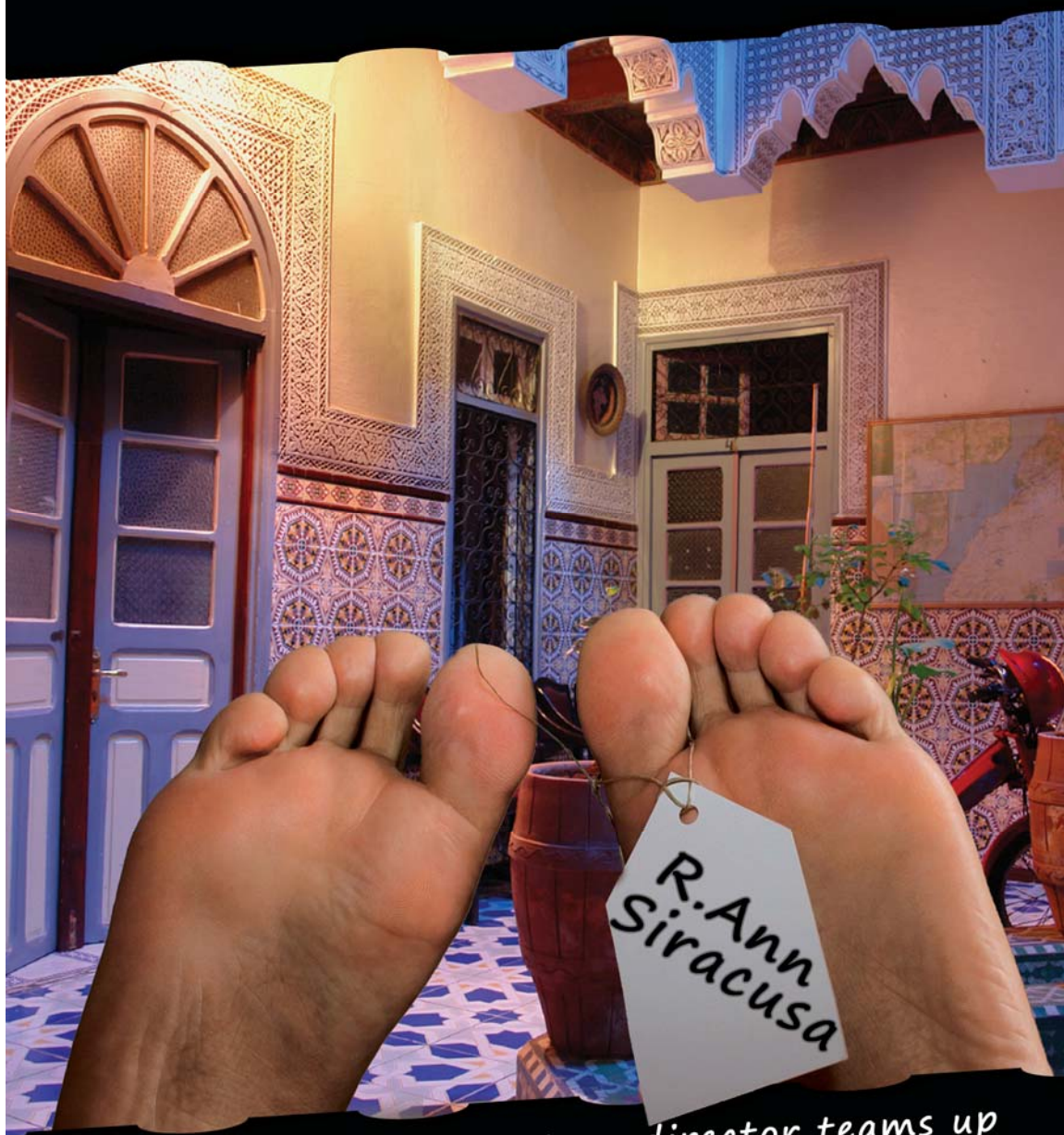




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Hilarity ensues when a tour director teams up
with a sexy spy to infiltrate a smuggling ring...

ALL FOR A DEAD MAN'S LEG

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All For a Dead Man's Leg

By R. Ann Siracusa

SAPPHIRE BLUE PUBLISHING

<http://www.sapphirebluepublishing.com>

Dedication

To my husband, Luciano, who is there for me when I need him, and not there
when I need to write.

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Chapter One

Looking back on it, I could see now that everything would have worked out fine if Archie Philpot hadn't chosen that particular time and place to die.

Not that he did it maliciously, mind you, nor did he exactly *choose*. But I'm sure that if he'd thought about the welfare of the many—our tour group, to be specific—as opposed to the convenience of the one, he might have staved off the event for another ten or twelve hours. Then there would have been no problem.

Well, not exactly *no* problem.

But perhaps I should start when everything began to fall apart.

My name is Harriet Ruby, Tour Director Extraordinaire. Or so I'd thought. I had just begun to believe my first solo stint in Europe was a roaring success, when we got lost in the medina—the ancient walled city—in Tangier, no less.

"Let's stop here for a moment," I called to my tour group.

While they assembled, I glanced around at the *souk*, the market place within the city walls. It was a maze of tiny shops, tents and winding passageways crowded with Moroccans.

"I'm never going to find my way out of here." I pulled out my cell phone and punched in my driver's number. Mario knew the route and spoke Arabic, but he had gone to fix a flat tire on our bus while I herded our fourteen tourists around the medina. That was two hours ago.

No answer.

Harriet, this does not bode well for your goal of a long and successful career in the tour business.

With the back of my hand, I swiped at the perspiration popping out on my brow. “Please, stay right here and don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

All of them smiled and nodded. Grimacing, I hurried to one of the tea shops we had passed to look for someone who spoke English. No luck. I was only gone for two or three minutes, I swear—well, maybe it was five or six—but when I returned to the place where I had left my tourists, they were gone.

This was not starting out to be a good day.

“Mez Harri Boobies!” The shrill cry sliced through the confusion of sweating bodies crowding the market. An arm shot out of nowhere, and a brown hand clamped about my wrist. I swallowed my shriek of surprise. Tangier was rife with hands that grab at foreigners.

“Mez Harri Boobies, you come queek,” the man whispered in my ear. “Mezter Pillpot no good, yes? You come.”

“It’s R-u-b-y, *not Boobie*.” I repeated my name for Mr. Takamura, one of the three almost-English-speaking Japanese tourists in the small group I was directing through Spain and Morocco. While my name was not destined to be in lights on Hollywood marquees, for the past twenty-four years it had served me well enough. I had a sentimental attachment to it.

Without a reply, he released my arm. Insinuating his slight body into the crush of street peddlers, dirty children, and veiled ladies, he moved quickly out of sight. With a deep sigh, I followed him, devastated by the foreboding that I would be nicknamed *Hairy Boobies* for the rest of my career as a tour director, which might not be very long after this little incident.

He penetrated further into the ancient market through twisted narrow passageways filled with malodorous bodies and a myriad of colors rippling in the heat—the red, blue, amber, purple of clothing, goods for sale, food, tents. In pursuit, I skirted white-robed Moroccans bartering for goods, men sipping Mint tea, and women painting the hands of girls with rich sienna-colored

henna. The humid air, replete with an exotic mixture of scents—ginger, curry, rare perfumes, cigarette smoke, donkey dung—stirred my senses. The babbling of many languages and the lilting of pipes assaulted my ears.

“Wait!” How in the world had they gone this far in such a short time?

He stopped for an instant, turned and waved. Then he disappeared again. Finally, Mr. Takamura stopped in a small plaza with a colorful tiled fountain in the center, a calm refuge in the midst of chaos. In stray beams of sunlight, tiny motes of dust danced in the thick atmosphere. The Japanese gentleman waited for me to catch up, then smiled and bowed.

My gaze followed his nod. *“Ohmigod!”*

Archibald Philpot of London, the most distinguished and eldest of my tourists, knelt doubled over the lip of the fountain, hurling his guts. Oh, boy.

My tourists—three American and two Swedish couples and the other two Japanese—watched with helpless concern on their faces, while a growing knot of Moroccans glared at us with mayhem in their dark eyes.

The disbelief and thin-lipped anger on their faces indicated they were not pleased about the desecration of what was probably their water supply. I couldn't blame them. This could get dicey. A drop of sweat dribbled into my eye.

Edith Johnson, a ditzy fiftyish blond trying to look thirty, was the first to see me. She clapped her hand to her bosom and cried, “Thank goodness you're here, Harriet. Do something.”

Who, me?

I dropped down beside Archie. His complexion was gray-green, his rheumy eyes were glazed over, and by the stench, I guessed the poor man might have a case of diarrhea. My stomach heaved. Swallowing hard, I managed to maintain my tour director decorum. This was definitely not in my job description.

I gently put my hand on the man's forehead. His skin was searing and he perspired profusely. He vomited again. I closed my eyes in resignation—well, maybe in part because I don't really like the looks of

barf—held his head and decided that tour director wasn't such a wonderful profession anyway.

Mr. Takamura, rather inappropriately attired for such a sweltering day in a three-piece silk suit, sat down on the fountain's ledge next to where I knelt. "I do okay?" he asked, beaming.

I nodded. "Thank you for bringing me." There was no point in asking how they had ended up here. It was enough that they were still together. "Please, help me get him up."

One thing you could say for Mr. Takamura. In addition to the fact that he had an unpronounceable first name that sounded like Bon Jovi, he was always ready to help regardless of how overdressed he was. He got down beside me in the gunk and helped pull sweet old Archie out of the fountain. Finally, Bob Feldman, one of the Americans, joined us.

The three of us heaved the gasping old gentleman to his feet. His flyaway white hair stood out in clumps in all directions, and his vest was soiled. His wire-rimmed glasses and duck-headed walking stick were gone. Lifting his arms over our shoulders, we half-carried, half-dragged the stumbling eighty-five-year-old to a nearby café's outdoor dining area.

"Put him here." I pulled out one of the chairs with my foot. The men got him into it, and I placed his arms on the table so he could lay his head on them. He looked as though he was simply taking a short nap. Rolling my eyes upward, I sent a fervent prayer to heaven that his condition wasn't too serious.

"Mr. Takamura...Bon Jovi." I mumbled his name to hide my weakness in Japanese pronunciation. "Would you please buy a bottle of water inside? Thanks." I handed him two fifty-Dirham coins. He took them, bowed and rushed off to make the purchase.

Okay, so this is a setback. But things had a way of turning out all right. Always the optimist, I pasted a perky smile across my face and clapped my hands for attention.

"All right, everyone, let's get the group together," I shouted, my voice oozing with tour director enthusiasm. I hadn't been a cheerleader in college for

nothing.

While they assembled in a loose circle around me, I tried phoning Mario again. Still no response. Once everyone was there, I counted twelve plus Bon Jovi still in the café and Archie draped over the table. As I looked at each of them, a slow burn in the pit of my stomach rose as bile in my throat.

Damn Mario. Damn the whole Adventure Seekers Travel Agency. It was their fault I was here, alone and unable to speak the language. When I accepted this gig on a moment's notice, they promised my driver would stay with me at all times.

My charges stared back at me with expectation on their faces, waiting for direction. I gave myself a little shake to force my mind back to grim reality.

"As you can see, Mr. Philpot—Archie—isn't feeling well." I gestured toward him, still asleep or passed out on the table. "We'll stop here for some refreshments and give him a few minutes to rest. Everyone go inside and make your selections."

Once they all had the beverages of their choice and found places to sit outside, I slumped down beside the patient. He hadn't moved, so I sat there and watched his back as he took slow shallow breaths. The poor man probably needed a doctor, but I honestly didn't think I could find my way out of the medina without help. With Mario unreachable, what was I going to do?

A hand on my arm made me jump. My shin hit the wrought iron table leg with a hard *thunk*.

"Ow!"

"Excuse me, Miss," a pleasant deep voice whispered close to my ear. "You seem to be having some difficulty. May I help?"

Rubbing my injured leg, I turned. Sitting at the next table was a bronze-complexioned man of indeterminable origin. He wore tan slacks with razor-sharp creases down the legs and a black short-sleeved shirt open halfway to his belt. Nestled in the curly hair of his chest lay a thick gold chain. His impossibly long legs stretched out in front of him.

Although he appeared to be in his early thirties, his dark hair—in a

spiky, longer-than-military cut—had just enough gray at the ears to be very sexy. His blue eyes, brilliant and clear, locked on mine and sent me floating through space like a slow motion Alice in the rabbit’s hole. My senses swirled in a cloud of musk-mixed-with-danger scent. My temperature went up ten degrees, and a swarm of butterflies tap-danced in my stomach. *Wow!*

I don’t know how long I gaped at him before things snapped back into place.

“Help? Difficulty?” I repeated, still a little dazed by his incredible good looks, but the words registered. *Oh, thank you, God. I promise I’ll never sin again.* Actually, I had done quite a bit of bargaining with the Almighty since I’d embarked on the tour, but this promise was heavy.

“Yes! Yes, I *do* need help. I’d be forever grateful if you could get me and my group out of the medina and back”—I paused and racked my brain for the name—“back to *Jamaa el Fna* Square.”

The stranger raised one eyebrow and blinked. “Marrakech?”

I blinked back, nonplussed. “Marrakech?” For a moment, I thought we were speaking different languages.

“That’s where *Jamaa el Fna* Square is located.” He grinned. My legs started to melt into the paving tiles. Thank goodness, I was sitting down.

I waved my hands. “No, no, I meant the square here...in Tangier. Where the tour buses stop.”

“Hmm, yes.” He nodded and smiled, flashing straight white teeth. “Forever grateful, you say?” he repeated in a low, sexy voice.

Wow again. He was drop-dead gorgeous. My cheeks warmed as I rummaged around inside my brain for a witty response and came up empty.

He rose, ignoring my embarrassment, made a slight bow, and held out his hand. All charm. “William Talbot, at your service. Call me Will.”

I cleared my throat so I could speak. “Hello, Will.” I shook his hand with a firm grip, determined not to be judged as weak. “I’m Harriet Ruby, tour director with Adventure Seekers Travel.”

