaction to my news.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," I began. Not because I'd

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found a clue, but because someone had to say something. "It's been a whirlwind ever since I found out about this case. And I did try to call, yesterday, but you were busy. And then I was busy. And then I didn't get a chance to see you last night." Oooo yeah, I was full of handy excuses.

His voice was soft when he finally spoke. "Is it safe for you to be there?"

I nodded. "Yes. Of course." I was a detective. He knew that. Was it the safest profession in the world? No. Could I get into danger? Yes. Did I think being in Dubai was unreasonably crossing the line of personal safety? No. Not after the research I'd done. And really, things could be—and had been—just as unsafe for me right here in Saskatoon. I stood by my answer.

"You've thought through the risks?"

"Yes."

He nodded, his eyes looking distant, as if he was trying to think through several different things at once.

"Does your mother know?"

"She will before I go."

"You know I'd rather you didn't go?"

I kissed him. "Yes."

"You know I will worry about you?"

I kissed him again. "I'm counting on it."

"Russell, something has to change."

I wasn't quite sure what he meant by that, but little bells started peeling in the back of my head. I did what I often do at times like that. I tried to lighten things up. "I know. I know. But it's not like every case takes me to a country where they persecute cute, half-Ukrainian, half-Irish, gay, Canadian, prairie private detectives."

He ignored my weak attempt at humour. "It's not just the whole Middle East thing, Russell."

I bobbed my head. I got it. "It's the not telling you right away part. That's what bothering you, right?" I wasn't so dim.

He reached out and took my left hand in his. His voice was eerily calm. "I was hoping that by now, you'd think something like this is a big enough decision that instead of worrying about



when to tell me what you've already decided to do, you'd want to discuss it with me before you make a decision in the first place. Russell, you know I'm not one for sermons." It was true. This was probably the most words I'd heard him put together in a while. "But you're not alone in this anymore. I know you're used to the freedom of jumping up and taking off for France, or Africa, or wherever, at the whim of a client. But, well, things have changed.

"I hate that I'm saying this. I hate that it sounds like I've just attached a ball and chain to your ankle. But sitting here, hearing for the first time that you're hopping a plane for Dubai day after tomorrow, well, it's just seems kinda crazy to me. Not that I'm saying you shouldn't do it. It's your career. I know that. And I know you love this kind of adventure. You've been doing it a long time. But I wish...I wish I'd been in on the whole thing a little bit sooner. It's hard to be supportive about something that's sprung on you out of the blue, y'know what I'm saying?"

My head moved up and down. He was right. I was wrong. I just didn't like saying it out loud.

"I don't blame this on you, hon..."

Yay.

"...It's because of this crazy circumstance we have going on."

Gulp. "Crazy circumstance? Which crazy circumstance are you specifically referring to?"

"We live separate lives, Russell. Sure, sometimes you pack a bag and come live with me for a few days. Sometimes I come here. But really, for the most part it feels like all we're doing is having a series of one-night stands with the same person over and over again."

My temper flashed. "You call this a one-night stand?"

"Am I sleeping here tomorrow night? Are you sleeping at my house?"

"W-well I don't know for sure yet, I supp—"

"You see. One-night stand. Neither of us knows if we're going to see each other tomorrow night."

"Ethan, that's not fair. That's not the way it always is."

"Isn't it? Think about it. If you and I slept in the same house, in the same bed, every night, do you think I'd be hearing about





# Chapter 7

The wedding ring was a little tight on my finger. I stared at it, surprised to see it there. Surprised at how right it looked. I'm not a jewellery kinda guy. There was an ill-advised but mercifully brief puka shell choker period when I was a teen. Then the ankle rope phase and the thumb ring thing, but other than that I have generally remained unadorned. When Ethan Ash slipped the white gold band onto my ring finger, I was certain it was going to look weird and scream out to all who saw it: *FAKE!*

Because that's what it was. A fake. Not a wedding ring at all, only a pretender.

That morning, Ethan had dropped me off at the Saskatoon airport. Both were now miles below me, slowly disappearing from view beneath a feathery layer of clouds as my Air Canada jet headed away from the Prairies. It had been an awkward moment when he'd presented me with the thing, just before I'd joined the security line. My first thought was: He really meant it when he said, "Something has to change." My second thought was: What

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a crappy time and place to propose. My third thought was: Oh my god, am I expected to answer right now? Not this...again!

"Keep this on while you're there," he'd advised me, his brown, puppy dog eyes filled with worry. "Tell them you're married. It'll cause less suspicion than a handsome man still single in his late thirties."

"I could be divorced," I'd told him, trying for light-heartedness once I'd recovered from my shock at seeing the ring in his hand. "I could be a widower. Besides, what's wrong with being single and in your thirties?"

"Here? Nothing," he'd said, not playing along with the humour in the situation. "There? Who knows? I just don't want anyone thinking you might be gay."

I don't know where Ethan was getting his information from. But I couldn't help smiling at his sweet—if misguided (not to mention not very gay-pride-worthy)—intent. "Ethan, I'm going to be fine. Please don't worry."

He'd finally managed an uncomfortable chuckle. "Okay, okay. I know I may be overreacting...but will you just wear the damn thing? Please?"

I'd slipped the band where it was meant to go and held up my hand. "Of course I will. But you realize this does not mean I'm going to take out the garbage every Monday without complaining. And I still want regular sex."

He laughed at that. "Deal."

I saw in his eyes that he wanted to say so much more. Sappy stuff. Stuff that would make it seem like I was going off to the front lines to fight the Nazis or something. Instead, he grabbed me and gave me one last hug.

"I love you, Russell."

I pulled back and looked him in the eye. For the first time, I couldn't quite read what I saw there. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, sure."

"I love you too."

"Good to hear."

"Tell Simon I think she's getting soft for not waking up early to see me off."

"Will do."

"I'll email you all the time. And I'll be back before you even begin to miss me."

"Doubtful. I've already started."

I'd felt a bit of a quiver. If the scene had been from a movie of the week, I'd have been doomed. Nobody lives after such a sweet farewell.

But I'd gotten on the plane anyway.

The trip to Calgary had taken less than an hour. As I deplaned, I scoured my scurrying fellow passengers for Hema Gupta. She was nowhere to be seen. This was worrisome. I'd done my best to study up on antique carpets over the past couple of days, but Colin Cardinale was right. There was just too much detail to ever feel truly knowledgeable, unless you'd done nothing but lived and breathed old carpets your entire life. Without Hema, I would definitely be up Dubai Creek without a paddle.

At noon, I boarded my flight to Montreal, Hema still unaccounted for. But, for the moment, I was a little less concerned about her and decidedly more in love with my client, Pranav Gupta. You see, he'd sprung for business class tickets. I spent the next three and a half hours watching a movie and being wined and dined in wide-seated comfort.

Before after-lunch drinks were served, I did a pass through the business class cabin. There was no way I'd be at the front of the plane and Hema wouldn't be. But she wasn't there. Had she bailed? Had something gone wrong? Had they changed plans without telling me? Hema hadn't struck me as a particularly sophisticated or worldly person. Maybe she'd missed the flight? She hadn't appeared resistant to the idea of coming to Dubai with me, but nor had she been particularly excited. Maybe she simply decided not to come. As I made my way back to my seat and snifter of Grand Marnier, I decided I would call Pranav as soon as we landed, to see if he knew what was going on.

We arrived in Montreal a little late, at 5:48 p.m. local time. Thanks to changing time zones, the farther east I went, the later it

got. My next leg—to Paris—didn't leave until nine. Fortunately, my business class ticket gave me access to the Maple Leaf Club lounge. That meant no waiting with the masses in uncomfortable seats for the next three hours. Instead, a flash of my ticket opened the big, shiny, silver door into air traveller paradise

The place was an oasis in the middle of the busy Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport. I found a comfortable seat, pulled off my coat, and set out before me my reference books on antique carpets. As my computer booted up, I went to the complimentary self-serve bar area and helped myself to a glass of red and some carrots. (I knew I'd be too weak to resist the meal on the upcoming flight—my second dinner of the evening—and I saw no need to stress my wonderpants further than was necessary.)

Back in front of my laptop, I was searching my electronic files for Pranav's phone number when I saw her. Hema Gupta was across the room, looking very much like me: laptop, books spread about, glass of wine. She seemed completely unaware of my presence, oblivious to her surroundings, head down, wildly texting a message into a tiny hand-held device. I noticed a much older woman, wearing a serious business suit, sitting one seat removed from Hema. She too was positioned in front of a laptop, cup of coffee in hand, talking softly into a cellphone. The man next to her, much the same. And the fellow next to him.

My eyes roamed the room. Everyone was doing pretty much the same thing. I'd never before thought about what an unique environment an airport lounge is: removed from the hubbub of the airport, the lighting a little less harsh, the ambiance for the most part calm, quiet, and reserved. It's otherworldly in a way, caught between the outside terminal and 35,000 feet in the air. Airline lounges are always situated somewhere after you pass through security, so you can't readily leave the airport. And there's no reason to leave the lounge itself until it's time to board your plane. You're caught, in suspension, in this ethereal place.

So what do people do in this special world, at a time when they are isolated from their real lives but not yet doing what they're here to do, which is to fly somewhere else? Some certainly use the time to work, their laptops and files of papers, and

sometimes even their colleagues or employees gathered round them at the ready. But many, I observed, use the time to reach out. Via cellphone, BlackBerry, PDA, laptop, they reach out. They speak to spouses, children, parents, even old friends they haven't talked to in while. They call people they've just left behind for one last goodbye. They call people they are about to see at the other end of their flight to reassure them—and themselves—that they'll soon be immersed in the plans they've made or lives they share.

There was a sense in the room that, although all was well, these were people about to undertake a shared experience, not entirely risk-free. If you asked them—the majority likely frequent flyers if they were Maple Leaf Lounge regulars—most of them would say they enjoy flying, and believe it to be safe. And yet, in the quiet, uninterrupted moments of this space, segregated from the real world, a free glass or two of liquor in hand, a moment with no responsibility other than to wait, what they need most to do is reach out and confirm they are alive.

I watched Hema for a moment, mesmerized at the speed with which her thumbs moved across that miniscule typing pad. She and I were meant to spend the next week together in a foreign country. We really needed to get to know each other. Not to mention come up with a basic plan for how things were going to work once we got there. I gathered my things, and headed over.

Even as I put down my stuff on the free seat across from her, Hema didn't bother to look up.

"Hello," I said once I was settled.

She finally glanced up, her large, dark eyes betraying something that looked a lot like irritation. Had she really believed we'd never talk our whole time together? I like my alone time too, but in this case that just wasn't going to cut it. I'd have to pull her out of her shell no matter what it took: humour, too much wine, or an escargot fork (only as a last resort).

"Oh, hello," she managed, still texting away, without even looking at the buttons.

"I was surprised not to see you at the airport in Saskatoon," I started out in a congenial conversational tone. "I was worried you'd missed the flight."

"Why would you think that? What sort of idiot misses a plane?"

"Uh...oh, well, yeah...I just thought...well I didn't see you there, or on the flight to Montreal."

"I flew in last night to see friends and go to some clubs. I hope you weren't expecting me to be your escort all the way to Dubai."

My mouth was open, but no words were coming out. What had happened to the reserved, demure, quiet young woman with the shy smile and gentle demeanour? Where was she? That's who I wanted to be on this trip with. Not this aloof, standoffish, indifferent creature with the lightning quick thumbs and razor-sharp tongue.

"I hope you can take care of yourself. I can't hold your hand through all of this. You do your job. I'll do mine. Then we go home. Sooner the better, as far as I'm concerned."

"I take it you're not as convinced as your uncle is that your cousin was intentionally murdered then?"

She snorted. "My uncle is delusional. But hey, if he wants to spend some of his wads of cash sending me on a fool's errand, who am I to say no? And I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to. So here I am. Who cares?" Her shoulders did a bit of a hunching move. "We're both here for the same reason, Russell. Money. You run after it. I get pushed around by it. That's the way it is." Her eyes moved down to her busy fingers as if she'd said her piece and was done with me.

Not so fast, sugar. "What do *you* think happened to your cousin?"

"How am I supposed to know?" She didn't look up. "But come on, the police investigated. There's no reason not to believe what they say. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time." She spoke as fast as her fingers moved, as if she were taking her own dictation.

"Sure, Dubai is as Western a city as any in the Middle East can be. But look at LA and Toronto and Detroit and Vancouver, even Saskatoon. They all have places that if you go there when you shouldn't, you're taking your life in your own hands. An Arabian marketplace late at night sounds like one of those places to me.

This had nothing to do with him being gay. It had to do with him being stupid."

I stared at the young woman. I smelled her flowery perfume, noticed her expensive shoes—low-heeled and practical for travel, but still ultra-stylish—and her trendy hairstyle that before had been hidden under the scarf of her sari or in a bun. "Even if that's true," I began slowly, hoping the exaggerated speed of my words would draw her attention. (It didn't.) "Don't you think your aunt and uncle deserve something more than a statement off some police report that says Neil's life was taken for no reason, by hoodlums who'll likely never be caught?"

Finally she stopped typing. She seemed to be thinking about something, then looked up and said: "Why? It won't change anything will it? He'll still be dead. They'll still be sad. Don't get me wrong, I'm sad about this too. Neil was an okay guy. But life goes on.

"I think you're wasting your time. No. Wait. You're being paid. What do you care? It's me whose time is being wasted. This wasn't exactly how I'd planned to spend the next several days of my life. I don't know about you, but I don't like playing the puppet of a rich old guy."

Her BlackBerry chimed. She looked down, read a message, and furiously began typing again.

"I could have done that job better and faster than Neil," she said, amazing me with her ability to have two conversations, one verbal, one textual, at the same time. Of course, I was trusting she was actually typing something other than gobbledygook into the BlackBerry. "If they'd really wanted me to have it, they'd have found a way, even though I'm a woman. But they wanted Neil. Fine. I'm over it. I've moved on to other important stuff. But now they're desperate. And guess who gets dragged back in to finish what Neil started? Me. And guess who'll get all the credit in the end? Not me. As far as I'm concerned, this is a week of my life lost forever. I just want it over and done with."

I nodded. Abrasive, unhappy, opinionated, free-talking people could be hard to take in many circumstances. This wasn't one of them. I now had a pretty good idea of where Hema Gupta was com-



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ing from. I didn't have to agree or sympathize with her. I didn't have to like her. I *did* want to know what her motives were, and what to expect from her as we grew closer and closer to a foreign, exotic world neither of us was familiar with. She had just given me a hefty helping hand in that regard. For a detective, that was a gift.

Our flight to Paris departed half an hour late because the little vehicle that was to push our plane back onto the runway decided to stall. If I had to work in such punishing cold and bitter wind, I'd stall too. But our seats in the new Boeing 777 were worth the wait. Actually, these weren't so much seats as they were individual mini apartments. They came complete with our own entertainment centre, lots of little shelves and cubbyholes to put stuff in, a fluffy pillow, cozy blanket, bedroom slippers, and a "seat" that could recline in a million different ways, including flat out as a full-length bed. Even though Hema was seated next to me, because of the staggered, angled configuration of the compartments, we'd never have to look at each other if we didn't want to. Chances were, we wouldn't want to.

The down-to-earth, Canadian country boy in me couldn't help but feel guilty as I settled into my new *pied-à-terre* while the back-of-the-bus passengers boarded after us. Strategic placement of the aircraft's cabin entrance ensured they'd suffer the indignity of having to walk through the neon-blue mood-lit (à la *Star Trek*) business class section on their way to sardine class. As they slogged past, struggling with their assorted carry-ons and packages, I tried to keep from catching their faintly accusatory eyes by busily trying to find other things to do. I stashed stuff in my many cubbyholes. I arranged and rearranged my slippered tootsies on the handy footrest. I studied the personalized menu from which I would make wine selections to best complement my upcoming gourmet meal. I sipped my chilled champagne.

But of course, eventually, the line got backed up by some self-indulgent traveller, somewhere way down the passageway, trying to squish their full-size luggage into the overhead compartment in order to avoid checking it. (This, to me, isn't being a wise trav-

eller; it's being a rude one.) I finally gave up and looked up with a polite smile at the harried woman standing waiting, next to my gracious airplane apartment. She simply looked down at the tow-headed boy standing behind her, his hand clamped in hers, and said: "You see this? *This* is why you stay in school."

Several passengers, and a steward in the area, laughed at the comment, lightening the mood appreciatively. I glanced over at Hema, thinking it might be a good idea to share this amusing moment together. She was too busy, bent over her BlackBerry. What the heck was she texting whoever was at the other end? *The Iliad*?

A light bulb (one of those energy-efficient ones, which aren't as bright but help save the environment) popped on over my head. While we still had the option, I reached for my laptop—stored in a handy nearby compartment designed for that purpose—and revved it up. I checked the files I'd stored on my hard drive. I found the list of contact information I'd been provided in a joint effort by Pranav, Unnati, and Colin Cardinale. Yup, there it was. Hema's BlackBerry number.

Hurrying before the cabin crew instructed us to turn off all electronic devices, I composed a message to Hema. I basically asked her a few pointed questions about the carpets we were after, what she would be doing in Dubai to procure them, and suggested ways our roles might fit together.

I hit send. Seconds later, I heard the "ping" of reception across the aisle. In my experience—well, sort of—I have found that if you're going to talk to an alien, it always goes better if you try to speak their language. It worked in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It might work here. About thirty seconds later I received a message: "transm dev turned off til p will prep ans on way." It looked like the alien was talking back. If I read her response correctly, in Hema-speak, she said she would get an answer to me in p (also known as Paris) once the transmitting functions of our electronic devices could be turned back on. In the meantime, I would nestle back into my cushy seat, enjoy a Cornish game hen, some nice Malbec, and the thrill of a successful first contact.

Charles de Gaulle International Airport, about twenty-five kilometres north east of Paris, is also known as Roissy. It's one of the world's busiest, handling about sixty million passengers a year. The place is named after the general who led the Free French Forces during World War II. From what I'd seen, many parts of the airport still look like that's when they were built. We arrived Friday at 9:15 a.m., now at a full seven hours time difference from Saskatoon. We had a tight connection and had to rush to check in for our Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt. Conceding we were actually travelling together, Hema stayed nearby as we navigated our way to the departure gate.

The flight to Frankfurt was only fifty minutes. Once in Germany, we had a long enough layover to enjoy the even plusher amenities of the Lufthansa Business Lounge. Over a light lunch of smoked salmon, smoked duck, prosciutto, and a nice selection of breads and fruit, I read Hema's texted response to my questions. Afterward, she relented and actually took part in a verbal conversation. Although she wasn't giving up any of her I-don't-want-to-be-here attitude, she did soften a bit in her overall manner. But only a bit. And only after a glass or two of Chardonnay.

By one-thirty p.m., we were aboard the massive 747 destined for the Middle East. After six hours, another sumptuous meal, an actual wine tasting (how would I ever travel economy again?), and another three-hour time change, we landed in Dubai at ten-thirty at night.

Phew.

There is something about arriving by air, at night, in a land where I've never been before, that fills me with both excitement and trepidation. Excitement over seeing new things, meeting new people, experiencing a new culture. Trepidation over the unknown. What's out there in the dark?

With Hema taking the lead, pulling her Louis Vuitton carry-on behind her, we traversed what seemed like miles of high-ceilinged, well-lit glass corridors and scaled swift-moving, mountainous escalators. The place was like a mausoleum combined with a shopping mall. It was bright and airy, but at the same time

glitzy and over-the-top. A traveller could spend a day or two just visiting the terminal and be very well entertained. Hema was moving too fast through the ebb and flow of people to take it all in, but from what I saw, it was all I'd expected and more. They weren't kidding around when they said this was one of the most glamorous airports in the world.

As promised, Umar, our guide arranged by the University of Dubai, was waiting for us at the end of one of the long hallways. He was holding aloft a sign, with both our names miraculously spelled correctly. Then, by some magic, he fast-tracked us through Passport Control, and we were, luggage in hand, getting into a waiting car before we could say *asalaam 'alaykum*.

Umar was from Pakistan. I'd learned that most of the population of the UAE are not Emiratis. Rather, they are workers from the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Africa, and even China. Even so, Umar acted and sounded like a local, knowledgeably pointing out the multitudinous sights on the forty-minute ride to Hema's hotel. Although it was dark out, the outlines of some of the most fantastic structures ever built by man were easy to see. The Burj Al Arab. The Burj Dubai. Emirates Tower. There were ubiquitous minarets, each signifying the location of a mosque. And about a million cranes at the ready to build more of the same.

Umar turned off the main road onto a curving driveway leading up to Madinat Jumeirah Al Qasr Hotel. I ooed and ahed. Hema sat stone-faced. Al Qasr (The Palace) was built along a kilometre of private beachfront. According to Umar, the idea behind the hotel was to recreate life as it used to be for residents along Dubai Creek, complete with waterways, *abras*, wind towers, and its own bustling souk. Not to mention lusciously appointed rooms. As Hema stepped out of the van, with little more than a mumbled "call me in the morning," I was confident about leaving her there on her own. Given the deluxe surroundings, I was pretty sure her royal highness would fit right in and be able to take care of herself.

Once Hema and her bags were palmed off on a helpful hotel employee, Umar and I took off for the Dubai Marina. Pranav Gupta had thought it would be a good idea for me to stay in his

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son's apartment, which remained on lease until his contract in Dubai was to have ended.

"You will be happy to know that where you will be living is thanks to Canada," Umar announced as he skillfully maneuvered the vehicle through traffic that seemed extremely heavy given the time of night.

"Oh, why is that?"

"The Dubai Marina was inspired by and designed to look much like your Concord Pacific Place development along False Creek in your Vancouver, British Columbia. You will no doubt recognize many of the fine features and feel right at home."

I nodded with a smile. As it happened, Concord, just on the other side of the trendy Yaletown area in Vancouver, was a spot I actually did know, mostly for its restaurants.

"Dubai Marina is considered the new Dubai. It is near Jebel Ali Port, Dubai Internet City, Dubai Media City, and the American University in Dubai. When it is done, it will be the world's largest man-made marina. Far bigger than your Marina del Rey in your California. It is quite beautiful, you will see. I hope you to enjoy it."

As I gazed in awe at almost everything I saw outside the car window, I did not doubt it. I asked, "Did you say you have an Internet City?" What the heck is that, I wondered. I pictured living in a computer-animated world. Were the Emiratis that far ahead of us technologically?

"Dubai Internet City is an information technology park, created by the government as a free economic zone," Umar explained with the easy expertise of a practiced tour guide. "It is a strategic base for companies targeting regional emerging markets. The rules of this specific area allow companies to avail themselves of a number of ownership, taxation, and customs-related benefits, which are guaranteed by law for a period of fifty years. Incredible, isn't it? They have here your Microsoft, IBM, Cisco, Nokia. Everyone wants to be in DIC."

I liked the way Umar talked. It wasn't really boasting. He was Pakistani, not Emirati-born. As such, he claimed no false personal credit for the astonishing accomplishments of the country he lived in. Instead, he spoke with honest admiration for the many tri-

umphant successes that his own homeland could only dream of.

"And Media City?"

"DMC is a tax-free zone," Umar told me. "It was built by the government to boost the UAE's media foothold. And the idea has worked brilliantly. This is now the regional hub for many media organizations of all kinds. You will see, Mr. Russell, there are many such 'cities' in Dubai."

My head shook in disbelief, an action I would repeat many times over the next few days.

"We are pulling up to your tower now," Umar told me. "I hope you to enjoy your new home for your short visit here. I know Mr. Neil enjoyed it very much. There is even a Starbucks Coffee here for your caffeine enjoyment in the morning."

"Did you know Mr. Gupta well?" I asked, as the car slowed.

"I was his driver on many occasions. He was a very nice man. I was sorry to hear of his death."

"What have you heard about how he died, Umar?"

"Only that he was killed by thieves at the marketplace. It was...it was a surprise."

"Why do you say that?"

Umar was silent as he brought the car to a halt in front of a large building overlooking the charming marina. The place was bustling with Friday night revellers and residents of the area.

"Of course, it is always a surprise to hear of anyone's death. Especially one as young as Mr. Neil."

There was more, I just knew it. So I sat in silence and hoped he'd fill it.

"It is strange that he died where he died. The markets in Dubai are not known for crime. Dubai is not known for crime. This was a sad, unexpected thing."

"Umar, may I ask you a personal question about Mr. Gupta?"

He turned in his seat and looked at me. "What is it?" he asked, his accent thicker than it had been until now.

"Did you know that Mr. Gupta was gay?"

"We never spoke of it directly," he answered carefully, "which is the custom here. But I supposed it."

"Did it bother you?" I was pushing a bit further than I perhaps

should have, but who can account for what jet lag does to reason?

"Of course not. What he did in his personal life was of no concern to me. Just as what I do in mine was no concern of his. Our mutual concern was that I drove him speedily and efficiently and safely to his intended destinations."

I nodded my appreciation of his attitude. "One more thing, Umar?"

He nodded in acquiescence.

"Did you know any of Mr. Gupta's friends? Or enemies? Did you know of any people who perhaps were not as accepting of his being gay?"

"No. But why do you ask these questions?"

I pulled back. As far as Umar knew, I was just another rug expert come to finish what Neil Gupta had left undone with his death. "Oh, no reason," I quickly tried to cover. "He was a friend and colleague. I can't help but want to know more about his life here."

"And how he died here?"

Umar was no dummy. I nodded again.

The driver handed me a package. "Here is all the information you need to know about this building and Mr. Neil's apartment. As well as two sets of keys. May I help you upstairs with your luggage?"

"Thank you, no, Umar. Everything is on rollers. I'll do just fine on my own. Thank you for the ride."

We chatted a bit more about plans for the next day, then Umar left me and my bags on the sidewalk outside my new apartment building. My new Arabian home.

I stood there for a moment, breathing in the salt air, the foreign scent of a new world. I watched the movement and listened to the voices of a thousand people, making an evening of it at the cafés and coffee shops and bars of the marina. For a brief moment I felt disappointment. Somewhere in my unrealistic, romantic mind, I'd pictured spending my first Arabian night in a tent, flaps battened down against hot desert winds, sand running between my toes, the grumbling bleats of camels in the not too far off distance. Not in a high-rise apartment on a marina modelled after home. But,

hey, there was always tomorrow.

It didn't take me long to find my door on the twenty-second floor of the building. I inserted the key into the lock and pushed my way inside. I flipped open the nearest light switch and thought: Uh oh.



# Chapter 8

Either Neil Gupta was a very messy guy, or someone had ransacked his apartment.

I stepped into the place, every sense on high alert. Was the perpetrator still here? A quick tour of the small apartment—living room, dining room, and kitchen all in one room, one bath and one bedroom in the back—told me I was alone. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. Once I was more settled, I took a second, slower tour, catching every detail I could. Unfortunately, this told me little else, other than that Neil had a nice wardrobe, liked shoes, and was organized in his work, as evidenced by an orderly filing system. One that had obviously been rifled, along with all the rest of Neil's possessions.

The first glaring fact: Pranav Gupta might just be right. There might actually be something more to his son's death than a simple mugging in a marketplace gone horribly wrong. But was this a gay thing, as Pranav suspected? Why ransack the apartment? Was it meant to scare Neil? Or to steal something from him? Was

this where Neil was actually attacked? Maybe he was killed here, then moved to the souk, a place that everyone, including his driver Umar, thought an unlikely place for murder. Or was this simply a robbery that happened after Neil was already gone? Maybe someone knew the apartment was empty and used the opportunity to see what they could get from a dead man's home.

Several things made me lean towards discounting the theory that Neil had been attacked in his apartment. First, there was no blood anywhere. Second, from all Pranav told me about his discussions with the police, there was no evidence of an altercation here before Neil's death; no neighbours reported sounds of violence or anything suspicious. Third, the disarray was widespread throughout the apartment. If someone came in—invited? by surprise?—and assaulted Neil, the mess would be more localized to one area. No, I was becoming convinced that whoever did this was looking for something. My job was to figure out what. But how was I ever going to do that when I didn't know Neil and had never been in his apartment before?

With a heavy sigh, I went to work.

Hours later, I still had no answer. I'd begun with Neil's personal items. Nothing. I'd left the professional material for last. My thinking was that I'd either find something useful, or the technical and historical manuals covering the A-to-Zs of antique carpets would be a handy sleeping aid.

As it turned out, it was a "Z" that caught my attention.

Neil kept all his papers in a set of hanging files next to a round table he probably used as a desk. Studying his system, I noticed there was only a hanging file if there was an actual file folder to go in it. For instance, there was a "B" hanging file because he had a folder labelled "Bahrain peasant carpet" in it. There was an "F" hanging file for a folder called "Fujairah carpet." But there were no "A" or "D" hanging files, presumably because he had nothing to put in them. Made sense. There was, however, a "Z" hanging file. But, there was nothing in it. Could this have been what the thief had taken? Or was I simply desperate to find something,

anything, to make sense of this mess?

I looked at my watch. It was after three-thirty a.m., five-thirty p.m. Friday at home. No wonder my head felt all woozy. My body was confused about whether it should be at rest or getting revved up for the evening.

I'd travelled enough, and knew my body well enough, to know I needed to get acclimatized to the new time zone as soon as possible if I was going to make the most of every waking hour while I was here. I stood up from where I'd been sitting cross-legged, next to the hanging file contraption. I stretched and let out a groan as I flexed my sore muscles.

After brushing my teeth and a quick sponge bath in the bathroom, I headed for the bedroom, pulled the blinds, stripped, and dove under the covers.

Oh god.

There was something weird in this bed.

Underneath me.

I lay completely still. My sleep-deprived mind raced, trying to figure out what it was, there against my bare skin. No go. I then tried to talk myself into believing I was imagining things.

Nope.

The texture of the sheet didn't feel right. Something was setting my skin on edge. Did I feel something crawling? Was it a bug? Snake?

Oh hell! I jumped out of the bed, tossing the bedspread across the floor. In a crazed dash, I made it to the doorway and switched on the light.

Expecting nothing less than a tarantula, or maybe a moray eel, I looked down at the bed.

"What the hell is that?" I asked the empty room.

I took a cautious step forward, frowning at the unfamiliar sight.

Nothing was moving. Thank goodness. Maybe all my writhing around had killed whatever it was.

I came nearer and bent at the waist to get a closer look.

They were black. Small. About the size of two fingertips.

Closer. Closer.

I picked one up. I peered at it. Held it up to the light.

Petals?

Petals. Black flower petals.

As arranged, Umar delivered me to the Madinat Jumeirah, Hema's hotel, at nine the next morning. If I'd thought the traffic was busy last night, this morning it was nothing short of madness. I was glad to be in the passenger's seat.

We met for breakfast at one of the many choices offered by the hotel. It was a beautiful outdoor spot, with umbrella-shaded tables and oversized, cushioned rattan chairs, and an outstanding view of the famous Burj Al Arab Hotel just down the beach. The Burj Al Arab, with its vaguely sail-boatish shape, helipad hanging off one end of its roof, cocktail bar dangling off the other, and attached to land by a narrow causeway, is perhaps the most recognizable symbol of Dubai.

I was dead tired after spending half the night searching Neil's apartment and clearing his bed of black flower petals. After tossing and turning a bit I finally fell asleep, only to be awakened at five by an eerie sound. I rushed to the window and threw it open to see what was happening. As I looked out, although still well-lit, the city seemed fast asleep. But winding its way through the towers of glass and dark steel, like a slithering auditory serpent, I could hear a ghostly wail. I knew immediately what it was. The call to prayer. Telling all the faithful that it would soon be time to head for the nearest mosque for morning devotions. It was a hauntingly beautiful sound, one I was to become very familiar with, as the call is repeated five times every day. Exhausted as I was, I stood rooted by the window for several minutes, listening with my eyes closed, my mind going places it hadn't been before.