He eyed Archie collapsed on the table. His nose twitched slightly. “Won’t

you join me over here?"

I must admit, by now Archie *did* smell a little ripe. I nodded and moved to the empty chair at his table.

He raised his thick, dark brows. "Tell me, how is it that a tour director needs help getting out of the medina?"

"This is my first solo as a tour director here in Europe." I lifted my shoulders in a shrug. "To make a long story short, I was supposed to be an assistant-trainee for the season with the regular guide who does these Spain-Morocco trips. Unfortunately, for both of us, he was in a motorcycle accident the day before we left. So, here I am."

"They turned you loose in Morocco alone?" He sounded incredulous.

"Not exactly," I replied and explained my situation. "I have plenty of experience as a tour guide in the States, and my driver has done this trip for years. We were doing fine until Archie Philpot got sick. Now, I need to get my group back to the bus so I can find a doctor for him."

"And you haven't got a clue."

It hadn't taken him long to peg me, had it? Who *was* this guy? A mind reader? My face flushed again and I hoped he hadn't tapped into my less-than-chaste thoughts.

"Right." What else could I say?

"Well, then." He pushed back his chair and stood, tall, well-muscled, and somehow even more handsome than before. Upright, he exuded the slightest hint of danger which made me tingle all over. I was always a pushover for the Bad Boy type.

"I'm not a doctor but I've had some medical training. Let me take a look."

I braced my hands on the tabletop and rose slowly. Did I dare put the health of one of my tourists into the hands of a complete stranger just because I found him attractive? My first inclination was to trust Will, and I *did* need help. Archie Philpot was depending on me. Since nothing really bad or traumatic had ever happened to me, I believed everyone meant well. Things would always work out, right? But still...

"I appreciate your concern, but the welfare of these tourists is *my* responsibility. I don't even know you."

He watched my hesitation and smiled. My temperature rose another five degrees and my insides went squishy. Yikes. That smile could melt diamonds.

"Ex-military, Special Forces," he whispered. "Trust me."

What choice did I have? I sighed and nodded. I mean, I would be standing right next to him, wouldn't I? What could happen?

He shot me a nod of approval, then gently lifted the old man's head, peered into his eyes, and took his pulse at the neck. Since this stranger seemed to know what he was doing and didn't need my advice, I counted my flock again to appease my paranoia over them disappearing a second time.

"Is he very sick?" I asked Will in a whisper, moving close so the others wouldn't overhear. "Do I need to take him to a hospital?"

He straightened and squeezed my hand in his. "No, Harriet, there's no need to take him to a hospital," he returned my whisper in a low grim tone, softened by a curious look in his eyes. "I'm afraid Archie Philpot is quite dead."

"What?" I cried at the startling news just delivered by my would-be savior. "Dead?"

I managed to whisper the second word before the troops realized what I was yelling about. Still, everyone looked at me with curiosity.

"Sorry," I called out and waved them away with a flap of my hand. "We'll be leaving in just a few minutes. Finish what you're doing."

I grabbed Will by both arms and hauled him off to one side. Sweat broke out on my forehead and dribbled into my eyes, stinging them.

"He can't be dead." My voice came out as a hiss. I wanted to wipe away the perspiration with the back of my hand, but I didn't dare let go of him. "He was alive a few seconds ago."

Will pried my hands off and held them in his, a reaction to my fingernails digging into his flesh. "I'm afraid he's not alive now," he said for my ears only. "I'm not an expert but—"

"But you've had training," I cut in with a tad too much sarcasm as I

fought the panic welling inside me. "Ex-military. Special Forces. I'm supposed to trust you, remember?" Yeah, right.

His brilliant blue eyes clouded with hurt, and he let my hands go. Instantly I regretted my words. I'd missed a good opportunity to keep my mouth shut. I flicked my tongue across my suddenly-dry lips.

"I'm sorry. I'm a little stressed right now. What were you going to say?"

He cleared his throat. "I was going to say," he replied, his cool tone giving me a taste of my own medicine, "that although I'm not an expert, it looks like poison to me."

My jaw dropped and I took a step back. "Poison? How...how do you know?"

"I *don't*, for sure, but I've seen this kind of thing before." He ran his fingers through his hair, leaving a slight trail by skewing the dark spikes. His hair looked soft. I was tempted to reach out and check. "Based on the timing, his color, the vomiting and all, that's my best guess."

At that point, my legs gave out. I pulled a chair away from a nearby table, plopped down with a groan, and dropped my head in my hands. At least I wouldn't have to worry about the nickname. This disaster was likely to get me blackballed from every respectable travel agency on the planet. Tours to the International Space Station would be my only hope.

"That's just great. I *told* them not to eat anything here without checking with me first." I paused. A fat lot of good that would have done. What did I know? "Do you suppose he bought something tainted from a vendor in the medina?"

"I doubt it."

"Then how could he get himself poisoned?" Icy fingers crept up my spine and I began to shake. I had no doubt that Will knew what he was talking about, and the idea that he did made me uncomfortable. Well, frankly, it scared me. Lust-at-first-sight notwithstanding, this wasn't a good time to get all fluttery about a man, even this to-die-for hunk.

He procured another chair and sat next to me. "Harriet," he whispered

softly in my ear as he put his arm around my shoulder. A shiver slid down my spine, and my skin tingled all over. For half a second, a sense of well-being settled over me, as though everything would be all right. "I suspect that Archibald Philpot wasn't just an ordinary tourist."

My feelings of security vaporized. I pulled away staring off into space. Who *was* this guy?

I sat silently for a few moments, unsure if Will was serious or playing with me. "What makes you think that?"

"Mmm," he hummed, avoiding an answer to my question. "You'll have to trust me."

That didn't sit well and made me all the more suspicious. After all, he was a perfect stranger. But there was something about him, apart from his good looks and gorgeous body, that *did* make me want to trust him. He seemed so competent and confident. So sincerely concerned.

But could I rely on my own judgment right now?

Finally, I turned toward him and mustered my most serious tone. "I don't know who you are, William Talbot," my mouth turned down with a frown, "but if I understand you correctly, you'd jolly well better turn out to be James Bond."

He nodded and patted my hand. I presumed he was responding to the "understanding correctly" part of my statement and I sputtered a few unladylike words under my breath.

"So..." I took a deep breath and struggled for some degree of composure, "you mean it's not just a dead body I've got on my hands, but an international intrigue?" I looked into those blue pools and, for a moment, wanted to go swimming. Then I snapped back to reality.

"What...what am I going to do?" Tears prickled behind my eyes. "I'm lost, I can't speak Arabic, and if I get everyone back to the plaza, Mario probably won't be there with the bus. I have to report this and I don't even know where the American Consulate is."

Will's eyes narrowed slightly, and a look of alarm rippled across his face.

He took me by the shoulders with those warm bronzed hands and gave me a tiny shake as though desperate to get my attention. "Oh, no, Harriet. You can't report this."

"Why not?" To me that was the appropriate, and legally required, thing to do. But what did I know?

"For starters, the Moroccan government would detain your entire group until everyone was questioned and all the paperwork was completed. That could take a week, maybe even two."

I blew stray tendrils of hair off my face. "You mean we'd be quarantined?"

He shot me a phony-looking smile. "Well, not exactly quarantined...but close enough. Besides, reporting Archie's death would be much too dangerous."

Dangerous? I wrinkled my nose and strained my brain. Inconvenient, yes. A disaster, yes. A financial loss for Adventure Seekers and for me, yes. But dangerous? Usually I was never at a loss for words, but this time I could only ask, "Why?"

Seemed like a perfectly logical question to me.

Without answering, he jumped to his feet and pulled me up along with him. "Stay here. Get your group together, but don't let on that anything is wrong. I'll be right back."

"You're not leaving me here alone, are you?" As much as I wanted to trust him and knew I shouldn't, my pulse accelerated and my mouth went dry and fuzzy as though it had sprouted fur. Part of me—my left-brain, maybe—was puzzled. Miss Independence never relied on others. The rest of me teetered as though I was going to faint.

He shook his head, a tiny smile turning up the corners of his mouth. "Does James Bond ever leave a beautiful damsel in distress?" He leaned down and planted a kiss on my forehead.

My heart pounded against my rib cage as I watched him disappear amongst the crowd in the market. Absently, I touched my forehead with a

finger tip, the moisture of his kiss still on my skin. It might have been fear sending the 'ol ticker into palpitations—for all I knew, that would be the last I'd see of him—but it might be something else that put my pulse into orbit. I couldn't help sighing. Maybe William Talbot wasn't the *real* James Bond, but I'd have welcomed that kiss a few inches lower.

Once he was out of sight, I took a moment to gather myself and rally my resources. It took everything I had, but I pasted that big smile on my face again and clapped my hands as I stood up.

"C'mon, everyone," I called out. "I'll give you five more minutes to buy post cards, then let's get ready to *rr-rum-ble*."

The tourists were grumpy but they all laughed, except Bon Jovi and his Japanese friends who saw the serious side of everything. They took my joke as a directive, dashed over to the nearest postcard vendor, and began making purchases in earnest.

By the time I had them rounded up, Will had returned—thank goodness—with a short rotund man wearing a striped robe. At one time, the garment had been woven of bright yarns, but now it was faded and a bit dark and ratty around the hem. He had a dark beard flecked with gray and his head was covered with a *keffiyeh* that resembled a plaid dishtowel. They were both speaking fluent Arabic.

Oh, yeah, Mr. James Bond a.k.a. Will Talbot was full of surprises.

"Time's almost up," I called to my group. "Mr.—" Just in time I bit back the name Bond. "Uh, our local guide, Mr. Talbot, has found a...paramedic to help us with Archie." I motioned everyone back into line and made tracks to intercept the two men before they got too close.

"Who is this?" I asked Will. If any of my tourists believed the man in the disheveled robe was a paramedic, I was Madonna.

Will gave me a military salute and bowed slightly. "Harriet Ruby, meet Essi Ahmed Mutassim O'Reilly. He's an old friend. He works for Mohammed Brothers Rug Emporium down the way."

I rolled my eyes. Was that minimalist explanation supposed to tell me

something?

"How do you do?" With exaggerated politeness, I extended my hand. The Arab took it with a firm, friendly grip that surprised me.

Will leaned close to my ear and whispered, "Everything I said is true. He really *does* have medical training. I wouldn't jerk you around about that."

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Ex-military, Special Forces, trust him and all that. By now, I knew the drill, but at the moment, I was beginning to wonder whose military we were talking about.

"May I call you Essi?"

"Essi Ahmed is fine."

Oo-kay. Biting my lower lip, I looked at Essi Ahmed. "So, what's the plan?" I sincerely hoped there *was* a plan.

Essi Ahmed smiled, exposing large stained teeth, and reached up to put his arms around both our shoulders. Will had to stoop but the Arab and I were eye to eye.

"This is what we're going to do. One of my men will go in front of your group. He'll blend in and no one will notice him. You follow him and he'll lead you out of the Kasbah."

I blinked. His English was perfect and his accent American. If he hadn't grown up in the United States, he must have lived there for some time. To my surprise, the guy impressed me, so I didn't question—out loud, anyway—the plan or the phrase "my men." Did he command an army? Was he with the FBI? The CIA?

"You have to act like you're in the lead," he went on. "As far as everyone else is concerned, Will is just a friend who's joined you."

I shook my head. "Not possible. Our insurance won't let me bring an unauthorized person with the tour. I told my people he's our local tour guide."

Essi Ahmed released us and stroked his beard thoughtfully. "That will work. He'll stay in constant communication with my man in front. I'll bring up the end of the line with...the *sick* guy."

"With Archie Philpot," I corrected him. No one in my group was a guy.

“What about stragglers?” By the expressions on both of their faces, it was another one of my not-so-professional questions. Well, how did I know?

The Arab smiled, and I noticed a wide space between his front teeth. Something green was wedged there, and I guessed he’d eaten spinach for breakfast.

“Don’t worry, they won’t get past us.”

I opened my irrepressible mouth to ask if this was a rescue or a SWAT operation, but good sense prevailed and I clamped it shut.

Who *were* these people?

The shivers in my bones were enough to convince me they were professionals. Professional *what*, I didn’t know, and I hoped I wouldn’t have to find out. I only wanted to get my group out of there and back to the bus.

So we set out. One anxious tour director, the enigma William Talbot a.k.a. local guide, thirteen tourists, one dead and possibly faux-tourist, and an unidentified gaggle of Arabs, Essi Ahmed’s men.

My job was to act casual...this was just another day of touring in Morocco. I pulled off the casual part, but kept a keen eye on Will so I wouldn’t get lost again.

I couldn’t see Essi Ahmed What’s-His-Face O’Reilly—I wanted to hear the story behind *that* surname—and his buddies behind us. For all I knew, they could have rolled up poor Archie, stuffed him into a black and white bag, and were kicking his dead remains like a soccer ball through the rat maze.

Trust Will, I reminded myself for the umpteenth time, and tried to ignore the chill inside me. Like a good tour director, I focused on my responsibilities. My primary objective was getting my still-alive tourists back to the plaza and onto the bus. I didn’t want to think about what would happen after that.

Chapter Two

I heaved a sigh of relief when Will and I passed through the familiar arched gateway and stopped outside of the walled marketplace. The open square beyond the *souk* almost defied description. It could have been called a forum or a circus, a swap meet or a parking lot for tour buses, but a few words couldn't begin to cover all that was going on. The area was packed with human bodies, bumping and pushing and yammering in dozens of languages.

The morning market—which had consisted of fruits, vegetables, herbals, wicker work, candy, and other food stuffs—was packed up and almost gone. Only the exotic aromas, the odor of sweating bodies, and the cloying sweetness of overripe produce remained. Now, the acrobats, storytellers, belly dancers, wrestlers, jugglers, and a myriad of animals replaced the market. And with them, the sounds of chatter mixed with heehaws, bird whistles, and music rose to a distracting level.

The afternoon entertainment.

I flexed my shoulders a few times to ease the tension and counted my ragtag flock as they emerged onto the huge plaza. Thirteen, my lucky number. Everyone except Archie Philpot was accounted for. I paused, wondering when and how Essi Ahmed would bring him out. Half of me refused to think of the old man as anything but alive. But poor Archie Philpot was indeed dead, and on *my* watch. The implications hadn't soaked in yet.

"This is like herding a flock of geese with an invisible stick," I complained

over my shoulder in Will's direction. "Should we wait here for Essi Ahmed?"

When my escort didn't answer, I turned around. He was gone. For a moment, I stared at the empty space where he'd been standing, annoyance and fear rising simultaneously inside me.

With a twitch of my shoulders, I turned my attention back to my charges...and my stomach flip-flopped. During that short period of distraction, my entire group had again wandered off and lost themselves in the chaos.

"Oh, no." Standing on tiptoes, I searched frantically. Even though tourists were usually easy to spot among the robed Arabs, there were dozens of foreign groups on their way to and from the tour buses. Finally, through a break in the crowd, I spotted Rod and Edith Johnson, one of my American couples. Open-mouthed, they stood among a large group of foreigners watching a nearby snake charmer.

Thank goodness. At least now, the number of missing tourists was reduced from the dreaded thirteen to a more auspicious eleven.

"Rod. Edith," I called and headed toward them. As I pushed through the milling bodies, I heard the eerie piping of the white-robed Moroccan. A deadly cobra rose from its wicker basket and wavered to the music in a trance-like dance. Its hood was puffed out in full glory.

The people around me gasped and stepped back in unison. As I pushed into the vacated space, Edith let out a shriek. She covered her eyes with one hand and stretched out the other, palm up, as though warding off the evil eye.

Startled by the vibrations from the massive foot-shuffle, the cobra lunged.

I couldn't see what happened, but again the crowd vibrated and shifted. There was a lot of confused shouting. Then I heard Edith screaming in earnest.

"Eek, it bit me! Oh, Lord. I'm going to die!"

Great. Another dead tourist was all I needed. I might as well resign immediately and report to the District Attorney. I elbowed a big Moroccan wearing a white *jellaba*.

“Oof!” He expelled a gust of air and shifted his weight to keep his balance. I leaped into the breach, so to speak, and slipped past him. Behind me, he cursed. I didn’t understand Arabic but the tone was the same in any language.

I rushed to Edith who, by then, was sitting on the pavement holding her arm above the elbow. Her husband, Rod, a balding milquetoast-type civil engineer wearing a shirt with a button-down collar, crouched nearby. He looked totally dazed. He squeezed Edith’s other hand and muttered to himself.

“No, no, Edith.” With surprising calm, I knelt down beside her and put my arm around her shoulders. “You’re not going to die. This is nothing, really. Trust me.”

Ha. Where had I heard *that* before?

“Hey, you,” I called to the snake charmer as I rose.

The man continued to play his flute in spite of the fact that the crowd around him had dissipated. A few feet away, the snake bobbed and gyrated with the music. Only Edith, Rod, and I were anywhere near. Irritated and frustrated, I realized that the Moroccan with the flute wouldn’t help me, even if I could communicate with him, which apparently I couldn’t.

I focused. While my tour director paraphernalia included a first-aid kit, there was nothing in it for snakebites. Besides, the kit was in the bus. While my stomach roiled, I wracked my brain to remember what to do. I could almost see the poison coursing through Edith’s arteries en route to her heart, lungs, stomach, and only God knew where else.

“We have to get the poison out,” I told her with unprecedented confidence. Maybe Will Talbot’s incredible composure was rubbing off on me. “Rod, do you have a pocketknife?”

The engineer looked up at me through the thick lenses of his glasses. His expression was blank.

“A knife? Yes, I think so.” His eyes were glazed over, and I feared he was as much of a basket case as his wife. Without rising, he took off his backpack and began to unzip numerous pockets and cubbyholes.

“Here it is.” He handed me a large do-everything tool. I could only hope it was sharp. I opened several blades before I found one that looked like it actually might cut something.

“Are you going to kill the snake?” In a daze, he turned toward the Moroccan still fluting over his basket.

Kill the snake? I stared at him for a moment, wondering what planet the man was on, then jumped into action. I reached into one of my own many pockets, pulled out an alcohol wipe, and opened the little packet with my teeth. I crouched down beside Edith again, swabbed her arm, and cleaned the knife as best I could.

Without explaining, I grasped her arm and poised the open knife. She screamed and tried to pull away. Hysteria wasn’t far behind. I sat back on my heels without letting go of her. Maybe if I slapped her in the face? Even though I had little left to lose, I decided to try talking instead.

“Edith, listen to me. I have to cut your arm a little and suck out the poison. It will hurt but I have to do it. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” I thought about all the Western movies I’d watched on TV and asked, “Do you want to bite on something hard?”

Edith shook her head.

“Okay, now close your eyes.”

The woman’s face went from white to transparent. She looked like she was going to pass out, which would have made my job easier, but instead she nodded and squeezed her lids together.

A new set of spectators was gathering around us. Although we hunkered only two or three feet away from the mesmerized musician and his associate-pet, most of the tourists seemed unaware of the little drama going on at their feet. Enthralled by the bobbing snake, they stepped either around us or on us. Only a few cast glances in our direction.

I got on my knees and clamped my teeth together. Quite frankly, I was a bit unnerved, since I didn’t have much experience with sticking knives into

people. Well, actually, none at all. *You have to do this, Harriet. Your tourists are your responsibility.*

Taking a deep breath, I gingerly inserted the point of the knife into her flesh. Edith uttered a subdued “Oh” and jerked a little but otherwise she was the model patient. She was too scared to do anything else.

So was I. My hand shook but somehow I held her arm steady and cut a quarter-inch X over the puncture wound, then squeezed the flesh around it.

Rod Johnson inched closer to look. “It’s bleeding,” he said in a flat tone. The man was unreal.

“Of course, it’s bleeding. That’s the whole point. Keep these people back. I need room.”

Without a word, he stood and held out his arms like a traffic cop to keep everyone away from us. I leaned over and sucked the wound, then spit out the blood and, I hoped, the poison.

My first shot landed on Rod’s walking shorts. *Oops.* He stared down at them in confusion.

“Sorry.” I went back to work.

My second attempt hit the Moroccan’s dirty robe. I was still sucking and spitting, with more accuracy, when Will squeezed through the entranced audience and squatted down beside me, lithe as a tiger. How he’d found us there on the ground, I couldn’t begin to guess. I was too busy even to wonder much about where he’d gone.

“*What* are you doing?” He sounded both intrigued and amused.

I gazed into those blue eyes and totally forgot about my maybe-dying patient. With that enchanting smile on his face, he ran a bronzed hand down my cheek and lifted my chin.

Screw Edith Johnson.

With his fingertips, he touched my lips, which were probably bloodstained, and murmured in that beautiful sexy voice, “Hey, wake up.” Then in a louder and less caressing tone, “What’s going on?”

I shook my head and blinked my eyes. “Oh, ah, I’m saving Edith

Johnson's life here. The cobra bit her."

To my surprise, he sat back on his heels and laughed.

That irritated me. "Just *what* is so funny?"

Will rose with grace and lifted me to my feet. Then he reached for Edith.

"Come on, Mrs. J, you're okay."

She opened her eyes and stared at her arm, then up at Will. "Are you sure?"

"Positive." He helped her stand. "Don't worry."

"But..." Edith murmured.

"But..." I sputtered in confusion and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

Will looked at us with a beautiful but patronizing smile. A smile that, for the first time since I'd met him, I didn't particularly like. I rubbed my soiled hands up and down on my thighs.

"I said not to worry. Trust me." Before I could react, he turned his back to us and took two steps toward the snake charmer. There he stopped, reached down, and grabbed the Cobra at the base of its head, holding it from behind between his thumb and forefinger. He moved so fast I didn't see his arm or realize what he was doing.

"No!" I shouted, too late.

"Eek!" Edith screamed. Beside her, Rod groaned.

"Ooh," the crowd gasped.

Will held the snake out in front of him and in a loud voice, addressed the Moroccan in his own language. The man's glazed eyes snapped to attention. He stopped fluting and nodded.

Now alert, the piper glanced at the frozen crowd around him and smiled, exposing rotten teeth. Then he reached into the folds of his robe, pulled something out, and handed it to Will.

"Thanks." Will took whatever it was from the snake charmer. He let go of the cobra and sprang out of its range.

The cobra writhed and slithered back into the basket. As Will turned

back to us, I saw he held a Band-Aid. Without a word, he tore off the paper and placed the sterile strip over Edith's tour-director-inflicted wound.

"These snakes are milked before they're brought out here," he explained. "Snake charming is a big tourist business in Morocco. They can't afford to let people get poisoned."

"You mean..." I couldn't even imagine my expression at that moment.

Ignoring me, he turned to Edith. "You'll be all right. Come on, we have to go now."

"Go?" I cried. "Without Archie?"

Will put a finger to his lips and shook his head. His body language told me to keep my mouth shut for a change.

"Where's Rod?" Edith glanced around. Color had returned to her cheeks but she appeared more somber than usual.

"He was right here beside us," I said. "Where'd he go?"

Then I spotted him a few feet away, passed out on the pavement under the feet of the multitude of tourists. His face was a ghastly gray color.

"Oh dear." Edith fretted and tensed to spring forward.

Will placed a firm hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, Mrs. J, I'll take care of him."

He brushed the gawkers aside, leaned down, and picked Rod up like a limp, straw-stuffed dummy. Then he threw the unconscious man over his shoulder—no effort at all, thank you very much—and nodded to Edith and me.

"Follow me, ladies."

Chapter Three

I followed Will and the Johnsons across the plaza in a state of shocked trepidation. My adrenal glands, which had been frozen temporarily, thawed out and sent hormones careening through my body. I could hardly keep upright. Every step was an effort. I seriously considered joining Rod Johnson on his quiet and serene planet somewhere in another galaxy.

Before I could even think about asking Rod where this haven was located, we reached the purple and pink Adventure Seekers tour bus. Much to my amazement, my tourists were lined up and waiting in anticipation to be off on a new adventure. Several unobtrusive but well-placed Arabs stood on both sides of the short line to keep them from wandering off.

Apparently, they were more experienced at herding geese than I.

At that moment, the bus door swung open. From the driver's seat, Mario Pellicci flashed an engaging smile. Without warning, I was overcome by my prior resentment at being left alone in the medina with my tourists.

"Where have you been?" I shouted at him. "And why didn't you answer your phone?" Wasn't it his fault, as the senior member of Adventure Seekers Travel, that I'd gotten lost? Wasn't it his fault that Archie Philpot had passed on to his greater rewards? I had to vent at someone.

Still smiling, in spite of the fact that I'd yelled at him, Mario got up and came down to my level...physically, that is. Emotionally, he was always pleasant, composed and competent. I trusted him. But then, I trusted

everyone.

"The tire is fixed, and we're all set," he announced cheerfully, first in English, then Swedish, and finally, for good measure, in Arabic. The three Japanese tourists would have to get the idea. "All aboard."

I stood there with my mouth open, then snapped it shut and planted my fists on my hips. Mario ignored me completely.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked Margie Feldman, a tall dark-haired woman from Denver. He took her packages and helped her up the steps. She chattered an answer I didn't listen to. From somewhere down the line I heard someone mention Archie.

Aw, jeez! I'd almost forgotten about Archie. How convenient for me. "I'll be right back."

I spotted Will and the Johnsons at the end of the line. Rod was on his feet, still looking a bit stunned but at least back on earth. Edith was talking a mile a minute, which meant she was her old self again. And Will, for the first time, looked besieged.

When I reached them, I put a hand on Edith's shoulder and forced a smile. "Excuse me, do you mind if I borrow Mr. Talbot for a minute?" Without waiting for a reply, I took Will's arm and yanked him away from the bus.

"Thanks for the rescue."

"You must be losing your touch if you need *me* to rescue you," I replied with sarcasm when a simple *you're welcome* would have done the job. "Where is Archie Philpot?" I was unable to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

Will rolled his eyes and grinned. "Heaven? Hell? Perhaps Nirvana? We mortals shall never know."

I had to suppress the urge to stomp my foot and let loose the stream of acid remarks building up in my gullet. "That is *not* what I meant! And I don't appreciate your making light of this situation. I'm in deep *caca* here."

A mask of concern dropped over his features, suddenly all business. "Yes, of course. Mr. Philpot is in that ambulance." He inclined his head toward a battered white van parked beside our bus. "He's being treated for,

hmm...shall we say, a mild case of dysentery?"

The van's dented sides were hand painted with flowers and Arabic letters. The license plate was so bent it was unreadable, had I been able to read Arabic. I blinked and swiped a hand across my eyes. The ancient vehicle looked more like a Berkeley hippie van from the nineteen sixties than an ambulance. Only the portable red light on top hinted it might be something else.

Maybe I *was* Madonna.

"Don't worry, I guarantee Archie will be able to rejoin the group at the end of our next stop."

My mouth opened and closed twice. "Rejoin us? The man's dead, for God's sake. And what do you mean, *our* next stop?" I repeated in disbelief. This was getting out of hand. Did Mario realize what had happened? Had I missed something? Somewhere, somehow, I'd lost control.

"Perhaps when we leave the old Spanish Church in the heart of the City?" Will held up a sheet of paper.

I grabbed it out of his hand. "Where did you get my itinerary?" I wasn't liking this.

He looked toward the bus. "Hmm, I think your driver wants us to board. We should go. We'll talk later." He turned and walked away.

Later. Great. Wait...we? Where did this *we* come from?

Annoyed, I dashed after him and captured him by the arm. "Hold on minute." I was hissing at him again. "As I recall, I only asked for your help getting out of the medina."

One eyebrow shot up. "What about getting Archie out of Morocco? Essi told you I was coming with your group, remember?"