With Hema soundly ignoring me in favour of her laptop and BlackBerry, I still had no problem keeping awake. There was so much to take in. I was in the Middle East, for crying out loud. Just being in the presence of the massive Burg Al Arab building, standing there like an icon to big money and modern-day Arabia was entertainment enough. The day was already very warm, a nice

departure from the Saskatchewan winter we'd just left behind. Here I was, wearing shorts, sandals, and a short-sleeved shirt. At home they were bundled up in parkas and mukluks. The air was alive with birdsong and flavoured with a tropical flowery scent, maybe jasmine? As I sat there, my face in the sun, in stunning surroundings, I thought about what a perfect experience this would be, if only Ethan were here with me. I fingered the wedding ring on my left hand. It had been too tight when he first gave it to me. Now it felt just right.

When our coffee and breakfasts arrived (granola and yoghurt for her, a small stack of whole-grain pancakes for me), I'd had enough companionable silence and I asked Hema how her night was.

"I was working," she said, barely glancing up from her multi-screens. "Searching provenance for the carpets I'm after, familiarizing myself with the documentation Neil left behind—such as it was—detailing the status of his negotiations, memorizing the dossiers of the merchants I'll be dealing with, studying customs regulations and the restrictions on transportation of carpets across international borders, studying the particulars of our itinerary so I know where we're going. That sort of thing. I suppose you ordered in and went to bed early?"

I couldn't help but smile at the little dig. This gal should be on a nighttime soap opera. While I doctored my coffee with a splash of skim milk, I told Hema what I'd discovered at Neil's apartment.

Halting her incessant typing, texting, and testiness, she looked up at me. Finally I'd gotten her attention. "Did you call the police?" she wanted to know, sounding alarmed.

Not a bad idea. I was so used to skirting around the police at home, like any good private dick does, I hadn't even considered it. As far as I was concerned, if they'd been happy to write off Neil Gupta's death as a random act of violence—in a city that prides itself on its lack thereof—it was their problem if they didn't keep a closer eye on the victim's apartment. "No, I didn't. I suppose..."

"No, that's a good thing," she surprised me by quickly agreeing with my inaction. "What's the point? Maybe they know about

it already and left it the way you found it for the family to clean up."

I highly doubted that but didn't say so.

"You said you found something missing? How could you possibly do that?"

Her lack of faith in my abilities was one of Hema's less compelling traits (of which there were many, I was coming to realize). I told her about the missing "Z" file.

She screwed up her face. Maybe her yoghurt was off?

"That's ridiculous. I think you're grasping for straws where there are none. Next?"

"Next?" Next? Next! Did she think I was her minion, dutifully reporting to her? I'd have to nip that expectation in the bud. I gave her a mighty frown as I very slowly sipped my coffee.

"What else did you find?" she asked, her manner a tad less imperious.

I shrugged. "That's about it," I said in a tone that belied the little voice in my head, which was suggesting I sprinkle the girl's granola all over her sharp, mint-green and pink, Ann Taylor business suit, with shoes to match. "Except for the black flower petals."

It was fascinating to watch Hema's face, often steeped in boredom or contempt, morph into something quite different.

Was it concern?

Fear?

Her half-filled spoon stopped in mid voyage to mouth. Carefully, as if handling a surgical instrument, Hema lowered the utensil onto the side plate next to the container of plain, unsweetened yoghurt.

"Repeat that," she said.

"There were black petals in my bed...in Neil's bed."

"Who put them there?" she demanded to know.

Suddenly I'd gone from being an idiot to either a genius or psychic. "Uh, I don't know."

She opened her mouth to protest my stupidity but then caught herself. Instead, she stared at me, her eyes like bowls of hot chocolate about to burble out of their boiling pot. Again the look of fear.

"What is it? Do you know something about these petals? Do they mean something?"

She shook her head. Just as quickly as alarm had covered her fine features, it disappeared. "It's silly really."

"What is?"

"The whole black petal thing. It's a silly superstition my parents believe in."

"Tell me."

Hema hesitated while a beautiful girl with glowing dark skin offered to refresh our coffees. I breathed in the intoxicating rich scent as the hot liquid was poured from a carafe into our waiting cups. Suddenly, I felt a stab of sadness for Neil Gupta. He would never again enjoy a simple pleasure such as this.

"It's a curse," Hema said once the server had moved on to a table of chattering Russians. "Or a blessing."

"That's handy," I responded. "What do you say we decide these particular black petals were a blessing, and leave it at that?"

"This isn't funny," she bristled.

"You said it was silly." Got ya.

She bit her lower lip as she regarded me with narrowed eyes. She began slowly. "It all depends on what you're doing when you receive the petals. If you find black flower petals somewhere in your possessions, it means you're being watched."

"By whom?"

"By the gods. If what you are doing is righteous and for good, the petals are a blessing. You will be rewarded with a long and wonderful life. If what you were doing is sinful and dishonourable, you...you..." she stumbled and looked away.

"You don't get the reward," I finished it for her.

Both of us knew which side of the coin Neil Gupta had ended up with.

"You see," she said. "It's all a bunch of nonsense. Superstition perpetuated by silly, stupid, superstitious old people who have nothing better to think about."

I doubted whether she'd say this in front of her silly, stupid, superstitious old parents who'd told her about the curse in the first place. And something about how she told the story made me

doubt her words. Somewhere deep inside, Hema Gupta totally believed.

The campus of the University of Dubai, much like Madinat Jumeirah and most of the other buildings in Dubai, was architecturally splendiferous, glitzy and grand, Arabian-styled, UAE-designed, Sheikh-inspired and -financed, but, ultimately, completely artificial. There was nothing authentic or real about any of it. It was beautiful beyond belief, but more like a cyber-world in 3-D than real Arabia. Everything was too perfect. Too clean. Too well organized.

Except the traffic.

Somewhere along the line, in his bid for a flawless metropolis, the Sheikh and his city planners forgot to think about how all these millions of people were going to get around his majestic creation. Actually the road network, often eight or ten lanes' worth, wasn't so bad, but the drivers were. With so many expats living here, bringing with them all the bad driving habits of the world into one city, it was a recipe for disaster. The death toll on Dubai's highways is one of the worst in the world. Fortunately, Umar was a terrific driver. Fast, yet courteous and safety conscious. According to him, there was nothing to worry about, because all the *bad* drivers were already dead.

Once on campus, we were shown to Neil's former office by a young man who introduced himself as Rob.

"So, you worked with Neil?"

The guy was a nervous type, constantly shifting from one foot to the other and swiping aside a swathe of brown hair that immediately fell back into his eyes. "Uh, well sure. Sometimes I mean. Not like always. I attended all his lectures. And he helped me with my research sometimes. He really knew a lot of stuff."

"Thank you, Rob-o, but I can take it from here," another man said as he entered the room. He was slight, with patrician features, natural white-blond hair worn longish and going a bit thin at the crown. He spoke with a strong British accent.

"Oh, uh, sure," Rob said with a befuddled look in his eyes.



"I've got a lot of work to do on my paper."

And he skedaddled outta there.

The blonde Brit shook his head with a bemused smile. "Grad students."

I held out my hand. "I'm Russell Quant." Hema did not offer hers. "And this is Hema Gupta."

"We've been expecting you. I'm Alastair Hallwood. And this charming and spacious work area is where you'll be situated, Russell," he announced with a grand gesture.

I looked around the simple, square room. Typical office equipment. Single window looking out onto a nice green space.

"Has everything been left as it was since Neil's death?" I asked.

"Absolutely, nothing w...oh wait, well, of course the police were here. They needed to have their little chinwag with us, you understand. They did come in here. But I don't think they took anything. They basically stuck their noses in, looked about, I may have heard a fart, then they left. Is that helpful?" he asked with a twinkle in his pale blue eyes.

I smiled. "Quite."

"Oh, and there was a file on Neil's desk. It contained notes for a lecture he was supposed to deliver, end of last week. Those were handed off to the substitute. A rather boring old sod, name of Hexley or Huxtable or something like that. Imported from America, San Diego or Poughkeepsie or somewhere. Bit of an arsehole. His lecture was total pants. Compared to how Neil would have done it, anyway. Neil was spot-on as a presenter, no matter what his topic was. The students here simply adored him. He will be sorely missed, as I'm sure you know.

"But look at me, getting all soppy. Sorry 'bout that, old chap. Now, tell me, how else can I help you?"

"Nothing at the moment," I answered. There was something strange and irreverent about Alastair Hallwood. I liked him. "Maybe once I have a look around, I'll have a few more questions." As much as I wanted to launch into a series of Who? What? Where? When? and How? queries, I had to be cognizant of my undercover persona. As far as Hallwood was concerned, I was

simply a replacement for Neil, here to get my carpets and leave.

"And what about me? Where am I supposed to work? I have a great deal to do today," Hema told the man.

"Ah yes, the lovely assistant, Miss Gupta."

Hema gave him her best sneer.

"Of course. I will be especially delighted to accommodate you."

She huffed.

"Now...Gupta? Are you by any chance a relation of Neil's?"

"I don't see how that is any of your business. But yes, I'm his cousin. I would have been here instead of Neil, if it wasn't that I'm a woman," she announced.

"Well," Hallwood mewed. "Lucky for you then."

Hema's eyes widened as she recognized the hard, cold truth behind the comment.

"Your office is just down the hall, second door on the right. I hope it meets with your approval," Hallwood said.

Hema turned to go.

"And if you require anything, a-ny-thing-at-all, you just call on me. Alastair Hallwood. Faithful hound at your service." He leered at her.

Hema stopped and turned, giving the scholar a damaging once-over. "Thank you..." she began icily.

"Mmmhmm," he enthused with a mooning smile.

"...but I much prefer cats." And with that, she turned on her heel and stomped out.

For a moment there was silence in the room as it refilled with the air Hema had sucked out of it.

Suddenly breaking the quiet, Hallwood trumpeted, "Bloody fantastic!" He turned on me, grasped my shoulders, and demanded to know: "Who is that wondrous creature?"

This was the final scrap of proof I needed. I now knew that I did not, and might never, understand the rules of attraction.

True to Alastair Hallwood's assertion, as I poked around Neil's office, it looked as if nothing had been disturbed. I spent the morning going through drawers and files and boxes. Most of it dealt with carpets, carpets, carpets, and more carpets. I was beginning to

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wonder if I'd ever see another book written about anything else. As I finished with them, I carted each item over to Hema's office, a replica of Neil's. Every time I brought her another stack, she barely nodded in acknowledgment of the addition, and continued to beaver away at whatever it was she was doing. I had to give the gal credit. She sure knew how to put nose to grindstone.

At the end, I was left with only a few personal items. I was keeping what I hoped would be the best, for last. After studying some correspondence and rifling through the top drawers of his desk—where people are most likely to keep items important to them—I was drawing a big nil on the column labelled: Clues. The only thing left was a ratty, army-fatigue-patterned knapsack I'd found stuffed behind the door. The first things that fell out were two more reference books. Oh goody. More carpet reading material. I pushed these aside and searched the pockets and compartments of the knapsack. Finally I hit pay dirt. A PDA.

Neil's personal digital assistant was a simple model. Before long, I found an address book stored on the device. Then, better yet, a calendar. I scrolled through Neil's recent schedule. Lectures and meetings. Lectures and meetings. That was his life. The lectures were to fulfill his responsibilities to the University of Dubai. The meetings, I could only guess, were to fulfill his responsibilities to the University of Saskatchewan, i.e. to get them their rugs.

I moved on to today's date, Saturday, January 31. The only entry was for eight o'clock that night. It said: Aashiq BAA, followed by a number. I quickly pulled out the detailed itinerary Colin Cardinale had given me. It included all the wheres and who withs of Neil's time here. I searched the paper document for Saturday, January 31.

Blank.

Discrepancy. I like discrepancies.

I picked up the phone on my desk and dialled Alastair Hallwood's office extension.

"Greetings," he answered cheerfully.

"Alastair, it's Russell Quant."

"Russell! Is this an invitation to lunch? How grand."

I glanced down at my watch. It was just after one. I *was* get-

ting a bit peckish. "Question first," I responded.

"Shoot, old boy."

"Does the term Aashiq B-A-A mean anything to you?"

"Hmmm. Aashiq, no. BAA is sometimes used as a nickname."

"Nickname for what?"

"Burj Al Arab of course. You may have noticed it? Big thumb sticking out of the water?"

"Oh."

"You're not thinking of the BAA for lunch are you? We'll never get in. They take reservations months in advance. They don't even allow a bloke to set foot on the property unless you're a paying guest or have a reservation. You even need a reservation for a pint at the bar. Splendid snobbery, isn't it?"

"Alastair, I understand it was you who identified Neil's body." Smooth segues are overrated.

After a brief hesitation he answered, "Well, yes it was. There was no family around, you see. I was...I was his friend as well as his colleague, and, well, it had to be me."

"I'm sorry to bring all this up. I was a friend of Neil's too."

"I understand, old boy. You want...oh what do you Yanks call it...closure? You need to know these things to help you get past this dreadful thing. Especially you, Russell. Having to come all this way to finish what your friend started. Having to work in his office, live in his apartment, work with his colleagues. Ghastly for you, if you ask me. Wasn't there anyone else? Anyone at all?"

I hated lying to this man, but it was necessary if I was going to get out of him what I needed to. "Just me." I tried to sound sad sack-ish.

"Well, I hope you know that I am here to help you in any way I can. And Hema too, of course." He sniggered a bit. "Especially the lovely Hema."

"There is one thing, Alastair."

"You want me to pay for lunch?" He sounded quite disappointed.

"How about this: I pay for lunch. Then you take me somewhere I need to go."

"Done."

# Chapter 9

My lunch with Alastair turned into a longer affair than I'd planned. Many of the souks close after the morning busy time, and don't reopen until late afternoon. But, I found, there are less pleasant things than spending a couple of hours with an amusing Brit in Dubai. Afterwards, Umar dropped us off at a place he referred to as the Bur Dubai Abra Station, next to a very active waterway.

"What is this place?" I asked Alastair as he led me closer to the waterfront.

The water was incredibly bright, a vivid turquoise I would have thought impossible in nature. Dancing across the surface were small whitecaps spattered with gold, reflecting off the sheet glass of spectacular high-rises that grew along the opposite bank.

"This is Dubai Creek," he told me. "Extraordinary, isn't it?"

"A creek? At home this would be called a river."

"Dubai Creek is the heart of the city," Alastair told me, donning sunglasses as he surveyed the sight with undisguised affection.

"What are those?" I said, pointing at a collection of odd-looking craft. Some were sitting against the opposite shore, while others sailed in and out from some point far beyond a distant inlet. If there were dinosaur versions of boats, these would be them. They were long and squat, made of aged wood that looked like a good home for worms and rot. A few were gaily painted, but most were brown like dirt. More than a few appeared as if it they might fall to pieces if a stiff wind came down the creek. Aboard, not a square inch of space was left unused, except for what was needed for the crew to navigate the boat. So loaded were they, it was a wonder they didn't capsize from the excess weight. Their cargo manifests would make interesting reading. The boats seemed to carry everything under the sun: from cartons of Pepsi, to couches and air conditioners, to sacks brimming over with who knows what. Many of the bows were criss-crossed with lines heavy with laundry and cooking pots and pans, all hung to dry in the sizzling midday sun. People lived on these small vessels.

"Those are the dhows," Alastair said. "Mostly from Iran. Delivering and picking up cargo. You'll get a closer look when we pass by."

Uh, what? "Pass by?"

"We need to cross here to get to the Deira souks. That's where Neil was on the night of his death. That's what you wanted to see, isn't it?"

We stepped onto an *abra*, a single-engine craft, wooden too, but much smaller than the dhows. Alastair paid two dirham—about fifty cents Canadian—to a captain sitting at a cockpit near the centre of the hull. A bench running down each side of the cockpit, shaded by a canopy, seated about twenty passengers at most. We were the last to get on.

And off we went. The captain operated the *abra's* rudder by a system of ropes and pulleys. My eyes scoured the deck for oars. Just in case. I grasped the edge of the bench, my knuckles milky white with strain. I'm a champion dog-paddler, but with little other swimming prowess, I was closer to the churning water below than I am normally comfortable with. But, after a minute or two, with the boat making its way across the creek, thankfully at

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a leisurely pace, I began to relax. Before long, I found myself mesmerized by the beauty surrounding me. Turquoise water, azure sky, soft, balmy breeze in my face, and a landscape of ancient world mixed with modern on either shore.

I caught Alastair watching me. “It’s something, isn’t it?” he asked, his words only slightly muffled by the gentle wind that accompanied us across Dubai Creek.

“It really is,” I said, giving a little wave to a young boy traveling in an *abra* going the opposite way. To him, this was just another ride in a boat from one side of the creek to the other. To him, being on water was likely as mundane as being on solid ground. That wasn’t true for me.

Years ago, I found myself living my worst nightmare. I was stranded at sea, in the dark, hanging onto the side of an old, wooden boat—not unlike this one—that was about to be swamped and sink.\* With little swimming skill, I doubted I could save my own life, or the lives of the people with me. A prairie boy through and through, I’d grown up surrounded by and loving the land, not water. As an adult, things changed. A little. I’d learned to love being near water. I enjoyed splashing around the shallow end of a pool. But as soon as the bottom was out of sight, out of reach, I was uncomfortable. Yet here I was, doing this. I hadn’t even hesitated. Well, not for long anyway. I still couldn’t swim worth a damn. But maybe, just maybe, I wasn’t so afraid anymore. As for my nightmare at sea, well, let me just say, it’s handy having friends with yachts.

Long before I wanted the trip to be over, the *abra* bumped up against the Deira Old Souk station and we jumped off. Alastair was tall, lanky, and long-legged, and I had to rush to keep up with him. Together we crossed Baniyas Road and headed up Old Baladiya Road.

“When you have the time, Russell, you must return here and visit the other souks. The Covered Souk is where you go for textiles, kitchenwares, and clothing. Maybe you want to pick up some henna for your wife back home? There are souks for per-

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\* *Tapas on the Ramblas*

fume, gold, electronics. All jolly, fun places.”

“Where are we going now?”

“The Spice Souk. It’s small, maybe only three hundred or so shops, but terribly atmospheric. It’s lovely. One of the oldest in the city, I believe. Ah,” he said, slowing down. “And here we are.”

The first thing that struck me as we wandered into the warren of narrow alleyways lined with small shops was the scent of the place. Pungent aromas promising exotic herbs and spices flavoured the air. The shops were old as dust, with open air fronts, stacked with cardboard cartons, wooden crates, and overflowing jute bags. There were fine powders of beige, red, and brilliant blue, grittier stuff of rust and orange, cracked seeds and nut husks, and dried leaves mulched into fine particles. Most of it I’d never seen or smelled ever before. From the ceilings hung tails of dried chilies, lemons, and other fruits, incense burners and water pipes of every size, shape, and colour.

Even the dying heat of the day was extreme, and the place was still not yet busy. This was good for us, making it easier to traverse the skinny pathways, and see into the many nooks and crannies. This may have been called the Spice Souk, but there was much more on offer here. The concept of one-stop shopping was alive and well in the souks of Dubai.

Alastair came to a sudden halt near one of the nooks. He was peering into a small space, neatly hidden between two merchant stalls. I came up behind him to see what he was looking at. His face was glazed over with a near hypnotic glare.

“This is it,” he said when he sensed my presence, his voice deadened. “This is the place.”

It was a dark corner of the souk, one of many, I guessed. It was probably used for storage, or as a place for garbage until it could be removed. The space was stacked with barrels and bags, old carpets, and cardboard boxes. By the look on Alastair’s face, I knew this had to be where Neil Gupta had died. Or, at least, where his beaten, knifed, lifeless body had been discarded, like just another piece of detritus from a busy day in the market.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know this must bring back unhappy memories for you.”



## Date with a Sheesha

He made a muffled sound, but was otherwise uncharacteristically unresponsive.

I used the time to take an inventory of the murder scene. Other than its obvious exotic nature, the area was rather unremarkable. Just another busy street in the world, where a man can get attacked, be killed, and then stuffed into a corner without anyone seeing a thing. It happens in Dubai. It happens in New York City. It happens in London. It can happen pretty much anywhere.

"He was your friend?" a voice asked.

Standing behind Alastair, staring at the same spot, with great sorrow on his face, was one of the merchants I recognized from a nearby shop. His skin was dark and wrinkled, although he may have only been in his thirties or early forties. He wore the typical garb of a Middle Eastern man. The simple, white, floor-length shirt-dress is known as a *dishdasha*. Although many men wear a loose, white headscarf—a *ghutra*—fastened by a black head rope called an *agal*, this fellow wore a round, white cap perched atop his grizzled hair.

"He was," I said, stepping to the man's side. "You have a shop near here?"

"Yes. You must come visit. I have many fine things."

"Were you here the day the young man died?"

"Yes. Is there anything in particular you are looking for? Frankincense? We have only the best, from Oman. Or maybe some cardamom?"

I moved the man slightly away from Hallwood, who still seemed a bit discombobulated. "Did you see anything that day? Did you see the young man come into the market?"

He shook his head. "Oh no, sir. There are so many people in the market. I only see him when he's dead."

I was impressed with the shopkeeper's command of the English language. And I planned to take advantage of it. "What about the other shopkeepers near here? Do you think they could have seen something?"

"Qasid. He maybe did. Come, I bring you to him. And then you shop in my store."

Without further discussion on the matter, the man moved off.

I called to Alastair and we quickly followed.

As it turned out, the fellow in the cap, whose name was Rahim, and Qasid had adjoining stores. Qasid, however, could speak no English.

"Can you ask him if he remembers seeing the young man who was found dead here?" I asked Rahim to translate.

The language was wholly unfamiliar to me, and as far as I knew, Rahim could have been reciting "Little Red Riding Hood" to Qasid. Eventually, when they were done, Rahim said, "He did see the man. He said he was here in the souk late that day. With other men. Friends, perhaps."

That made sense. It was to have been a farewell party for Neil. As I glanced around, the Spice Souk seemed to me to be an odd location for a party. Maybe there was a restaurant or bar nearby?

"Qasid saw nothing else until early the next morning," Rahim kept on. "You see, many of the dogs were congregated in the spot we just came from. Qasid went to see what they were doing there. Then he saw the young man again. Dead."

"Was he able to identify the friends for the police?"

More Arabic conversation. As Alastair and I stood there, watching and hoping, we could feel the heat escalating by the minute as the close quarters of the souk became more congested with shoppers.

"No," came the unrewarding answer. "Qasid knows nothing else. But wishes you his sympathy."

"Thank you," we both muttered.

"And now you shop in my store," Rahim announced with joy.

"Nothing for us, old chap," Alastair said.

"Baharat, turmeric, the best saffron..."

"Wait," I put a hand on Hallwood's departing shoulder. My mind replayed what I'd read in the last email Neil sent his ex-lover, Darrell Good: *"I still havent found saffron i need saffron."*

I turned to Rahim, and said, "Saffron. I think the young man might have been looking for saffron. Are you sure he didn't come to your store looking for some that night? Maybe you saw him, or who he was with? Maybe you heard something they said?" I was desperate for something.

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Rahim shook his head. "No. I'm sorry to say so."

"Is there another store nearby where he might have bought saffron?"

The man hesitated, then smiled. "Only I have the best saffron."

"Save it, Russell," Alastair chimed in. "They all sell saffron. All three hundred of them. I don't understand where you're going with this, mate. Why get your knickers in a knot over saffron?"

Had the police already been over this? Had they taken a photo of Neil to all the merchants to see if anyone knew anything about the crime? Had they exhausted all possibilities here? Did I care? If it needed to be done, I'd do it myself. I just wasn't sure the time-sucking activity would get me anywhere. All these guys wanted to do was sell some spice.

"Can you show me the saffron?" I asked, thinking I should at least know what the stuff Neil was so anxious to get his hands on looked like.

Rahim reached to a nearby shelf and retrieved a small container of reddish yellow threads. He encouraged me to smell. They had a faintly grassy, hay like aroma.

"Perhaps you are feeling tired? My saffron will help you," Rahim promised.

I nodded. "Thank you."

I purchased a small amount (the stuff was pricier than I expected). I pledged to return for all my spice needs while in Dubai, and we said farewell to the shopkeeper.

The afternoon call to prayer followed Alastair and me through the souk's narrow passageways, and darts of sunlight found their way through the battered coverings of the marketplace, stencilling our skin. More slowly this time, we retraced our steps back to the *abra* station. Umar was waiting to pick us up on the other side of the creek.

"Alastair, when you identified the body..."

"Back to that, are we?" he interrupted me with a voice that was tinged with a mirth I didn't buy for a second. "You're like a hound on a fox, aren't you mate?"

"It's just, I'm interested in why they asked you to come to the

market, rather than the morgue, to identify the body. Seems a little macabre, don't you think?"

He shrugged his narrow shoulders, so thin I could see the bones protrude at the top of his lightweight shirt. "Dunno. Just the way they do things around here, I suppose."

"It's funny..." I began.

"What's that?"

"I thought for sure when I asked Qasid if he recognized the friends Neil was with the night he died that he was going to point at you."

I heard a choking sound, then Hallwood came to an abrupt halt. His voice exploded next to me. "Bollocks! Are you accusing me of murder?" And then came some unintelligible stuff made more so by his accent and use of words I'd not heard before.

I too stopped in my tracks and stared at him. When the outburst was over, I cleared my throat of surprise and said, "Alastair, no, of course I'm not accusing you of murder. What gave you that idea? I just assumed you were one of the guests at the party. As one of his best friends and a colleague, it would make sense for you to be one of the people Qasid saw with Neil that night."

"Russell, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Neil was killed in the marketplace," I said, as if explaining things to a not very bright student. "He was there in the first place because he was attending the surprise farewell party given by his colleagues at the University of Dubai. You said you were his friend. I thought for sure you'd have been there."

The Brit's face was pinched with confusion. "Russell, you've been given some rubbish information. There was no such party."

I felt my heart go pitter-patter.

"Whatever Neil was doing in the marketplace that night," he said, "it had nothing to do with me, or the University of Dubai."

Via a lazy waterway winding its way from one hotel's picturesque beachfront property to the next, an *abra* delivered Hema and me from the Madinat Jumeirah to the Mina A'Salam boutique hotel. She'd booked us an outdoor table at Zheng He's, which promised

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(and delivered) “new Chinese” cooking—a blend of Western tastes and Far Eastern ambience. Over a Peking duck appetizer, a few dim sum selections, a to-die-for spicy chili prawn dish, and with Hema’s ever-present BlackBerry as a third dinner companion, we discussed our day. She proudly announced that she’d made contact with a number of the rug merchants we would be visiting. I easily topped that with my shocking revelation that the “surprise” party that had lured Neil to the marketplace—and his death—was actually a fake.

We (or rather, me, with Hema only half-listening) tried out the many permutations of how the whole fake-surprise-party-thing could have gone down. Neil intimated to his ex-lover, Darrell Good, that he’d been tipped off about the party. But who had planned the party in the first place? And who let out the big secret? Or, was Neil telling a lie? Did he know the party was a fake? Did he think the party was something it wasn’t? An assignation perhaps? Something he didn’t want to admit to Darrell, because maybe he hoped they might get back together upon his return to Canada?

By the time the last dish was finished, we had more questions than answers. Hema was showing signs of being bored with me. And I was ready to leave for an assignation of my very own, with the mysterious Aashiq—whoever or whatever that was—at the Burj Al Arab.

A handy golf cart—they’d thought of everything—ferried me along a lovely seaside route away from Mina A’Salam. Only minutes later I was being delivered to the cordoned-off entrance to the causeway leading up to the imposing Burj Al Arab, sitting on its own artificial island off Jumeirah Beach. As we approached, the light of day long gone, I saw that the hump side of the grand hotel was lit up. Every minute or so, it changed from one colour scheme to another. It looked, for all the world to see, like some kind of magical, many-hued butterfly, metamorphosing in its mighty cocoon. According to the hotel’s imaginative PR team, the Burj Al Arab is the world’s only seven-star hotel. Hyperbole aside, for about the millionth time, as I sat there looking up at this magical castle that oil bought, I thought to myself: what a place, this Dubai.

I stepped off the golf cart, thanking the driver and approached a guard who was in the process of politely turning away a four-some of tourists. They were in their seventies, and appeared to be seasoned travellers. But even they had never come across anything like this. I smiled at the guy and told him I had a reservation at the Skyview Bar. He checked the number I'd pulled from Neil's PDA against some master list. Once I was cleared, he waved me over to yet another waiting golf cart. This one, a little snazzier than the first, carried me down the bridge to the massive front entrance hall of the hotel. I felt like Cinderella in her carriage. I hoped I'd get in and out of this place before my glass slipper turned into a flip-flop.

I entered the Burj Al Arab's towering atrium, feeling a bit like a visitor from another planet. All the gold and glass and razzle and dazzle of the place was enough to make a Donald Trump joint look like a Motel No Tell. But I didn't have time to dawdle in the shops and little bars, or admire the pools of water, or the twenty-two-karat pillars holding up the place, or gawk at the dizzying array of beautiful people who looked as if their sole duty in life was to be admired. I had work to do.

Up a set of escalators and to the rear of the hotel I found a sign that indicated I'd found the elevator to the top floor. Too late, I also realized that I'd stepped into a panoramic elevator. Dealing with dizzying heights at great speed has never been a favourite activity of mine. As the little metal box with glass walls hurtled me up, two-hundred metres above the Persian Gulf, I was glad to be alone. Lest anyone hear me whimpering.

About three months later, the hell ride came to an end. Glad to be outta there, I giddily stepped out onto the cantilever that hangs off the top of the building where Al Muntaha restaurant and the Skyview Bar reside. (It sounds scarier than it is.) While giving my knees a moment to resolidify, and my heart time to settle back into my chest, I was both chagrined and relieved (for later) to see an entire bank of elevators promising the same ride but with four solid walls. I made note of their location and headed off to find Aashiq.

In any other circumstance I could imagine, the woman staffing

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the welcome desk at the Skyview Bar would have been a famed movie actress, supermodel, or Queen of the Nile. But here, in the surreal high-in-the-sky world of Dubai, she was a seating hostess in a bar. I gave her my valuable reservation number and, with a million-dollar smile and boobies to match, she offered to lead me to my table.

As we slowly wended our way through the lively cocktail lounge, I was ever so glad I had accepted Anthony's offer to send me on my way with a few pieces of what he calls "gentleman's finery." According to Anthony, during the course of any trip, be you visiting Dubai, Denmark, or downtown Deadwood, a fellow must always be prepared to present himself impeccably groomed and dressed with distinction. Tonight's Ungaro slim-fitted Prince de Galles dove grey suit, with a pale blue shirt, and Nicole Farhi Brushed Nobuk laced shoes were just what I needed to fit in. Or at least do a good job pretending.

I was disappointed to see that because the sun had long ago headed to another, no doubt less charmed, part of the world, the view outside the floor to ceiling windows was little more than black sky over black ocean. After the amusement park ride to get up here, certainly I deserved more than this. I couldn't help think that somewhere there was an architect, hitting his forehead and saying: "Doh! I knew I shoulda pointed that cantilever thing towards the city instead of out to sea!"

But never mind that. Miss Universe was bringing her four-inch stilettos in for a landing. I slowed up behind her. We were about to stop next to a table for two. One seat was already occupied by a man I was guessing was going to tell me his name was Aashiq. With a strong jaw, dimpled chin, and precise moustache above shapely lips, he was the spitting image of a young Omar Sharif, the Egyptian actor best known for playing Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia* and the title role in *Doctor Zhivago*.

The man must have noticed our approach, looking up as we neared. When he realized the hostess was intending to introduce me as his companion for the evening, what I saw in his dark, intense eyes was not at all what I expected. It wasn't surprise. Nor confusion or uncertainty. It was horror.

# Chapter 10

After confirming that no one was going to keel over, nor was an outbreak of fisticuffs imminent, our hostess, a perplexed pucker marring her perfect features, sashayed off with the promise of sending someone over to offer me a drink. I hopped onto the stool across from Aashiq and his grim face. The horror that greeted me upon my arrival had now become something new—resignation and sadness. I had no idea what was going on with this guy, but I was determined to find out.