Mental grimace. Maybe in my state of shock I hadn't paid close enough attention. Both the possibility that I had missed something and his assumption of power irritated me, but not as much as the fact that I *did* need his help to deal with Archie's corpse. My career was at stake. My dream job that I'd worked long and hard to land. My chance to experience a life that was

more than ordinary and predictable. I wasn't about to give that up.

"How am I supposed to explain your being here? I have to tell my people something."

He shrugged. "Your call, but you've already told them I'm their local guide."

"I know, but Mario won't buy that."

"Maybe not." He shook loose and boarded the bus.

I scrambled up behind him. He sat in the front seat reserved for the tour director and patted the cushion, an invitation to sit beside him. Thanks a load! It was *my* seat. I glared at my driver, who didn't show any sign of concern, and shook my head at Will. Before I sat down, I had to be sure everyone was on board. Besides, I was angry and worried...and I needed a minute or two to cool down.

Counting heads, I started down the aisle. On number three, Bon Jovi Takamura, seated behind Will, tapped my arm. "Mez Harri Boobies, please, where ez the Mezter Pillpot?"

His loud voice echoed through the half-filled bus. Everyone glanced around and murmured in unison. I glared at Will. He was trying to keep a straight face and not doing a very good job.

Jerk.

I returned to the front, snatched up the microphone, and tapped it hard. My charges snapped to attention. "Before we get started, I'd like to update you regarding Archie Philpot's condition. As we speak, he's with a local doctor being treated for a mild case of dysentery."

Another murmur swept through the bus, louder this time.

"That's why I warned you to drink only bottled water and not to buy anything to eat from street vendors. But don't worry, he'll be back aboard after our city tour. In the meantime, we still have our local guide, Will Talbot, riding with us." I pointed to Will who stood and bowed, smiling with white teeth flashing. "He'll point out the sights on the way to our first stop."

I thrust the microphone into his hand and flounced down the aisle to

resume my head count.

Attempting to embarrass him was hardly an appropriate *thank you* after he'd pulled my butt out of the fire, but he was interfering with my job. His presence had sent my orderly world bobbing off to hell in a rowboat.

Now, here's the thing. In my book, if something was worth doing, it was worth doing well. I'd always done the best that could be done, and just because I'd pushed the envelope of my good but predictable life, I didn't intend to settle for less. Fearing failure was not my problem—I'd never experienced it—but somehow I subconsciously connected Will with Archie's death, and it did seem that having a tourist die on my first solo trip was an inauspicious beginning for my career.

All my people were on board and seemed to be waiting with anticipation for their local guide to speak.

Without hesitation, Will began identifying the passing sights and filling in the gaps with a detailed history of Tangier. "The destinies of Tangier go back to earliest times," he effused. "According to legend, the city was founded by the giant Anteus, the son of Poseidon, god of the sea, and the goddess of the earth, Gaia. At the beginning of the fifteenth century BC, the Carthaginian Hannon referenced Tingis, as Tangier was called, in his Tingitanian Mauretania."

To my surprise, my tourists were transfixed by his melodious voice. The women clutched the armrests, entranced by his perfect mouth and brilliant blue eyes and sexy body. Even the men were listening.

How did he do that?

"After occupation by the Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, the Visigoths, and the Arabs, Tangier passed into the hands of the Portuguese in the fifteen century, the Spanish in the sixteenth, and the English, before finally becoming Moroccan once more under the Alaouites."

Yada-yada-yada.

There was no stopping this guy. I was beginning to suspect he was more than just some ex-military hunk who happened to be relaxing in the shade of the medina.

Since everyone was accounted for, I returned to my seat and slumped down next to Will who was still expounding into the microphone. To my dismay, he held the attention of my entire flock, something I'd rarely been able to do. An uncomfortable warmth flooded through me. My skin itched. I wiggled in the seat and I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to scratch my back and sides without being obvious. Irritation has a way of doing that, like wet woolen underwear or ants in your sleeping bag. He was making me question my abilities. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this job after all.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. Gorgeous face, trim tight body, muscles galore, great buns. I sighed. I wasn't cut out for his job, either, whatever it was. My eyes glazed over. I blocked out his voice until finally he put down the microphone, clicked it off, and smiled at me.

"Mez Hairy Boobies?"

My eyes widened. A gurgling sound came out of my throat. To my relief, just then we came to a halt at our first stop.

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The city tour of Tangier and our brief visits to its famous monuments were uneventful but interesting since Will was able to explain what we were looking at in English *and* Swedish. As usual, Bon Jovi and his two companions had to rely on their marginal English.

We made our final morning stop, and our next destination was lunch at a local tourist trap where the main features were Americanized Moroccan food and a belly dancer. I couldn't wait.

I led the way back to the bus with my Adventure Seekers sign held high over my head. My people straggled along behind, all of us with our eyes on the ground to avoid tripping on the loose chunks of paving stone or stepping in potholes. Will and Olaf Anderson, one of the Swedes, brought up the rear. They were engaged in unintelligible but intense conversation.

Since Will was with us, Mario had stayed with the bus. My driver's apparent comfort with the turn of events and Will's presence had gone a long

way to allay my fears. He was an old hand at this and had worked for the travel agency for many years.

When I was about a hundred yards from where our distinctive purple and pink eyesore was parked, Mario opened the doors and came down the steps. Seeing our slow progress, he went to the front of the bus, leaned against it and lit up a cigarette.

As I walked, I noticed a small boy, five maybe, crouching on the broken sidewalk. He was semi-clad in ragged white robes and played a flute. I glanced around in anxiety, convinced I would see a basket with a cobra poking out of it. But there was only a cracked pottery dish holding a few coins.

I passed the child, my heart aching. As a part-time guide in the United States when I was a starving student of languages at MIT, I'd learned how to steer tourists around the poverty areas, but in third world countries, there was no way. Behind me four of the women stopped.

"Oh, my, isn't he darling?"

"Poor little thing. He's so skinny." That was Margie Feldman.

"Wait a minute, let me get my coin purse. How much is a Moroccan Dirham worth?" Edith asked.

"Eight to the dollar, I think," Ingrid Ericsson replied. "I'll look at my conversion chart."

I turned to tell them it was bad policy to give money to beggars in any country, but the child looked so pathetic I could barely restrain myself from fishing around in my own backpack for dollar bills.

Helga Anderson, a tall blond-gone-gray Swedish woman, dropped a handful of coins into the ceramic dish. The child stopped playing and looked up at her with a beatific smile. The poor kid already had rotting teeth.

"Ladies," I began, then choked on a lump in my throat. I sniffed my nose and held back a tear, unable to continue.

Before I realized what was happening, three Arab women in dirty robes came out of nowhere and accosted my four ladies. They pulled at their clothes and yelled for money. I glanced at Mario, then at the rest of the group lagging

behind. No one seemed aware of what was happening.

Fine. It's Harriet to the rescue...again. I raised my sign and charged forward.

"Leave them alone! Get out of here." I struck one of the assailants on the shoulder with the sign.

"Aahi! Aahil!" she screamed.

Confusion ensued. My ladies tried to scatter but they were surrounded. The women clawed at them with grimy broken fingernails.

"My purse," Margie cried.

I spun around and whacked at the woman who'd snatched Margie's bag. "Let go!" I yelled again. I took hold of the purse strap and pulled it away.

The ragged woman behind me, the one I'd struck first, entwined her hand in my hair, taking my ear along with it, and yanked hard. I let out a screech as my earring, the sign and I went flying. I hit the ground hard and the back of my skull bounced off a chunk of cement from the broken sidewalk.

"Ohmigod," I moaned and sat up. My head spun. I touched the back where it hurt. Ugh. Sticky liquid. I stared at my fingers. Definitely blood. There was more on my ear lobe where my pierced earring had been. Aw, jeez.

"Harriet, are you all right?" Helga crouched over me and tried to help me up. For a moment, she seemed to have two faces, then both of them blurred into a single blob of color.

"I...I think so," I lied. "Just let me sit here a minute. What happened?"

Behind Helga, Margie sputtered out something I didn't understand. My eyes came into focus, and I studied the scene of the disaster. By now, Mario was chasing the three beggar women down the street, yelling at them in Arabic. One of them held the child by his hand and dragged him along behind her. All of them were wailing.

Closer to me, Will charged toward the bus, moving so fast he was a blur of motion. Just as he reached the open rear door, a man clad in black from ski mask to tall leather boots, leaped out. He knocked Will backward against the car parked next to us.

To my surprise, instead of chasing the man, Will shook himself and dashed up the steps into the bus. By then, everyone in the group had caught up. Bob Feldman helped me to my feet and many hands reached out to steady me. They all *ooohed* and *ahhed* at the blood in my hair. The questions flew.

We reached the bus together. Will and Mario, who had returned from his pursuit of justice, were in a huddle. Neither of them worried about helping the ladies into the bus. Without being asked, Bob Feldman took over that responsibility and everyone climbed on board. While we waited, the women who had been attacked explained what happened to the others who hadn't seen it. Their voices tittered with excitement.

I didn't hear anyone mention the guy in the ski mask, but I wondered what he'd wanted. Why had he broken into *our* bus? Or did he break in? I didn't see any shattered windows or other damage. I thought about that for a long moment. Will had gone for the bus as though he suspected someone was inside.

As I counted heads to be sure everyone was on board, I looked to the back of the bus and sucked in a surprised breath. Archie Philpot, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, sat in the last seat. He was covered with a thin blanket and his head rested on a pillow.

I glanced around. No one else seemed to have noticed him. His hair had been combed, and he didn't smell anymore. His eyes were closed. If I hadn't known he was among the dearly departed, I would have assumed he was taking a long-needed nap.

Someone touched my arm and I nearly jumped out of my skin. Yesterday I would have screamed bloody murder, but today my life, which I was starting to think of as Life-After-Will, was full of surprises. I was getting used to it.

Next to me, he smiled. "Well, I see Archie is with us again," he commented casually, without lowering his voice. Clearly, he intended everyone to hear. "How's he doing?"

I swallowed hard and played along. "His color looks a lot better."

Actually, that was the truth, thanks to modern cosmetics. “We should let him...sleep.”

The fact that Will hadn't bothered to ask if I was hurt, annoyed me. And when he didn't mention the man in the ski mask or the attack, a wave of nausea rippled through my stomach. Something strange was going on here.

This whole situation was giving me the hives. My skin seemed to have shrunk two sizes and was dry and itchy. Will put his hand on my wrist as I reached to scratch the back of my neck. There was a glimmer in those blue eyes. Reality began to melt and once again, I was seduced by those deep pools. Darn him.

“Wait, Mez Boobies,” he whispered, mimicking Bon Jovi. Then, before I could decide whether or not to kick him in the shins, he went on. “I'm afraid I'm going to have to change your itinerary.”

Chapter Four

“Change my itinerary?” I couldn’t keep my voice down, or my annoyance. “Not a chance. Why?”

He put a finger to my lips. “Trust me.”

My heart flip-flopped. Jeez, what was wrong with me? These strong, and unfamiliar, reactions were scaring me. I chewed at my lower lip and followed him back to our seats, torn between anger and lust.

Across from us, in the seat behind Mario, sat Essi Ahmed What’s-His-Name O’Reilly. He smiled at me with reassurance. “Your Mr. Philpot is resting. Do you want me to take a look at your head wound?”

“It’s nothing. I’ll take care of it. And he is not *my* Mr. Philpot.” I grabbed the first aid kit out of the overhead and slammed my body into the seat.

With a gauze pad dipped in peroxide, I cleaned the back of my skull and my ear and spread on a dab of antiseptic cream. When I was finished, I tossed the gauze into the trash and crossed my arms over my chest. Glaring out the window, I forced myself to calm down and looked for the positives. At least Archie was back with the group. Now, I had to figure out what came next. I had no clue what we were going to do with a corpse. And, as Will kept insisting, I had to trust him and go with the flow.

Before long, the grand old buildings of Tangier’s International Zone gave way to a labyrinth of filthy, narrow streets. The air smelled of burnt trash and

rot. This was definitely not on *my* itinerary. I was beginning to think nothing about this tour was mine anymore. I wanted to demand an explanation from Will, but I sensed that I would only get another “trust me.” And I couldn’t take that.

The problem was, he was deliberately keeping me in the dark about serious matters, walking all over my job as a tour director, and still, I *did* trust him. That alone made me nervous.

After a silent half hour of rumbling through what looked like an old warehouse district, we came to a road that followed the curve of the harbor. Here the breeze off the bay eased the increasingly unbearable stench.

At last, the bus came to a halt beside a wooden dock. It looked old and unsteady, and its white paint was peeling. The arched sign above the entrance was written in Arabic, but underneath, in English, were the words Tangier Dinner Cruises.

I slipped out of my seat and sat beside Essi Ahmed. “Dinner cruises?”

He looked at me with raised eyebrows and shrugged. I shot a piercing glare first at him, then at Will. Behind me, the members of the tour murmured surprised questions.

“How am I going to explain this to my people?” I asked in a low voice. “They expect a restaurant with a belly dancer.”

Essi Ahmed shrugged again. “What could look more normal than a group of tourists taking a lunch tour of the bay?”

“It’s not a question of how it looks to anyone else. It’s not on the schedule.”

Disconsolate, I peered out at the rickety dock and the four tour boats anchored by its side. The dock jutted out into the water about thirty feet, and at its end was a ramp leading onto the first moored ship. Only that one had access from the dock. The others were in parallel, their bows facing in the same direction. At least they looked maintained and seaworthy.

But what did I know?

I ground my teeth and asked, “Which one are we going on?”

“The fourth one,” Essi Ahmed replied. “The furthest from the dock.”

My heart sank. “You mean these people have to cross three ships to get there? I mean, there’s water between them, isn’t there? That’s dangerous.”

“Of course it is. You must caution them to be careful. If the ramps between the boats are wet, they can be very slippery.”

Wonderful. A law suit waiting to happen. And I was already in trouble up to my mascara.

“Do we actually get to eat something?” My voice was acrid with disdain. By now, it was well past lunchtime and the natives were restless. What with the excitement of the snake and the attack at our last stop, they hadn’t complained, but the onslaught was due at any minute.

“A buffet luncheon has been arranged,” he assured me, “and a belly dancer...of sorts.”

I winced. I could only hope the dancer, of sorts, wasn’t Essi Ahmed’s sister. At least the piece of green was gone from between his front teeth. A marked improvement.

“Good, everyone’s hungry.” I picked up the microphone and clicked it on. “Okay, folks, because of the unanticipated delays at the market and our last stop, we’re going to have a special treat.” I paused for breath and watched my flock’s ears prick up. “Instead of going to the restaurant, we’ll be taking a luncheon cruise of the bay on one of these ships. Won’t that be fun?”

Could I improvise, or what?

Essi Ahmed tugged at my arm. “It’s a tour boat, not a ship. Ships are larger. And tell them to take all their belongings with them.”

Uh-oh. I put my hand over the microphone. “Why? Isn’t the bus staying here?”

By then Will had joined us. Mario turned in the driver’s seat to face us, and the three men shook their heads in unison.

With a sigh, I repeated the message through the speaker system. Several people whined and others scrambled back to their seats to retrieve the rest of their things. Instead of taking exception to the turn of events, Mario opened

the door and took his place at the bottom of the steps as though this was the usual routine.

"We didn't have to take everything before," one of the Swedes grumbled as he passed us.

Bon Jovi followed, holding up a small travel bag and his camera. "See, Mez Harri Boobies," he said as though I was conducting an inspection. Behind him, his two companions also displayed their belongings.

I smiled and nodded at them, but out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the amused look exchanged between Will and his Arab friend. I leveled a glare at Bon Jovi's back that should have burned a hole in his silk suit.

At the back of the bus, Archie slept on while everyone else got up, gathered their bags, purses, and jackets, and lumbered down the aisle.

Bob Feldman was the first of the Americans to get off. Before clambering down the steps, he stopped and looked at Will, Essi Ahmed and me. "I hope you've got alcohol on board that bucket. We need it."

Will and I smiled and bobbed our heads in a noncommittal way. I was ready for a couple of shots myself. An apple daiquiri would be nice, but anything would do. About then I would have tried rubbing alcohol. Why not? My short career as a tour director was probably finished, anyway.

"Are Arabs allowed to drink?" I whispered to Will. But I wondered how much my people had guessed about the wool being pulled over their eyes. Essi Ahmed was supposed to be a paramedic, and Archie was not at his best, in spite of a thorough cleaning. Now this. The inconsistencies were piling up. My speculations were interrupted by Essi tapping my arm.

"The lunch tour may be a little rushed."

"Rushed?" I held my breath. This comment did not bode well.

The last to get off were the Johnsons. Edith's arm still wore the telltale Band-Aid and as she passed, she frowned at me. *Oh, boy.* I had the feeling I was going to get more than just a balling out when we got back.

If we got back.

Once all the tourists were off the bus, Will leaped down the steps and

caught up with them. He took Edith's elbow and escorted her toward the dock, exuding pleasantries. Her husband followed a pace behind. While I waited, Essi Ahmed and Mario carried on a long conversation in Arabic. Mario nodded a final time and fired up the engine.

"He's leaving?" I asked in alarm. "Why? And what's this about being in a hurry?"

The Arab pursed his lips. "Your tourists will have time for the cruise and their lunch, but we have to keep a tight schedule."

"A schedule?" I was stunned. All morning no one had paid any attention to a schedule. I didn't think we had one anymore. "Why now all of a sudden?"

He cleared his throat. "We have to rendezvous with the ferry boat to Gibraltar at a specific place. I'll explain once we're on board. In the mean time, while the bus warms up, the three of us will have to...ah, assist your Mr. Philpot."

"He isn't mine," I murmured and sighed. Could things get any worse?

With Mario's help, we got Archie out of the bus and down the dock to the ramp. By then Will and his merry tourists were in the process of crossing from one boat to the next. As far as I could tell, none of them bothered to look in our direction.

"You two will have to take him from here." Mario released his hold on Archie.

"Sh...oot!" I cried as the sudden increase in weight unbalanced me. I stumbled back against the sturdy wooden handrail, dragging Archie and Essi Ahmed with me. All the air *whooshed* out of my lungs and my lower back screamed with pain.

Essi Ahmed allowed me to lean against the railing and suck in a couple of deep breaths before saying, "You get on that side of him and put your arm around his waist. I'll do the same. Get a good grip on his belt and lift."

Get a grip? Yeah, I need to get a grip, all right. By the time we had Archie rebalanced between us, the motor coach was pulling away.

"What about the bus?" I asked, watching it go.

“Mario and the bus will be onboard the ferry when we meet it. That’s why we have to be in position at the right time.”

I was not liking the sound of this. My eyes narrowed. “Why do I get the feeling this isn’t the usual contract arrangement between the Moroccan government and the ferry line?”

“It’s a bit unconventional, but not to worry. I have the appropriate approvals.” He scrunched up his roundish nose. “Right now, we need to hurry. Do you think you can manage?”

I eyed the gangway. It was a straight and level shot from the dock onto the boat, and from there it ramped down gently.

“A piece of cake,” I answered with great, but misinformed, assurance. With one arm grasping Archie around the waist and the other free to hold onto the railing, I maneuvered my share of the burden without undue huffing and puffing.

As we “walked” the body through the lobby of the first boat, I sensed that crew members hidden away from sight watched us with curiosity. My assurance petered out when we approached the transfer from the second to the third boat. The two times before, there were ramps from the deck to the gangway between boats. Here was a high step. The gangway consisted of planks of wood without any slip-proof surface or handrails. The rope that stretched from one ship to the other did little to inspire my confidence.

If you’ve ever walked a tight rope for three feet carrying a six-foot-long, one hundred and eighty-pound sack of sand, you know what I mean.

Ahead of us, I heard Will speaking to Edith as he helped her from the third boat into the last one. “Watch your step, Mrs. J. There’s a lot of movement. We don’t want to lose you.”

I couldn’t see him from where I was standing, but his words made me notice how much the deck bobbed and swayed under my feet. What else? I had the almost-uncontrollable urge to push Archie into the water, flop down on the deck, and scream “uncle.”

Exhausted, I knew I couldn’t budge that dead body another inch. My

muscles protested. I was drenched with perspiration and my clothes stuck to my skin like fly paper.

Ahead of us, Edith let out one of her infamous shrieks.

“Here we go,” I heard Will say.

His steady voice was beginning to get on my nerves. Why wasn’t *he* over here lugging dead meat up and down steps? Why me?

“You’re doing fine, Mrs. J. That was the last.” Then more loudly, as though addressing the whole group, “Let’s all go into the dining room. I believe lunch is ready.”

Good. If he’s going to take over my job, the least he can do is keep them occupied. I stopped, grateful for even a short moment of rest.

To my dismay, the final transfer looked worse than the last one. The step was higher, the plank narrower, and there wasn’t even a rope. *There’s no way I can do this.* A week or so in quarantine—or more likely, in the slammer—didn’t seem like such a bad alternative at the moment.

“Ready?” Essi Ahmed asked. If my glare had been a laser, it would have singed his eyebrows to stubble. He hadn’t even broken a sweat, although the robe and the pervasive camel odor made it a little hard to be sure. The man was short, but he was strong as a bull.

Not ready to admit failure—the “f” word, as far as I was concerned—I nodded my head in agreement. We were about to hoist our deceased buddy up the step when we heard the loud roar of an outboard engine. A few seconds later, the deck bounced and wobbled beneath our feet so violently that I tottered and almost fell.

Swallowing a cry, I shot one hand out to balance myself and nearly let loose of Archie’s belt. After I regained my footing and shifted my grip on him, I gasped, “What was *that?*”

“Speedboat. Probably water skiers. They’re not supposed to come near the cruise docks, but no one pays attention to the restrictions. Do you think we can lift him?”

I studied the last step. Archie had been old, but a tall and reasonably

large man. I now understood the term “dead weight.” I wondered how long it took for rigor mortis to kick in. If Archie got stiff enough, we could slide him across between the boats and use *him* as a gangplank.

“In case any of your group sees us, it needs to look like we’re only helping him step up.”

“Yeah, right.” My murmur was followed by much teeth gnashing and eye rolling.

Essi Ahmed didn’t respond. “Brace his feet against the step and we’ll push him up from behind.”

The step was a good nine inches high, but Archie’s feet were big. Maybe we could do it. Fortunately, Will emerged onto the deck of the cruise boat in time to help. The one thing I was beginning to like about the guy was that he always seemed to show up in the nick of time.

“Is Archie all right?” he asked loudly, for the benefit of eavesdroppers. “Can I help?”

“Where are the others?” I kept my voice low and tried not to pant...I wasn’t sure if the reason was exhaustion or hormones.

“They’re in the dining room, already wolfing down lunch,” he returned my whisper. With one foot planted firmly on the deck, Will placed the other foot on the gangplank and stretched out his arm to take Archie’s limp hand. “They’re a hungry lot. They should stay busy for a while. Be careful.”

Duh! I balanced myself the same way. Essi Ahmed and I pushed, Will pulled, and Archie went up with the toes of both feet on the step and heels dangling in midair. I took one of his legs and placed it forward onto the gangplank. Suddenly we heard the roar of the speedboat again.

“Hold on!” I cried.

The waves hit hard. The boats bucked and pitched. I screamed as Archie’s foot slipped off the plank and his leg went down between the boats. *Thunk!* The sides of the boats *whanged* together with Archie’s leg between them.

Then the air exploded with a horrendous pop, like dozens of champagne

bottles opening simultaneously. Will lunged forward and grasped Archie under the arms and pulled. They went over backward and landed on the deck of our tour boat with a loud crash. Still on the third craft, I fell on my already-bruised back and rear end. My backpack flew off into oblivion.

In response to the racket, the door from the dining room opened. Olaf Anderson stuck his head out and yelled, "Hey, what happened?"

"Was that a gun shot?" someone else asked.

"It's Archie Philpot! Did he have a heart attack?"

"He looks gray. Does anyone know CPR?"

More voices—higher, louder, more hysterical. Hearing the shouting, the others abandoned their lunches and crowded out onto the deck. A barrage of questions and gasps floated in the air.

"Oh, my."

"Are you all right?"

"Who shot him?"

Both Essi Ahmed and I clambered to our feet and ran to the railing. On the other boat, all thirteen of my flock were gathered around Will and Archie. My heart started fluttering painfully. I pressed my hands to my chest. No doubt, I was due for a heart attack of my own.

Maybe I can retire on disability.

"Eek, eek!" That was Edith Johnson again. Didn't that woman do anything but scream at precisely the wrong moment? "His leg. They've shot off his leg!"

Everyone froze. There was a brief moment of complete silence. Then...

"His leg's gone," came the cry.

Everyone pointed at the limp pant leg of Archie's trousers. I sucked in a breath. They were right. The pant leg was empty. His leg *was* gone.

For a moment, the sound around me was swallowed up by the roaring in my ears. My chest ached as though an elephant was sitting on it.

Will crawled out from under Archie's body. "Please step back. Go back inside."

I didn't know how anyone could stay so cool in a crisis. Without raising his voice or his fists, he eased the horrified tourists back inside, then stood in the doorway with his arms braced on both sides of the jamb.

"Mr. O'Reilly, you're needed over here. We have another injury."

From the third boat, Essi Ahmed vaulted over the rail, across the water, and landed upright on the deck of our cruise boat in spite of his flapping robe. My thirteen tourists surged forward, pressing against Will hoping to get an eyeful.

"Go back inside," Essi Ahmed ordered with authority and pointed at the door. "I need room to work. Inside, everyone." He dropped down beside Archie's limp and crumpled body.

I hadn't moved. My mind raced. Archie's leg? How could he be missing a leg? It couldn't have been shot off. There had been no gunshot. Adrenaline coursed through me. Panic welled up leaving a nasty taste in my mouth.

How can we make him look alive without both legs?

Instinctively, I leaned over the rail and examined the water below. There, floating toward the bow was a white iridescent blob.

"*Ohmigod!*" My voice sounded hysterical, even to my own ears. "That's Archie's leg!"

Letting out a primal war cry, I lunged toward the front of the boat, kicked off my shoes and leaped onto the rail. From there, I executed a perfect swan dive into the bay.

Yikes! The water was so cold my girls snapped to attention like two big goose bumps. When I surfaced, I heard shouting behind me, but I couldn't make out the words. All I could think about was reaching the white leg wearing a high sock and conservative loafer, which was moving away from me. *I've got to get it. I've got to get it.*

My Australian crawl, which is usually respectable, was hampered by my soaked clothes. How the hell could an unattached leg out swim me?

Goodbye Summer Olympics.

I kept my eyes focused and blocked out everything else, which wasn't too

hard since my brain was frozen. Then, it was right in front of me...and sinking. I dove after it and resurfaced with the leg in one hand. For some reason, I expected to be holding a sharp bone surrounded by warm soft flesh.

Cold. Hard. I screamed. I don't know why. They probably heard me all the way to Gibraltar. Still, I held onto the leg as though it was a life preserver.

"Harriet," a voice called. Will's voice. It seemed far away.

Through the fuzziness, I heard splashing. Something solid appeared in front of me. The sound of a low *putt, putt, putt* reached my ears. "Will." I lifted one hand and waved. "Will, I'm over here."

"Hold on." The response sounded strange and muffled, but at the moment, everything was a little off. The low hum of the engine stopped. The little craft pulled alongside me. It was the inflatable kind with a small motor. Treading water, I lifted up my prize and spit out salt water.

"Archie's leg. Take it and help me out."

A hand pulled the leg from my grasp. "Got it," a man said.

"Harriet," I heard Will call again. His voice was not any closer. That didn't make sense. The boat was right next to me.

"Will, pull me out. I'm freezing."

Instead of a hand reaching down for me, something dark and solid came at me. The wooden oar landed on my head with a *splat*. Everything went black and I sank.

Chapter Five

Will was kissing me. It was wonderful...except for the horrible nagging need for air. I struggled.

"She's breathing again," someone said. Will pulled away and rolled me on my side.