"You're Aashiq?" I started out with an easy question.

He nodded, his liquid eyes fastened on my face, as if he was hoping I was some sort of mirage that would soon disappear.

"I'm Russell, Russell Quant," I told him. The news didn't seem particularly exciting to him.

Another impossibly beautiful woman presented herself at our table. With a breathy, sex kitten voice, she asked if she could bring us something. Aashiq wordlessly indicated he wanted a refill of his Manhattan. I ordered a glass of Chardonnay.



"Tell me what happened," the man finally said. His deep voice was dull, devoid of anything resembling texture or timbre.

"Excuse me? Tell you what happened about what?"

"Neil. Something is wrong, isn't it?"

I nodded slowly, finding myself almost mesmerized by his unwavering glare. "I'm sorry to tell you this, Mr. Aashiq, but Neil was killed a week ago."

Although this wasn't a moment for enjoyment, there is something hauntingly beautiful about a handsome man fighting to keep from crying. As his eyes filled, the pool of unwept tears reflected the gentle flame of our table's candle. His heavy jaw tensed, the corners of his mouth quivered. His left hand tightened around his cocktail glass, and I worried it would break.

"Tell me what happened please," he finally got out.

I gave a rough description of Neil's death in the souk, much as his father had told it to me. Only when I was done did Aashiq's eyes leave my face. They came to rest on some dark, uncharted spot, far beyond the glass of the windows that faced the sea.

The waitress arrived with our drinks. Giving Aashiq a few minutes to take in the obviously distressing news, I sipped my wine. It was very good. And it should have been: I later found out that every sip cost me roughly five dollars.

"Did you know Neil very well?" I ventured after about fifteen bucks' worth.

"Yes. No. It depends how you mean it."

Good answer. "Mr. Aashiq, why were you meeting Neil here tonight?"

"Aashiq. Just Aashiq is fine."

I noticed he wasn't giving up his surname too readily. "All right, Aashiq. Why were you meeting Neil?"

The man's eyes left the safety of far far away and made a quick trip around the room before finally settling on me. "Who are you?" he asked, as if seeing me for the first time.

"My name is Russell Quant. I've come to replace Neil at the university. I saw he had an appointment scheduled with you tonight. I came because I thought it might have something to do with Neil's work here in Dubai."

Aashiq studied my face more closely. "You work for whom?"  
"The university."

He glanced around again. Was he looking for someone? Did he think someone was watching us? Was this meeting supposed to be a secret? Was he worried that I'd been followed? Who did he think I was?

For all I knew, maybe I had been followed. So I too took a gander around the room. Not knowing exactly what I was looking for, it didn't take me long.

"Is that what you were meeting about tonight? About Neil's work at the university? About antique carpets?"

He let out a mild scoffing sound. "No. I know nothing about those carpets of his." He stopped there and looked as if he'd said something he hadn't wanted to. And maybe he had. His statement told me a lot. First, he'd confirmed that this was a meeting that had nothing to do with university business. Second, the way he'd said it made it sound to me as if Aashiq knew Neil in a more personal way.

"You were friends then? You and Neil?"

"Why are you asking these questions?" he asked, heavy brows settling over suspicious eyes. "You came here to find out if this was a business meeting of your concern. It was not. You should leave now." He wanted to be left alone. Well, good luck with that. I still had thirty dollars' worth of wine to drink.

"You didn't seem exactly surprised I showed up tonight, rather than Neil." Time to obfuscate with a change of topic. "You looked very unhappy, but not surprised. Why is that?"

He observed me coolly, taking a long sip of his drink. The man's confidence and poise were quickly coming back to him. "Again, Mr. Quant, that is none of your concern."

"It is when a man is dead, brutally attacked and stabbed to death before he even reached thirty years old. I'm very concerned about that."

A noisy group of patrons, being led off to their dinner reservation at Al Muntaha, passed by, followed closely by Aashiq's wary eyes.

"Is something wrong?"

"Maybe. I don't trust you, Mr. Quant." The words rolled over me like a piece of heavy machinery.

"Why do you need to?"

That got him. He eyed me carefully, then signalled our waitress for another drink. We sat in silence, neither of us quite wanting to leave, neither sure how to proceed. I decided that if I wanted more out of this man, I'd have to give him something.

"Aashiq," I said, "I lied to you. I am not employed by the university. I was sent here by Neil's father."

Something changed in his face. At the mention of Neil's father, his eyes softened and the tension in his jaw relaxed, if only just a bit.

"Is this true?" I could tell he very much wanted it to be.

"I'm a Canadian detective. Pranav Gupta, Neil's father, believes his son's death was not a result of random violence. He wants me to find out if that is true." I waited a beat, and then added, "Is it true, Aashiq?"

In a movement almost too slow to see, Aashiq nodded. He whispered: "Yes."

With Aashiq's third Manhattan came a sense that he was ready to confide in me. Starting with a large gulp that took up almost a third of the bittersweet drink, he began to reveal himself to me. "I do not live in Dubai," he began. "I run my business in Abu Dhabi."

I knew that Abu Dhabi was the neighbouring emirate. It was, by far, the largest of the UAE. From what I'd read online, Abu Dhabi is somewhat less cosmopolitan but more livable than Dubai. "Is that where you met Neil?"

"No. We first met here. I come to Dubai every four or five weeks for my work. We met at...a party."

Something wasn't being said here. I thought I knew what it was. "You mean a gay bar?"

He appeared shocked. "No!" He took another drink. "A party."

I looked at him but said nothing.

"A party...for...fabulous men."

I see. Safety in synonyms. "I understand. You and Neil were boyfriends."

He sucked in his cheeks, pursed his lips, stared at me for a while, and then said, "Casually so. Whenever he was in Abu Dhabi, or I was here, we would meet."

So, tonight had been a booty call.

"But we were more than lovers, you must understand. In many ways, we were friends too. We wouldn't always jump right into bed, you see. We would meet first for dinner, or drinks, and talk. Then we'd go to a party. Spend time with other men. Men like us." (The aforementioned fabulous men, I was guessing.)

"Sometimes, that was all we did. It was nice, you know, to have someone from another city, from another country, to confide in, tell things you wouldn't tell your wife."

The naive me gulped. "You're married?"

"Of course."

"When I arrived instead of Neil, you looked...certainly taken aback, and sad, and not all that surprised. You knew there might be a chance he wouldn't show up, didn't you?" What I left unsaid was: "As if you knew he was dead."

"Neil called me, at my office in Abu Dhabi. This was unusual. Each time we saw each other, we'd make plans for our next meeting. There was no need to be in contact between our meetings. But he called. He sounded not like himself. He sounded nervous. Unhappy."

"What did he say?"

"He pretended he wanted to confirm our date for tonight. But then he told me there was a possibility he might not show up. I asked him what the problem was. He wouldn't say anything at first. Then he said it was too complicated to explain. He told me that if he did not come to meet me tonight at the Burj Al Arab, that I would know something bad had happened to him. He gave me a phone number for his father in Canada. He told me I should call him. To ask for help."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Pranav Gupta had sensed his son was in danger. He had sensed Neil met his death

for a reason other than what the police claimed. It seemed, yet again, that he was right. Neil too must have known he was in danger. Had the black petals warned him he was involved in something perilous? That he was risking his life? A risk he took and lost.

"Did he tell you what this bad thing might be?"

"No. Only that I was to trust no one other than his father."

"But he must have said more than that. How would his father know how to help if he had no idea what Neil was dealing with?"

"I wrote it down," Aashiq said as his fingers dipped into the breast pocket of his dark suit jacket. He pulled out a small square of paper and handed it to me. "This is the only thing he told me."

Next to a phone number, which I recognized as Pranav Gupta's in Saskatoon, was a single word. I stared at it. It was familiar, yet at the same time wholly mysterious to me. I looked up at the other man with questioning eyes.

"Saffron. This is all he told me," Aashiq said. "He told me to me to tell his father to find saffron."

Back in my marina apartment—after a short, jet-lag induced nap—I stewed about saffron. Why did a spice, albeit a locally popular one, keep on popping up in this case? And why would Neil leave his father such a cryptic message? "Find saffron." How could he possibly expect anyone to know what that meant? Unless...unless that information was in the "Z" folder I suspected was missing from Neil's apartment. Still, what could a spice possibly have to do with Neil Gupta's death? The options floated through my mind as I changed into something more appropriate for a late-night outing. Stolen saffron? Poisoned saffron? Smuggled saffron? Missing saffron? Poor quality saffron sold as the more expensive variety, like the stuff I'd picked up earlier from Rahim in the Spice Souk? Had Neil stumbled upon something like that and been killed for what he knew? Possible. But how could I ever hope to prove it?

I had to know more about Neil, about his friends, about his life outside the university. About saffron. And "more" wasn't

going to just show up at my door. Which was why I'd convinced Aashiq to invite me to the "party for fabulous men" he and Neil had planned to attend together tonight.

As I was finding out, whether you're in the Middle East or the West Village, some things never change. Apparently the merry-making didn't really get going until after one a.m. So I had plenty of time to come up with increasingly incredible and absurd saffron-related criminal activities. I'd donned the requisite stylishly distressed jeans and tight T, and was considering a saffron-in-the-Dubai-food-supply-causing-Mad-Camel-Disease scenario, when the phone rang. It was after midnight.

"Russell Quant," I answered, assuming it was someone from home who hadn't quite figured out the time change.

"Quant! Up for a pint, mate?" Guess who? Could he be more British?

"Oh, Alastair, it's rather late, isn't it?"

I heard his trademark raucous laugh, like a pleasant hyena. "It's never too late or too early for a pint, old boy!" he chided. "I just thought, with it being your first weekend in the big city and all, you might fancy a look round the hot spots."

Having an interpreter along tonight wouldn't be such a bad idea, I suddenly realized. And it was much too late to call on Umar, our driver. "You know a little Arabic, don't you Alastair?"

"Wee bit, why?"

"I *would* like to go out tonight. As long as I get to pick the place."

"Absolutely. Whereabouts then?"

"Can you get yourself here? Then we'll take a taxi."

There was a short pause. He had sniffed out that something was up. "Just where is it you're taking us, Russell?"

The jig was up. I knew he'd figure it out sooner or later. Plus, this was the Middle East after all. I wasn't simply inviting him out on another night on the town. I was asking him to take on a certain degree of risk. He deserved to know. "It's a party. For gay men."

More hesitation. "I see," he finally said. "No problem." Pause. "But on one condition."

Alastair and I gingerly got out of the taxi.

The area wasn't quite what I expected it to be. I thought when the cab dropped us off, we'd find ourselves in a dark and dingy back alley, with wild dogs and shady characters creeping around the edges of crumbling buildings. Instead, the street seemed pretty average-looking, and certainly safe enough. It was busy too. Lots of foot traffic. Cars whizzing by. I wasn't exactly sure what part of town this was. Neither was Alastair (which gave me some concern). But the area looked to be a bit of an entertainment mecca (no pun intended). There wasn't rock music blaring from rooftops, or drunk and disorderly twenty-somethings staggering about from bar to bar, but there did seem to be a jovial atmosphere, with a preponderance of young people.

Alastair poked his head back into the cab. "It's okay," he said.

Hema stepped out of the car. I think it was the first time since we'd left for Dubai that I'd seen her without her BlackBerry. When not tapping away at miniscule keypads, her hands looked small, like those of a little girl, and soft like toffee; tonight she'd painted her nails dark crimson. Her outfit and intricately mussed up hair hinted that she was not unused to going out dancing after midnight.

I paid the cab fare. Then the three of us stood side by side, looking up at the nondescript building in front of us.

"What is this place?" Hema asked in her hard, nasal tone.

"Don't worry, my decadent beauty," Alastair drawled as he attempted to lay one long, skinny arm around Hema's tiny shoulders, a foot or so below him. "I will take care of you. Any sign of trouble, I will personally escort you home. Perhaps we could share a nightcap?"

Glaring up at him as if he were some kind of giant stick insect, she shrugged off his arm. "Do you even know why you're here? Has Russell even bothered to tell you the truth?"

Bitch!

Oops. I hate that word. I really do. But it just slipped out (in my head). And okay, I suppose she had some reason to be a bit

grouchier than usual (which was no small feat). I'd gotten her out of bed. I insisted she come out with us so Alastair would have her as his date, and I would have Alastair as my translator. But this was an investigation. She was part of that investigation. And sworn to protect my cover. Well, maybe she didn't swear to that, but she should have.

Alastair pulled out of our lineup of three. He turned and stood gazing at me while laying a pale hand on my shoulder. "Oh, I know the truth, my sweet muffin," he said, with a wink at Hema. "Our Russell is on the pull! In search of some rumpy-pumpy! Riding the beast with two backs! Looking for action! We're here to provide cover, and that we shall. Onward. Into the breach!"

Hema shot us both a disgusted look. I was rather dumbfounded myself. She marched inside the building without a backward glance. I hurried to follow her in, and to get away from Alastair's wacky outburst.

"What is this place?" I used Hema's question when we stepped inside.

We were in a large, palm-filled courtyard, littered with hundreds of pillows and large cushions strewn about a floor laid end-to-end with Persian carpets. Although the lighting was low, I could see many small groupings of people, most of them huddled together on the floor.

"It's a sheesha café," Hema announced, wandering further into the room.

"Sheesha?"

"Hookah, my friend," Alastair said, coming up behind me. "You know, a water pipe? Smoking *nargileh*?"

I looked around with a bit of a frown on my face. "This is the gay bar?"

Alastair lowered his lips close to Hema's right ear, and asked, "You up for a hubbly bubbly, my love?"

Her nose indicated a free spot not far off. "We'll be over there."

Alastair went off to arrange our sheesha. Hema and I lowered ourselves onto a large cushion near the centre of the room. Not the best spot from which to watch the comings and goings, but the



# Date with a Sheesha

place was popular and we didn't have much choice. While we waited I assessed the crowd. It seemed to be an even mix of Arabs and expats, all ages. There was not a butch dyke, twink, or celebrity DJ to be seen. I began to worry that we'd either come to the wrong place, or, maybe more likely, been *sent* to the wrong place by Aashiq.

A moment later, Alastair returned with a sheesha server (for lack of a better name), who set up our apparatus. The odd-looking thing was about thirty inches tall, sitting on a glass base filled with water. Above the base was a valve and narrow stem leading up to a small plate or ashtray positioned below a very small clay bowl. From near the valve mechanism came out a trio of hoses, like the rubber arms of Medusa, each with a mouthpiece attached to its end. The server placed a hand on top of the hookah and handed one of the mouthpieces to Alastair. He made the most of making a sucking motion. We—or maybe it was just me—oohed and ahed as bubbles formed in the water. Apparently this meant the set-up was airtight.

As the server placed some tobacco in the clay bowl, Alastair said with great authority, "In other parts of the world, this device is called the hookah, and the tobacco the sheesha. But here, the device, particularly the glass water container at the bottom is the sheesha, and the tobacco is called *moassel*. What we have here is more of a herbal molasses."

Hema watched with a practiced eye as the server placed a small bit of pierced foil atop the tobacco. Then, with a set of tongs, he laid a lit charcoal on top of that. "Do we have a flavour choice?" she asked, obviously no stranger to a water pipe.

Flavours? What was this, Ben & Jerry's?

"I went with a mixture of raspberry, jasmine, and honey," Alastair told her with an adoring look. "A sweet combination that will forever remind me of you."

She rolled her eyes and reached for a mouthpiece.

Alastair dumped himself unceremoniously on the cushion next to his resistant amour. With dramatic flair, he pulled the tube away from her. "Allow me," he said with an indulgent smile. "You must never accept a hose with mouthpiece pointing toward

you. The last smoker should always fold the hose back on itself so that it's pointing away from the recipient." He demonstrated. "Then, as I hand it to you, you will tap the back of my hand as a sign of friendship...or perhaps affection?"

Hema eyed the blond Brit for a second, gave his hand a perfunctory tap, and took the hose. While Alastair used the tongs to gently press down on the charcoal, Hema sucked in using the mouthpiece, pulling air up through the charcoal. The burning charcoal heated the air, which, after a couple of sucks, began to burn the tobacco and produce smoke. The smoke passed down through the tube that extends into the bottom jar, and bubbled up through the water. Our server grinned upon seeing Hema's success, and walked off to deal with other customers.

After we'd passed the thing around and tapped each other's hands once or twice, I decided I'd had enough. I used to be a smoker, many years ago. The acrid feeling in my throat and lungs as I partook of the sheesha was not altogether unpleasant. But I didn't want to play footsie with temptation. Besides, I had work to do. The first thing on the list was to find out if I was where I was supposed to be.

I pulled myself up to a standing position and told Hema and Alastair I was going to take a look around. Hallwood seemed glad to be getting some alone time with his "Indian rose petal." Hema, as usual, didn't seem to care if I stayed, left, lived, or died.

For the next little while, I circumnavigated the sheesha café, looking for something familiar. But several minutes later, I still had seen no sign of Aashiq, a Donna Summer drag queen, or two men doing much more together than sharing a sheesha. It was on my third time around the room that I found the doorway, hidden behind a thick velvet curtain. I pushed the drapery aside and found myself at the top of a set of stairs, lit only by a red-tinged spotlight. I tipped my head to one side. I thought I could hear something...something...something...oh, yeah, there it was. If I wasn't mistaken, it was the rhythmic bass of the Black Eyed Peas singing "My Humps."

The telltale noise was coming from somewhere downstairs, far below the sheesha café. I looked back into the café and caught

Alastair's eye. I pointed through the curtain to show him where I was going. Giving me a wink and an A-okay sign, he returned his fawning attentions to Hema, who was pretending to look bored.

I was surprised after descending one staircase to find another. Then another. And another. When they say gay nightlife in the Middle East is underground, they aren't kidding. Finally I emerged into a small foyer. Behind a window cut out of a drab wall was a rather theatrical Grace Jones type (or is that an oxymoron?). She asked for one hundred dirham. I calculated in my head that she was charging me roughly thirty Canadian dollars to get in. Jeeeeeeeeeeepers.

I paid the entrance fee and was buzzed in through a steel-reinforced door. Once inside, I made my way down a narrow hallway, then another, then down another set of stairs into a large room where another Grace Jones type (how many were there? was this some kind of employee uniform?) assessed me with RuPaul eyebrows. Apparently I passed muster, and Grace #2 waved me in.

Okay, fabulous boys. Here I come.

About ten minutes later, I concluded that, yes, Aashiq had led me astray. This was indeed a dance club, filled with no doubt fabulous people. But these fabulous people were decidedly straight, both men and women. I walked around a little longer and was about to leave when I spotted yet another velvet covered doorway. Oh, come on. You gotta be kidding me.

This time, behind the velvet curtain wasn't another set of stairs. This was a good thing. If I went much lower, I'd be back home. Instead, I found my third Grace Jones. Another seventy-five dirham bought me passage through the next door. This, I promised myself, would be the last. It would have to be. I was running out of money.

The door opened.

"Voila!" a choir of angels sang. Friends of Dorothy!

They were everywhere.

Once again, I was surprised, and rather heartened, to see that some things remain the same, no matter where you are. Although the tune blaring over the loudspeakers wasn't familiar to me, it had the thumping, primal beat of Saturday night dance music

being played in gay bars the world over. Also typical, more people were on the dance floor than were standing at the collection of tables spread throughout the room. Gay men who frequent these types of places traditionally do not make very good wallflowers. If they've made the effort to pluck their eyebrows and get in that extra workout, purchased that too-pricey, too-tight tank top, and spent their hard-earned money on a bit of something special to get them in the mood, they certainly aren't going to stand in the shadows letting it all go to waste. Nope, these men wanted to move and writhe, flirt and play naughty.

As before, the mix here was even between locals and immigrant wannabe locals, but unlike the sheesha café many leagues above, the age range was decidedly narrower. I, approaching forty, was probably a bit skewed to the right of the bell curve. But, thanks to dim lighting and the blurring effects of alcohol and other mood-enhancers, I was pleased to note that my entrance attracted more than a few admiring stares.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and saw Aashiq. Or rather, the late-night-out-on-the-town version of Aashiq. Gone were the stylish but sedate black suit, slicked back hair, and uncertain, wary eyes. He'd wriggled into a pair of tight denims that barely reached his waist and an equally tight shirt with an intricate embroidered design running up one sleeve and across his pumped-up back and chest. His hair was boyishly messy, and he looked five years younger than he had at the Skyview Bar, and, if possible, even more handsome.

"You made it," he shouted in my ear.

I smiled and shrugged, as if it had taken nothing to find the place. If Aashiq had meant to make getting here difficult for me, I wasn't going to give him the pleasure of seeing the result of his duplicity on my face.

"Come," he said, taking my hand. "You must dance."

And so we did. The music was good. Infectious. A little bit later, when I felt Aashiq's hand casually fall to my buttocks and linger there, I knew it was time to sit the next one out. He good-naturedly agreed, and led me to a corner of the room where a group of men sat around a table smoking. Although Dubai restau-

rants, hotel bars, and members-only clubs (which I guessed this must be, or else why did I just pay fifty bucks to get in?) are allowed to sell alcohol, there was none to be seen.

Aashiq and I squeezed in amongst the others. The musky, spicy scent favoured by Arab men was heavy at the table. Aashiq introduced me as a friend of Neil's. At first, there was general talk about Neil and his death. I learned nothing new. Eventually, the conversation turned to how these men lived their lives as homosexuals in an Arab nation.

"I have lost three jobs because of what I am," said the youngest of the bunch. He'd been introduced as Yash.

"They call us names," said another, a heavysset man who, in America, would do quite well in the bear clubs. "They see us coming out of certain establishments or walking together down the street as friends, and somehow they know. The most vile things come from their mouths. They shout them loud, for all to hear. And then they laugh at us."

The most effeminate of the group spoke up. "Our families can be a problem too. If they suspect, they taunt you until you deny it. Me? I never deny it. I told them I am who I am, and I will never change."

"What happened then?" I asked, hoping for a story of familial love triumphing over hate.

"They shun me like a dog," he told me, his eyes blurring, but only for a second. "To them, I am unclean. Unacceptable. A violation of all they believe in."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You're very brave."

"A brave man with no place to live," he said with very little of the bitterness I was expecting to hear.

"At least you still live," the bear said. "Think of Khidr."

"Khidr? What happened to him?" I asked.

Yash shrugged his shoulders. "No one knows. One day, he tells his brothers he is homosexual. The next, he is gone. No one has heard from him since."

"Police and politicians regularly turn a blind eye to such things," the husky man said. "There is nothing we can do."

There was so much I wanted to say to that, but I stopped

myself. This was a world I did not know. Things worked differently here. Should I preach the power of fighting for a cause, when doing so could mean death?

"But things are so much better than they once were," Aashiq spoke, breaking the tension that had begun to smother the table like a cloud of smoke.

I was surprised, given what I'd just heard, to see every head around the table nod in enthusiastic agreement.

God bless hope.

As Aashiq and his friends talked, I couldn't help but think about my own life in Canada. These men had lost jobs, family, and friends. Some lost their lives. The only thing I stood to lose, the only thing I would have to give up to be with my true love, was my house. I'd been testy and tormented for months, trying to find another way. How absurd it all seemed to me now. I looked down at the wedding ring on my finger. I used my thumb to twist it around and around. I vowed, at that moment, to make things right, as soon as I got home.

If these Middle Eastern gay men thought they'd come a long way, then we in North America have travelled a distance too far to measure. It's true, we still have a long way to go, but we are free. We need to celebrate that freedom and not take it for granted. I would, I promised myself. I *will* celebrate. With Ethan.

The mood lightened, and as the men laughed and teased and unabashedly flirted with one another, just like any collection of young singles anywhere in the world, I thought about Pranav Gupta. On the one hand, since coming to Dubai, I'd become more and more convinced that Pranav's belief that Neil's death was something more than an accidental mugging were accurate. But now, if what these men were telling me were true, and Neil hadn't had any hassles with anyone over his sexuality, it seemed less and less likely that his murder had to do with his being gay.

At the first call of the horns and whistles of an obviously über-popular song, Aashiq and most of our table mates jumped up like jacks-in-the-box and made for the dance floor. I was left with the young man named Yash. Once the others were gone, he shuffled closer to me. He smiled, and said, "You must miss your friend

dearly."

I nodded. "Did you know Neil very well?"

His smile widened, but he said nothing.

"It's okay," I said. "We were only friends, not lovers."

"And Aashiq?" he asked, hinting at great disappointment if my answer was not to his liking. "Are you friends or lovers tonight?"

It must be the air here in Dubai, I thought to myself. Why else was I suddenly so popular?

"Friends," I confirmed.

He moved even closer. "That's very good." There was more smiling and ogling, and a salacious leer that seemed odd coming from someone so young. "Aashiq was Neil's Abu Dhabi boyfriend," he told me. "I was his Dubai boyfriend."

Apparently Neil did not find the Middle East to be as drought-stricken when it came to finding sexual partners as many would have guessed.

"When was the last time you saw Neil?"

"Maybe two weeks ago," he answered in a way that told me he would quickly become bored with this non-sexual line of conversation. I had to make this snappy. It wouldn't be long before I lost his attention, or a song he couldn't sit still to hit the airwaves.

"What did you talk about?"

"Not very much. We drank. We danced. We went to his home for fun." He smiled and winked. "A lot of fun."

"Did he ever mention saffron to you?"

The young man gave me a quizzical look. "You mean the spice?"

"I don't know. Could it be something else?"

"I don't know. But no, he never mentioned saffron to me." He waited a second, then added, "The only thing he ever talked about were carpets and men. Those were his two passions. Carpets and men." He laughed seductively. "I only have one."

"Were there other men, boyfriends, like Aashiq and you?"

He nodded. "Yes. Zinko. Fahd."

Fahd. Could this be the same Fahd mentioned by Darrel Good? He had guessed Fahd might have been a boyfriend of

Neil's. He might have been very right. From what I was learning tonight, Neil Gupta was certainly not a one-man man. "Are Zinko and Fahd here tonight?"

He shook his head. "These men are not from here."

"They were from Abu Dhabi, like Aashiq?"

He shook his head. "I don't know Zinko. But Fahd, he is from Fujairah."

Did my client's son have a man in every port? It seemed so. "Do you know where I might find Fahd?"

Yash draped an arm over my shoulder. "What do you care about Fahd? I'm right here. Ready to go home for some fun right now. Are you ready?"

I felt a hand on my other shoulder. Aashiq was back and pulling me away from Yash. Yash pulled back. It was a Russell Quant tug-of-war. I had to smile. This certainly did not happen to me every day. This didn't happen to me ever. Dubai was most certainly a land of dreams come true.

For some.



# Chapter 11

Sunday morning, still jet-lagged, tired from being out until nearly three a.m., queasy from too much sheesha, is never the right time for a road trip. Especially not with a companion like Hema. Her morning disposition made me think of a wasp looking for someone to sting. Regardless, that's exactly where I was. On the way to Fujairah, eighty-seven miles east of Dubai. To top things off, there wasn't even any worthwhile scenery, only mile after mile of strangely desolate, sand dune landscape. At first it was kind of spectacular, and certainly a nice change from the snowbanks of home. But after a while, the dunes began to look like sandy brown snow, and it was downhill from there.

"Don't worry," Umar cheerfully called back to us from his place behind the wheel. "Soon we will be at the Hajar Mountains. Much more scenic. And then not far to Fujairah from there."

I slumped a little lower in my seat and tried to fan away a heat too stifling for any air conditioner to battle on its own.

"Are you sure you can remember everything I told you?"

Hema, concurrently checking her BlackBerry and laptop screens, questioned me for about the millionth time since leaving Dubai.

I got it. She didn't like the plan. But it didn't make any sense, given how little time we had in Fujairah before the markets closed for midday break, for her to visit all the rug guys herself.

"I'm supposed to be meeting with the three most prominent merchants on Neil's list of contacts. I cannot come home empty-handed. I know you think your duty here is the most important one, but it isn't. I have a job to do here too, for my aunt, for the university. Many people are counting on me. I can't allow you to make a mess of this."

"I can do this, Hema," I assured her—also for about the millionth time. "You take care of the first two guys, I'll do the third. I'll have Umar with me to translate. I remember everything you told me about the carpets I'm looking for, and the price I should pay, and how hard to bargain. I can do this." She obviously hadn't seen me work my magic with the beach vendors in Puerto Vallarta.

"They won't believe you are who you say you are," she fretted.

Maybe not, but I just couldn't work up a big head of steam over the whole thing.

"My reputation is on the line here. Do you understand that?"

I pasted a tight smile on my face, nodding in the affirmative.

Following Neil's itinerary for carpet acquisitions, I'd be away from Dubai for a number of days. Each of them spent in the glorious company of Hema the Horrible. Hooray for me.

"We'll go over the pictures again once we get closer to Fujairah. That'll give you the least possible amount of time to forget what you're looking for. Don't even attempt to speak Arabic. You'll only make a fool of yourself. Just stick to the simple facts when speaking through Umar. Come to think of it, Umar as your spokesperson may help you appear less ignorant than you might otherwise. Did you study the books Auntie gave you?"

She had been out just as late as the rest of us. Why wasn't she tired? Just a tad more sedate and quiet would have been much appreciated. I hate morning people.

"My sellers are close together. Umar will drop me off at one

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and I can walk to the other. You'll have to drive to the third. I've given Umar the directions to your merchant. Umar, you have the directions?"

"Yes, Miss," he answered from the front, still impressively merry.

She shot me an unhappy glance, then returned her full attention to her technology. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I saw the laptop cowering.

Leaving Hema in our dust at one of the market areas in Fujairah was a good feeling. Even good-natured Umar seemed to be growing a little impatient with her by the time we entered Fujairah city in the emirate next door to Dubai. The town was old, dirty, polluted and grungy in places, and overall much more real. I liked it. For the first time since arriving, I truly felt as if I was in the Middle East. We headed off to find my rug merchant with whom, according to Hema, I had an ice cream cone's chance in a camel's armpit of making a successful buy.

I was too busy admiring the authentic scenery to notice it was taking us quite a while to get to our destination. I was particularly enthralled by the people who actually looked like they were born here and lived their lives among these hot, dusty, time-worn streets. But after about half an hour, I ducked my head into the front seat.

"You do remember the directions, don't you?" I asked Umar. "I thought Hema said our market should be only ten or fifteen minutes away from hers."

Umar, unusually distracted, grunted something in a language I did not understand. His eyes were darting back and forth, from the road in front of him to the rear-view mirror.

"There is bad news and there is bad news," he said.

I surely did not like the sound of that. "Okay, give me the bad news first."

"There appears to be a vehicle following us."

I sat back and snuck a peek out the rear window of the car. "You mean the Jeep?"

"I do. I may be mistaken, but it has been behind us ever since we left Miss Hema."

"What is the bad news?"

He gave a little chuckle, glad I was running with his joke. "Miss Hema's directions do not take us anywhere." He passed me the piece of paper on which Hema had written in precise little letters a series of go-heres and go-theres. "These directions are only taking us in circles. I cannot find this market she spoke of using these instructions."

I *thought* I'd seen that same camel grazing near that same mosque more than once. I didn't know if we could do anything about the tail for the moment, if it really was a tail. But we certainly could stop chasing our own. "Can you call someone?"

"Of course."

Umar was good at what he did. He got on his cellphone and spoke to somebody, first in English and then in another language, then hung up.

"Let's try this," he said confidently, making a sharp right turn onto a street we'd definitely not been on before.

I kept a surreptitious eye out the back window, watching the Jeep. It followed us for a short while, and then disappeared. Before I knew it, we were pulled up next to what looked like an Arabian version of a strip mall.

We jumped out of the car and confirmed that our possible tail was nowhere in sight. Umar led the way, passing quickly down the row of stalls selling everything from transistor radios to lamb shanks. Without warning, he made a sharp right turn, taking us deeper into the souk.