"No-o," I pleaded in a weak voice. *Don't leave.* I coughed and proceeded to spew out the African half of the Mediterranean Sea. Between bouts of heaving, I drew in deep breaths until my lungs began to function. Somewhere in the process, I forgot about being kissed and started to shiver. I realized I was sopping wet and lying on a wooden deck. My head throbbed, my stomach had the nervous heebie-jeebies, and my body ached all over.

"I...I'm cold."

"Both of you need to get out of those wet clothes." It was the same man who had just spoken, a voice that sounded familiar but I didn't recognize it. I should know who that is, shouldn't I? With my mind in a hazy free fall, I couldn't concentrate well enough to remember, and I wasn't about to raise my head to look.

Someone picked me up. The motion made me dizzy and triggered another fit of coughing, followed by darkness.

The next time I regained consciousness it was like waking up in a strange place after a bad dream. I jerked awake and sat up suddenly, startled and afraid. I couldn't see anything except darkness.

Ohmigod, I'm blind! The taste of fear rose in my throat and shivers ran down my arms to my fingertips. I squeezed my lids closed, reached out for something to hold on to, and tried to stand up. That was when the migraine hit me.

"Oh, my head." I collapsed back onto the surface I'd been lying on. My fingers massaged my temples. "Make it stop, make it stop."

Gentle hands lifted me up into a sitting position and balanced me with an arm around my shoulders.

"No-o." I didn't want to sit up. It hurt too much. Everything was spinning, and my stomach rumbled and turned over. The foul taste of bile filled my mouth.

"Here, take this," a man's voice said softly. He put a pill into my mouth.

Well, jeez. I was hearing voices again. Didn't I know this one? I tried to open my eyes again and couldn't. Someone had glued the lids down.

"Pwth." I spit out the medicine. "No...no pills."

Fingers put the capsule back in my mouth. My head was tipped back, and a glass of water pressed against my lips. "Come on, it's just Tylenol. Drink."

"Will?" I said. In went the water and down went the medication. I gurgled and coughed.

"It's all right." His hand caressed my forehead. The disembodied voice continued to speak to me in a low soothing tone. It sounded like Will's, but I didn't trust my judgment anymore. The last time I recognized his voice, something bad had happened.

What was it? I needed to remember, but everything was blurry. I leaned into his warm solid body and relaxed.

I had no idea how much time passed between intervals of consciousness. Seconds? Hours? When I finally woke up in the real world, I was lying on a narrow bunk covered with a thin wool blanket. It's roughness against my skin told me I was naked.

Yikes. My eyes opened a slit. Darkness enveloped me, but this time I

was able to see outlines and knew I was in a small room. The migraine had subsided, along with the nausea. I was ensconced in delicious warmth, and I wasn't alone on the bed.

Unable to orient myself, I closed my eyes again and snuggled closer to the other body. If I was suffering from hallucinations, so what? The person beside me turned over. Strong arms wrapped around me. *Mmm.*

Then Will kissed me again. I knew it was Will. I recognized the lingering scent of his musky aftershave spiced with a smidgen of salt from the ocean water, the firmness of his lips, the muscled chest and slightly coarse hair. Everything I'd fantasized about all day. This time I was breathing, so I responded with enthusiasm.

Nice. Really nice.

Finally, he eased us apart and sat up beside me. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a little shake. "Come on, Harriet, open your eyes. I know you're in there."

With reluctance, I did as I was told and smiled up at him. "How'd you know I was awake?"

In the subdued light, his teeth flashed as he smiled. "Well, let's see. You stuck your tongue down my throat and nearly chewed my lip off. That's a pretty sure sign."

"Sorry," I said, not sorry at all. "I was dreaming."

"About what?"

"I'll never tell." I adjusted the covers around me, my face burning. Considering the fantasies I was having, I must be feeling a lot better. "How, ah, did I get like this?"

He knew exactly what I meant. "I had to warm you up."

I propped myself up on my elbows, making sure the blanket was tucked around my chest.

"Warm me up for what?" My imagination shifted into overdrive, running away with me. It must have shown on my face. Maybe it was the way I was panting, not to mention the drooling.

He laughed as he climbed over me, got off the bunk, and stood up. I was disappointed to see he was wearing an ill-fitting pair of trousers that looked too short for him. Only his chest was bare.

“*Not* warmed up for what *you’re* thinking. I mean warmed up as in *not dying*. You know, to prevent hypothermia. Any other kind of warming you up might be a little awkward right now.” He indicated our surroundings with a lift of his chin.

We were in a tiny cabin on one of the boats. Some crew member’s personal cabin. Now that Will’s incredibly sexy scent was several feet away, the whole place reeked of sweat, incense, and cigarettes. *I get the picture.*

“A rain check, perhaps?” I asked hopefully, then, “Did you bring me here?”

He nodded. “Of course. I had to get you out of those wet clothes. You were freezing.”

Uh-oh. “You undressed me yourself? No help?”

He placed his right hand over his heart and held up two fingers on his left. “Scout’s honor.”

“No Arabs?”

“Not a one.”

“Not even Essi Ahmed What’s-His-Face?”

“Would I lie to you?”

Now that made me stop and consider. “Probably, but I’ll let it go for now.”

I sat up and my head began to spin again.

“Oh, boy.” I pressed the base of my palms against my temples, realizing too late that I’d let the blanket slip down around my waist. When I didn’t move, the dizziness went away, so I wasn’t sure it was worth the agony to cover myself.

I mean, he’d undressed me, hadn’t he? *What more could he see?* Modesty and social conditioning won out and, with great effort, I pulled the cover up and tucked it under my arms.

Will positioned himself chastely beside me on the edge of the bed and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. His face was flushed and those pants looked suspiciously full.

"A rain check?" he said in a rough voice. "Oh, yes, you can definitely have a rain check. Several, in fact."

No clever rebuttal on my part was forthcoming. "You didn't, hmm, take advantage of me, did you?" I asked. I almost hoped he had, although I would have been angry that I'd missed out on the fun. He was such a hunk.

He frowned and pulled back a little. The little lines between his brows deepened. "What do you take me for?" He almost sounded hurt. "I'm an honorable man."

I wasn't sure if his tone of indignation was real or if he was teasing. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Ex-military, Special Forces, et cetera. You're a man. Period."

One dark eyebrow shot up and he was about to rebut when there was a tap on the door. His forehead smoothed. He got up and opened it a crack, while I snuggled down into the covers and hid my face. Like, did I think no one knew who was in here? *Yeah, right.*

When he came back, he carried a tray with a steaming bowl on it. "Hot soup. You need something to give you energy."

I wasn't up to any more physical or verbal sparring at the moment, so I murmured my agreement. By the time Will finished spooning the broth into my mouth, I'd recovered enough to worry about my tour group. I glanced around the cabin, looking for my clothes.

"I need to get dressed," I told him after he'd taken away the tray and empty bowl. I thought about asking for another headache pill but decided I didn't need it.

"Our clothes are being laundered. We'll have to stay here until they're ready."

"How long will that be? How long have we been here? What about Archie? What happened to my group?" I glanced around the tiny cabin as

though I expected to find all thirteen of them hiding under a piece of furniture.

Again, Will sat beside me on the bunk. I blinked my eyes and took a deep breath, savoring his scent. I wanted to reach out and touch him. A tremor skittered through my body. My blood heated and began to tap-dance through my arteries.

“Relax, the hoard is still working on lunch.” He took my hands in his and squeezed them. “You weren’t unconscious very long. They won’t miss you for a while.”

I took a moment to refresh my memory regarding recent events. Yeah, my tourists had plenty to talk about.

“I suppose everyone saw me jump in.” The heat of mortification crept up my neck. Inside, I shuddered. If the “Hairy Boobies” tag didn’t make my life as a tour director unbearable, the stories about my jumping into the drink after an artificial leg certainly would.

“Bingo.” Will nodded, unspoken sympathy written all over his face. Under the grin, of course. “And with all your shouting, they know you went in after Archie’s leg, but no one understands why.”

I shook my head. “Neither do I.”

Suddenly this was nothing to joke about. We stared at each other while the implications began to soak into my befuddled brain. I started to shiver and closed my eyes. He held my hands while I relived my near-fatal dip in the bay. I wanted to ask him what had happened, who hit me, what was going on. But I was afraid he might tell me the truth. I didn’t think I could handle that at the moment.

“I suppose the excitement will keep my folks distracted until we meet up with the ferry,” I said lightly. I pulled one of my hands away and touched the sore spot on my forehead. “Ouch!”

The lump was large and tender. Moving my hand, my fingers probed the back of my head where I’d hit the concrete during my earlier fracas with the gypsies. The swelling was still there but diminished, both in size as well as importance, overshadowed by the more recent and painful drama.

"Be careful, you don't want to start the bleeding again."

That comment gave me the opportunity to ask the question that was bothering me.

"I presume *you* didn't hit me with that oar," I said, remembering now what happened. "Do you know who did?"

His eyes lost their brilliance and broke contact with mine. He looked across the room and said nothing. When he didn't speak, I repeated my question with growing frustration.

"Someone took Archie's leg and hit me on the head. I almost drowned. Someone tried to kill me." My voice rose a decibel or two. I paused, realizing, perhaps for the first time, the enormity of the situation. "It's not a real leg, you know. It's a prosthetic."

"I know."

"Is there anything you *don't* know?" I was irritated, and, I realized, scared. This wasn't fun and games anymore. One person was dead, and I might have drowned if Will hadn't pulled me out in time. I wanted this to stop. Now.

"Unfortunately, there's a lot I don't know. I wish I did."

"I think it's about time you explained to me what you *do* know," I demanded with school-teacher-like firmness. "There are too many coincidences at work to be the simple case of a misguided, inefficient tour director."

"Coincidences?"

Going to play dumb, is he? What a surprise! "First, our regular guide gets hit by a car riding his motorcycle two days before we're due to leave." I ticked off my first point.

"What's so suspicious about that? People get hurt in vehicle accidents all the time."

"It didn't seem weird at the time," I agreed with a lift of my shoulder. "And neither did the fact that Adventure Seekers Travel sent me instead."

"Why shouldn't they? Didn't everything go according to plan?"

I ran the tip of my tongue across my lips to moisten them. Will was right, as usual. The tour had gone fine...until today. "Yes, until Archie Philpot, who's a bit unusual to begin with, got sick and died."

Will's eyes narrowed. His frown formed a pronounced deep indentation between his dark brows which pulled down into a sideways letter S. "Why do you say Archie Philpot was unusual?"

I planted my hands on my hips. My indignation pose, as it were, although less effective when I was sitting down. "He was eighty-five, for God's sake. That's a little *old* to be traveling alone, particularly since he'd never been out of England before."

The cute frown marks disappeared as he relaxed. "Maybe Archie wanted to see a bit of the world before it was too late. At a certain point, some people realize they haven't done the things they wanted to do in life."

His voice sounded almost wistful, as though he was one of those people and understood that emotion. I wondered what Will wanted that he hadn't been able to do or have.

"Fine, so he decides to see the world and books a tour," I said, going along with the scenario. "Then boom. He's wasted. By the way, did you find out if he was poisoned?"

"They pumped his stomach and did some blood workups before they brought him back. It was definitely poison. He'd ingested ricin."

Never heard of it. But since tour directors don't resort to offing their tourists very often, we didn't need a working knowledge of poisons. "Could that have been an accident?"

Will shot me a how-could-someone-possibly-poison-himself-by-accident look and shook his head. "No, it's a poison refined from castor beans. No accident."

"See what I mean about coincidences? Then *you* show up and conveniently offer your assistance. And you just *happen* to run into What's-His-Face O'Reilly, who has a military squadron waiting for something to do."

His expression became defensive. "I *told* you, I travel a lot. Essi's an old

friend and—”

I didn't let him finish. “William Talbot, you haven't told me jack.” I was whipping myself into a frothing rage. “What about the incident on the bus?”

“Gypsies.” He gave me his what's-this-world-coming-to shrug. He had a whole repertoire of expressions and gestures. One for every possible occasion and all of them unresponsive to my questions. “You find them in every country.”

“Not wearing black ski masks and leather boots, you don't.” My sarcasm referred to the man who, coincidentally, happened to be standing around looking for a bus to break into when the gypsy incident took place.

Tears stung my eyes and my headache was back full force. “Will, you *must* tell me what's happening.” I chewed at my lip to keep it from trembling. “My career is probably ruined but I...I don't want anyone else to get hurt.”

Uttering a guttural sound, Will stood up and jammed his hands into his pockets. He paced from one side of the tiny room to the other, back and forth, back and forth. The corners of his mouth turned down, foreboding and anxious. He stopped and turned to me, rocking on the balls of his feet. “I guess I owe you an explanation.”

Finally! “Yes, you do.”

Squaring his shoulders as though steeling himself for a blow, he said, “Harriet, I work for Europol.”

“Europol?” I was completely baffled. “A hot tub company?” What the hell did *that* explain?

His eyes rolled upward. “Euro-pol, not pool,” he retorted through clenched teeth. I could almost see the word “idiot” hovering above his lips, but he didn't say it. “The European Union's version of Interpol. It's a law enforcement agency.”

I must have looked completely blank.

“Jesus, Harriet. Listen to me for once.” He shook his head and let out along exasperated breath. “I'm a *spy*.”

Chapter Six

“A...a spy?” I could barely force the words out. I sprang off the bed, dragging the blanket with me. Holding the rough cover over my chest with one hand, I grabbed Will’s wrist with the other. “A spy?” I squeaked, louder this time.

Ohmigod! Here I was, in the nude and cavorting with spies. *My mother would not be pleased.* Fortunately, she would never know about it.

“Relax, I’m...well, *not exactly* a spy...by title, anyway,” he said in a low voice. “I said that to get your attention.”

“Well, you’ve got it.” I pulled my hand from his arm and clutched the blanket tighter against my chest. My heart was pounding again. *Cardiac Care Unit, here I come!* “What is *not exactly* a spy?”

Perspiration broke out on Will’s upper lip, and a muscle in his neck twitched. He looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable, but he didn’t break eye contact.

“Officially, I’m a Special Agent for Europol. Europol is the European Union’s Intelligence Agency.”

“Like the CIA?” Oh, that didn’t sound good to me. The title Special Agent had “international spy” written all over it.

He shook his head, but I wasn’t convinced.

“It’s *not* like the CIA. Our primary mission is to assist the member nations of the European Union to combat organized crime.” The frown line

between his eyes reappeared. In spite of everything, I sort of liked that frown line. It was sexy and matched the cleft in his chin.

I closed my eyes and remembered how the slight roughness of that chin had grazed my cheek. My knees turned to Jell-O.

"The term organized crime covers a lot of territory," he continued, giving me a chance to steady myself. "Not just theft, smuggling and illegal immigration, but crimes like drug trafficking, gun running, supplying weapons to hostile foreign countries, terrorism."

"But...but, you're an American, aren't you? Or was all this talk about military and Special Forces just bullshit?"

Will shook his head. "Of course I'm an American, and no, I wasn't bullshitting. Everything I told you is true. Europol hires qualified agents, regardless of nationality. Besides, the United States and the Europeans are supposed to cooperate with each other."

Icy needles prickled my arms and legs. My shoulder muscles tightened. "You used me!" I shouted at him. Used me for what, I wasn't sure, but I was consumed by righteous indignation. Somehow, I'd been violated...and not the way I wanted.

"No, I didn't use you. You were right in the goddamned middle of a potential crime situation and didn't even know it. I was trying to help you without blowing my cover."

I ignored his protests. "It was bad enough that you led *me* into danger, but you jeopardized all those innocent tourists. How could you?"

After that tirade, I could tell he was irritated. His lips thinned into a grim line. The brilliant blue of his eyes darkened to indigo and flashed. He reached out to take my arm, then pulled his hand back as though he feared he might hurt me.

"You were already in danger." He took a step back and began to pace, clenching and unclenching his fists by his sides. "Isn't Philpot's murder evidence of that?" He stopped to let that soak in for a second or two.

Murder is an ugly word. I'd been trying hard not to think of Archie's

demise as connected in any way with homicide, but there it was...out on the table at last.

He put his hands on my shoulders and shook me gently. "Did you know what to do? Did you know how to protect the rest of your people?" He shook his head. "No, you didn't. You didn't even suspect anything was wrong, did you?"

I compressed my lips. "No." My voice was tiny.

I really hate it when he's right.

A sigh escaped his delicious lips. "I *told* you at the beginning I didn't think Archie Philpot was an ordinary tourist. I had good reason to believe that and still do. We've been under cover investigating, ah, certain crimes. Philpot was implicated, indirectly, but we aren't sure of his involvement."

"It would have been nice if you'd explained that *before* I got thumped on the head and nearly drowned."

"Please believe me, Harriet. I couldn't."

"Then why are you telling me now?"

"I shouldn't be, but I...I don't want anything to happen to you."

He sounded sincere. I should have been touched by his concern, but all this was making my head hurt again. Actually, I *was* grateful, but still I planted my fists on my hips and sneered at him. "Gee whiz, that's sweet. What's changed in the last couple of hours?"

He frowned at me, then the touch of a grin tweaked his lips. *Jerk!* There was nothing amusing about this.

"You have to understand, most of the time the good of the many has to outweigh the good of the few," he explained.

Mental groan. "Oh, please, are we on *Star Trek* or something? I'm out of here."

Indignation overpowered my slight dizziness, and I stomped toward the door. Before I could turn the knob, his strong fingers closed around my wrist.

"Let me go." My voice was a feral growl. He wasn't going to push *me* around.

He released me at once. His face was inscrutable. "Look, I know you're furious with me, and in a way I don't blame you. And I know I don't have any right to tell you what to do, but you can't go like this."

I yanked open the door into the corridor. "Yeah? Why not?" I never back off from a challenge.

He looked me up and down. "Because," he said without even cracking a smile, "you're buck naked."

~ ~ ~

I blinked with surprise, then looked down at myself and gasped. He was right! My mouth moved but nothing came out. The blanket lay in a puddle at his feet where I'd dropped it. Although, I did notice the toe of his shoe resting on one corner.

One could only speculate what might have happened if a little Moroccan man hadn't arrived at that moment with our clothes. Seeing me with my face uncovered, not to mention the rest of me, the flustered Arab uttered a startled cry. He dropped our laundry in the middle of the hallway and ran down the corridor at about a hundred miles an hour.

Inside the cabin, with our backs to each other, Will and I dressed in silence. Already over my anger and still possessed by what seemed to be mutual lust, I had the urge to sneak a peek at him, since he already had the advantage of seeing me *au natural*. Instead, I restrained myself. I had mixed emotions about this man, and I didn't want my hormones taking over when I needed to think rationally.

When Will and I arrived on deck a few minutes later, my thirteen tourists were outside enjoying the sights, fresh air, and salt spray. Inside the boat's dining room/lounge, Archie Philpot was sitting in the corner, apparently asleep at a table, his head on his arms, with an open copy of Newsweek and a half empty glass of water in front of him.

On the other side of the large cabin, Essi Ahmed occupied another table. We joined him—all of us fully clothed—and conferred in whispers. At least, *I*

was whispering.

“Well, now,” I started out the conversation, trying to keep hysteria out of my voice, “please explain to me what’s going on.” I’d managed to calm myself down and it was in my nature to be polite.

Will and Essi Ahmed exchanged a long glance and both stared off into space. Neither said a word.

Oo-kay, so that’s how it’s going to be. I would have to take the lead.

“Feel free to nod if I get something right.” My cheerful tour director voice took the edge off the sarcasm. I assumed Will had informed his colleague or co-worker or whatever the Arab was, of our earlier conversation. “I gather that one of the crimes Europol investigates is international smuggling.”

The men both inclined their heads.

“Good, now we’re getting somewhere. Since Archie Philpot was possibly involved in an alleged smuggling ring, and since someone went to the trouble of poisoning him, it isn’t much of a stretch to assume that this same someone thinks Archie is carrying something he or she wants.”

Not a very articulate speech, but so what? That was as far as my powers of deduction took me, and I hoped the agents would fill in the rest.

“Hmm,” Will murmured.

I rolled my eyes. Obviously, William Talbot wasn’t going to tell me anything more. Intellectually, I didn’t blame him. *He* still had his career to think of. Emotionally, I was hurt that he didn’t trust me and miffed that he’d already ruined my shot at being a tour director—well, *maybe* a *wee tad* of the blame was mine. But since I was in Europe to experience life and decide on a long-term career, I might even look into the possibility of being a spy.

“I’ll take that as a yes, thank you.” I forced a smile. *Harriet Ruby, spy extraordinaire. That doesn’t sound bad.* “Now, let’s think this through. Will, you told me you knew from the beginning that Archie’s leg was a prosthetic.” I didn’t ask *how* he knew that, but I couldn’t help wondering.

“Bingo.”

“Could anyone else have known that?”

Will and his colleague looked at each other. Their facial expressions and body language spoke volumes, but the response was less than informative.

"It's possible," the Arab said, "*if* your Mr. Philpot was even aware that he was involved in a crime."

"He's not *my* Mr. Philpot," I retorted. "It would help a whole lot if you'd give me a glimmer of an idea what kind of smuggling we're talking about."

Again, the men looked at each other and said nothing.

I did the eye squint, nose scrunch thing and shot them my best Simon Legree scowl. All at once, right brain emotion overtook intellect and I was steaming mad again. I pushed back my chair and got up, ready to leave and go outside, but something held me back. I wasn't quite sure what. It was something Essi Ahmed had said just now. The words "if he was even aware" stuck in my mind. What did he mean by that?

The men looked at me with expectation. I couldn't guess what they were thinking.

"I need some water." I strode across the lounge to the makeshift bar. There was no bartender, so I opened the small refrigerator under the counter and helped myself to a bottle of Perrier. On my way back, I swung by Archie's table. Everything looked normal.

Don't get me wrong. He was still dead and all, but compared to what had happened already, things looked ordinary.

Then I wandered to the buffet table and checked out the leftovers. The food was pretty well picked over, and I decided my stomach wasn't ready for anything solid, anyway. By the time I sat down with the boys, my temper had cooled off.

"We were talking about Archie's leg," I reminded them. "If someone *did* know it was artificial, could they have planned his, ahem, encounter with the boats in advance?"

Both shook their heads. *Flop, flop* went Essi Ahmed's *keffiyah*. I had to cover my mouth and cough. "Most unlikely," Essi replied. "We didn't decide to come here until *after* the incident with the gypsies."

My eyes widened and my respect for the Arab went up several notches. “You got all this together in that short a time?” I asked in awe, waving my hand to indicate the sparse remains of the buffet lunch and the boat in general. “And a belly dancer? Oh, Mr. O’Reilly, we *need* you at Adventure Seekers Travel. Call me if you ever want a job.”

I meant that, and the man actually looked pleased.

Will must have decided to throw his career to the wind, for he said, “Whoever killed Archie is prepared for any contingency and willing to take chances.”

I considered his comment in light of the risk I knew he was taking. “In other words, we aren’t dealing with some two-bit criminal. This is a big operation with well-equipped professionals and a lot at stake. They were close to us and prepared to take advantage of Archie’s accident.”

My own words started my mind racing. If these smugglers were on our tails, and if Essi Ahmed could arrange the boat tour so quickly, why couldn’t they act just as fast?

Will smiled. “You must watch a lot of TV crime programs.” His tone carried a hint of amusement.

The comment interrupted my train of thought. I switched gears and wondered if he’d spoken for the benefit of eavesdroppers? I glanced around, but didn’t spot any microphones or video cameras. *But they would be hidden, wouldn’t they?*

In spite of Will’s almost-mocking tone, I didn’t sense that he was suggesting that my assessment was incorrect. But I was tired of playing games. I wanted answers. I wanted plans. I wanted out of this situation.

“Yes,” I replied in a voice that seemed to drip sugar syrup all over the table, “and I love spy movies and game shows. Please tell me if it’s animal, mineral, or vegetable?”

Will smiled but Essi Ahmed looked confused. Ah ha! This was the first time I’d been able to trip him up. Apparently, his background didn’t cover the parlor game of “Twenty Questions.”

"Vegetable," Will replied without hesitation.

So, it couldn't be guns or explosives or even jewelry that Archie was supposedly smuggling. Will's response meant it had to be drugs. At least I couldn't think of anything else it might be. I gazed across the room at the old gentleman hunched over the cocktail table and mentally chewed on the possibility. He didn't seem like the type, but what did I know? Still, the idea didn't set well with me.

"Harriet, was Archie carrying anything this morning when you went into the medina?" Will asked.

I shot him a puzzled frown. "I don't think so." Straining to remember, I sank my teeth into my lower lip and realized I hadn't taken the time to put on lipstick. Darn! Then something clicked in my brain.

"Wait a minute," I blurted out. "When I got to the fountain, when he was barfing, I noticed he'd lost his glasses and his walking stick."

"Walking stick?" Essi Ahmed asked.

"Yes, Archie limped—because of his leg, I guess—and always carried it. It seemed so much like a part of him that you didn't notice."

The Arab's eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth to say something, but he was waylaid by the boat's horn blasting three long hoots.

I covered my ears. "What's *that* all about?" I asked when it stopped.

Will stood up. "We're approaching our rendezvous with the ferry. Essi, what arrangements have you made for our guest?" He nodded toward Archie, still "asleep" at the table.

"My men are on the way with a wheel chair." Essi rose also, continuing to speak but in Arabic.

Wheel chair? I thought about the narrow planks we'd traversed to get onto the boat and wondered how they got a wheel chair on board. And when? I didn't dare ask.

Instead, I kept my mouth shut and watched the exchange between the two men as the panic welled up again inside me. My skin was suddenly too tight and it felt like ants were crawling all over me. I stood also and shook out

my legs.

Even if we got Archie from the tour boat onto the ferry, then what? I didn't remember any private cabins on the ship we'd taken across the strait to Morocco. We would have to keep him in the lounge or up on deck. With luck, they'd have an infirmary. But based on the events of this morning, expecting any luck was a bit of a stretch.

"I'll take care of it," I heard Essi assure Will. Then he turned heel and went out onto the deck.

I stepped to Will's side and slid the fingers of my hand around his elbow. His skin against mine sent an electric shock skittering along my nerve endings from the roots of my hair to my toenails. My hold on his arm tightened, and I pressed against his side. His gaze met mine and the intensity of our connection grew stronger.

Reining in my lustful thoughts, I whispered, "How are we going to keep up this ruse with Archie missing a leg? We can't 'walk him' like we did before. Besides, isn't he going to start getting stiff?" I envisioned the old man propped on a wheelchair, rigid and slanting like a board, without touching the seat. "Sooner or later he's going to start to smell and look...hmm, well, *dead*."

Chapter Seven

Clunk. Bang. Loud noises emanated from below us followed by an ominous grinding of gears. The cruise boat slowed. I detached myself from Will and ran to the window. The ship was still moving but it was more like bobbing with a slight forward momentum. “Now what?” I moaned.

Will, who had followed me, placed his hands on my shoulders. Another bolt of lightning jolted me. “Okay, Harriet, here’s what you have to do.”

Five minutes later, I was on deck, in sight of my entire tour group, conferring with the captain. Then I picked up the microphone and tapped it to get everyone’s attention. I was finding it harder and harder as the day wore on to psych myself into that preppie cheerleader mode, but I was still determined to be the best tour director ever. I smiled a toothy toothpaste-ad-type-grin, clapped my hands, and spoke with unbridled enthusiasm.

“Attention, everyone. I’ve spoken with our captain, and it seems the boat is having a bit of engine trouble.”

All the English speakers uttered a simultaneous “Oh, no” while the others rattled off questions in their respective languages. I waved my hands, open palms down, in *be calm* motions. “Will, please translate for the others.”

He nodded and strode to the place where the Swedish and Japanese tourists were gathered.