As in Dubai, the marketplace was divided into sections, with merchants in each separate area specializing in specific items. There was an alley dedicated to jewellery, another for clothing, and another for spices. And finally, the ubiquitous carpets.

Much to my surprise, the carpet salesman I was to meet was ready and waiting to make a deal. But first, we shared a plate of dates and some very sweet, hot tea served from an odd-shaped container that looked like a genie's lamp. Only then, through Umar, did the negotiations begin for the special carpet Hema was after.

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The man kept his rare carpets in a box in the back (no climate or humidity controlled display area here—I could feel rug experts the world over cringing) We haggled good naturedly for what seemed a respectable amount of time. As soon as that time expired, the salesman clapped his hands and declared the carpet sold. Things could not have gone better.

I had purchased an antique carpet.

Go figure. I was strangely thrilled. Best of all, I got the price I wanted.

Before I knew it, Umar had me and my carpet at a local shipping company around the corner. They took the rug off my hands with the promise of crating it with great care and delivering it to the University of Saskatchewan within a promised time frame. This type of thing obviously happened regularly here. But to me, it was extraordinary. Especially since nothing but dilemmas and quandaries had been forecast by Miss Hema, she of little faith.

Surprise, however, soon turned to bewilderment. Upon leaving the shipper's office and heading back through the market to where Umar had left the car, we spied a woman sneaking off down the street opposite us. Normally, a woman running away down a street isn't big news. But this woman was not wearing the traditional black *abeyya* worn by every other woman in sight. This woman was decidedly North American. This woman looked amazingly like Hema Gupta.

Back in the car, I gave Umar the name of yet a third souk. He got on the phone, talked to the same somebody in the same unfamiliar language, hung up, and we were on our way.

After cooling his amorous jets last night, I'd managed to grill Yash a little further. I asked him what Neil had said to him about the man named Fahd. Neil had mentioned someone named Fahd in his emails to Darrell Good, but I had no idea whether he was just another rug merchant, just another boyfriend, or someone who could tell me what saffron meant to Neil. Or, better yet, maybe Fahd could tell me why Neil had seemed so unhappy and worried about his safety when he'd last spoken with Aashiq.

Possibilities abounded.

Yash told me he'd playfully accused Neil of having another boyfriend (other than Aashiq; I guess a *third* boyfriend was simply a no-no) in Fujairah, because he spent so much time there. Neil told him about Fahd, a rug merchant at the souk we were now off to. He mysteriously referred to Fahd as someone important to him, but not for the same reasons. That's all Yash knew. Or all he was willing to tell me.

Fahd was also a name on the list provided to me by Colin Cardinale. Hema had the same list but obviously didn't think Fahd was worth visiting while we were here. Maybe he didn't have the kind of carpets she was after. Also, Fahd is not an uncommon name. But if there was any chance that all the Fahds—the one Darrell Good knew about, the one Colin Cardinale knew about, and the one Yash knew about—were the same guy, then he was definitely someone I wanted to meet.

On the way to meet the illustrious Fahd, I mulled over all the possible reasons why Hema would have been skulking around our marketplace. She was supposed to have been fifteen minutes away, doing her own carpet deals. Did she really trust me so little? I suppose she had reason. I knew she felt personally responsible for completing Neil's carpet purchases here. To return home empty-handed would be a major failure to her and make her look bad in the eyes of both universities. She had no idea whether I, a detective and ex-cop, could actually pull off a successful rug buy on my own. (Neither had I, until I actually did it.)

The traffic on the streets had gotten heavier, and the trip was taking longer than Umar had anticipated. I stressed safety over speed and sat back. I debated making some calls while I had the time. I really wanted to talk to Ethan. Just to hear his voice. And, I knew, I should talk to my client.

I'd been having an internal battle ever since Aashiq gave me the message meant for Neil's father. Neil had said if he didn't show up at the Burj Al Arab, it meant he was in danger. If that happened, Aashiq was to call his father for help. And ask him to find saffron.

These were Neil's last words.

They would be difficult to hear: words that communicated finality, fear, and uncertainty. A plea for help. A plea that would come much, much too late.

Pranav Gupta would have been gutted to hear these words. Instead, I had gotten the message. I was Pranav's representative. I was here to help. Albeit too late to save Neil's life, I would be the one to find this bloody saffron...or something, anything, to reveal the truth behind his death. Was that enough? Or, did Pranav deserve to hear his son's last words himself?

When Umar pulled to a stop, I caught him checking the rear-view mirror.

"Are we being followed again?" I asked.

"Not that I can see at this point."

"Is this the place?" I asked, reaching for the door handle.

"The shop you want is in there," he pointed down an alley of shops of a type that was now becoming quite familiar to me. "But, please, you should be extra careful now."

I pulled back from the door. This was unlike our usually jovial driver. "Is something wrong, Umar? Is this a dangerous part of town?"

He shook his head and tried a smile. "Not particularly so, no, not that I know. I just feel it is always wise to be cautious in these situations."

What situations? Had he been spooked by the Jeep? By the unexpected sight of Hema running away from us in the last market?

"Umar, why don't you stay with the car? I'll find Fahd. If he can't speak English, I'll come back and get you."

"Absolutely no. I am coming with you."

And so he did. And although I didn't say it, I was glad.

Fahd was a rug merchant who could speak less English than he thought he could. He was in his forties and ran his shop alongside two much older men who watched us very closely. All three wore light beige shirt-dresses. The elder men wore headscarves, Fahd a cap.

"We were the bestest bestest," Fahd told me when I showed him a picture and asked if he was a friend of Neil's. "He goes here to Fujairah for all he wants, you understand?"

Not quite. I asked if he'd heard of Neil's "mishap" in Dubai.

"No. No. You understand?"

I didn't get the sense the man knew about Neil's death. So I told him.

"I am happy happy to have you here now, you understand?"

Well, he got over that quickly.

"You want it too, mistress? I have it too. Gupta comes and gets soon. But no mores for now. Now you come. You understand?"

I turned to Umar and winced. Umar began speaking to Fahd with words that made no sense to me. I smiled and nodded and hoped for the best.

"He says he met with Gupta many times. Gupta was looking for something."

"Saffron? Ask him about saffron."

Umar did as told.

"No, he does not seem to know anything about saffron. He says Gupta was looking for a very special rug, which this man knew about."

My hopes fell. This was just about rugs. "Do you think he knew Neil personally? Or was this just business?"

More exchange. "I think just business. Although he is trying hard to convince us they were best friends, I doubt this. He wants to sell you something."

I thought for a while. I asked Umar to ask about Yash. Nothing. Aashiq. Nothing. Finally, "Does he know anything about someone named Zinko?"

At the sound of the word, Fahd's face nearly exploded with glee. He clapped a hand against my arm and pushed his face into mine. "Zinko, yes, we have Zinko for you right now. I am happy, happy to have you here now, you understand?"

Things were looking up. "Umar, see what he knows about Mr. Zinko, please."

The two men spoke for over a minute. Finally Umar moved back into English. "It seems this man first told Mr. Neil about



Zinko...do you know who this Zinko is? This man is being rather mysterious about him."

I shook my head no.

"Well, this man was trying to put Mr. Neil and Mr. Zinko together somehow. I must admit to you, I'm not exactly sure what he means by this. He speaks a dialect I'm not entirely familiar with. But he says you must now meet with Husain in Salalah."

Salalah. Hope blazed through me like a shot of burning whisky on a cold winter's night. It was the satisfying *click* of two pieces fitting together when you didn't expect them to, telling me I just might be on the right track in this case.

I'd thought it was nothing more than a stroke of good luck last night when Yash had told me to seek out Fahd in Fujairah. For the very next day I was to be in Fujairah. Now, Fahd was telling me to go to Salalah, my exact destination for tomorrow. I had simply been following Neil's intended itinerary for his last week in the Middle East. My hope was that I would stumble across something, anything, that would give me a clue as to why he'd died. Now these men were giving me Neil's *secret* itinerary, meetings with men in places he planned to be. None of which were in his PDA. But maybe they'd been in the missing "Z" file. Z for Zinko, perhaps?

*Click. Click. Click.*

Pranav thought his son's killing had something to do with his life here as a gay man. Certainly it was the gay men in Neil's life who'd put me onto Fahd and ultimately Husain. Ironically, instead of being the cause of Neil's death, the gay connection might be what led me to solving the mystery behind Neil's death.

But was I getting closer? Or further away? What about saffron? And Zinko? I still knew little about either. Were they red herrings?

As we made our way back to the car, I was worried. With each new contact and clue, I was being led farther and farther away from the actual scene of Neil's murder. In most cases, this wouldn't make sense. Should I have stayed in Dubai to figure out more about Neil's life there? Or was it his plans for what would have been his last week in Arabia that would lead to an answer? Aashiq claimed

Neil had been worried in the last few days before his death. Neil himself had talked about saffron and Zinko to his friends during that same time. In his email to his ex, Darrell Good, Neil said he was anxious to get to Saudi Arabia. I currently had nothing more to go on in Dubai. The best idea for now, I concluded, was to see where the trail these men were laying would take me.

The Port of Fujairah, on the Gulf of Oman, is simply unattractive. Dirty. Industrial. Generally yucky. This was where Umar was to drop me off to meet Hema.

"Are you sure this is it?" I asked Umar when he pulled up alongside an unexceptional looking craft. Calling it a ship was being very generous.

"Yes, of course. There is Miss Hema now."

And indeed, in all her scowling glory, Hema was standing near the dock, technology in hand. We got out of the car and waved. She checked her watch in silent reproof. As if that would make me move faster.

"You'll be careful now?" Umar said, as he pulled my luggage from the back of the car and handed it to me.

"I promise, Umar. I wish you could come with us."

"Oh, not me. I travel by land. Not water."

"Would you get on that thing?" I asked, eyeing up the boat, checking for telltale signs of leaks, rust, or runaway rats.

"Oh, of course," he said confidently. "This boat looks very safe to me."

I winced. He nodded enthusiastically. He had the same kind of look on his face that mothers, trying to feed their toddlers, have as they aim a teaspoon of gruel towards their baby's mouth.

The things I do for a paycheque.

Waving goodbye to Umar, I joined Hema, feeling like I'd just been picked to play for the wrong team in a game of shinny.

"Are you sure we can't just drive to Salalah?" I asked, again giving the ship a cursory once-over. Where were the lifeboats? I didn't see any lifeboats.

"You know as well as I do, there's no time to drive, unless you

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want no sleep at all. We get on this boat tonight. Tomorrow morning we're in Oman. I don't know about you, but I need my sleep."

Or else what? You get grumpy? Too late, sister.

"God, it is so good to hear your voice," I exclaimed into my cell-phone.

"Oh man, you too, hon. I really miss you. Where are you exactly?" Ethan asked. "You sound like you're next door. The reception is great."

"I'm on the upper deck of this old tugboat thingy. I think it might be the ark. I'm pretty sure Noah just walked by with a worried look on his face. It's supposed to be seaworthy enough to make it all the way down the Arabian coast to Oman. I have my doubts."

"Oman? Isn't that the place famous for frankincense, gold, and myrrh?"

"Uh huh. All of which I hear make excellent gifts."

He chuckled. I loved making him chuckle. Suddenly I felt very homesick. "I'd give anything to be there with you right now."

"Oh, you're just feeling a bit nervous about the ship. I know you, Russell. You're loving every second of being out there amongst the sand dunes and all the weird smells and foods. Face it, you're an adventurer at heart. You're my very own Sinbad."

"Uh, is that a good thing?"

"Well," Ethan said, "as everyone knows, Sinbad was an extraordinarily dashing figure of a man, not to mention quite the charmer and a prodigious lover."

"Awwww, you're sweet. Even if you are making that up."

"Not a chance, hon."

I pulled in a deep breath. I wanted him with me.

"You sure everything is going okay?" he asked, sensing in my voice a trepidation I was trying to hide.

"Yeah, it's fine," I said. "The beginning of a case is always the toughest. I know so little. Sometimes it feels like I'm a blind man looking for a light switch. And every time I find it and finally switch it on, I realize I still can't see anything."

He made an empathetic sound, then: "Your mom says hello."

"You saw her?"

"She and Barbra and Brutus are over for dinner."

"There is a special place in heaven for you."

He laughed. "Wanna say hi?"

"Oh sure."

A moment later: "*Sonsyou?* Dat you? Can you hear me? *Sonsyou?*"

"I can hear you just fine, Mom."

"Where are you den? I can hear you so goot." Her voice was quite loud, as if not quite believing I could hear her if she spoke at a normal register.

"Oman."

"Amen, *Sonsyou*. Amen. I pray for you every night until you come home safe."

She'd misheard me. I tried again. "Oman. Salalah, Oman."

There was quiet, and then I could hear her talking to Ethan. "Etan, I tink mebbe someone took de phone. I don't understand dis language dey are talking to me."

"Russell?" came Ethan's voice. "Maybe this isn't working too well."

"Just tell her I'm all right, and I'll be home soon. Oh, and make sure she's not feeding Barbra and Brutus people food."

"Uh huh, yeah, good luck with that."

We played lovebirds for a little while longer, until the boat started making grunting and groaning noises. We were about to shove off to sea. I'd need both hands to hold on.

"Oh gawd," I said into the phone. "This thing is beginning to move. Pray for me, Ethan."

"Oman to that, Sinbad," he said, laughter in his voice.

A couple of hours later, Hema and I met in the ship's dining hall. It was a surprisingly charming room of dark, heavy woods with sparkling chandeliers. We were seated at a table with six other guests, none of whom spoke English.

When we were settled with our *khuzi*—slices of stuffed, whole

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roast lamb—I asked Hema about her success with the Fujairah rug merchants.

“It went moderately well. I made one purchase. The second piece I was hoping to buy was much too damaged for our collection. And his price was too steep. There was no negotiating.”

I felt sorry for the guy.

“But at least we have two carpets on their way home. I have high hopes for Oman.”

She almost sounded excited. And she had also given herself away.

“What two carpets are those?” I asked in mock innocence as I spooned up some deliciously spiced rice.

Hema stared at me, the badger knowing she’d been spotted near the chicken coop.

One thing I learned about badgers growing up on the farm: if they’re cornered, they can be as dangerous as a wounded lion. I decided not to play games with mine. “We saw you, Hema. At our marketplace. Why were you there?”

She recovered quickly. “I got through my business sooner than I expected. As I already told you, the one seller’s carpets weren’t worth pursuing. I decided to check on you. See if you needed my help.”

Hema wasn’t the type to dig herself in deeper with a lie, especially when it hadn’t worked in the first place. I appreciated that. But still, something about the way she answered made me think there was something she wasn’t telling me.

“I know these carpets may not seem like much to you. But to me, my aunt, and to the university, they are treasures. I couldn’t just sit back and hope you and Umar found the market and made the deal. I needed to be sure.”

“Why wouldn’t we find it? You gave us the right directions, didn’t you?” Not according to Umar.

“This is the Middle East, not Eighth Street in Saskatoon. What’s the big deal? Why does it bother you? You don’t like being checked up on? Is that it? Or is it that you don’t like being checked up on by a woman?”

Where did that come from? I could see there was no use

defending myself against her meritless accusations. She was simply trying to launch us into a different argument to distance us from the conversation at hand. Clever. But never try to trick a trickster.

"Then why run away when we saw you? You obviously didn't want us to know you were there. Why?"

A couple of our tablemates, although not understanding a lick of English, were beginning to give us looks. It was becoming obvious to them that we were not a lovey-dovey couple on a honeymoon Arabian cruise. And if we were, the chance of one of us ending up overboard was growing high.

"I wasn't running away," she insisted. "I saw you had your carpet. I saw you'd had it shipped. I was satisfied. I had other things to do." And with that she began a frantic search of her purse. "Oh great! I left my BlackBerry in the cabin. I'm not hungry anyway."

Off she went.

I glanced at the other diners at my table and smiled. They gave me sad smiles in return.

My cabin had no balcony, only a porthole above a narrow single bed. What I wouldn't have given to be on the Friends of Dorothy cruise ship that had ferried me, ever so safely, and ever so glamorously, from Spain to Italy a number of years ago.\* Then again, someone had been murdered on that ship, and I myself had been knifed. But now, as the tiny vessel bounced and heaved and moaned and groaned its way across the Tropic of Cancer and past places like Muscat, the Island of Masirah, Sughra Bay, and Shwaymiyah, I think I'd've preferred it. Sure, it all sounds like a big adventure until you think you're about to end up in the Arabian Sea. Fortunately, I do not get seasick, only sea-scared.

After exhausting every prayer I knew, I decided to pull out the books in the backpack I'd found in Neil's office. Even reading another textbook extolling the wonders of old carpets was better than staring at the ceiling, wondering if the screws that held together the struts looked a little loose. I was in luck. The smaller

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of the two didn't look like a textbook at all. The cover was a brightly coloured depiction of a scene featuring brown-skinned men in turbans, vests, and *I-Dream-of-Jeannie* pants. They were in a small room, surrounded by heaving mounds of sparkling jewels, gold coins, glittering brass lamps, and other intricate metalwork. Through an arched window in the background, a flying carpet carrying two more men was outlined against the mellow cream of a full moon. Great, I thought to myself, maybe I can lose myself in the tale of some Ali Baba-ish adventure.

I opened the book and nearly jumped out of my bed.

Dry, black petals fell from the book onto my chest and bedcovers.

I remembered what Hema had told me about the flower petals.

Curse or blessing? Curse or blessing?

Being on this boat was curse enough for me.

After clearing away the bloody things, and catching my breath, I went back to the book. The first thing I found was a table of contents. Blech. It *was* a textbook. Still, reading was better than bolt-watching. And, I was betting that whoever placed the petals must have thought there was something worthy of my attention—or rather, Neil's attention—in here. If so, I was going to find it.

As the boat shifted up and down, side to side, making noises I did not want to contemplate, I flipped through the pages, one by one.

Eventually I came upon several pages with passages that had been highlighted or underlined. By Neil? By the petal pusher?

I studied each word carefully. Something interesting caught my eye. Interesting enough to make me forget the creaking boat beneath me. At the top of one section, with a penned asterisk next to it, was a word I'd recently become very familiar with: Zinko.

# Chapter 12

*How does one measure the value of an antique carpet? When a rare find is uncovered, is value derived from its age? Its appearance? Its state of completion? Its state of relative impairment? For instance, the oldest known knotted pile carpet is the "Pazyryk Carpet," dating from the fifth century B.C. Is the Pazyryk more or less valuable than the "Fostat Carpet," from the ninth century A.D.? One is from Siberia; the other was found near Cairo. One is virtually complete, the other just a fragment. Does there exist another knotted pile rug which is intact, virtually complete, and although younger than either the Fostat or Pazyryk, considerably more valuable? So it would seem. This carpet is known as the "Zinko Carpet."*

Thus began the claim of the essay's author, Christopher Longwith, long since passed on to that great carpet souk in the sky. The article was one of many included in the book I'd found in Neil's backpack. According to the volume's editor, Longwith's claim about the Zinko was met with great incredulity from many quarters.



Longwith asserted that the only official description of the Zinko was in a little known dialect of Classical Arabic, and only by travelling to Saudi Arabia, at much personal cost and danger, had he been able to obtain a careful translation. Neil had noted in the margin, *"Classical Arabic has no dialects. Check this."*

With thorough cross-checking of facts, Longwith ascertained the age of the carpet to be tenth century A.D. The Zinko was apparently found *in situ* with other contemporary objects, buried in dry sands that facilitated preservation. Longwith determined that the excavation date had been relatively recent (some time during the early twentieth century). He credited the lack of communication between the Arab nation and the rest of the world for the rug heretofore being unknown. Again, Neil had noted, *"Could he get to SA without the British knowing? Coastline was British protectorate. Research."*

Another old rug story. Sheesh.

I laid the book aside. I pulled myself up in my bed, just high enough to peek out the porthole. Black as pitch. I was hoping for some sign that we were about to enter calmer waters. Or, better yet, land somewhere with a beautiful beach and swim-up bar. No such luck.

Since taking on this case, I'd come to realize that one man's welcome mat is another man's treasured possession. So, I dutifully retrieved the book and read on. Fortunately, I had Neil's yellow highlights and underlinings to guide me to the good parts. And the next part certainly got my attention.

Apparently the Zinko was more than just a carpet. It was, by Longwith's account, also a treasure map. Uh-oh, I said to myself. A case I had last year in Saskatoon had revolved around a treasure map.\* As full of the promise of great wealth and adventure as treasure maps always first appear to be, I've found things never seem to end up too well for the treasure hunter.

I had to reread the section more than once, but if I had it right, this particular old rug, the Zinko, was inlaid with a series of priceless gems. Longwith waxed poetic about rubies, emeralds, dia-

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\* Aloha, Candy Hearts

monds, and amethysts. The greatest value of all, however, wasn't in the gems themselves, but rather in their placement. Longwith described how the positioning of the jewels in the carpet created a map. The map supposedly would lead the owner to a priceless cache of more of the same. This cache, Longwith purported, was the greatest treasure chest of gems in the world.

Now this got my attention. Whether the Zinko tale were true or not, every criminal justice professional the world over would agree: money and wealth are the root of most evil. Could Neil Gupta's death be somehow tied to the Zinko? He certainly seemed interested in it: telling his friends about it, highlighting passages about it in the books I found in his knapsack, visiting merchants throughout the Middle East who seemed to know about it. And there was the missing folder in the "Z" hanging file in his apartment. Far-fetched? Maybe. Maybe not.

I quickly skimmed the rest of the book, but found no other highlighted areas. I tossed it aside and reached for the second book. A quick look revealed no highlights or underlined passages. I turned to the index at the back of the book. Under Z, I found Zinko. I turned to the associated page.

The heading of the paragraph was "Myths Debunked." I read the two-line entry. It basically said the existence of the Zinko carpet had never been proven and was likely a researcher's (unidentified in the article) failed attempt at fame via fakery.

Apparently no one thought much of Christopher Longwith's claim of an antique carpet doubling as a treasure map. So why did Neil Gupta?

In the morning, with much kissing of the ground by yours truly (sand in teeth be damned), we hit land. We were now in the southernmost reaches of the Sultanate of Oman. A world away from the oftentimes industrious, oil-crazy, sometimes flamboyant north, and separated from it geographically by an interminable gravel desert known as *Rub' al Khali* or The Empty Quarter. With summer temperatures reaching nearly 55 °C (131 °F) at noon, and dunes taller than the Eiffel Tower, some called it the most forbidding

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environment on Earth. But not so the city of Salalah. Salalah is a colourful, sub-tropical place with coconut-fringed beaches and banana and papaya plantations. Now you're talking.

As we filed off the ship, locals greeted us with plates of dates soaked in a syrup that tasted kind of nutty. We collected our luggage, tossed onto the dock like freshly caught salmon, then cabbled it to our hotel, The Haffa House. There was no time to catch our breath. Hema was on a tear, and with barely enough time to wash our faces, we were off.

As the morning wore on, Hema was having great success and making many buys. I, on the other hand, was a little bored and not finding much to help my cause. Although I hate to sound jaded, after a couple of days of visiting them, I was finding that a souk is a souk is a souk. I'd arranged through Fahd in Fujairah, with Umar's help, to meet with Husain later in the evening. Until then, I was digging as much as I could, but coming up empty-handed. No one in the markets recognized Neil's picture—or if they did, they weren't admitting it to me. I tried to bring up the Zinko carpet with the few who understood some English. Most ignored me. Some chided me for believing such foolishness. One fellow became rather irate and called me a troublemaker. I was just doing my job.

After a few blisteringly hot hours in the city, making deals with the Omanis, I was glad when Hema instructed our driver, Ali, to head out of town to Mughsail. She wasn't a sightseeing kinda gal, but the markets closed during the hottest part of the afternoon and would not reopen until later in the day. She was simply making the most efficient use of her time. And I was being brought along like the bratty younger brother.

Oman is probably not high on the must-see list of the run-of-the-mill sun worshipper. But one look at the coastline would convince all of them to give it a try. In some ways, this was some of the most beautiful scenery I'd seen so far on the Arabian Peninsula. Mile after mile, soft-sand beaches sat deserted below glittering azure skies, against water so sparkling blue it almost

hurt my eyes to look at it for too long. As we got closer to the spectacular Mughsail Bay, near the Yemeni border, dramatic cliffs rose to our right. Although the place was only fifty kilometres out of town, it took us almost an hour to get there. Hema instigated the first stop.

"Do you need to pee?" I asked as I followed her out of the car.

She ignored me and started digging in her purse. If she stopped us just to text someone, I was going to explode. Instead, she pulled out a camera and began clicking away. The tree, her subject, was unremarkable, except for how ugly, scraggly, and gnarled it was.

"We have ugly old trees at home too, you know." I was being the pill she already thought I was.

"Oh, for goodness sake," she huffed.

She tossed her camera back in her purse, and grabbed my hand with hers. It felt so tiny wrapped around my big one, her skin dry but soft. It was the first time I could remember her touching me on purpose.

She led me closer to the tree. Reaching up to one of the misshapen limbs, she scraped the bark with a short nail. She then rubbed her thumb against the wound. With her thumb under my nose, she instructed me to take a whiff.

"Hey, that's..." I couldn't quite place the smell.

"Frankincense."

I stood back, stared at her, stared at the tree, stared at her, stared at the tree. "You mean...frankincense?...Really?"

She nodded and gave me one of her infrequent smiles. Pretty.

A small amber tear of resin had popped up where Hema had touched the tree. I don't quite know what I expected, or where I thought frankincense actually came from. I probably didn't even know what it was until now, other than something the wise men gave to Jesus for his birthday. Suddenly I felt heavy in my feet. My mind was overwhelmed. For an astounding, fleeting moment, I was more present and more cognizant of my miniscule place in the history of the world than I had ever been before.

"We're going to be late."

Snap.

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Hema was already halfway back to the car.

The moment was gone. But I'd always remember it.

The second, third, and fourth stops along the unexpectedly wide and modern highway to Mughsail were not Hema's idea, but rather, due to camels. According to Ali, our driver, many camels in Oman, and the rest of Arabia for that matter, were free to roam at will. Sometimes this meant hanging out on the highway. On these occasions, Ali would stop, wait patiently, and then move on only when they did.

Although the conversation was sparse, and there was much pecking away at BlackBerry and laptop, Hema and I spent a remarkably pleasant afternoon together at Mughsail. We got soaked at the blowholes near the shore that intermittently shoot up plumes of ocean water through vents. We walked the pristine beach. We enjoyed a small lunch at the sole café.

Then it was back to work.

We toiled in the souks of Salalah until early evening. More rug buying. More dates-in-syrup eating (Omanis reputedly have a very sweet tooth). More being called a troublemaker. All in a day's work.

As the day came to a close, I schemed at how best to ditch Hema before my nighttime appointment with Husain. I suppose she could have come with me. But Fahd had assured me Husain could speak English, and so, after a full day spent together, I thought we could both use a break from each other. In the end, I didn't need to do a thing. Upon getting back to The Haffa House, she hurriedly abandoned me in the cavernous, gloomy lobby with a curt, "See you in the morning." No explanation or excuse offered. I guess she was as sick of me as I was of her. How could that be?

After a quick freshen up in my room, I was back in the car with Ali, heading out of town. We started out on the same road we took to Mughsail. We passed by the familiar massive incense burners

Salalah is known for, which dot the roadside like route markers. But soon we turned off onto another road I didn't recognize. Twenty minutes later, we ended up on a switchback heading up a small mountain. Although I'm not fond of narrow winding roads, the view of the sun coming to rest over the plains outside of Salalah was stunning.

As I marvelled at the sight, I remembered that Salalah is the alleged resting place of Nabi Imran, father of the Virgin Mary. And now I was on my way to the tomb of Job, as in the Job from the "Book of Job" and the Koran. Regardless of religious convictions, I thought to myself, this was mind-blowing stuff.

Once atop the hill, Ali parked the car in a large parking lot. This place was obviously popular with tourists, but at the moment, there were more camels in the lot than cars. We got out, and Ali waited by the car. I headed towards a series of squat, white buildings. Husain was to meet me by Job's footprint. Yup. His footprint. I'd had the location translated twice, to make sure I hadn't gotten it wrong. I hadn't.

A curving pathway, sloping gently upwards as I went, led past serene and holy-looking places. Men in traditional garb stood watch under shade trees and said nothing. The path became narrower and narrower, and eventually I got to a place where I was asked to take off my shoes. By this point, the crowd of tourists and religious pilgrims, which hadn't seemed so dense before, had grown thick. I deposited my runners on a pile with the others, and progressed further, inch by inch.

I was wondering what the holdup was, when I realized everyone ahead of me was stopping to gaze down at the ground before moving forward. You know what they say: when in Oman, do as the Omanis do. So when it was my turn next to the spot on the ground, I did as the others did. And lo and behold, in a square about eighteen inches long and wide and deep, was an imprint of a very large foot. Job's footprint.

I immediately looked up to find Husain.

Oh sure. How was I supposed to do that? I had no idea what he looked like.

The crowd began to push behind me. I found myself being

shoved away from the footprint. Playing lemming for the moment, I moved ahead, then up a few steps into a small room. In the centre of the room was a tomb, close to the ground. It was covered with some kind of thick material, with gold, burgundy, and light green woven into the fabric, creating symbolic designs. At one end was a small sandbox. Buried in the sand were several small, colourful pottery vessels smoking with incense. The odour was intense but not unpleasant. The most surprising thing was the tomb itself. It had to be at least twelve feet long. How tall was this guy supposed to have been, anyway?

I scoured the faces around me, but no one looked back. No one seemed to be looking for me. I followed the queue back outside. As I was bending over, trying to tie my shoes without being trampled, a voice said: "Follow me."

I looked up just in time to see a husky, dark-skinned man in beige robes and dark sunglasses move off into the shade. I followed, one of my shoes not quite on. He led me to a less crowded spot beneath a nearby tree.

"Are you Husain?" I asked.

"I am, Mr. Russell. Fahd told me what you looked like. His description was very accurate." His English was good.

"You know why I'm here?"

"You've come a long way for it."

"You mean the Zi..."

"Shhhhhh!" he warned, a finger held up against his lips. "No one must hear us talking of it. If others found out that we had this thing, there would be pandemonium. Not only right at this moment, but throughout the country. You must know how important this is. How important it is to our country's culture and history. This is a most significant item."

And yet, Husain seemed more than willing to sell to me, a foreigner, this important bit of his culture, this significant Arabian artifact.

The look on my face must have spoken for itself. Wordlessly, Husain ran his thumb over the tips of his fingers. His face spread into what in other circumstances might have been classified a lecherous grin. Ah, yes. The great motivator: profit.



I simply nodded. "I'm also wondering what you and Neil Gupta talked about in regards to this item. Were you two meeting today to negotiate?"

"Oh no, Mr. Russell. Things had progressed much further than that. And I am of great hope, since you are here, that you are a man of honour and will abide by your friend's promises."

"When did you last speak with Mr. Gupta?"

"Mr. Neil had been to visit me several times over the past months. I do not recall the exact last time we met. We spoke on the phone only last week. He was prepared to finalize our deal. He was going back to America soon. You, I assume, will be doing the same?"

I felt my heart speed up a tick. The sale of the Zinko was going down right now. This meeting was meant to be the exchange of goods. I surreptitiously felt my pockets to see how many Omani rial I had with me.

Just what I thought. None.

"Is your shop nearby?" I asked. "Is that why we are meeting here?"

"No, no shop. I spend much of my time here, however, in prayer."

I was confused. "May I see the Z...the item?"

Husain stared into me so hard I thought I might fall over. "You did not speak with Mr. Neil before his death?"

"Unfortunately, no. But I am here to..."

"I do not have this item. I am only here to confirm the final meeting place. As you must know, a sale such as this does not happen directly between buyer and seller. There is much to discuss before this can happen."

I guess I did know this. The system of "liaisons" Colin Cardinale had told me about. But I didn't have time to *discuss*. "Everything you discussed with Mr. Neil (I was catching on to the Arab's preference for using the first, rather than surname) goes for me as well. As you have already said, I must go home very soon. I will do whatever needs to be done to have this item with me when I do." In my head I was saying: Big promises, Quant.

The man's head moved up and down as he considered this,



and me. "Yes, I see."

For several seconds, although it seemed much longer, we said nothing to one another. Then Husain reached into the satchel hanging over his shoulder. He pulled out a packet. "In here is what you need to know." He handed the package to me and turned to walk away. I quickly opened it. It was a single sheet of paper, with what I took to be an address written on it. Above the address was a very familiar word.

"Wait! What is this?" I shook the paper to get his attention. "Saffron? What do you know about saffron?"

He stopped and turned. "That is your contact. In Jeddah. Mr. Neil knew about this."

It was a bloody nickname. Saffron was not meant to put me onto some spice controversy Neil had gotten mixed up in. Saffron was a person. The person with the Zinko carpet. The person Neil was anxious to travel to Saudi Arabia to meet.

Jeddah was in Saudi Arabia. Where Hema and I were set to fly tomorrow morning. The secret itinerary continued.

Saffron, here I come.

Rooms at the Haffa House are old-fashioned but pretty comfortable. And I was all set to take advantage of mine. It had been a long couple of days with a lot of travel, heat, and uncertainty, and little sleep. I was ready for some downtime. Anthony always tells me that the third day of jet lag is always the worst. Had I only been here for three days? I'd arrived Friday night. It was now Monday night. Yup. Three days. Two emirates. One sultanate.

Having travelled in foreign countries before, I knew that, despite how much I relish dipping into different cultures and everything that goes with them, food and drink included, there always comes a time when all I want is something familiar to eat. Not relish. Not experience. I just want to sit in front of a TV or with a good book and eat. And for me, the best (and most travel-worthy) comfort food is red, Pull-n-Peel licorice.

I retrieved my sweet treat from my carry-on, where I always keep a bag stored just for such an occasion, along with a Snickers

bar (in case I needed a second course). That, plus a diet cola from the mini-bar, and I'd be set. As I arranged my banquet, mouth watering, on the night table next to the bed, I caught sight of the phone. A pang of guilt replaced the one of hunger. I'd yet to contact my client. I checked my watch. Not quite noon in Saskatoon.

I dug out my cellphone and dialled. Cellphones are great. Not only do they cost much less to use than what most hotels charge for calling out, they now work almost anywhere in the world. And assuming the person you're calling also has one, you never have to wonder where they are or which number to call them at. Maybe Hema had a similar love affair with her BlackBerry. Perhaps I should cut her some slack?

"Hello?" came a voice from across the globe.

"Mr. Gupta, it's Russell Quant."

"Oh, Mr. Quant. How timely. I'm just sitting down to lunch with Unnati and Mr. Cardinale. You've met Colin, have you not? The executive director of the upcoming carpet symposium?"

I pictured the dark lord in my mind. "Yes, I have."

"Tell me, how are things going? What have you found out?"

I gave my client a general briefing on my last few days. He remained admirably silent until I was done.

"Oh, but Mr. Quant, do you really believe this carpet you are after in Saudi Arabia is the key to my son's murder? What about those gay men you met? Could one of them know something? Maybe they know of someone who did not like Nayan because of his homosexuality. If they themselves have been abused and beaten, perhaps they might know if this is what happened to my son. What do you call it, a gay-smashing? If someone smashed my son because he was gay, you must find them. And then they must be persecuted. Like they persecuted my son."

I let the man vent. He deserved it. Although he might not understand it now, I knew the only way for me to serve his cause—which was to find out how and why his son was killed—was to not allow my judgment to be swayed by what he'd already concluded to be true.

"Mr. Gupta," I began slowly, "the man I met at the Burj Al Arab—"

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"Yes, yes, what about him? Do you think he had something to do with it?"

"No. He was a very good friend to your son. They had a relationship."

"I see. I see. What of it?"

"He and your son were to have met—"

"Yes, I know. You told me this."

"Neil told him that if he didn't show up, it meant he was in trouble."

"You see. You see. I was right."

"And he told him, that if he didn't show up, he should contact you."

Silence at the other end of the line.

After a beat, I continued. "He was to ask you to send help. And to find Saffron, who I now know to be a person in Saudi Arabia. I'm going there to meet Saffron."

"I see."

I could hear chattering at the other end of the line; Unnati's voice asking her husband if he was all right, Colin wondering what I was saying.

"Mr. Gupta...?"

"He knew he was in danger then?" the voice subdued.

"I believe so."

"And he wanted my help...asked for my help?"

"Yes."

Quiet.

"Although the farewell party in Dubai was a ruse, I believe he went because of something this man in Saudi said to him, and quite possibly because of the Zinko rug."

"Yes. You may be right." His voice was quiet. Changed.

"It's only one possibility, Mr. Gupta. If I find nothing in Saudi tomorrow, I will return to Dubai. I'll see what more I can find out there."

"Yes. Of course. Do what you think is best."

"Mr. Gupta, could I speak with Colin for a moment?"

"One thing, Mr. Quant."

"Yes?"

"My son wanted me to send help. And there you are. I want to tell you, thank you."

Deep breath. "I will do my best to help *you* now, Mr. Gupta."

I heard background noises again, then Colin's voice on the phone: "Mr. Quant?"

I could picture his sneering handsomeness seated at a beautifully set luncheon table, with sparkling flatware and white linens, probably a glass of white in his manicured hand. "Yes. Colin, I've run into something here that maybe you, as a carpet specialist, can tell me more about."

"Oh? What is it?"

"The Zinko carpet. Neil seems to have been very keen to find it, buy it, and bring it back for your collection at the U of S. I wonder if you can tell me if this thing is for real. Or was Neil on some fool's errand? And if not, what is the Zinko really worth today?" And, is it worth killing over? But I left that question for later.

There was nothing at first from the other end of the line, then, "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about, Mr. Quant."

Ah, gone were the good old days when he called me Russell. Or was that for just a few minutes last week? "You've never heard of the Zinko carpet? Or you just don't believe it's real?"

"The former. Which, I suppose, makes the latter true as well." Couldn't he just say "yes"?

"Could you maybe ask around? Maybe some of your colleagues, Unnati perhaps...?"

"Perhaps." More background noise. It sounded as if their lunch had arrived. "Goodbye, then."

And he hung up.

Was it a bad thing that I wanted Colin Cardinale to choke (just a bit) on his medium rare filet with blue cheese rub, or perhaps his endive salad with prosciutto?

But never mind that. I had my own culinary delight to get to. After a quick shower, I dug out my Louise Penny mystery, and headed buck-naked back to bed and my Pull-n-Peel. I tugged back the quilt and stared at what lay waiting there for me.

Black petals.

A cool snake wound its way up my spine.



# Chapter 13

“What happened to him?” Ethan asked.

I called him as soon as I got Hema settled, less chillingly rattled, back in her own room. There was nothing we could do for Umar. We had a big day tomorrow. We needed our rest. But as soon as she was gone, and I again caught sight of the black petals in my bed, the last thing on my mind was sleep. I dialled home in need of a bit of digital hugging. The whole thing, the petals, Umar, my doubts about whether or not I was on the right track, my cheerless telephone call to my client, heading deeper into the Middle East tomorrow like a locomotive with no engineer, was causing me, uncharacteristically, to become a little unhinged. I was beginning to feel unsure, unconfident, and unsafe.

“Apparently it was an accident,” I answered. “On his way back to Dubai after dropping us off in Fujairah.”

“Apparently?” Ethan could read me like a recipe for boiling water.

“I’m only getting this second-hand. Alastair Hallwood, the

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guy from the university, called. When I wasn't here, he asked for Hema. Anyway, the police found Umar's car run off the road. Overturned and burnt out. As if it had exploded or something."

"That can happen, Russell. Maybe he was going too fast, or the road conditions...?"

"I suppose. But Alastair told Hema he'd driven that road a million times before. And I know that road. We were just on it. It's in very good shape. Better than a lot of Saskatchewan highways. There was no reason...no reason." I fell silent.

"Are you okay?"

He seemed to be asking me that a lot. "I don't know."

"Come home." The words were simple, strong, compelling.

There was nothing I wanted more. But something about Umar's death didn't sit right with me. And if it had something to do with my investigation, perhaps with what someone thought Umar might know about my meeting with Fahd in Fujairah, then the last thing I was going to do was be run off. Not my style.

But I still wished I could go home. It'd be so easy. "Say it again," I murmured. Now I was just being shamelessly needy, like a full-grown German Shepherd rolled over, legs in the air, begging for a belly scratch.

"I mean it, Russell. You're in a dangerous part of the world. Dangerous things are starting to happen around you. Get out. Come home. I'm worried about you. You're all alone out there."

"I'm not alone," I quickly—too quickly—replied. "I've got...I've got Hema."

"Oh yeah, she sounds like a real support. I'm sure you'll be bff's even after all this is done."

"She's coming around. Really. She touched my hand the other day."

"Mmm hmm."

"I'm okay, Ethan. Really I am. I just got a little spooked tonight. I feel much better talking to you, hearing your voice. Thank you."

"Saudi Arabia tomorrow?"

Although I was feeling a little off, talking with home had helped. I felt the familiar jolt of excited anticipation at the mention

of my next destination. "Yeah."

"Don't you need special visas or something to get in there?"

"Yes. That's the magic of working with two powerful universities as our sponsors. They'd already approved a visa for Neil. I suppose extending it to cover us didn't take too much wrangling."

"Be careful, hon."

"I will."

"Love you."

"Love you."

Our Oman Air flight didn't depart until one o'clock on Tuesday afternoon, so I used part of the morning to work off some tension in the hotel's gym facility. Then, over a spartan brunch, Hema and I studied the university-provided list of dos and don'ts for our upcoming visit to Jeddah. Dress conservatively. No shorts in public (no matter how hot it gets.) Don't be Jewish. Carry your passport with you at all times. Stay away from the *mutaween* (religious police). Don't drive (Saudi Arabia has one of the highest incidents of road fatalities in the world.) Don't share a hotel room unless you're married. Alcohol is prohibited. Affection between men and women is prohibited. Affection between men and men is okey-dokey. Use your right hand for everything.

The don'ts far surpassed the dos.

At the last possible moment, Hema decked herself out in the requisite head-to-toe black *abeyya*, and we were off to the airport. The plane departed on time. After a ninety-minute stopover in Muscat, we arrived in Jeddah at six p.m. Once again, the university had arranged for a guide. Semir met us in the arrivals area and immediately transported us to our hotel. The Jeddah Hilton was a strikingly modern building, with a unique triangular design and views of the Red Sea and an attractive stretch of North Corniche Road. However, as evening market hours had already begun and there was a lot to do, we had no time to enjoy it. We arranged for Semir to pick us up at the hotel's front doors at eight p.m.



We checked in, and I headed for my room to freshen up and unpack. Instead, I was accosted by the unexpected.

"Russell, old man! Imagine finding you in a posh place like this!"

Alastair Hallwood.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" I haltingly accepted the man's outstretched hand.

"Oh, just passing through," he said with his usual hooting laugh and a toothy grin. "You know how it is for us international types. One day the Jeddah Hilton, on to the Bangkok Four Seasons the next, then it's the Ritz in Kiev."

I stared.

"Okay, you've rumbled me. I was worried about my beautiful pheasant after we talked on the phone last night. I came to see if I could help."

"Hema? You came to Jeddah because of Hema?"

"That's right, mate. She was distraught beyond belief. You didn't hear her. She took that poor sod's death quite hard, you know."

"So you just hopped a flight to Saudi Arabia?"

"It's not difficult for me, Russell, ol' chap. I'm back and forth several times a year on university biz. They're used to me here. Don't even look at me twice at the airport. Even though a handsome lad like myself is hard to miss. Now where is she? You haven't gone and lost her already, have you?"

I was still perplexed, and it must have showed.

"Russell," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder and lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "She told me everything. About who you *really* are. And why you're here. I'm fine with all that, I am. But I'm worried about Hema. She may come off all rugged like, but don't let her fool you. She's not used to all this blazing guns and sword action like you might be."

I scowled. "I never use swords."

"You know what I mean. Besides, I haven't had so much fun in forever. So I thought I'd take a few days off and drop by for a touch, maybe help out where I can. That all right with you, then? After all, as a representative of the University of Dubai, I feel

rather responsible for Hema's safety." He sniggered and slapped my shoulder. "And yours too, of course, Russell, there's a good chap."

I wasn't sure if I was "all right" with this. But at the moment, it didn't look as if I had much choice. "You do know they frown heavily on an unmarried man and woman cavorting in these parts, right?"

"Oh sod that, Russell. I know you're not *au fait* with the new Jeddah, but this is the wildest, most degenerate, most cosmopolitan town in the kingdom! Don't worry, mate. Now where is my petal, anyway? Has she said anything to you about me? Do you really think she might be willing to cavort with me?"

I rolled my eyes. I wasn't about to get involved in this. But I think he got his answer when, a second later, Hema pulled up next to us, a sneer on her face. "What are *you* doing here?"

What followed was a back and forth lobbing of thinly veiled insults (from her) and mismatched love sonnets and candy heart sayings (from him). It was really quite intriguing to watch, as neither seemed quite capable of getting their message across to the other.

Finally I pointed to my watch to indicate that Semir would soon be back to pick us up. "I'm going up to my room to wash my face. If you two want to stand here and continue bickering or lovemaking or whatever it is you're doing, go right ahead. I'll meet you at the front doors at eight."

I glanced back as I was nearing the elevator. If I didn't know better, I'd swear I saw Hema Gupta blushing.

In my business, surprises are not entirely unexpected. When dealing with people's secrets, lies, and the criminal element, surprises are bound to come up. And this is a good thing. It usually signifies I'm on the right track, or at the very least, provides a new clue to follow up on. But some surprises are wholly unexpected. Like the one that greeted me in my hotel room.

Draped across a chaise longue, overlooking the sea, eating from a scrumptious bunch of luscious grapes, like some kind of

## Date with a Sheesha

sultana, was Sereena Orion Smith. Sereena is not your average next door neighbour. Her background is as mysterious and baffling as the land I now found her in. She's lived a million lives and bears the fruit and folly of each in her heart, her eyes, her soul. Her face and figure hide no secrets. Anyone who looks at her will know they are seeing one of the world's great beauties—less than perfectly preserved, but a beauty nonetheless. Her hair is thick and wild and dark as rich chocolate. Her bright eyes flicker with the reflected memories of a life made worthwhile by great pains and greater loves. She's lived by the sea, on mountaintops, in grand cities, and in humble countryside villages (well, maybe not too humble). How she ended up in a house next to mine in Saskatoon is thanks to my Uncle Lawrence. He sent Sereena to watch over me when circumstances meant that he no longer could. And she, for reasons of her own, was more than happy to do so. She is my friend, my neighbour, and my guardian angel. And now, here she was, in my hotel room in Jeddah, like a mirage in the desert.

"Don't look so shocked, my darling," she called out to me. "Close your mouth, and the door behind you while you're at it, and do come in."

I did as I was told, in a near somnambulistic trance. I eyed her as I moved forward. Was she real? It seemed so.

She was wearing the Sereena version of a traditional *abeyya*. It was mostly black, but enhanced with fine embroidery in dark, rich colours, wound into complicated patterns. Around her face and hands, and along the hemline, tiny gold disks, like small coins, jingled softly whenever she moved. I wondered what the *mutaween* would think of this.

"Anthony told me you were in Egypt." I finally managed to speak.

She nodded. "Near Luxor. Maheesh has a house there. A wonderful retreat on the Nile. Very green, peaceful. Lovely people."

The name made my heart stop. Maheesh Ganesh was the man who'd shared my uncle's life, a secret life, a life in hiding because of something horrible that happened to them and Sereena many years ago. But all that was in the past. The last I'd seen or heard

from Maheesh, or my Uncle Lawrence, was when we were guests at an Arctic getaway near the top of the world, several years ago. My uncle was dying then. When we parted, he refused a final good bye.\*

But now, I had to know.

"Is...is Maheesh with you?"

"No," she said gently. She knew where this was going.

"I'm alone, Russell."

Something in her tone, in her lovely, soulful eyes, told me what I already knew to be true. He was dead. My uncle was dead. I'd been grieving for a long time, but the certainty was nevertheless a crushing blow.

I shook my head, still in disbelief that Sereena was sitting in front of me. For her to come to a country where alcohol is prohibited was truly a major sacrifice. For it is rumoured that through my neighbour's veins run golden rivers of fine champagne.

"Maheesh made all the arrangements," she told me. "He is, as you know, a connected man in this part of the world."

"But to come here? Alone?"

"Despite the obvious challenges for women—which I won't go into until we're somewhere that serves a decent libation—there are also certain privileges women are accorded in Saudi Arabia. In most situations, they are shown great respect and deference. Decorum dictates that no man can turn down the appeal for help from a woman. If you want to get to the front of a line, for instance, just be a woman in Saudi Arabia. I've simply taken full advantage of this. After all, how do you think I got into your hotel room?"

"And really, I'm not at all alone. Maheesh has made sure I have a lovely companion and driver while I'm here. Shekhar will take wonderful care of me...should I require it."

"But I don't understand. Why are you...?" I stopped there, my brain chugging away. Then I had it. "It was Ethan. You spoke to Ethan."

Her chiselled chin dipped slightly as she selected another

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\* *Stain of the Berry*

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grape. She regarded the fruit circumspectly, as if attempting to assess its potential for sweet over tart. "I spoke with Anthony...who'd spoken with Ethan."

"I don't believe this."

"He was worried about you, Russell. He said you sounded dreadful, and lonely and sad."

"I don't think I sounded dreadful." Lonely and sad I'd give him. "So you came all this way to check up on me?"

"No," she told me with an authoritative glare. "I came to pick up a few things: a pound of Yemeni coffee, some *Zamzan* from Mecca, and maybe a nice, sharp *jambiya*...I just love a good ceremonial dagger, don't you? If I happened to run into you while I was here, all the better. Besides, it's not as if this was a great effort. Egypt is only a short hop across the Red Sea."

Sereena has a way of making the world seem exceedingly small. To her, the globe might as well be a tiny community where everything is within driving distance. If you can't find the right kind of parsley in one town, you just scoot over to the next. So what if there is a sea or mountain range in the way? That would never stop her.

"Anthony filled me in as best he could on why you're here. Tell me everything."

"It will have to be in the elevator. We're heading into old Jeddah tonight."

"Al-Balad," Sereena exclaimed. "A magical place, especially at night. I'm thrilled. Come!" she said, hopping off her couch. "No time to dawdle."

I'd learned from years of experience, there was no point in arguing. If Sereena Orion Smith wanted to come with you, she came with you.

Souk al-Alawi in Al-Balad (Old Jeddah) is reputed to be the most extensive and traditional in the Kingdom. As the four of us traversed the darkened, aged streets, lined with near-dilapidated buildings towering above crammed market stalls, the wailing call to evening prayer followed our every step. The place was abuzz

with activity as merchants, foreign traders, pilgrims, and locals out to buy daily goods went about their business. The heady scent of spices, musty perfumes and colognes, and freshly tanned leather sat heavy in the evening heat, like a thin layer of oil floating on water.

It had been agreed with Husain in Oman that I would meet Saffron at (reputably) the easiest place for a tourist (i.e. me) in Al-Balad to find. Nassif House is an ancient mansion, now restored and used as a museum and cultural centre. When it was time, Sereena and I left Alastair to watch over Hema, despite her vehement protestations. She most definitely did not wish to be watched over. But who was I to intrude on the progress of a great love story?

As promised, we found the five-storey, Turkish-style building without difficulty. I'd been instructed to wait in the front courtyard. By some magic unknown to me, Saffron would recognize me. Something about that made me slightly uneasy.

Sereena and I stood side by side in front of the building, near a neem tree, and waited. Before long, a young child appeared in front of us. He was wrapped in a once-white cotton sheath that covered most of his body and part of his face.

"Quant," the child barked. Dark eyes, older than their owner, stared up at me through the swaddling. He completely ignored the presence of Sereena. Something, I'm sure, she was altogether unaccustomed to.

"Yes, I am. And who are you?"

"Saffron. You're here to meet me."

This was certainly becoming the day of the expected. I thought of what Neil wrote to his then boyfriend: *"sa is coming up soon im a little unsure about what will happen there im glad to finally be going but worried the big one still eludes me and I still haven't found saffron i need saffron."*

Neil needed to contact Saffron. He even told Aashiq to have his father find Saffron if he got into trouble. Which he certainly had. And now I find that Saffron is a ten-year-old boy? Good grief.

"Who is the man?" the child demanded in his disarmingly rough voice.

I must have looked confused because he repeated the question. I was still busy processing that I was now dealing with a minor. "What man?" I asked back.

"The man who is watching you from behind that store over there." He pointed a dirty little finger to a spot across the street.

I followed the finger. Alastair Hallwood was standing behind a power box, under the partial cover of shade from an overhead awning belonging to a rather modern-looking store. His eyes grew to the size of two boiled eggs when he saw that he was caught. I crooked my own finger at him, indicating that he should join us.

"What are you doing?" I asked him as he sheepishly approached.

"Yes," the boy asked rather forcefully. "What are you doing? Why are you watching this other man?"

Sereena eyed Alastair carefully but said nothing.

Alastair's reedy frame towered above the boy's. He peered down at the youngster and said, "We're together. We're all friends. Isn't that right, Russell, old chap? Sereena?"

I wasn't sure I'd go so far as to call us friends. Or necessarily together. He was *supposed* to be watching over Hema. Why *was* he here?

"Hema sent me away, I'm afraid. She said I was slowing her down. You told me you were coming to Nassif House, so I thought I'd join you. I can't let you two have all the fun. We can catch up with Hema at the hotel later."

I glanced about. It was getting darker in the souk. People were scurrying about, completing their tasks before going home or to prayer. It didn't feel right leaving Hema alone in this environment.

He must have read my thoughts, because he said: "Semir is still with her. Apparently *he* doesn't slow her down," he added petulantly. "Now, who's this little fellow?"

"I am no little fellow!" Saffron proclaimed, crossing two arms across a puffed-out chest.

"Now keep your hair on," Alastair quickly apologized. "I can see my error, now that I get a good look at you."

I pulled out a photograph of Neil Gupta. "Do you know this man, Saffron?"

He studied the picture closely. "Yes. He's dead now."

"How do you know that?"

"Husain told it to us. He was told by Fahd. Fahd was told by his brother who lives in Dubai."

Instant communication. Cellphones and Internet. Even here. Gotta love it. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd told me they Tweeted each other the news.

"Neil was my friend," I said. "He told me before he died that he really needed to find you. Can you tell me why?"

"Of course. The merchandise. He made a promise. And now Quant will keep his promise. As I will keep mine."

The Zinko. That darn old carpet. This was still about the Zinko. Neil was anxious to get his hands on it. Maybe someone had been just as anxious to ensure he didn't.

"I will keep any promise Neil made." A lie. I just wanted to take this a little further. "What promise did you make?"

The beady eyes toured my face, then: "You understand the dollars for the merchandise?"

Husain in Salalah had told me how this would work. Once I was satisfied with the merchandise, I'd instruct my bank to electronically transfer the agreed-upon funds to another bank account I would be told about only when the negotiations were complete. I had no intention of spending my money—or Pranav's—on some mythical carpet. But something was telling me the Zinko carpet was the key to finding out what happened to Neil Gupta. I'd thought Saffron might be the key. Now, I wasn't so sure.

"I do. May I see it now?"

"No. We will go tonight."

"Tonight? Go where? Where is the carpet?"

"No! You must not speak so loud, Quant!" the boy admonished me. I did not like it. He was ten frigging years old for Puff-the-Magic-Dragon's sake!

"Okay, okay, just give me the address."

"I will take you and your friend," he said, nodding towards but never looking at Alastair. "Now. We go now."





# Chapter 14

The four-wheel drive truck spiriting us out of Jeddah was driven by a man I understood to be ten-year-old Saffron's father. He did not speak. Saffron sat in the front with him, Alastair and I in the seat behind them, and Sereena, seemingly invisible to the men, in the seat behind us.

"Where exactly are we going?" I asked, feeling increasingly uncomfortable as the lights of Jeddah faded away at the far end of the strip of highway.

"I have already told you," Saffron proclaimed, unhappy to be disturbed by me. Unhappier still that we'd allowed Sereena to accompany us. But, too bad, buddy. Without her oddly superb tracking skills, we'd never have kept up with him, as he raced through the souk like a cat with a burning tail. Maybe it was just that he hadn't quite come to know and love her yet, as I did. "To see the Bedouin," he said.

"But where? Where is the Bedouin?"

"At the Bedouin camp, of course."

## Date with a Sheesha

Stupid me.

"This is his home we're going to?"

The boy scoffed. Little bugger. "Of course not. He lives in a big house in the city. Just like most of the Bedouin do now. He is a Jeddani. But for you people, he also keeps this camp. To show how it once was for the Bedouin."

We were going to a tourist attraction? In the middle of the night?

"Why are we going there?"

The boy only shrugged.

I thought I understood. At night there would be no tourists. Only us. And the Zinko. If Saffron was any indication, everything about the rug, this mysterious piece of "merchandise," had to be kept on the down low. I suppose, if I were a rogue Bedouin who had decided to sell off a slice of my cultural heritage for a tidy profit, I'd want to keep it a secret too. I, however, was more interested in what the Bedouin might know about Neil Gupta and his death.

I took another glance out the back window of the truck. Jeddah had disappeared. "How far?"

"Not much further. You will see."

Although the highway was wide and modern, obviously a major thoroughfare during the day, at night it was nearly abandoned. About fifteen minutes out of the city, traffic had dropped to nearly nil. The wind was stronger out here, away from the protection of the city buildings and dwellings. Sand blew across the pavement like brown wisps of snow, gathering in banks, like fingers attempting to reclaim what had once been desert.

Eventually the truck slowed and made a right turn off the highway onto a rough, rutted road. We came to a stop, some time later, in a gravelled parking lot, home to a solitary building. A bare bulb hanging from a pole provided scant lighting.

"Is this it?" I asked, even though the place looked nothing like what I'd expect from a nomad's camp.

"No. We must stop here to relieve the tires. Wait here, please." And with that, Saffron and his father stepped out of the truck.

"We're going into the desert." Alastair's strained voice made

the words sound ominous. Worried eyes scanned our surroundings.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"They're letting air out of the tires. They do that so they can travel on the sand, up and down the dunes."

"At night? They can do that?" I'd always wanted to take a desert safari, doing the dune-buggy-roller-coaster thing. Right about then, though, it wasn't at the top of my list.

Alastair sniggered. "You know, they'd say the same about you Canadians, heading out on one of your snow machines; what do you call them?"

I suppose he was right about that. Even so, I wasn't convinced that heading out into the Saudi Arabian desert at night to meet a carpet salesman was such a good idea any more. "You okay back there?" I asked Sereena who was unnaturally quiet.

"It's perfectly safe," she responded. "Just hold on to something and enjoy the ride."

Saffron and his father returned. Without a word, we were off. The four-wheel drive, now with minimal tire pressure, pulled out of the parking lot and ploughed into the dark heart of the desert.

For what seemed like the next several years, I did what Sereena advised: held on to something and enjoyed the ride. Well, actually I only did half of it. I surely held on to something, every tendon strained to the max. The enjoyment bit was a little harder to come by. Especially given how dark it was. I'm generally okay with wild rides, but I like to see where I'm going. The driver had obviously been down this road many times before and (I hoped) could have driven it blindfolded. But even with the vehicle's headlights on bright, I don't know how he did it. The relentless ups and downs, ups with curves, and downs with greater curves, came at us without warning. My stomach began to feel as if I'd just consumed my weight in corn dogs, elephant ears, and root beer, then decided to jump up and down on a trampoline for a couple of hours. And to think, at the end of this there wasn't even the faint hope of a stiff gin and tonic.

I was heartened when, having humped over one last doozy of a sand dune, I saw a muted light in the foreground. By this point I didn't care if it was a Bedouin camp, alien spaceship, or a fallen star, I was getting off.

The truck came to a halt. We all poured out, grateful to feel solid ground beneath our feet.

I felt like one of those coin-operated bubble gum machines—filled with bowling balls. “How long was that? An hour?”

“Ten minutes, would you say?” Alastair asked Sereena.

“Eight,” she answered, unruffled and still, somehow, looking fresh and fabulous in her *abeyya*.

“Two for each camel,” came the dizzyingly unappealing words from the boy's mouth.

“What? We're not there yet?” I blurted out. “And what's this about a camel?”

“Nadidah keeps his camels here to bring tourists down into the camp at the bottom of this hill.”

There were many things very wrong with that statement. First, I couldn't believe people actually paid to go through what we'd just been through—and *then* wanted to ride a camel. Second, did he say hill? Another one? Third, why camels? Why couldn't we just finish off the trip in the damn truck? This wasn't a tour. It was an endurance test.

“Marvellous,” came Sereena's considerably less hesitant opinion. “Russell, why don't you and I take this one, with the green and orange?”

Indeed, one of the camels nearby—there were about thirty wandering the small encampment—wore what looked like a green and orange knit cap over its snout.

“It keeps the spitting to a minimum,” Sereena said as she approached the animal and petted its elongated neck. “And the biting.”

Nice.

Saffron's father pulled a rein on the animal, which caused it to obediently lower itself, in a rather ungainly manner, to its knees. Sereena scooted up top, looking for all the world as if she scaled a camel's back every day, despite the added complication of her *abeyya*.

She patted the blanket-covered seat in front of her. I followed.

I swore I saw Saffron's mute father crack a smile as I tried to maneuver my bulk atop the camel. It wasn't pretty, but finally I made it.

"Lean back and tighten those abs, Russell," Sereena warned as Saffron's dad caused the animal to jerk back up to its feet.

At one point, as the animal was getting up, it seemed as if we were on the sheer side of a furry cliff, facing down. There was nothing to hold on to but a small, round, metal protuberance meant to keep us in our saddle. We leaned back as far as we could. My back and stomach muscles ached with the effort. At last the camel made a jolting upwards motion, getting its front feet back up under its bulk.

The whole experience was, I must admit, totally exhilarating.

Alastair and Saffron had already mounted their own mightily humped steed. With no instructions on what to do, we were headed off into the desert. Our camel, which I came to think of as Rosie, simply started moving, apparently requiring no urging from me. She'd obviously been at this gig for a while. I wondered if she got double time for working after-hours. Saffron's grim-faced father stayed behind. Maybe to guard the truck? I'd miss him.

Riding a camel is not the gentlest or most comfortable means of transportation. But, I must admit, there was something magical about it. As we made our way forward, we eventually settled into the groove of the jerky up and down, side to side motion. Tender moonlight reflected off the mounds of sand that encircled our small caravan, bathing us in a supernatural glow. The sky was a lush dark carpet, dotted with stars twinkling like gems. The air smelled of old heat. At one point I turned to glance at Sereena. I caught her face in profile, as she gazed up at the moon, breathing in the cooling night air. She'd never looked more beautiful.

"This is really something, isn't it?" I whispered to her. I don't know why I whispered. Alastair and Saffron were far enough ahead of us. And it wasn't as if I was telling secrets. But something about the purple night, the starry skies above us, the faint shushing noise as breaths of wind kissed the sand dunes made it seem right.

## Date with a Sheesha

Her eyes fell from the moon onto me. "It certainly is. We'll always remember this moment, you know. You and me, out here in the Arabian desert, on the back of this lovely animal, led by the light of the moon."

She was right. "I'm glad you're here."

Our host, Nadidah, "the Bedouin," was not part of the greeting party. The men, dressed in variations of the same theme—shirt-dresses and headscarves—helped us off our camels. Some looked after the animals while others escorted us into the camp. The place, in a hollow formed at the foot of three particularly mountainous sand dunes, was a large, roofless area, sealed off from the desert by walls of fabric that fluttered in the escalating wind. Only one of the men spoke any English, but it didn't take an interpreter to tell us they wanted to corral us into the enclosure.

Inside, the camp was faintly lit by burning torches, their acrid pitch smell cloying in the still air. I could easily see how this set-up would translate into a fine tourist experience. The area was dotted with oversized examples of the traditional black, goat-hair tents the Bedouin favoured, which, after throwing up a flap or two could double as handy pavilions for buffet tables. One entire end of the space was laid with thick rugs and cushions for sitting on, in front of which a small, raised, wooden platform had been constructed. A stage perhaps? Still another, more intimate area, also littered with pillows and cushions in inviting natural colours with intricately stitched designs, was where we were taken.

We sat, cross-legged, around a small fire, next to which a sheesha pipe was ready to go. Saffron was nowhere to be seen. It was probably past his bedtime.

The main guide, the one who could manage some English, brought us coffee. Unlike Saffron and his father, this man was reverential and deferential toward Sereena, treating her as the most special guest.

He offered her a platter of dates, prepared several different ways.

She graciously accepted two.

When the man had left, Alastair reached for the sheesha's mouthpiece and helped himself to a long pull.

I took the opportunity to look around. Despite the lateness of the hour, there certainly seemed to be a great number of people, all Middle Eastern men, milling about throughout the enclosure. Was this all because of us? Because of the Zinko deal about to go down? Or was this like any other tourist joint, with staff getting ready for tomorrow's onslaught of day trippers looking for an authentic Arabian experience? Wash down the camels. Refill the turmeric shakers. That sort of thing?

I was more concerned about Nadidah. Where was he? I hoped Saffron had gone to fetch him. I fought the temptation to go looking for both of them, or at least do some poking around. I didn't want to be rude. The men had been generous in making us comfortable. The hospitality of the Bedouin is legendary and should never be turned down. But I was a detective here, not a true guest. I could only take so much sitting around.

Alastair took another drag, tipped the mouthpiece back on itself, and handed it to Sereena. She tapped the back of his hand and accepted it.

"Off to spend a penny," Alastair said, rising to his gangly heights, reminding me of Rosie. "Either of you spot a loo on the way in?"

We hadn't.

"All right then. I guess I'll go do a little investigating of my own."

I hoped he meant that only in terms of finding a bathroom.

As soon as he was gone, "Do you trust him?" were the first words out of Sereena's mouth. She said it in a way that made it impossible for me to tell what her own opinion was.

I accepted her offer of a toot off the sheesha, then told her: "You know me. I trust everyone involved in a case...once it's over."

"Wise policy." She selected a date from the platter and fed it to me. She appeared to be considering another, when out of the blue she said: "I like this place. Charming ambiance. Something like this would be an interesting choice for a wedding reception."



## Date with a Sheesha

Like the Arabians', at times, the words that came out of Sereena's mouth needed careful translation. I started to respond, stopped, thought better of it, then tried again. "Are...are you planning on getting married?"

I hadn't even known she'd been dating anyone. Sereena had been married a few dozen times in her earlier days—okay that's a bit of an exaggeration, but not much—and I'd simply concluded she was done with husbands.

"Not at the moment," she said. "I was thinking more about your preferences. Would you like a themed wedding reception? We could do it, you know. Did you know that the most northerly sand dunes in the world are located right in Saskatchewan? In Athabasca Sand Dunes Provincial Park. We could set up a tent and—"

"What are you talking about? I'm not getting married."

She gave me one of her extremely rare smiles, most of it in her eyes.

"You think I should get married?"

No response.

We sat in silence, staring at one another. My mind was spinning. Just thinking about Ethan in this way made my heart suddenly swell. I didn't need Sereena to tell me any of this. I knew. I knew. I knew. I knew in my supersized heart, that above anything else, I wanted to make Ethan Ash my husband. I wanted to have a life with him. I suddenly felt so sure, so ecstatically happy, it was all I could do to keep from jumping on Rosie the camel and galloping all the way home, to get down on one knee, proclaim my love to that man, and propose.

Instead, Alastair was back. The news wasn't so good.

He folded his knees and crumpled down beside us, his normally jovial features displaying something close to panic. "Something is wrong." His whisper was hushed and insistent. His eyes danced a jerky waltz in the darkness shrouding the camp.

"Where were you?" I asked. "What's happened?"

"After I had a wee, I went outside. The reception was better there."

"Reception?"

"My phone." He shook his cellphone in my face to demonstrate. "I called the hotel. I wanted to check on darling Hema. She's disappeared, Russell."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hema is gone," he hissed. "I called her hotel room. There was no answer."

"That doesn't mean a thing," Sereena said. "She could be in the bath, or screening her calls, or asleep. You do know what time it is, don't you?"

"No, that's not it. After I couldn't get through, I called Semir's cell...I asked for his number before leaving him with Hema in the souk. He told me he lost her. Lost her, Russell!"

I bit my lip. Did Semir lose her? Or did she give him the slip? Or had someone taken her? The possibilities were many. None good.

"This is Quant." Saffron's prematurely old voice crawled over us like a net made of spiders.

We looked up. The boy was standing next to a venerable-looking man. He was wearing the standard shirt and headdress, but somehow made the outfit look regal rather than utilitarian. We all stood to greet the newcomer.

"I am Nadidah," he told us.

The Bedouin.

"This is your proper name?" he asked.

"I'm Russell Quant," I told him.

"Ah, Mr. Russell." He shot Saffron a brief, scolding scowl, then turned back on me. "You'll forgive me, but I am uncertain why it is that you are here."

Oh, so we were gonna play it that way, huh? "Well," I began, eyeing Saffron for any hint of what was going on. "I'm here for the *merchandise*."

"Yes," he said, "the Zinko."

Oh. So it was okay to say it out loud now? The rules kept on changing. "I believe you know that Neil Gupta had been in negotiations with your associates in Dubai, Fujairah, and Salalah to

purchase the Zinko."

"Yes. That is true."

"I would like to speak to you about Mr. Gupta and his interest in this rug."

"But you see, Mr. Russell, Mr. Neil has already purchased the Zinko."

My first hope was that I'd gotten sand in my ears. I asked the Bedouin to repeat what he'd said. He did. I choked.

My mind started revving up. Was this why Neil was killed? I'd come to believe Neil was murdered because he *knew* about the Zinko and was *trying* to buy it. But did he already own it when he died? Had he been killed by someone wanting to steal it from him? Something about this didn't make sense.

"Neil Gupta has already been to this camp?" I asked to make sure I had the facts perfectly clear. "And he bought the Zinko when he was here?"

The Bedouin nodded solemnly.

"When did this happen?"

The Bedouin looked perplexed. He slowly raised a skeletal arm and pointed west. "He is leaving now."

# Chapter 15

In my fantasies of what my life as a prairie private detective might be like, never did I dream I would take part in a low-speed camel chase across the Arabian desert. But, on this Tuesday night in early February, that was exactly what I was doing.

Nadidah confirmed that a group of three had arrived at the Bedouin camp only a short time before us. One identified himself as Neil Gupta, and he completed the purchase of the Zinko as had been negotiated. The carpet was turned over to him, and he and his party were now returning to Jeddah. We explained to Nadidah with great exuberance and much arm waving, that he'd sold the carpet to the wrong person. The real Neil Gupta was most assuredly dead. He seemed rather indifferent to this turn of events. I suppose he had his money, so what did he care? He could book his ski vacation, or buy that chalet in Switzerland, or whatever it was that desert dwellers who'd struck it rich did with new-found loot.

Eventually, after a bit of skillful begging, we managed to elicit

some assistance. Nadidah agreed to give us Saffron, and two camels, to go after the imposter and his accomplices. And so, as quick as one can rustle up a couple of camels—which was not nearly as quick as I'd hoped—we were in pursuit of the fleeing carpet thieves. I was in the lead with Sereena on Rosie, Saffron and Alastair brought up the rear.

After topping the first sand dune, I was able to get a better view of the situation. Fortunately, the moon was full and sitting low on the horizon, throwing a mauve-blue light across the eerie, undulating landscape. In the distance I could just make out the silhouette of three camels. One of the riders was very tall and thin, another squat and round, the other was somewhere in between, indistinguishable in the shadows. It wasn't much, but at least we had them in our sights.

"How do you make these things gallop?" I called back to Saffron.

The wind was picking up, and it seemed my voice was stolen away. Either that, or the little bugger was ignoring me. He hadn't seemed thrilled to be given the job of accompanying us on this jaunt in the first place.

All I could do was fall back on my horse-riding skills, such as they were. I gave the camel's shanks a little kick with my heels and ordered: "Giddy up!"

Poor Rosie, she was probably thinking to herself: just because you ride me like a horse, doesn't mean I am one. I heard Sereena, at my back, whisper something colourful under her breath. But that didn't stop me. I called out again, this time jiggling the little round thing on the saddle and giving the reins a bit of a tug. Rosie finally responded and began a galumphing version of a gallop. I'm sure this looked a little odd, and it certainly didn't feel very good to my behind, but at least we were getting somewhere. Sort of. We needed to catch up to those carpet-baggers!

There should have been some sort of triumphal music accompanying our determined pursuit, the dark, fluttering folds of Sereena's *abeyya*, the dastardly crooks fleeing into the moonlight. Instead there was only silence, and the vaguely threatening whisper of the wind as it brushed gritty sand against our faces.

We were making reasonable progress when I heard the shriek coming from behind us. It was Alastair.

"Russell! Stop!" Sereena urged.

I shot a look over my shoulder. The second camel, trotting to catch up with us, was now riderless. I scoured the desert floor for signs of Alastair and Saffron. I was startled to see both of them lying on the ground. Not moving.

"Stop, Rosie! Stop!"

She apparently did not know English very well. I suddenly felt like it was my first time on a bicycle, and I'd forgotten to ask where the brakes were.

I pulled up on the reins, this way and that, and mercifully one of the yanks did the trick. Rosie came to a jarring halt, almost sending Sereena and me snoot first to the ground. But at least she stopped moving. Getting her to move down onto her knees so we could get off on our own terms was another matter.

"Never mind that," Sereena said after a few of my rein maneuvers and camel calls were met with nothing but a steely, resistant gaze from our mount. I swear she looked at me as if wishing she could take off her snout gear and spit at me (Rosie, not Sereena). "Let's just jump. We have to help them."

It was further down than either of us anticipated. But at least the ubiquitous sand provided a soft landing. We sat up, checking all our parts for anything broken or strained.

"This wind," Sereena shouted out at me above the whipping sound of sand-filled blasts of air. "This isn't good."

I knew that was true, but we had other things to worry about first. Helping each other to our feet, we eyed the two lumps in the distance where our companions had fallen. We tried to run, but we were against the rising wind. We moved as fast as we could, sometimes only managing a stagger, fighting the biting bluster every step of the way.

As we approached, Saffron sat up, then slowly got to his feet. His tiny face glowered behind the wildly flapping fabric of his garment.

"What happened?" I asked, spitting out sand as I fell to my knees next to Alastair.

"The camel, she became frightened of something. Maybe a lizard," the boy yelled through the wind.

"Alastair, are you all right?" Sereena joined me at his side. She placed her hand on his left cheek, then his forehead.

"No, no..." he began to murmur, sounding disoriented.

"Do we have some water?" Sereena asked me.

"N-n-nooooo," he began again. "S....s...stop..."

We both leaned in over him, trying to hear what was coming through his lips.

As he sputtered more mumbo jumbo, I decided I needed to give him a quick once-over. I'm no medic, but from what I could tell, he didn't seem to have any obvious injuries as a result of his fall from the skittish camel. No blood. No cuts. But I knew that told only part of the story. As my probing hands reached his right ankle he yelped out: "Bugger off! Stop that!"

He'd finally come out of his daze.

Sereena sat back on her haunches. "I'd say he has a sprained ankle. Or worse."

"Worse?" he cried.

She regarded him coolly. She didn't do well with crybabies.

He turned to me. "Russell, old man, I think we've just been diddled."

"I'll get some water," Sereena said, making to get up. "I think he's delirious."

"There's a flask on the saddle," I told her. "There should be water in it."

"Oh, no." I heard the words above me.

A small chill nipped at me.

I turned. Sereena was standing over us, quite still, except for her hair, blowing wildly in the storm. She was staring at something, off into the distance. I got to my feet, and stood next to her. And then I understood.

"Oh no," I repeated the sentiment.

"See, I told you," Alastair rallied from his prone position. "We've been diddled, and good."

He was right. We'd been conned. The camels were gone. And so was Saffron.

The wind was becoming more forceful with every passing minute. We were being attacked by invisible sheets of sandpaper, abrading our bare skin. Alastair was injured and needed medical attention. It was the middle of the night. We were in the desert, miles from nowhere. With no means of transportation.

Nice one, Quant.

Sereena and I formed a human wall on Alastair's left side, to shield him as best we could against the worst of the sandstorm.

"That little wanker *made* the camel throw me off!" he grumped. "He did something dodgy with those dirty little fingers of his, and next thing I know we're on the ground! I'm telling you, he did it on purpose."

Something about the fact that Saffron had abandoned us in the desert, with no means of escape and a killing sandstorm fast approaching, was compelling me to believe Alastair.

"Do you think you can walk, Alastair?" I shouted the question over the wind.

"Don't you worry, mate," he responded with a glimmer of his customary grin. "This is not going to be some scene from *The English Patient*."

I groaned. "How long have you been waiting to use that line?"

"Pretty much since the movie came out. But I must say, never did I imagine I'd actually ever be at risk for being buried alive in a desert sandstorm!"

"Well, you did tell me you came to Saudi Arabia for a bit of excitement," I reminded him. "Here it is."

"By excitement, I had something a little more romantic in mind. And with Hema in my arms. Not me in yours."

"Come on, you," I said sliding my arm under his shoulders. "Let's see if we can put some weight on that leg."

"Wait!" Sereena called out. "I think I got him."

She'd been fiddling with her cellphone, and, miracle of all miracles, seemed to have gotten through.

The idea had been mine. It came to me as we were chasing Saffron through the Souk al-Alawi, on the way to the vehicle wait-



ing to take us to the Bedouin. While in Jeddah, Sereena's driver, Shekhar, was at her disposal twenty-four hours a day. I decided it wouldn't be a bad idea to have him follow us to wherever we were being taken. And so, the entire time we were being driven out of town, Sereena was texting Shekhar with directions. It allowed him to know where we were going, without his actually tailing us close enough to be seen. I'd been tough on Hema for her PDA addiction and incessant texting, but now this pesky technology might just save our lives.

Shekhar had successfully tailed us to the parking lot where we'd left the four-wheel drive and gotten on the camels. He was waiting there for further instructions. Sereena handed me the cell-phone.

"Shekhar, you are a lifesaver!"

"Thank you very much," he said in his nasal accent. At the moment, it sounded like the voice of God.

"There will be three camels coming into the parking lot very soon." I stopped there, realizing I had a dilemma. Did I have Shekhar rescue us, and let the criminals get away? Or did I have him follow them, and come back for us later? Neither had great side effects. "Shekhar, there's only one highway into Jeddah from here, right?"

"Yes, sir, that is correct."

"Do you see another vehicle in the parking lot?" Saffron's father.

"Yes, sir, I do."

"The men on the camels will be getting into that truck and leaving for Jeddah. If you memorize the description and license number, is there any way you can get someone from your organization to pick up their trail as they head back to the city?"

"Of course. They may wait for them by Al-Matar Road. From there they may follow them as they enter the city. There is no other way for them to go. This is no problem."

"Shekhar..." I wanted to say I loved him, but thought it might not be a good idea. "Two more things."

"Yes, sir."

"Is there a place you can park where the men coming your

way cannot see your vehicle?"

"I am already parked in such a place."

I really liked this guy. "Okay, great. I know you can't drive in here. And even if you could, I don't know exactly where we are. You'd never find us in this storm. So, once the men are gone, I want you to start honking your horn every couple of minutes. We'll find you by sound."

"Very good, sir. Very smart thinking. I will do that. I think they are coming. I see some shapes coming through the sand. Good luck to you, sir."

"Good luck, Shekhar."

I felt like a general giving orders to his man down on the front lines. Or was it the other way around?

"Okay, Alastair," I turned back to our injured companion. "We have to get you on your feet."

With some ouching and owing, we were soon successful.

Several minutes later, we heard the first honk, an auditory beacon from an unseen lighthouse. With Alastair supported between us, the three of us moved slowly towards the sound. I prayed that, with any luck, although nearly blind, and partially disabled, our ship would make it through the storm to a safe harbour.

Although it seemed to be an endless journey, it took us less than half an hour to make our way through the desert to Shekhar's truck. He was waiting for us with a very worried face and a much-needed bottle of water for each of us. By the time we were back on the highway heading for Jeddah, it was nearly morning, the first sprigs of light appearing against the dirty horizon at our backs.

When Shekhar's phone rang, he checked the display and handed it to me. "It is my colleagues."

"Hello, this is Russell Quant. I understand you are following some men for me, driving a white four-wheel drive?"

"Yes," came a flat voice.

"Can you tell me where they are now?"

The news was not good. "We followed them to the airport.

## Date with a Sheesha

They are awaiting a flight on Saudi Arabian Airlines to Dubai."

I looked at my watch. I was booked on the same flight, but my departure was much later in the day. Could my luck be so good? Were they waiting for my plane? I was due for a break.

"They are entering security now," came the answer.

I swore. Shekhar looked at me askance. I apologized.

I thought for a moment.

"Do you happen to have a cellphone?" I asked.

"I am talking to you on it now, sir."

Duh. "Can you take a photograph with your phone? Of these men?"

"This is no problem. We will send it to you soon."

I hung up and crossed my fingers.

Mere minutes later my phone indicated a message coming in. A grainy image appeared on my screen. I got them! Accompanying the photo was the message: Only two of the party were visible to us.

I studied the picture. It was of two men in a line. They were the perfect stereotype of a pair of villains, right out of a comic strip. Both had dark, evil features. One was very tall, sporting an unruly, bushy handlebar moustache. The other was shorter and heavy, with beady eyes squinting with malevolence. (Or so I decided.)

Gotcha, bad guys.

The next couple of hours were spent taking care of business before my own flight back to Dubai. Our first task was to deliver Alastair to a hospital, where his injured ankle could be looked after. He assured us he was fine on his own. I promised I would call him the second I had news of Hema. Then Sereena and I had Shekhar rush us back to the hotel. Just as Alastair had reported, Hema was not answering the phone in her room. I reached Semir the driver, and he told me the same story he'd told Alastair. She'd simply given him the slip.

I checked the front desk. They confirmed Hema Gupta had checked out. They also handed me a message she'd left for me:

Russell,

*I am returning to Dubai. I don't feel safe since Umar's death.  
You should consider doing the same.*

Hema Gupta

I studied the handwriting and decided it looked the same as the precise penmanship I'd seen from Hema before. The note's to-the-point terseness also reminded me of Hema. I believed she'd written this note. Whether she'd done so under duress was another matter.

I showed the note to Sereena. She read it quickly, crumpled it into a small ball, and handed it back to me. "Don't invite her to your wedding," was all she said as she headed for the elevators.

Within the hour, we were both packed and heading to the airport. Sereena for her flight back to Egypt, and me for Riyadh, and then Dubai.

It was a long day. But it gave me time to think about all that had happened since I'd arrived in the Middle East, less than a week ago. I spent a fair bit of time beating myself up over losing the Zinko and the men who stole it. Sure, I had their picture. But what good would that do me? I could only hope that someone who knew Neil would recognize them. Then I focused on whether or not the Zinko truly was related to the death of my client's son. Pranav Gupta was convinced Neil was killed because he was gay. Of course, Arabia is not the safest place to lead a gay life, but I'd found no evidence that leading a gay life caused the end of Neil's. Instead, I'd found that he'd been able to live a rather typical life for a young, virile, single gay man.

No, there was something else at play here. Neil knew he was in danger. Neil was anxious to get to Saffron, and through him, to the Zinko. Then there were the black petals. A curse? A threat? A warning of bad things to come if he didn't back off from the Zinko? From whom? Then Umar, our driver, was killed. Accident? Coincidence? Or had his role in leading us to the Zinko

cost him his life? I couldn't know for sure. And what about the surprise party that wasn't?

I mulled over my growing list of suspects, which was pretty much everyone I'd met since arriving here. The boyfriends: Aashiq and Yash. The carpet merchants and Zinko liaisons: Fahd, Husain, Saffron, and, ultimately, Nadidah the Bedouin. Umar had known Neil too, so, dead or not, he might have played a role. There was Alastair and the other carpet experts at the University of Dubai. And of course the Saskatoon connection: the parents, Pranav and Unnati, and cousin Hema. The ex-boyfriend, Darrell Good. The WACS executive director, Colin Cardinale. I especially liked him for this. Not because I had any proof: I just didn't like his snooty attitude.

There certainly was no shortage of suspects. But suspected of what? Had there actually been a murder? Or had it been just what the police suggested: a random mugging by local hoodlums gone bad? And if it was murder, the real question was, why? A gay-bashing? Or, as my gut was telling me, something more complex and sinister?

As soon as I landed in Dubai late Wednesday, I had a taxi take me directly to the Deira Spice Souk. The shops were about to close for the night, but I was just in time to catch Rahim and Qasid as they were shuttering up their stores.

"You come for more saffron?" Rahim asked in his heavily accented English as soon as he saw me approaching. I was surprised he remembered me at all. Then again, there likely weren't too many white guys coming into his souk asking questions about a dead man.

*"Assalamu 'alaykum,"* I greeted him with a smile.

He gave me a wide smile in return. *"Wa alaykum assalaam."*

I waved at Qasid, who was eyeing me closely. We exchanged the same greeting. I turned back to Rahim. "Rahim, do you remember the other day when I was here? Qasid told us that he'd seen my friend with some men the night he died."

"Yes, I remember."

I pulled out my cellphone and brought up the photo of my carpet-stealing villains, who'd I'd come to think of as Stretch (the

tall one) and Squat (the chunky one). "Could you ask Qasid if these were the men he saw that night?"

Rahim took my phone, waved Qasid over, and showed him the picture. They began a short discourse. I knew the answer before Rahim shared it with me. The instant Qasid took the phone and saw the photograph, he began to nod.

My next stop was the Madinat Jumeirah, Hema's hotel. She was no longer a registered guest. I debated what to do next. The lounge looked mighty inviting, with frosty cocktails imbibed by beautiful people and a stunning view of the Burj Al Arab with its nightly light show. Instead I took a cab to the university. It was late, but, as a visiting scholar, I had a set of keys for where I needed to go.

When I opened the door to Neil's office, there was someone sitting behind his desk.

The man jumped up, startled at the sight of me.

"You're Rob, right?" I'd met the young researcher earlier in the week. He was a colleague of Neil's.

"Yeah, I, uh, sorry, I didn't expect anyone to still be here. I know I shouldn't be using Neil's office, but I like the quiet. And no one's been in here for days. Sorry."

"No need to apologize," I told him in a reassuring voice (the guy really looked spooked). "Why should a perfectly good office go to waste, right?"

"Uh, yeah, right, I guess."

"Have you been here all day?"

"Sure. I've got this journal article I'm working on with a killer deadline..."

"You didn't happen to see Neil's cousin here earlier today, did you? You remember her? You met a few days ago. Pretty, not real cheery."

"Sure, Hema. She was here."

Yowza. "Did you speak to her?"

"No. She looked kind of busy with those other guys. And the next time I checked, she was gone."

"The men she was with, do you know who they were?"

He shook his head.

I pulled out my phone and pulled up the photo of Stretch and Squat. I showed it to Rob.

"Yeah, that's them."

My heart soared and fell at the same time (if that's possible). The good news was that I hadn't lost my carpet thieves after all; I was only one step behind them. The bad news was that I'd just solidified my growing suspicion that Hema Gupta was somehow involved in all of this. Her bad attitude. Her predilection for working alone (i.e. without yours truly). Sending me and Umar to the wrong address in Fujairah. Then skulking around when we got it right. Her sudden disappearance from Jeddah, and now Dubai.

The three stooges who stole the Zinko out from under my nose hadn't all been identified. It was stupid of me, but I'd never asked if the third one was a woman. Could Hema possibly have had a hand in Neil's death? Her own cousin? Rob had just placed the same men who stole the Zinko, and who'd been in the souk with Neil the night of his death—and more than likely were responsible for his death—with Hema, right here in Dubai.

"What was she doing with these men, Rob?"

A shrug. "I don't really know. They were in the lab most of the time. Not up here in the offices. And I was pretty busy doing my own thing, y'know."

"The lab? What goes on in the lab?"

He gave me an are-you-stupid look. "Uh, lab stuff. Testing things. I'm assuming if Hema was with them, it had something to do with the package they brought in with them. Probably a carpet or carpet sample they'd picked up somewhere. That's what it looked like anyway. They might have been checking authenticity trace markers, that type of thing."

"How is that done?"

He thought about that. "Well, not much can get done in the short amount of time they were here, except..." he cocked his head as if considering something.

"Yes? Except what?"

"Well, if they were working with a carpet, I suppose they could have been testing its age. They wouldn't have had time to test how old a carpet is, but they certainly could have done an exception test."

"What does that tell you?"

"It won't tell you how old a carpet is, but it could tell you how old it isn't. There are a lot of crooks out there nowadays. Carpets are hot. Some of the shiftier merchants try to falsify a rug's age, make it look really old and stuff, to increase its value. It's pretty easy to do actually. And they fool a lot of people. The ones who don't really know what to look for. Tourists mostly. But a professional with the right tools can find out for sure."

"So basically you can tell whether or not it's a fake pretty quickly?"

"It's not my specialty, but yeah, I think so."

If Hema and her henchmen were here with the Zinko, I was dying to find out what their tests told them. "Thank you, Rob," I said with a smile. "You've been very helpful."

"Really?"

"I don't suppose you know where they were going when they left?"

"No. Like I said, next time I checked, they were gone. Too bad. Hema, she's hot, right? I wouldn't have minded getting to know her a lot better."

First Alastair, and now this guy? Hot for Hema? Hema! What was wrong with these straight guys?

I called a cab. Real or fake, it seemed certain that Hema had the Zinko. Either way, she had nowhere else to go but home. And I'd be right behind her.



# Chapter 16

Moving from sand to snow, sultry to frigid, spice to ice, I was still overjoyed at the thought of going home. As much as I love traveling to foreign locales, I never tire of setting foot back in my hometown. Even in winter. Home is home.

Prior to our descent into “The Dief” late Thursday night, our captain informed us that we were being greeted by a minor blizzard, with temperatures hovering around the minus twenty-five Celsius mark. Even that did little to dampen my mood. Soon I’d be back in Ethan’s arms, nuzzling the furry snouts of Barbra and Brutus, amidst familiar surroundings, and tonight I’d be in my own bed. Glo-ri-a!

The landing was respectably smooth, despite the conditions. As I towed my carry-on behind me, off the plane, through the arrivals lounge, down the escalator, heading towards the doors that would take me out of the security area, I felt myself getting more and more excited. Of course I was happy to be home, but this time was different. I was about to be welcomed by the man I

had decided to marry. I felt giddy, every nerve in my body jangling. Would he be able to tell? Would he take one look at me and know my secret?

I pushed through the door, behind a gaggle of fellow travellers. Over their heads I caught sight of Ethan in all his sandy-haired, sturdily built, boy-next-door glory. He was searching the crowd, looking for me, a sweet smile at the ready on his face. He was wearing the cream-coloured parka Anthony had bought him for Christmas. He'd thought the colour was impractical, but he looked wonderful in it, especially with the turquoise and beige scarf my mother (with my help) gave him to match.

I was almost upon him when he finally caught sight of me. We kissed and embraced and kissed again. I barely resisted the urge to drop to my knees and ask him right then and there. How was I ever going to wait? But I would. I wanted to do this right.

"Here," he said, handing me my red, North Face Himalayan parka. "You'll need this."

"That bad?" I asked as I slipped on the coat.

"Not really. The worst of it is over, I think. But it's supposed to go down to minus thirty-five tonight, minus forty-seven with the wind chill.

"Dang! I forgot to bring your gloves. Do you have any on you?" Ethan asked.

"Yeah, in the side compartment of my carry-on. You wanna dig them out for me? I'll go round up the rest of my luggage at the carousel."

I was back in a few minutes with my suitcase. Ethan stood waiting for me, a strange look on his face.

"You okay?" I asked.

He handed me my gloves, then held out his right hand, palm up. "What are these?" he asked.

It looked like a small pile of black feathers.

I studied it closer. My heart skipped an extra beat, my mouth grew dry.

It wasn't feathers. It was petals. Black petals.

## Date with a Sheesha

As I strolled up the pristinely shovelled pathway leading to the front door of the Gupta house, I marvelled at how quickly the results of a winter storm can be tidied away and tamed, as if it had never happened. Friday morning dawned clear and cold, nary a cloud in the ice-blue sky. I'd arranged to meet my client at his home at eight a.m. The meeting had been my idea, the time had not.

Pranav Gupta answered my knock and invited me in. The first thing that struck me was how different the house felt from the last time I was there. Gone were the commiserating, grieving relatives, and gone were the buffet tables weighed down by endless food, and the aromas that went with it. However, as he led me down the hallway to his office, I noticed the battle between contemporary Western and traditional Indian decor raged on unabated.

We entered his office, he offered me a seat on the guest side of his massive, ornate desk, then rounded it to sit opposite me. I glanced to my left and saw that the shrine to Neil's memory also remained untouched.

"May I offer you a coffee?" Pranav asked once we were settled. "It is no problem; I have a carafe right here."

"Actually, I'd love a cup." It was eight in the morning after all. I hadn't had time to zip to Starbucks. Even if I had, I'd thought it might be odd if I walked in with a steaming latte for myself and nothing for my host.

Pranav poured our drinks. When he was finished, he sat back in his chair and regarded me. "You must be very tired from all your travel? I'm sorry we had to meet so early, but with the symposium beginning today, it seemed to me that we should get this out of the way as soon as possible. As it is, my wife has already gone to the airport this morning to greet the final arrivals. After that, I told her I would be at her disposal. This is a very important time for her, you understand."

I nodded and sipped the delicious blend. "Of course."

"So, tell me everything."

I guess we were done with preamble. Suited me just fine.

I caught him up on my activities since I'd last talked with him on the phone. I ended by asking whether he or his wife had heard

from or seen Hema.

"Wait just one moment, Mr. Quant. Are you telling me you suspect Hema of somehow being involved in her cousin's death?"

This was going to be touchy. But I was ready.

"Of course not. I'm only saying that the men Hema was last seen with in Dubai are men of interest in my investigation. One of them pretended to be Neil and purchased the Zinko. They are also the same men an eyewitness saw with Neil in the souk the night he died."

I'd let Pranav come to his own conclusions. At least until I had proof of something. He was right to be doubtful. I was too. Right now, all I had were suppositions and theories. Damning as the evidence might seem, it was my job to be skeptical until I could prove otherwise. The non-detective part of me, however, thought Hema looked about as guilty as Lizzie Borden in a hatchet store.

Pranav sat silent for a moment, mulling over all I'd told him. His head moved back and forth very slowly, as if trying to dislodge his own suspicions of a guilt-ridden niece.

"Are you sure you are right about all of this? Are you sure Neil's death didn't have something to do with his being gay, rather than all this carpet business?" It sounded almost as if he'd prefer it. "I asked Unnati about this Zinko. She's never heard of it. Are you sure you haven't gone down the wrong path? It seems to me that both Neil, and now Hema, have been wooed and led astray by this mythical thing. Have you been too?"

I knew he might be right. But I didn't think so.

"There's nothing to say this Zinko has anything to do with why Neil was killed."

"Possibly not," I allowed.

Pranav studied my face. He knew I was saying as little as possible about what I personally thought. "But possibly so," he said, each word coming out slower than the one before it.

I nodded.

"I see." His face was grave.

"There is one other reason I have that makes me believe I am on the right track," I told him. "I found more black petals in my carry-on luggage when I arrived in Saskatoon yesterday. I

checked that bag before I got on the plane. The only time those petals could have gotten there was during the flight. Maybe while I was in the bathroom or asleep. Whoever put them in there, Mr. Gupta, was on the airplane. And now, they're here in Saskatoon."

The older man's face was suddenly ashen. "What are you talking about? Petals? You received black petals?"

I quickly tried to think back. Perhaps I'd only spoken to Hema about the petals when I'd first found them amongst Neil's possessions, and then amongst my own. "Are you all right? I know about the superstition, Mr. Gupta," I said. "Hema told me about it."

"That's not it, Russell. That's not it at all. You see, I too received black petals."

My eyes narrowed. "What? When?"

"The day of Neil's funeral. A flower box—you know the kind that long-stemmed roses would arrive in?—came to the house. It was filled with black petals."

"Have you any idea who sent them?"

He shook his head. "There was no card or note. I called the people at the flower shop right away. But they could not identify who sent them."

"Curse or blessing?"

He stared at me. "I do not know. But it seems you may be right. You received these petals on last night's plane. There were many WACS delegates on that flight. The petals must have come from one of them."

I wasn't willing to rush to that conclusion quite yet, but I was grateful to have Pranav closer to my way of thinking about his son's death. Neil Gupta died for some reason other than that he was gay. I just knew it. And I was betting it had something to do with old carpets. In particular, the Zinko.

"I'd like to attend the conference," I said.

"I will arrange it," he agreed without hesitation.

"And, I think I should go to the airport. The balance of the delegates are arriving throughout the rest of the morning, correct?"

"Correct. Unnati and Colin Cardinale are there now. What do you think you may find there?"

I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for. And sometimes that's the best a detective can hope for; that maybe you'll recognize someone or something when you see it.

I didn't.

I studied each arrival carefully. My greatest hope was that either Hema and/or Stretch and Squat would appear before us. My lesser hope was that something or someone would show up that shouted: Yoo hoo! Over here! Me! A Big Clue!

Of course, none of that happened.

By noon, the last of the WACS delegates had arrived. They'd been whisked off in taxis and buses and private cars, all with the heat turned up to blasting. Unnati and Colin followed, no doubt to ensure that none of their charges died of frostbite or pneumonia before attending the conference. They hadn't worked so hard for so many months for nothing. I headed for a quick lunch with Anthony and Errall at Truffles on 21<sup>st</sup> Street. The restaurant was close to *gatt* and, more importantly, several of Saskatoon's better jewellery shops.

"Russell," Errall pointed out with her usual cutting precision, as we stood over the fourth glass display case in as many stores. "People traditionally take months to select the right engagement ring, not a few minutes after lunch."

"I'll know it when I see it," I said, not sure if I was telling the truth. With what Pranav Gupta was paying me for my current case, I was feeling flush. So, not even cost was a stumbling block. Yet still, I was having a difficult time picking out the perfect ring. There were so many more to choose from than I'd expected.

"I have faith in you, Puppy," Anthony murmured, sticking up for me, and giving my hunched over, aching back a patient pat. "What about that one in the corner, with the circle of diamonds?"

"Too much bling," I said.

"I don't understand the reference," he replied dryly.

"What about the one with the Aztec design around the edge?" asked Errall, somehow still mistily pale, even after spending the last few days on a Mexican beach.

"Too 'too-much-retsina-in-Santorini'."

"Oh Kee-rist! Just pick one, will you?"

"I wish Sereena were here," I said, my nose pressing against the cool glass. "She'd know what to do."

"You're marrying Ethan, not Sereena," Anthony accurately pointed out. "This ring should be about him. Not Sereena. Not me or Errall. Not even about you. This is Ethan's ring."

I straightened up and stepped back from the display case. I turned to look at Anthony. As usual, he was right. I was making this too hard. Thinking too much.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and approached the rings one more time with my new-found perspective. Immediately, I saw the right one. A simple, pale, red gold band. That was Ethan. Classic. Solid. Handsome. Nothing fancy or gimmicky or trendy. It was perfect.

I know I shouldn't answer my cellphone when I'm driving, but when I'm in the throes of a big case, I cannot help myself. I reached into my coat pocket to retrieve the beeping device. It was a text. Fortunately I was driving down 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue on my way back to my office. The blocks between 19<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> have a reputation for being slow going, particularly on a Friday afternoon. The street was jammed up tight with cars and bundled up downtown denizens trying to get home to start their weekend. This inch-along movement gave me plenty of opportunity to check my message. When I saw who it was from, however, I knew I'd have to stop.

I scoured the street ahead of me. The gods of parking were smiling on me. Just as I was coming up to the Starbucks on my right, a car pulled out. I handily slipped into the abandoned space.

I pulled the phone's display close to my face and studied the text.

*Russell*

*If u want 2 keep bf and kid safe*

*We must meet  
Ash House pond  
Now  
Hema*

Bf and kid. Bf and kid! She was talking about my boyfriend, Ethan, and his daughter, Simon. How could that be? How could they possibly have gotten involved with this?

Anger blew up inside me like a nuclear reaction—abrupt, furious, and destructive. I wanted to scream. Lash out. Throttle someone.

With no heed for passing traffic, I screeched out of my spot amidst blaring horns of protest. What did I care if this stupid van I hated got rear-ended? I inched up the street, aggressively riding the bumper of the car in front of me, swearing at the driver like he had some choice in the matter. At the next cross street, I peeled off the molasses trail and headed for the freeway. It was still much slower going than I'd have liked, but swerving, horn blowing, and more swearing served me well.

There was only one spot Hema could have meant by "Ash House pond." It was right in the brochure for the place. One of the pictures—I'd taken it myself—showed about half a dozen of the elderly residents enjoying an ice-skating party on the property's own pond, just over the hill from the house. The unusual sight had turned out to be one of the best-selling features. Instead of a "resting place" or "care facility" or "old age home," Ash House was offering an enjoyable, active lifestyle for fun-loving men and women of a certain age.

But now, that great photo had invited danger.

And a threat against two of the people I cared about most.

How had this happened? What was going on? My brain raced with the possibilities as I headed south out of the city toward Ash House. Intermittently I texted Hema back and tried her phone line, but got no response. I found more swear words. I knew I needed to get control of my anger. As good and right as it felt, it would not help me. I needed my wits about me.

Once on the highway, shattering speed limits to reach my des-



tination, my head a little clearer of rage, I made a call to the police station. I left an urgent message for Constable Darren Kirsch, my Saskatoon Police Service go-to guy (whether he liked it or not). When that was done, I unlocked the glove compartment and pulled out my revolver. I rarely use a gun in my line of work. I prefer to do battle with my mouth or, in some cases, my muscles. Sometimes, I can't even remember exactly where I last hid it. But something this morning had told me it was time to dig it out. I'd stuck it in the van before leaving for my meeting with Pranav. Just in case. Only when things get extreme—as they just had—do I actually pull out the firepower. But, I would not hesitate to use it. I wasn't going to take any chance of being out-gunned when it came to protecting my loved ones.

As I approached the turn off the highway, I moved on to prayer.

I made the right turn and was faced with a fork in the road. The one to the right led to the house. The one to the left circled around the heavily treed hill and ended up in a small clearing next to the large pond. That's where I was headed.

Less than two minutes later, I jerked to a halt in the makeshift parking lot. From here, Ash House was completely invisible. I was glad. The elderly residents did not need to witness whatever was about to go down.

I searched the area. Even through my dark glasses, the sun was blindingly bright against an immaculately white landscape. The ground, covered with a fresh layer of snow, was unsullied, except for the bluffs of trees that rose from a colourless earth.

I yanked on my gloves and grabbed the gun.

Slowly I swung open the door of the van. I stepped out, the soles of my Sorels crunching as they hit the ground, like stepping into a *crème brûlée* world made of snow and ice.

From inside the vehicle the day had seemed all bright and sunny, with a sky of flawless blue. But outside, God it was cold. A north wind added to the misery. But I didn't dare flip on my earmuffs. I wanted to hear every tick and boo and heartbeat.

I stepped forward and studied my surroundings.

There was no other vehicle in sight.



# Chapter 17

Until recently, it had been a mild winter. So mild, in fact, that Ethan and Jared had so far resisted taking the Ash House residents skating on the pond. They were waiting until they were confident the ice was thick enough to support them without fear of cracks or breaks.

Someone had decided to wait no longer.

In the dead centre of the pond was some kind of object. From where I was standing, next to the van, the sun's glare obfuscating detail, it looked to be nothing more than a big, dark lump. But there are no lumps in the middle of a frozen-over pond. Something was not right here. I whipped off my sunglasses and peered at the thing, all the while quick-stepping to the frozen water's edge.

And then I was horribly sure. This wasn't some unlucky wild animal, a deer, or perhaps a large coyote or wolf. It was a person.

Simon!

She was lying in a crumpled heap. And worse, she was wear-

ing only a light jersey and sweatpants, as if she'd just stepped outside to get the mail or something. The girl was going to freeze to death if I didn't get to her immediately.

"Simon!" I called out to her, my voice ragged with fear and anger, both exploding in me like competing poisonous mushroom clouds. "Simon! Can you hear me?"

Was she unconscious? It was the only option my brain would allow.

There was no time to figure it out. Any of it. Least of all, why Ethan's thirteen-year-old daughter was lying inappropriately clothed in the middle of Ash House pond. But I did know *how*. I could see a narrow path of tiny footsteps, drawn in the dusting of snow that covered the pond from last night's storm.

Gingerly I took a first step onto the ice.

Simon seemed secure enough where she was. The ice was holding her up just fine. Then again, I had a good eighty or ninety pounds on her.

Slowly I inched my way down the same path, ears cocked for the telltale sound of weakening ice.

By the minimal disturbance of the snow, I could tell there was only one set of tracks. Simon had walked out here on her own. Why would she do that? Did she have no choice? How did they force her? Who could do such a thing to a child? My anger surged forward, as did I.

Forward.

Forward.

Forward.

Then, a sickening sound.

Crackle.

My stomach turned to stone. My cheeks flared red. My brain screamed in silence.

I stopped. Perfectly still. Holding my breath.

The sound had been slight, but definite.

I tried to remember everything I'd ever learned, or seen on TV, or in movies, about being on ice.

Moving as slowly as I could, I lowered myself down, down, down, until finally, I was flat on my stomach on the ice.

"Simon?" I tried again. "Honey? Can you hear me?"

No response.

I had to get to her.

Using a shimmying motion, I once again began to move towards the motionless girl.

Forward.

Forward.

Crack!

My head popped up like a gopher from his hole. I looked around. Nothing. No spiderweb of death forming beneath me. No shaking of the icy platform below me. No seep of glacial water inching up my pant legs.

Crack!

"What the...?" There was something strange about the sound. It was different. It wasn't coming from below or around me. It was coming from higher up. Behind me.

Crack!

Oh god. It wasn't the ice cracking. It was something much worse.

Gunfire.

Part of me wasn't surprised. Hema Gupta didn't text me a threat against my family just for fun. She was a madwoman. Likely she was working with others. They'd lured me out here, onto this frozen pond's dangerous surface, for a reason. They knew I would try to rescue Simon, no matter how risky the situation might be. And they were right. I could never allow *anyone* to stay out here, abandoned on the ice in a killing cold. No one deserved such a fate. But now, I knew in the aching pit of my heavy stomach, this doom...was meant for two.

And I knew one more thing.

They weren't shooting at me.

Or even at Simon.

In a way, the plan was ingenious. A perfect murder. Whoever the shooters were, they had likely forced Simon to walk out onto the lake under threat of death. Of course, she must have known an unhappy ending was coming for her anyway—she couldn't imagine she'd last long without layers of warm clothing in this

extreme cold. She'd have no idea what was going on, why these people were doing this terrible thing to her. Still, she would have had hope. Simon was a strong-willed girl. She was a fighter. She would have believed she'd find a way out of this, or that help would arrive in time—from her dad...from me? So she did it. She walked out to the centre of the ice to await what happened next. With hope.

Watching her quiet, still body, as I once again began my migration towards her, my mind began to creep into deep, dark corners I did not want to visit. Was Simon...okay? Had her hope—her trust in those who were supposed to be protecting her—been for nothing? What about Ethan? I felt the molten sting of icy tears burn into my cheeks as I came closer to the curled up form.

Simon would have cuddled up into a fetal circle, trying to preserve warmth. Or maybe, mercifully, they'd given her a fast-acting sedative before they'd sent her on her fatal walk, to ensure she'd stay in place until I arrived. And now that I had, and was nearly by her side, their flawless plan could continue to stage two.

Of anywhere on a frozen body of water, the ice is at its thinnest near the centre. Where Simon was. Where I was about to be. All they had to do was shoot at the ice until they found a vulnerable spot. One small crack, under pressure from Simon's weight, and now mine, would quickly lead to more. Eventually, the ice would give way. We would fall through. The bodies, once discovered, would seem to have been drowned, not shot.

It would be ruled a horrible accident. It happened all the time in cold climates. Places where outdoor skating was considered a fun activity, or crossing a supposedly frozen-solid body of water was seen as a necessity. Farm kids trying to walk across a slough on a dare. Hunters. Winter sports and outdoor enthusiasts. Skidooers. Tragedy happened. It was, sadly, nothing new. We'd be seen as just another two victims who'd made the wrong decision.

Well, screw them!

I would not—could not—give up. Using triple time, I sped up my shimmying towards Simon. "Simon! Honey, I'm here! I'm coming!" I cried out again and again in desperation.

The closer I came to her body, the more worried I became. The

## Date with a Sheesha

visible skin, puffy and discoloured, did not have goosebumps. There was no obvious shivering. These weren't good signs. In hypothermia, the body begins to shut down, pulling the victim into an irresistible sleep. I had to wake her up. I knew she'd be sluggish and uncoordinated, but if we were to have any chance of getting out of this, I'd need her help.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Crack! Another shot.

Crack!

Crack!

"Fuck off, you assholes!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. I knew it was a useless gesture, born of intense frustration and fear. But it felt good all the same.

I was just about there. Closer. And then, with the very tip of the longest finger of my outstretched hand, I brushed against the back of Simon's exposed neck.

Cold.

Oh God.

Too cold.

Closer. Closer.

More gunfire.

I finally reached her. I maneuvered my way around to her other side, like some kind of ice slug, until I could see her face.

Deep brown eyes, steeped in dread, stared at me.

Not Simon.

Hema Gupta.

Dead.

And then the shooter met his mark.

I heard the unmistakable, gut-twisting sound of cracking ice.

An ominous dark line streaked out from beneath Hema's hip, like a black fork of lightning.

I instantly knew, the ice would not hold the weight of both of us so close together.

Like a frightened seal, I tried to shuffle backward. The movement wasn't working. I was getting nowhere. I knew I had to turn around. Going forward I could move faster.

One more shot.

I heard a pop.

An ugly, harsh noise shattered the air, like the cracking and rubbing together of two Styrofoam boards. Then, right in front of me, like some horror movie playing out just for me, I watched the grotesque sight of Hema's body falling through the ice that had just given way below her. She slipped below the surface, swallowed by freezing, liquid quicksand.

Oh God, no. No!

My hand shot out just in time to catch hers. For a moment we remained motionless in that state. I was lying flat on my stomach, only inches from the hole, grasping the fingers of Hema's brownish-blue little hand with all my might.

Then something caught my eye. In a world seemingly devoid of colour other than white, blue, and brown, I saw red.

In the palm of Hema's hand.

It was bleeding. Had she somehow cut it on a shard of ice?

Another cracking of the ice.

At least the shooting had stopped. Whoever was out there knew there was no need to fire another round. Their job was complete. They'd been successful. The surface of the ice had been broken. One of us was under and the other soon to follow. We were lost. And they were free to escape the scene of their crime.

More cracking.

My eyes were glued to Hema's bloody hand. There was something about it. It wasn't a just a wound. It looked like...like...

Cracking.

And then I saw it. Clear as day. How had I missed it? This wasn't just an accidental gash on her skin. It was intentional. It was...a message.

The letter "C" was cut into her skin. My eyes could barely believe what they were seeing. How had she done this? With her fingernails? Her diamond ring?

I heard a deadly groan well up below me.



## Date with a Sheesha

Oh no. Oh no!

With bitter tears stinging my eyes, I knew what I had to do.

If I continued to hold onto her, our combined weight would destabilize the already weakened ice bed even further. To save myself, I could not save her. I could not keep her from a watery grave.

I let go of Hema's hand.

I watched in stunned horror as the ice water pulled the rest of her in. It wanted her. The tiny hand with its tiny fingers quickly disappeared. With an appalling sucking sound, her body was irretrievably committed to the water.

I'd given her up. My stomach roiled, and I thought I might throw up. I had even bigger problems, though. The ominous groaning sound of the ice did not stop.

My eyes darted from left to right. What I saw frightened me more than anything I'd seen before. A web of fine lines was rapidly radiating out from beneath my body.

And then I fell through the ice.

# Chapter 18

All hope was gone.

For a brief moment, my mind went there. It went to the underwater tomb, where Hema Gupta's body lay at the bottom of the pond, an eerily translucent light seeping through the roof of ice. Her pale, cold, lifeless arms floated upwards, reaching for me, wanting to pull me down with her.

"Snap out of it, Quant!" I remonstrated with myself.

I was in the excruciatingly cold water. With gloved hands, I held onto the nearest, fragile edge of ice. As I fought the paralyzing effects of the freezing liquid, my legs below me performed a stolid dog paddle.

Where was Kirsch? Where were the police sirens? The dispatcher had promised she'd get my message to him pronto. Sure, Kirsch and I had a like/dislike relationship...well, mostly dislike...but he knew I'd never cry wolf about something like this. If this were a TV show, he would be riding in about now. So where was he?

The snow-covered hills and thickets of trees were exasperatingly silent. The shooters were long gone, obviously having rushed away in a hidden vehicle. Not that I wasn't glad of that. They certainly weren't about to come out here and save me, even if they had bothered to stick around.

I had to get out of the water. I'd already been cold before I fell through the ice. But if I was in here much longer, I knew my limbs would begin to numb and I'd lose finger dexterity, and then I'd be gone. I would join poor Hema fifteen feet below.

I devised a plan. There wasn't any time to study it for flaws. It was now or never. So it had to be good.

Trying for a firmer grip on the ice's edge with my left hand, I slowly let go of it with my right. Once I was sure I was managing to stay afloat with only one hand on the ice, my right hand dived underwater. In less than three seconds it found its goal: the right-hand pocket of my coat. Blindly I pulled up the Velcroed flap and felt inside.

There! My keys.

My right hand surfaced, key ring in hand. Fiddling with my fingers, thick with cold, and less agile because of the glove covering them, I maneuvered so that the longest of the keys was now positioned in my fist, like the pointed end of a pickaxe. With effort that seemed Herculean, I reached out. I was aiming for the closest part of the ice that seemed the sturdiest. With as much power as I could muster, I pounded down.

It was a mighty risk. Either the ice would hold or it would crack and create an even bigger hole. A hole from which I was unlikely to escape.

There was a third option I did not anticipate. Complete failure.

The tip of the key was either too blunt or the ice too solid. My key, along with my clenched fist, thumped ineffectually against the pond ice. There was no puncture. Like fingernails against chalkboard, but with a hollower, yet no less grating sound, the fist-clamped key uselessly skittered its way back toward me.

I tried again. This time letting out an "oomph!" sound like Roger Federer at match point.

Again, the key failed to penetrate the granite-like surface.

A third attempt had the same result.

There would, as it turned out, have to be time for another plan.

The problem was, I had none.

I just needed out.

“Out!” my brain shrieked.

A deep, calming breath. I was ready to try again.

I tested the firmness of the ice edge nearest me by lightly tapping it with my right fist. If the damn stuff was so thick a key couldn’t puncture it, surely there was some way to work that in my favour. I devised a new plan. In the back of my mind, I knew that if this one didn’t work, I would be finished.

Fortunately, the hole made by both my and Hema’s dunkings was rather large. Large enough so that, while holding onto the ice edge, I could slowly kick my feet up and eventually float level with the surface. It didn’t seem like much, but the effort rendered me near exhaustion. My abdominal and back muscles were screaming as I fought to keep my body flat and level with the ice shelf. (Thank goodness for those camel-riding workouts.)

Next, I flung out my arms, as far in front of me as I could, and willed myself to float forward. Small laps of water, caused by the slight rocking motion of my body, helped to propel me. Eventually, centimetre by precious centimetre, I began to move out of the water and onto the ice.

After what seemed like hours, but was probably less than a minute, a third of my body, probably down to just below my chest, was completely out of the water.

Crack.

No no no no no no no!

I froze. I lay there. Half in water, half out. I tried to regulate my breathing as much as possible so I could be perfectly still. My right cheek began to stick to the ice surface. One more crack and I’d be toast. Soggy toast.

After several seconds of silence—I didn’t have a lot of time to work with here—I concluded the cracking had stopped.

I tried to move forward again.

I couldn’t. My jacket had frozen to the ice; the ice water had

turned into damnable glue.

Just great! Why couldn't I get a break?

But no, wait. Maybe that's exactly what I'd been given. My mind danced with hope...this *was* great. I could use this.

I waited another second or two, thinking—wishing—that would give the jacket time to stick even more firmly to the frosty surface. Then, using the solidity of my frozen but fragile attachment as leverage, I sloooooowly swivelled my legs slightly up and over and in the direction of the ice.

More.

More.

Just a bit more.

More.

I did it! My entire body was now out of the water and lying prone right next to the deadly chasm of water. But it wasn't time for celebration just yet. This was pretty much where I'd started out in the first place. I knew I had to get away from there fast, before either I froze to death, or the ice cracked again, plummeting me back into the drink. Neither option appealed.

I took one last deep breath, pulled my stinging cheek free...and rolled.

I rolled and rolled and rolled and rolled. In my mind I could see a thunderbolt-sized crack forming behind me, chasing me across the pond, my wildly rolling body only mere seconds ahead of it.

I did not stop until I hit dirt. Bumping up against that snowy beach, with its thatch of scrubby willow branches whipping my face, was the most welcome sensation I'd experienced in my entire life until then. I was safe. I would live.

But as fast as the excitement over my own survival overwhelmed me, so did my sorrow that the same could not be said for Hema Gupta. Just the thought of her lying at the bottom of that frozen pond nearly made me physically ill. And then came the shivering. I wasn't out of the woods yet. If I didn't get heated up soon, I would still be in danger.

I pulled myself unsteadily to my feet. With one last look at that blasted, black hole to hell in the centre of the previously

unspoiled pond surface, I made a mad dash for the Babamobile. I jumped inside and started the engine with the keys I was still gripping with ice-cold fingers. Although they'd failed to help save my life on the pond, they would be of inestimable use to me now. As soon as the engine turned over, I flipped the heat to high. Of course, the vehicle had sat too long in the frigid environment. It needed time to run before it gifted me with warmth. I couldn't wait. I shifted into drive and spun out of there.

Within minutes I pulled up in front of the wide staircase with its wheelchair ramp that led up to the front porch of Ash House. I jumped out of the van, ran up the stairs, crossed the porch, and was in the front door. Running through the house, I passed by the main living room. About fifteen pair of eyes landed on me, most of them belonging to thirteen-year-old girls. I screeched to a halt like some kind of cartoon character. I stared at the girls. They stared at me. I quickly realized what a scary sight I must be. I scooted off in search of heat. Lots of heat.

Ash House is a deluxe facility. In some ways it resembles a luxury hotel or posh vacation getaway, with plush accommodations including a fully equipped spa. That's where I was headed. Specifically, the sauna.

Without bothering to shed any clothing, I threw open the door of the steam room and dived in, immediately soaking up the glorious warmth like a dried-up sponge in a sink full of hot water.

Seconds later the door swung open. Ethan and Jared ran in. Ethan was wide-eyed and shocked, Jared not looking much better.

"Russell, are you okay? What the hell is going on?"

I fell into a sitting position on a handy bench. Ethan sat next to me and began rubbing my arm.

"There's a police car, and another car with Darren Kirsch in it, that pulled up right behind you," Jared informed me.

"Russell, are you in trouble?"

I can't imagine what they must have been thinking. It couldn't have been good. And I didn't blame them. As for me, I must have been in shock, because the first thing out of my mouth was: "Who are all those little girls?"

Ethan's eyes grew even wider as he stared at me with silent

incredulity, still valiantly trying to rub warmth into my arm.

Jared answered. "They're Simon's friends, Russell. She's having a birthday party."

I looked up at him as if trying to make sense of the Pythagorean theorem. "But her birthday isn't until Sunday. I thought we were having a party on Sunday."

"We are," he said. "But that's just for family. Today she wanted to have some of her friends over after school." I saw him shoot Ethan a quick look of concern, then back at me: "Russell, what is going on here?"

The door to the sauna opened again. The big, hulking figure of Darren Kirsch filled the space.

"He's freezing cold!" Ethan barked. Barking was extremely unusual for him. Actually, I don't think I'd ever heard him sound angry before. "Close the door! You're letting out the heat."

Darren stepped inside, fully dressed in a winter overcoat and boots. Just like me. As he quickly worked up a sweat, he stepped forward and half knelt in front of me. "Quant? You called. Something about a threat at Ash House pond? This better be good."

"A threat?" Ethan spoke up again, looking from me to Darren and back again. "At the pond? What are you talking about? Who was threatened?"

I grabbed onto Ethan's suddenly wild eyes with my own. He deserved to know the truth. "You," I whispered. "And Simon."

He fell silent.

"Get your men here," I told Kirsch in a monotone. "There's a body at the bottom of the pond."

"What?" From all three of them.

"And someone needs to start searching the woods around the pond. There'll be shell casings. And tire tracks from the vehicle they used to get away."

"What?" Same trio.

"Quant, you need to start at the beginning," Kirsch wisely suggested. "And, if at all possible, can we do this somewhere a little less hot and sticky?"

By early evening, things at Ash House were beginning to settle back down. At least as settled as a dozen hyperactive septa- and octogenarians could be.

I was wrapped in a thick, fuzzy blanket in front of a hearty fire in Ethan's—our?—bedroom on the top floor, far away from the maddening crowd. As I sipped on the last of the hot chocolate Jared had made for me, liberally doused with dark rum, I ruminated on what had happened that afternoon.

It hadn't taken long for the Saskatoon Police Service divers to retrieve Hema's body from the bottom of the small pond. Her remains revealed no obvious signs of trauma. The only hint that this was something other than a tragic but typical wintertime accident was the fact that she was found so lightly dressed. And, of course, that I'd almost gone down with her. Darren agreed that the culprits must have lured or forced her outside. She hadn't been expecting a winter walk.

I reflected on Hema's last message to me, the "C" on her bloody palm. What did it mean? Maybe she'd meant to write out an entire word...perhaps a name...but run out of time. Run out of life. Why had she done it? Why was she so determined to tell me something? Had I been wrong about her? Either she hadn't been working for the bad guys to begin with or they'd turned on her. Either was possible. If it was the former (which I hoped it was), then maybe she'd been taken from Saudi Arabia by force. Made to find and buy the Zinko, then return to the University of Dubai to verify its authenticity. Then, when she, as the least suspicious of the bunch and with the accreditation allowing her to export an antique carpet, successfully got the Zinko out of the Middle East, they were done with her. So they killed her. She knew too much.

But why lure me to the pond? Why kill me too? I guessed it was because they wanted to tie up all possible loose ends. Because they had seen me at the Bedouin camp, they knew I also knew about the existence of the Zinko. Obviously they thought I'd try to horn in on the profits, or instigate an investigation into the legality of their procurement of the Saudi Arabian treasure. Either way, their life would be simpler with me out of the way.



## Date with a Sheesha

It was becoming clear that Neil Gupta, like his cousin, had been killed because of what he knew about the Zinko. Perhaps the men who killed him in that souk in Dubai had done so in the process of trying to get information out of him about the whereabouts of the rug. Or maybe Neil had somehow learned of the goons' intention to steal the rug for themselves, transport it out of the country, and sell it for their own personal gain. He threatened to expose them. So they killed him. The big questions remained though: Who were "they"? What was Hema trying to tell me? As I sat and mulled further, I began to believe I knew at least some of the answers.

Ethan was aghast when I pulled on a sports coat over the crisp white shirt I'd borrowed from his closet. They went well with my extraordinary wonderpants. Everything did. But it wasn't my hastily assembled getup that concerned Ethan. It was my intention to go out that night. He felt it was unreasonable that on the same day I'd almost been killed, I should have to go to work. In almost any other career I can think of, that would probably be true. But not in criminal justice. And that's what I was. A criminal justice professional. Someone kills someone else, or tries to kill me, or threatens the ones I love, I hunt them down and make them pay. Simple as that.

Ethan only relented when I told him I'd convinced Constable Darren Kirsch to accompany me as my date. We were attending the World Antique Carpet Symposium's opening night banquet, being held that evening at TCUP. Somehow, my having a policeman as an escort made him feel better. Come to think of it, I felt better too.

The upper hall of TCUP, with its spectacular floor-to-ceiling glass walls facing 22<sup>nd</sup> Street, was done up as well as a room that huge can be done up. There were lush carpets draping the walls, carpets made to look as if they were flying through the sky, rolled up carpets artfully arranged in nooks and crannies. Carpets, carpets,

carpets. Everywhere. Overkill if you ask me. And most of the effect was lost in the crush of fourteen hundred people, all hobnobbing, schmoozing, or looking for a cocktail before finding their assigned seats in the massive ballroom.

Colin Cardinale, in all his splendid, satanic handsomeness, was doing duty at the door, greeting guests as they arrived. I shook his well-moisturized hand and gleefully introduced Kirsch as my "partner." Kirsch gave him a curdled smile. I expected some snootily snide remark from the man, but instead he just gave us a sullen, dismissive nod. I tried to ask him if he knew where our table was, but his dark eyes, unaccountably dull, had already moved on to the people behind us. With a tight fist around my bicep, Kirsch moved me off.

"What was that for?" he spit out.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, all innocence.

"The partner bit?"

"Aren't we partners in solving this crime tonight?"

"You know that's not what it sounds like."

"You have a problem with being undercover?"

"Of course not. And I'm fine with people thinking I'm gay. What I'm not fine with is having them think I settled for someone like you."

My eyes narrowed. Without taking them off the cop, I reached out and stopped a woman who was passing by with her husband and another couple. "Oh hello!" I greeted them with an exuberance that made it seem as though I knew them. The foursome, not wishing to be rude, nodded politely and smiled. "I don't know if you've met my sweetiekins, Darren?"

I repeated the charade several more times as we made our rounds of the room, at the same time keeping an eye out for bad guys. I was rather enjoying myself. Kirsch, not so much.

With only a few minutes left before we were to take our seats, I finally hit pay dirt. Stretch and Squat. And, to make matters even more interesting, they were chatting with Colin Cardinale. Colin was indisputably the man of the hour. As one of the organizers of this shindig, and curator of the upcoming permanent collection of antique rugs at the U of S, everyone wanted a piece of him.

Including, apparently, my carpet robbers. And now, so did I.

Leaving Kirsch shaking hands with a well-endowed blonde with too much jewellery, who thought he was “darling, just darling,” and might have some good interior decorating tips for her, I raced off in the direction of Colin and the chatty crooks.

“Raced” might be overstating things a bit. With every square inch of the place crammed with carpet devotees and their plus-ones, it was a bit of a challenge to get through at a pace much faster than one “excuse me” at a time. By the time I got to where I’d last seen Colin, Stretch, and Squat, they were long gone, and the MC of the event, a slick local radio DJ, was calling on people to take their seats.

Pranav had arranged for Kirsch and me to sit with him and Unnati. We were joined by two other couples. They seemed to speak very little English. This was fine with me. I didn’t need any added distraction from the task at hand, which was to find Stretch and Squat again as soon as possible. Once I eyed them sitting down to dinner, I’d be on them like lint on a rug.

As for Pranav and Unnati, both seemed preoccupied and sullen. I’d convinced Kirsch that it might not be a good idea to inform them of Hema’s death until after the banquet. It wasn’t that I was worried about ruining their evening. I just didn’t want anything coming between me and pinning down her murderers, which I had every intention of doing that night.

While we waited for our appetizers to arrive, I showed Pranav and Unnati the cellphone picture of Stretch and Squat. They studied the picture with blank stares, and shook their heads when I asked if they recognized the men.

“You say they are delegates here?” Pranav asked. “Do they have something to do with Neil’s death? Is that what you think?”

I tilted my head to one side as I put away the phone. “Possibly. And yes, I’ve already seen them here tonight.”

“Then we know who they are,” he said hurriedly, giving his wife an inquiring look. “You have a record of every delegate, yes? We must at least have their names, isn’t that so?”

She nodded as she regarded her husband with pursed lips. She said, “Yes. But there are over seven hundred registered dele-



# Chapter 19

Ever since I stopped being one myself, I just can't resist trying to ditch the cops whenever I can, but Darren Kirsch was tougher to shake than most. Especially when he knew I knew more about a case than he did. I'd been living with Neil Gupta's death in Dubai for almost two weeks. Darren had become involved via Hema's murder in Saskatoon only hours ago, but he was a smart guy. No matter how little he relished joining forces with a "meddlesome private dick who investigated more by blunder and bluster than proven professional investigative technique" (his words not mine—sometimes true, sometimes not), in this case he knew it was to his benefit to do so. So when I excused myself to get the table more wine, the big, brawny, mustachioed lug followed me. He knew there was no way I was coming back. I hated that he knew me so well.

"You've got that look in your eye, Quant. You're onto something."

I picked up speed, making my way via circuitous route

between tables of eight diners, towards the rear of the ballroom.

I led him to the bathroom doors, where he stopped me with a T-bone-sized paw on my forearm. "What is it, Quant? What do you know?"

"I'm not sure I know anything for sure yet." For once, I wasn't lying to him.

"Okay, what do you not know for sure?"

"It's the Zinko," I finally broke. "I know that damn rug has something to do with both Neil's and Hema's deaths."

"So what was all that back at the table about who believes in the Zinko and who doesn't? How can a rug that doesn't exist have anything to do with any of this?" He sounded both frustrated and confused. He had good reason to be.

"Whether or not it's real," I said, "may not be what's important."

"Huh?" His square jaw moved from side to side, a regular habit whenever he was confounded.

"Do you believe in Santa Claus?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes, and made a move as if about to walk away in disgust. "Oh c'mon, Quant."

"No, just answer me. Do you believe in Santa Claus?"

"No, of course not. I'm an adult, for crying out loud."

"Okay, okay, but by that do you mean to say you *did* believe in Santa Claus when you were a kid?"

"Of course I did. All kids do."

"But suppose you ran into a kid who told you that not only did they not believe in Santa Claus, but also they'd never even heard of the guy."

"So what?"

"Suspicious?"

"Maybe a little odd. But I repeat, Quant, so freaking what?"

"Colin Cardinale. He's the executive director in charge of tonight's extravaganza *and* the entire *World Antique Carpets Symposium*. He's about to become the curator of the University of Saskatchewan's new permanent collection of antique rugs."

"Uh huh. So?"

"He told me he'd never heard of the Zinko."

Kirsch thought about this for a second, but it wasn't enough to keep his brain cells active for long. "Big deal. There are kids who lived in...I dunno...maybe someplace like India, but who live here now, and that's why they've never heard of Santa Claus. Mystery solved. Maybe the same can be said for Cardinale and the Zinko."

He had a point. Colin Cardinale got his current job because of his administrative and curatorial experience, not because of his expertise with rugs. I suppose all his bluster and bravado about how much he knew about rugs when I first met him at the museum could have been covering up how much he didn't know. "But," I countered, "I think Hema was pointing a finger at Cardinale."

"Huh?" Again. Not the biggest vocabulary, this boy.

"On her palm. In her dying minutes, Hema used her ring to tear up her own skin, and write the letter 'C' on her palm. 'C' for Colin or 'C' for Cardinale, you choose one."

"Huh. Well, that could be. But it could be 'C' for about a million other names and words too."

This was true.

"Besides, if he did know about the Zinko, why would he lie about it?"

I had a theory. "Well, maybe he wanted to throw me off the scent. Make me believe the whole Zinko thing was unimportant in the grand scheme of things."

"Okay, but why?"

"Maybe he found out that the Zinko was actually real."

"What? A rug of jewels that's really a map to finding more jewels—you think that's real? Are you nuts?"

"Just suppose it were true, Darren." I like to use his first name whenever I want him on my side. "It could be worth untold riches. Maybe Neil, while he was snooping around the Middle East looking for carpets to bring back for Colin's collection, stumbled upon the real Zinko. He tells Colin. Colin, maybe jokingly at first—to test the waters—suggests they partner up, sell the Zinko, keep the bounty for themselves. They'd live like kings for the rest of their days. Neil disagrees and threatens to turn Colin in. Colin

waits until Neil actually identifies where the Zinko is, then hires some thugs to spread around a few black petals. Then he has Neil killed so he can go after the rug himself. Unfortunately, Pranav sends me and Hema to follow up on Neil's deals, complicating Colin's plan to get the rug."

"So then, he makes a deal with Hema to find the rug," Kirsch took up the tale. "Things go wrong, or there's some kind of double-cross. She ends up at the bottom of a pond. Cardinale has the rug all to himself."

"Or maybe Hema was an unwitting accomplice all along. But, sadly," I concluded, not sure we'd ever know the truth about that one, "the result was going to be the same for her, no matter how it went down."

He bobbed his head in agreement.

"And, one more thing: I just saw our curator with the two scumbags who stole the Zinko right from under my nose in Saudi. The same two who were seen with Hema at the university in Dubai."

"You could be onto something, I suppose," Kirsch grudgingly allowed.

"Yeah. I suppose."

Kirsch shot me a look. "What?"

"What?" I shot right back.

"What's wrong?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The way you just said that. Like you don't quite believe yourself."

Kirsch and I had obviously—and unwittingly—grown way too close over the past few years. Since when had he been able to read me so well?

"Spill it, Quant."

We waited while a slightly inebriated diner passed us on his way to the john. Then, "Why is he still here? Why isn't he happier?"

"What are you talking about?" Kirsch asked.

"Cardinale. If what we've just theorized is true, why is he still here? Why didn't he take the rug and run?"

"To avoid suspicion?" The cop floated the idea. "It would



## Date with a Sheesha

seem very strange if he just disappeared on the eve of an event he'd spent months organizing."

"Okay. But at the very least, he should be ecstatic. He's sitting on a veritable gold mine. Instead, he seems miserable."

"Maybe that's just the way he is."

I nodded, thinking. "Maybe. Or maybe we're missing something."

"Like what, Quant? First, you talk up a good story, you almost have me convinced, and now, what? You're changing your mind?"

"Not totally. But something about the way he's acting doesn't add up."

"We need proof, Quant, one way or the other. You do remember the day at the police academy when we talked about proof, don't you?"

I raised my eyebrow, communicating many things that are best left unsaid in public. "I'm going to the can," I told him. "Care to join me, *partner*?"

He shook his head. "I think I'm gonna go check on the whereabouts of our man Cardinale."

"And bring some wine back to the table with you while you're at it," I told him as the bathroom door swung shut between us.

Once in the washroom, I found an empty stall, took a seat, and pulled out my cellphone. In honour of Hema's favourite pastime, I tapped out a text. To Colin Cardinale.

*Colin*

*I got there first*

*I have real Zinko*

*Wanna share?*

*Meet?*

*Quant*

I waited.

And waited.

The text was a risk. I was taking a gamble on a few things. First was my hunch that when Hema took the Zinko back to the

University of Dubai with the thugs, she'd proved it was a fake. I was pretty certain about this, because nothing so far had led me to believe that the Zinko was anything but a myth or wishful thinking. The second was that the "C" scratched in blood on Hema's palm was for Colin Cardinale. Kirsch was right, of course. The "C" could stand for a million other things. But how many of those things were indelibly involved in this case?

And now, I'd just told Cardinale that the reason why Hema's Zinko was a fake was that I'd pulled a switcheroo of sorts. I was pretending I'd actually gotten to the Bedouin camp first and purchased the *real* priceless carpet. And now, by asking to meet, I was implying I needed his help: with valuation, with selling the damn thing, with whatever. After all, I was just a lowly PI, looking for a quick carpet ride to the easy life, whereas he was the big expert with all the know-how. I was hoping Colin Cardinale was just arrogant enough to buy the scam. Assuming I was right about all this.

My phone beeped.

A message from Cardinale: *Yes – U exhibition space – now*

He wanted to meet at the future home of the university's exalted first permanent antique carpet collection. How apropos. I texted back: *On my way.*

In all my cases, I maintain what I call a Red Herrings file. Sometimes it's an actual paper file; sometimes it's just in my head. The Herrings file is where I stash all the information I gather during the course of an investigation that I'm not quite sure what to do with. Most of it turns out to be useless ancillary material, with no bearing on the case at hand. But every now and again, I find myself rifling through the file for that one, nearly forgotten, seemingly innocuous gem.

As I was nearly out of the ballroom, on my way to meet Colin Cardinale at the university, I ran smack into Pranav Gupta. The collision must have knocked something loose in my mental Red Herrings file. For one of those rare gems jumped right out and knocked me upside the head.

"Mr. Quant, where are you going?" he asked once we pulled our bodies apart. "The evening is not yet over."

I ignored the query and rubbed my head where the gem had—metaphorically—hit me. "Mr. Gupta, how did you know about the surprise party?"

"Surprise party?" he responded with a quizzical look on his face. "What surprise party? This is no surprise party, Mr. Quant. You must be confused."

"The surprise party in Dubai. The one your son was invited to the night of his death."

My clients face turned suddenly sober. What he told me changed everything.

I stepped through the graceful stone archway into the Museum of Carpet Antiquities. It is truly amazing what can happen in less than two weeks. The last time I had been in the room, it was a large, hollow space, overflowing with boxes and crates and the various paraphernalia required to create a public exhibition of antique rugs. Tonight it was a wonderland.

The room had been artfully sectioned off by walls of luxurious carpets hung from the ceiling by invisible wires. Some were large, some no bigger than a bath mat. Some were brightly coloured, others imbued with deep, rich hues of thread and dye. Some were square, others rectangular, circular, or octagonal. In some places the carpets were leaning in rolls against a wall, in other places laid out on the floor to best showcase their unique splendour. Each individual partitioned area was populated with artwork, small furnishings, and sculpture (likely clever replicas of originals—which I knew the university was masterful at creating) representative of the era, culture, and geographical home for each specific grouping of carpet. There were digital slideshows flickering on the walls, brochures, pamphlets, and luscious coffee table books that described in loving detail everything the visitor saw. Here and there were small sitting areas, with potted palms and places to set your things while you sat back and took it all in. The lighting was gentle, yet bright enough to highlight the delicacy and

minute detail of each component of the collection. The room even smelled wonderful, like some mix of ancient carpet, exotic spice, and greening fern leaf. It was extraordinary. Say what you will about him (and I have), but Colin Cardinale had done a fine job.

Looking imposingly dashing in the After Six tuxedo he'd been wearing at the WACS dinner, Colin Cardinale was standing in the largest open area. His impressive figure was dramatically backlit, as if he'd planned it that way for greatest effect. All he needed was an atomizer of *Acqua di Gio* by Armani or a Grey Goose martini in hand, or a Breitling watch on his wrist, and this could have been an ad shoot for a glossy magazine.

"You have the actual Zinko?" he asked. No "hello." No "how are you doing?" No "did you enjoy the chicken marsala at dinner?"

"I do," I lied, stopping about four metres away from him.

"How can that be?"

"Your men in Saudi were duped. I knew they were coming. I made it seem I arrived after them, but really I got there before they did. I made the deal with the Bedouin. Then I told him to sell a fake carpet to your guys. It was easy."

"So it's real," he said, the words full of wonder and amazement.

"It is."

"What do you intend to do with it?"

"I've already taken the gems out of it," I said, using a defensive tone. "So you can forget about those. I found them, they're mine. But I need your help with the map to get the rest of the jewels. I can't figure it out. You were after the Zinko too, so I'm guessing you've already thought about how to decipher it."

"You removed the jewels from the rug?" he asked, his voice harsh. I could sense his hackles rising.

"Yes."

"You idiot!" he exploded. The guy really had anger management problems. "It's the placement of the gems in the carpet that create the map! Without them it's just an old rug!"

"So we put them back. No big deal."

"You know exactly where each jewel goes?"

I hesitated for effect. "Well, not exactly."

Mr GQ hit his regal forehead with the palm of his right hand.

"You dunce! You've destroyed one of the greatest creations of the ancient world! Do you have any understanding of the cultural and historical significance, not only of the Zinko itself, but of the cache of gems it would have led us to? Researchers, gemologists, carpet professionals the world over, they all would have been queuing up for decades, wanting to study them. And now, because of your petty personal greed, your unheard of, immeasurable stupidity, all of it is likely lost to us forever!"

Just as I'd thought: Colin wasn't the mastermind behind all of this after all. He wasn't the puppeteer behind Stretch and Squat. He wasn't responsible for the deaths of Neil and Hema. He actually cared about the Zinko for its historical significance, not its monetary value.

What had first begun to irk me was the black petals, meant to warn off Neil and then me. The myth might be that black petals represented a blessing or a curse, but, in this case, there was no way I believed they were ever meant as anything but a scare tactic. I could believe that Colin might have arranged for goons to deliver the petals to Neil, as intimidation, and then me to frighten me off. But what bothered me were the black petals Pranav Gupta told me he received the day of Neil's funeral. Why would Colin do that? Besides, the petals were a curse in a culture far removed from that of Colin Cardinale. For the same reason that Colin likely hadn't originally known about the Zinko, there was no rational reason for him to know about black petals. He was a man of the modern, Western world, and therein lay his expertise. Not in the myths and folklore, curses and blights, of a foreign culture.

So who would have sent Pranav the petals? Especially on the day of his son's funeral? They were meant to send a message, and not a very nice one. Who was in the best position to know about the petals, about the Zinko, about Neil's whereabouts, about what he was doing while he was in Arabia, about his death and funeral, and about the surprise party where he met his killers?

Unnati Gupta stepped out of the shadows and stood next to Cardinale.

It wasn't a "C" on Hema's bloody palm. It was a "U."

"You see," Colin said to the woman whose eyes were blazing

into me. "He has the real Zinko. And he's desecrated it, Unnati. He's ruined it!"

"So I hear," she said, her voice hard and clear.

"Where is it? Give it to us," Colin ordered.

I opened up my hands in front of me, palms up, showing they were empty. "Sorry."

Colin shot a distressed look at Unnati. "I thought he'd bring it with him. We must call the police. I know you didn't want to, but there's nothing left for us to do. We must force him to hand over the carpet before he destroys it any further."

Poor Colin. Still thinking he was in control. Still thinking he knew what was going on. Still thinking Unnati was friend rather than foe.

Unnati Gupta continued to stare at me, looking disconcertingly radiant in the multicoloured sari she'd worn for the opening night celebration of the symposium. Her makeup was exquisite, making her eyes pop out like beacons. Her hair was pulled back and shiny with fragrant oils. Her mouth was painted deep red, a hard crimson line across a face that read treachery. And hatred.

She hated Colin for being so stupid. She hated me for standing in her way. She hated Hema for failing to turn up with the goods, hated her enough to have her killed when she failed to share in her aunt's perfidy. She hated Neil for refusing to be part of her get-rich-quick scheme when they thought he'd found the elusive, mythical Zinko. And she hated her doting husband, Pranav. And so she sent him black petals on the day of his son's death. To tell him he was cursed. By her. It was a message she did not expect him to understand until she was long gone with her millions, hiding on some tropical island, laughing at him and the world she had left behind. But she was wrong about that. He had received the message loud and clear this evening.

When I asked Pranav how he knew about the surprise party where Neil was murdered, he told me that Neil himself had told him about it. Who told Neil? Unnati.

Unnati had set up the whole thing. Neil had refused to be part of her plot to keep the Zinko for themselves. So, once he revealed its whereabouts, he needed to be disposed of before she went after

it herself. She first told Neil she had arranged a meeting with a special rug vendor. But he had other plans that evening, and did not want to spend it working, so he declined. To convince him, Unnati pretended to “spill the beans,” saying the meeting was actually a surprise farewell party in his honour thrown by his colleagues. She told him he must attend or they’d be insulted. He was not to say anything to anyone and to act surprised when he arrived. In this way, she’d guaranteed her victim would show up just where and when she wanted him to, delivered into the hands of his murderers. Although Neil was already suspicious of his stepmother, and because of that had left Aashiq the message to call his father if things went awry, he was not suspicious about the party. It seemed exactly the type of thing his workmates might do.

Only the killer, or the person who hired the killers, could have known about the surprise party that wasn’t really a surprise party. Pranav was inconsolable as the truth of what happened to his son at the hands of his wife became obvious. He knew she had originally lied about not knowing about the Zinko, hoping to throw everyone off the scent of what she was really doing. Her dream of great riches at the expense of his son was abhorrent to him.

But now her dream was threatened. The real Zinko had emerged after all. The only thing that stood in the way of her bright future was me. And Colin. She’d already killed twice to make her bankroll. What was two more? To her, it likely wouldn’t seem a lot, not for a future of unbridled wealth and happiness.

I suddenly felt an ominous presence behind me. And then the dangerous end of a gun butting up against my back. Even through my heavy winter coat, a bullet would have no problem finding its mark.

“What’s going on?” Colin asked, his voice taking on a not very manly squeak. “Unnati, be careful! That man has a gun!”

Unnati smiled. What was it going to take to make this silly man understand?

“You will tell us where the Zinko is,” she said in steely tones.

“That man,” Colin croaked, pointing at the guy behind me. “He was at the dinner. He’s one of our delegates. Sir, what are you doing here?” he demanded to know of the fellow with the



revolver in my back.

"Now's your time to speak, Mr. Quant," Unnati said, ignoring her unwitting cohort.

"And why should I?" I responded. "You'll only have me killed. Like Neil. Like Hema."

"What!" Colin croaked, his eyes jumping from me to Unnati to the gunman and then back to me. "Hema is dead? When? How?"

"Care to tell him?" I asked Unnati.

"She was a foolish girl. As stupid as this one here," she said, her regal head nodding towards Colin. "I would have shared the wealth with her, I truly would have. Some of it, anyhow. But she wanted the Zinko for the world. Stupid girl."

"The rug she brought back from the Middle East was a fake, wasn't it?"

"It was. But I suspected she was not being honest with me. I knew the real Zinko still existed somewhere. And, as it turns out, I was right. Wasn't I, Mr. Quant? Colin told me what you did. I know you have it.

"It didn't matter for Hema anyway. She already knew my plans and refused to go along with them. Just like my equally stupid stepson. I couldn't risk them telling Pranav, or the police, or the university. I had no choice but to dispose of them."

Colin seemed to be choking on a sour bit of spit.

"Well, the last laugh is on you," I said in a not very nice way. "There never was a real Zinko." I guess I couldn't be one hundred percent sure of that, but for now, it was the truth.

Her face blanched. "You are a liar!"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. The Bedouin, Fahd, Husain, Saffron, the whole lot of them. A gang of con artists. They'd convinced Neil the Zinko was real, and that they'd sell it to him in secret for a big payday. That night at the Bedouin camp was the climax of their con. They'd worried that Neil's death meant the end of their game. But along came you and me and Hema. Lots of potential buyers, actually fighting over what we'd eventually find out was nothing but a big fake."

"It's not true. Neil sent me papers. Experts had verified the find."



"Experts hired by who? Neil? The University? Or by Fahd or Husain?"

I could see the woman's confidence in the existence of the Zinko begin to slip. She hissed at me. "No! You are nothing but a liar!"

Oh, I'm a lot more than that, sweetie.

"That'll be enough right there," came Darren Kirsch's authoritative voice from behind me. And, more importantly, from behind the guy with the gun.

Unnati cried out something I did not understand. Suddenly Squat emerged from behind a hanging rug, between her and Colin, a gun pointed at the trembling curator.

Not a great situation.

"You unholy bitch!" came yet another voice from behind Unnati.

These walls of carpet were certainly making for good hiding spots.

The next thing I knew, somebody yelled and Unnati, Squat, and Colin went tumbling down to the ground.

Immediately, several of Saskatoon Police Service's finest emerged from the many folds of hanging carpets, on the scene just in time to cover Unnati and her buddies with enough firepower to give pause to any guerilla army.

I glanced around, trying to figure out exactly what had happened to send the trio to the floor. And then I saw him. Pranav Gupta. He was standing there, one end of a rug in his hands. He had, quite literally, pulled the carpet out right from under their feet.

It was going to be the best day of my life so far.

I was going to ask Ethan Ash to marry me.

The preparations had been augmented by the talents of my friends Anthony and Jared. My living room had been transformed. There was music. There were drapery things flowing from the ceiling. There were candles, lots and lots of Tiamo soy blend candles, smelling of lemongrass, jasmine, tuberose, and fig leaf.

There was a bottle of Perrier-Jouët in a silver bucket of ice. There were chocolates from both Bernard Callebaut and Harden & Huyse because I didn't know which he preferred. The freshest strawberries I could find in the market in February were artfully arranged on a platter. There were several stunning arrangements of flowers from Blossoms spread throughout the room. A wood fire was crackling merrily away behind a rustic grate. Barbra and Brutus were freshly clipped, and each wore a new collar for the occasion. Barbra's was pink with diamond studs; Brutus had gone for classic black leather with brass accents. I'd gotten a trim (and maybe a touch-up of blond) from Shelley at Salon Pure, and a new outfit of Paul Smith jeans, a Bolongaro Trevor cardigan over a white T, and John Fluevog shoes, all from *gatt*. I was ready.

I was nervous.

I was excited.

I thought I might pass out.

When Ethan arrived that Friday night, he looked like a man anyone would fall in love with. He was big and strong, with merry eyes, a gorgeous smile, and he smelled great. We embraced and I buried his coat in the foyer closet. Barbra and Brutus, sensing something momentous was about to go down, maintained a respectful distance after the usual traditional hand-licking greeting. Hand in hand, I led him into the living room.

I positioned Ethan just where Anthony and Jared had suggested during rehearsal: near the fireplace, but not too near that either of us would start to sweat. And close enough to the champagne, so we could easily move into celebratory mode once the deed was done.

I stood facing Ethan, taking each of his hands into mine. I looked up.

And, stop.

There was something in his eyes. What was about to happen began to dawn on him. He looked at the fire, the flowers, the strawberries and champagne. He recognized my uncharacteristic nervousness. He noticed the ring-box-shaped lump in my cardigan pocket. He knew.

A movie screen of emotions began to play across his face.

Uncertainty went to surprise. Surprise led to shock. And then, as my heart plummeted to the ground, shock became sadness. A sadness so heavy, so dark, it could only survive in the deepest of wells. And I knew Ethan was about to pull me right down in there with him.

For almost a full minute we stared at each other, wordless, our throats constricting as we fought a killing dryness, and searched for words that would not come.

In time, Ethan's mouth opened. Out came the words that I should have wanted to hear. But I knew they were wolves in sheep's clothing. "I love you too, Russell.

"I know we've talked about this," he kept on. "About sharing our lives. Finding a way to put our worlds together. This is my fault. I know it. I was pushing."

"Of course you pushed," I replied with a pleading enthusiasm. "I needed pushing. You were right to push. Ethan, I love you. I want to—"

"Russell, don't!" he cried out. "Don't say it."

"But why?" I whispered in a tortured voice. I didn't understand what was happening.

"It's too much for me to ask. I *won't* ask it of you."

I shook my head with so much force, it might have fallen off. "It's not. I know our current living arrangement can't work anymore. I've thought a lot about this. I'm ready. I am *so* ready, Ethan. I'm going to put my house up for sale. On Monday. It's not too much to ask. I want to do it. I want to move in with you, and begin making a real life together, and—"

"No. No, Russell. That's not it."

I was dumb. What was he saying?

"For us to ever be together...I would have to ask even more...it's not just the house...it's...Russell, I would have to ask you to give up your career. And I can't do it. I won't do it. It's not right."

I was stunned. My career? Give up my career? Give up being a private detective? Where did that come from? We'd never talked about that. Sure, I knew Ethan worried about me when I was on a case. But really, most days the most danger I got into was running

out of gas in the middle of winter, during a midnight surveillance of some deadbeat husband.

"Russell, a murderer—someone I didn't even know, or know about—threatened my daughter..."

Oh.

"Someone was killed, only yards from our home. You ran by Simon during her birthday party having just come from nearly being killed yourself. Russell, I just...I just can't have that."

Oh no.

"It didn't happen this time. But what about next time, Russell? What about the next time someone wants to threaten you, or get back at you, or who knows what? The best way to hurt you is to hurt your family. To hurt those you love. To hurt Simon. Oh God, Russell! They could have killed Simon, just to get at you! It could have been her at the bottom of the pond!

"And I know what you're going to say. I've been saying all the same things to myself ever since that poor woman was drowned in our pond. But none of it matters. There is nothing you can say that will change the facts. You cannot guarantee the safety of my child. I know, I know, neither can I. But as a father, there are things I can do to minimize the opportunity for danger to come her way." He stopped there. We were now several feet apart, but still eye to eye. I was trembling. I was scared. Scared that he was right.

Every excuse, every promise, every thing I could think of to say to counter what he was telling me was no good. I *was* a threat to Simon's safety. As long as I was a private detective, I put that little girl in jeopardy. It might never happen. Probably wouldn't. But just the sliver of the chance...

"And to do that," Ethan started again, his voice tormented, "I have to let you go."

It was the worst day of my life so far.

I am an optimist. I am generally a person of good spirit. I also believe in karma. And karma had come to give me a swift kick in the ass.

On a Hawaiian beach, eighteen months ago, I'd made the dif-

## Date with a Sheesha

ficult decision to rescind my agreement to marry a good man.\* And now, another good man had decided he could not marry me. Karma.

I was thankful to Ethan Ash. Thankful he stopped me before I actually got down on one knee, pulled out the ring, and asked for his hand in marriage, as I'd fully intended to do. He saw it coming and did his best to soften the impact of the car crash.

February in Saskatoon is the bleakest month. There is cold. There is bitter wind. There is snow and ice. Spring is still many weeks away. The sun doesn't rise until eight-thirty and sets just after six. They were dark days. Especially for me. On my worst days, I ate Doritos and ice-cream sandwiches and declared myself utterly unlovable. On my best days...well, there simply weren't very many of those.

As I zipped into the vacant slot in the long-term parking lot, I smiled. One of my first in days. I stepped out of my brand new, Envious green Solstice with the curvaceous body, powerful front-mounted engine, rear-wheel drive, fully independent suspension, big wheels and tires, close-to-perfect weight balance, and 177-horsepower inline-4 that took me from zero to sixty in eight seconds. The Babamobile had turned out to be good for one thing: a decent trade-in value.

The car was completely impractical, especially in winter. It had no back seat. Trunk space was only a dream. Barbra and Brutus would have to hunch over to fit. But Annabelle was a beauty. Sporty. Fast. Mine. Molly, my dear, departed Mazda RX-7 would have liked her. So impractical was she, in fact, that Anthony had to follow me to the airport in his much roomier Mercedes, ferrying my luggage. I needed a lot of it. The best Annabelle could manage was my carry-on.

Sereena was waiting for me. Someplace hot. Someplace with bright sun, warm sand, refreshing waters, and strong drinks. Exactly what I needed.

As we scurried out of the cold and into the airport terminal to check in, we talked of mundane matters. There was no need to go

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\* *Aloha, Candy Hearts*

over what had happened. We'd already done it, ad nauseam, in the obliging company of too many red apple martinis and too much gin and tonic.

Duly checked in with Air Canada, my luggage on its way, we headed for the security lineup. I turned to say goodbye. Anthony grabbed me into a long, hard hug. He stepped back, his aging, matinee idol features strained.

"I don't regret it, you know," he announced, as if expecting a disagreement.

I gave him a what-do-you-mean look.

"Being part of the brigade. All of us encouraging you, for years, to take a chance on love. Which, of course, Puppy, might seem to you now as having been decidedly bad advice. You think love has let you down."

"Anthony," I said. "You don't have to say another thing. Actually, I wish you wouldn't. I know."

He fixed me with a doubting gaze.

I repeated with sincerity: "I know."

I pulled him into one last quick hug, then turned to go.

"Russell..."

I stopped and glanced back at my friend.

"Don't be so sad, Puppy. Please don't be sad."

I nodded, although it was a promise I could not make.

"He was wrong, you know."

I furrowed my brow, uncertain.

"Ethan. He was wrong."

I couldn't stay any longer. I did my best to smile, tipped my head in farewell, and walked away.

After being wanded and searched, temporarily relieved of my shoes, and queried about what I was carrying with me, I was finally through to the other side. Only as I was on my way up the escalator to find my gate did what I'd just done truly begin to sink in. I'd turned in the Babamobile for a sports car. I'd wrapped up all my current files and told Lilly to tell any potential new clients that I'd be away indefinitely. I'd set up Mom to look after the

## Date with a Sheesha

house and dogs. I'd bought a one-way ticket to paradise. I was leaving.

I stepped off the escalator and saw a small crowd, other passengers, gathered by the glass windows that looked down onto the first level of the terminal. What now? Was there another mourning family like the Guptas, waiting for the arrival of a loved one in a casket? Didn't matter to me. I was out of there. I was not getting involved.

I selected a seat near my gate and let out a sigh.

By this point, some of the people at the window were giggling. That did it. I decided, of anyone, I could use a good laugh right about then.

I walked over and peered down with the rest of the crowd.

And there they were. Anthony. Jared. Errall. Beverly. Alberta. Lilly. Several other friends. Even my mother was there. They were holding up a big sign, the letters handwritten in bold, bright, happy colours. They were waving like a bunch of silly idiots. The sign read: We love you, Russell!

My heart swelled.

It was still not nearly the size it had once been.

But one day, I knew, it would be.

## Praise for Anthony Bidulka's previous books

"Quant makes for a riveting hero...the kind of friend you want to have—unless you're a killer."  
—*Mystery Scene Magazine* (New York)

"...an entertaining read, fast and funny and with lots of tender moments."  
—*NOW Magazine* (Toronto)

"Saskatoon's master of suspense ratchets up the tension..."  
—*Planet S* (Saskatoon)

"Bidulka's skill makes the story so vivid that we feel as if we are the friend holding the flashlight while Quant explores the tunnel ahead."  
—*Wayves* (Halifax)

Neil Gupta went to the Middle East looking for antique carpets. He found something equally timeless: murder.

When Neil is found stabbed to death in Dubai's spice souk, his distraught father wants revenge. He hires private investigator Russell Quant to catch the killer. In his greatest case to date, Quant goes undercover to match wits with a wily museum curator, shifty souk merchants, corrupt carpet experts, and the denizens of an underground club for "fabulous" men. From the flamboyant glitz of Dubai to the scorching sand dunes of Saudi Arabia, Quant risks his life as he wades further and further into the shadows cast by the desert sun.

As Russell's spicy international adventure heats up, he learns a valuable lesson about love, life, and learning to seize the moment...before it's gone. On the verge of making the biggest personal decision of his life, Russell discovers that endings sometimes come before beginnings.



Anthony Bidulka is an award-winning writer who, like his protagonist, lives a big life in a small city on the Canadian prairies. Please visit his website at [www.anthonybidulka.com](http://www.anthonybidulka.com). *Date with a Sheesha* is the seventh book in the Russell Quant mystery series.



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