“Don’t worry. Apparently, the problem isn’t anything major, but it *is* going to require some time to fix. So instead of making you wait here, and risk

missing the ferry back to Spain, the Captain contacted the Port Authority and made arrangements to have the ferry to Gibraltar take us aboard.”

The air vibrated with questions from all directions. I tapped the microphone again. Silence reigned. “Please, let’s not all speak at once. The ferry will be here in ten or fifteen minutes, so you’ll need to gather all your things and be ready to debark.”

“Mez Boobie?” Kimiko, the female third of the Bon Jovi triad, called out and waved her hand.

“Miss *Ruby*,” I muttered. It was hopeless. Bon Jovi had infected everyone. “Just call me Harriet. What’s your question, Kim?”

“How we get our...ah, bandage?”

Befuddled, I stared at her while I ran a mental word check. “Oh, your baggage? Good question. I’m sure everyone’s concerned about that. I spoke on the phone with our driver Mario, and there was enough time for him to catch the ferry boat that’s picking us up.” Behind my back, I crossed the fingers of my left hand. “We’ll board our bus on the ferry, get off in Gibraltar, and we’re back on schedule.”

Yeah, right.

“Weren’t we supposed to take the ferry back to Spain?” asked one of the Swedes.

I smiled and tried not to sound patronizing. “Yes, Sven, the original itinerary *did* call for us to take the ferry back to Algeciras, but Gibraltar isn’t that far. We’ll still spend tonight at the same hotel in Algeciras as the night before last. The only difference is that we’ll be landing in Gibraltar.” Smiling, I pointed at another hand in the air. “Yes, Margie?”

“How are we going to get onto the ferry? I mean, I remember it being a lot higher than this boat.”

R-right. I dredged up the preppie smile again. “Yes, it is. The ferry will lower a lifeboat and take us up in that. Isn’t that exciting? But all of us must be very cautious getting on and off.”

Can I improvise, or what?

If Adventure Seekers Travel knew this was happening, not only would I be booted out on my rear end, but there would be several heart attacks among the top executives. What was the old saying about acting first and begging forgiveness afterward? Very soon, I was going to have to call the office with my daily report. I could only hope that by then I'd be at the forgiveness stage.

"What about Archie Philpot?" Margie asked. "Is he going to be able to get into the life boat with...er, without his leg?"

I shook my head. Instinctively, heartfelt distress turned the corners of my mouth down, along with the preppie volume. "No, I'm afraid he's confined to a wheelchair." If only that were the worst of it. I'd genuinely liked the old man. "The rest of us will go up first. They'll have to lower the life boat a second time to get the wheel chair in."

Edith Johnson chewed at her lower lip. "Poor Archie. He's been terribly quiet since he got back on the bus. He's hardly said a word."

Will and I exchanged a glance, and I wondered if Edith was visiting the same planet her husband's mind was vacationing on lately.

"He's been very sick," I said quickly. "Besides not feeling well and being very weak, he had quite a bad shock when he lost his prosthetic. I think someone from London is meeting us in Gibraltar to take him home."

Like maybe the coroner.

The three American women grouped together. "Maybe we ought to go talk to him," Margie said to the others. "You know, cheer him up a bit."

Uh-oh! I took Margie by the arm. "No, it's not a good idea to disturb him. I doubt if he'll talk." *Not bloody likely.* I cleared my throat. "Why don't you go get your belongings? This ought to be fun. You know, the life boat and all."

Tittering among themselves, my ladies headed off toward the lounge, followed by their husbands and the others. Once they were all inside, talking about who-knows-what, I reconnoitered with Will.

"What *do* you intend to do with Archie?"

"Just what you said," he replied, shrugging those broad shoulders. I suppressed a moan. Every time he did that, those damned butterflies in my

stomach turned handsprings and I'd lose my train of thought. "You go up with your group. Get them dispersed and off the deck as quickly as you can, then wait for me. I'd rather not have an audience when we get Archie up to the ferry deck. We want to stay low-key."

He glanced at the window into the lounge, paused, and looked again. "Harriet, your people are looking at us. You'd better smile. Pretend everything is routine."

I pasted on the toothy grin, looked in the window, and did a finger wave. Bon Jovi Takamura and Edith Johnson waved back. "This is *not* routine," I insisted through the stiff smile.

He grinned back. "All right, then pretend everything is going to be all right. Laugh a little."

Crossing my fingers behind my back, I took a deep breath and forced a pathetic laugh. Ha, ha, ha. Lucky for me no one but Will heard me.

"That's better. Now kiss me."

My mouth and some other body parts pleaded for that opportunity. Now was not the time, my left-brain told them. "In your dreams, smartass."

He raised one eyebrow and grinned. "It was worth a try."

Lust turned my knees to water. "I'll definitely take a rain check."

This time he chuckled. The pleasant sound of it started deep in his chest and rumbled to the surface, rippling muscles all the way. *Ohmigod*.

"That makes two rain checks," he told me. "By the time this is over, you're going to owe me big time, and I intend to collect."

Yes, yes, yes! He had such a nice way of distracting me from my problems.

A ship's horn blasted through the air, nearly deafening me and rattling the windows, and the ferry sailed into sight. I snapped my mouth closed and ran my sleeve across my chin, just in case I'd been drooling.

"Good timing," I said to him. "I was just about to get naked."

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The ferry stopped. Once our captain had maneuvered the tour boat into position beside it, our engines cut off, and the crew of the ferry lowered the lifeboat without delay. Three crewmen helped my thirteen tourists climb aboard, a process less risky, I decided, than crossing from one tour boat to the next at the dock.

While they were boarding, Essi Ahmed appeared out of nowhere, conversed with Will, and then disappeared again. Will motioned me aside.

"Our objective here is to attract as little attention as possible. One of the officers on the ferry is a Europol agent. He's made the arrangements, *but* he is the only one on board who knows what's really happening. The captain and crew believe this is a genuine rescue or a pop-quiz to test their procedures."

I was about to ask which officer, then decided if Will wanted me to know, he'd tell me. Still, my feathers were a bit ruffled. Didn't he trust me? After all I'd been through?

Then I asked myself, *would I trust me?* Since the answer was *no, not today*, I confined my reaction to a grimace. "Aren't people on the ferry likely to ask questions? I can't keep my group from talking, you know."

"That's no problem. Your folks will say the tour boat had engine problems and the ferry rescued them. That's the same story that was given to the ferry Captain, crew, and passengers."

"Is Mario on board with the bus?" I crossed my fingers again. It was getting to be a habit.

He nodded and gestured toward the lifeboat. "It looks like they're all in. You'd better get on board. See you in a while."

As I followed my group, I couldn't help wondering if Mario was an innocent bystander, like I was, or if he was part of the international intrigue scene. Earlier, I was bugged when he allowed Will to accompany the tour, although we both knew it was against company policy. Now, his apparent friendliness with Will and Essi Ahmed niggled at the back of my mind.

I took a seat in the stern next to one of the crew members. The other two were positioned in the bow. Sometimes I do what I'm told without questioning.

Not often, but this was one of those occasions. I was playing out of my league and I knew it.

Orders were shouted back and forth and into small communication devices that looked like cell phones or maybe miniature walkie-talkies. After a grinding sound, a motor somewhere hummed to life. The cables holding the lifeboat pulled taut and we began to move upward at a slow but even pace. In spite of a slight rocking motion, my charges seemed to be enjoying themselves. They pointed, laughed, chattered, and acted very much at ease with the situation. I had to admit, this trip *was* going to be something to talk about when they got home.

Edith Johnson, who was sitting near the bow, turned and thrust her camera toward Margie. "Hey, would you take our picture? Just push this button right here. This is so exciting."

"Sure."

While Margie Feldman studied the settings, Edith grabbed her husband by his arm and sprang to her feet, pulling him up along with her. "C'mon, honey."

The sudden motion sent the lifeboat rocking as it hung suspended by the cables at its bow and stern.

"Photographs? Yes, yes," Bon Jovi cried with delight. He and his two companions thrust their three cameras at Sven Ericsson, the Swede sitting next to them, and stood up. Bon Jovi bowed. "Picture, thank you, yes?"

"Please, sit down," the three crew members called out at the same time.

"Here, here." Bon Jovi motioned to his two companions as he scrambled to the side of the boat where Edith and Rod Johnson were already standing. "Better. Big ship behind, yes?"

As the other two joined him, the lifeboat tipped in that direction.

"Eek!" Edith shrieked as she teetered backwards. Margie let out a cry. Her hand shot out, grasped the front of Edith's shirt and pulled. *R-rip-pp* went the shirt. Two buttons flew off. One smacked Bob Feldman on the cheek. The other hit the nearby crew member in the eye.

"Ow!" Instinctively his hand flew up to his face. The cable he'd been holding slipped and the lifeboat listed to the opposite side.

Edith, her lacy bra and boobs immodestly exposed, lurched forward and fell on Margie, knocking her off the seat into the bottom of the lifeboat. Rod landed on top of both of them. In the confusion, Edith's camera disappeared over the side.

"Camera!" Bon Jovi squealed in distress, appalled at the loss of such a sacred icon. He scrambled to the side and leaned over to watch it splash into the sea.

"Eek!" Edith screamed again. She pushed off her husband and stepped on Margie to reach the seat. There, with her knees on the bench and her hands clamped to the side of the boat, she peered over the edge and wailed. "Oh, no. All my photos. Rod, you've got to save my camera."

"Sit down, all of you," I shouted, while the crew members struggled to get things under control. By now, half the passengers on the ferry were hanging over the rails above us, shouting and cheering.

Without any warning, Rod Johnson returned from his vacation planet or wherever it was his mind kept sneaking off to visit. He clambered back into his seat, threw his arms around Edith's waist, and heaved her down onto the bench.

"Dammit, Edith, I'm *not* going after your camera, so forget it. Just sit down and *shut up!*"

All activity in the lifeboat ceased. No one moved. The sudden silence was deafening. As loud as the cheer we all wanted to give. I wanted to shout my personal congratulations to Rod, but I didn't move. In that momentary lull, the lifeboat straightened and steadied. One of the crew ordered everyone to their seats. With subdued murmurings, everyone settled on the benches and we made the rest of the ascent without any further incidents.

Our arrival was greeted with great interest and joviality on the part of the ferry passengers. However, the officer who waited with them stood so straight and stiff that I suspected he had a steel rod up his...ah...back. From the look

on his face, I was sure he was there to escort us all to the brig, never to be heard from again. Instead, he gave my tourists a pithy “welcome aboard” and asked that I report to the bridge to take care of some official business before I left the ship.

Undaunted by the thought of that yet-to-come meeting, I led my tourists to a diagram of the ship posted on the nearby wall and pointed out all the wonderful places they could go. The restrooms, the snack bar and buffet, the upper decks, and the interior lounge. *Wow!* We agreed on a meeting time and place and everyone took off, except the Bon Jovi Three.

“Mez Boobies, photo please.” Bon Jovi tried to hand me his camera.

“Please, call me Harriet,” I snapped at him. I clenched and unclenched my hands and held myself back from wrapping my fingers around his neck and squeezing until he either said “Harriet Ruby” in clear English or turned blue and expired. In my current mood, I was, unkindly, hoping for the latter.

“Actually, this isn’t the best place to take pictures. Why don’t you go to the upper level where you can get shots with Gibraltar in the background? Up those steps and to the left.” I took him by the arm and practically shoved him toward the metal staircase.

Three steps up, he turned toward me and bowed. I knew he was going to say something, and I didn’t want to hear it. I must have given him a look that would cut diamonds, for he flushed and scurried up after his friends, or relatives, or whatever they were. I hadn’t figured out the relationship, but they all had Takamura as a last name and shared a room together.

Shortly after I’d cleared the deck, the lifeboat arrived with Archie Philpot in a wheelchair, sporting a hat pulled low over his forehead, sunglasses, and a lap robe across his knees. In no time, he was unloaded. Will thanked the crew, slipped each of them a generous tip, and turned his attention to me.

“Looks like getting your buddy Archie up here was cake compared to the rest of your group.”

“Very funny.” I failed to see the humor in nearly losing several people overboard. As we watched, the ubiquitous Essi Ahmed and another man lifted

Archie and his wheelchair over the lip across the door and into the interior of the ship.

"This reminds me of a movie I saw once." I cringed and wrinkled my nose. "Where are they taking him? Like I said before, he's starting to look...deceased."

Will gave me that delicious shrug that always started my heart pounding. "Don't worry, they're going to stow him in the walk-in freezer on the crew's deck for the rest of the trip."

"The *freezer*?"

"Trust me, Harriet. He won't mind."

"I didn't mean *that*. But won't he get solid or something? We can't have him thawing out all over the place."

He shot me an incredulous look and rolled his eyes. "We're only eight or ten miles from Gibraltar. He can't freeze solid in that short a time. Come on, I think you're getting light headed. You need something to eat."

Now that he mentioned it, the mere thought of food made my stomach rumble. I remembered that I'd been unconscious for lunch and only had a cup of coffee and a bite of muffin before we left the hotel in Tangier this morning.

This morning? A shiver ran through me. Was it only this morning that we went to the medina in Tangier? Hours ago, not days? Was it possible that I'd only met Will Talbot this morning? I looked into his eyes, into those mesmerizing blue pools, and molten fire coursed through my arteries. My toes curled and the butterflies took up gymnastics again. This was definitely lust-at-first-sight.

"Eating sounds like a good idea." I envisioned my teeth sinking into him. "Is there some place we can go?"

His nostrils flared with anticipation and desire. He cocked his head, and a little smile twisted the corners of his firm, delicious lips. I'd swear the man was a mind reader.

"Rain check, remember?" His voice was low and sexy. He moved closer, almost touching, lifted a strand of my unruly hair and tucked it behind my ear.

His warm sweet breath caressed my cheek. Then with a low sound in the back of his throat, he stepped back and took my hand. "Let's go see what they have on the menu."

I feared I was losing my ability for independent thought, for questioning, for making my own decisions. I let him lead me into the ship, up the stairs, and finally into a dining room with a buffet. It was crowded with passengers lingering over coffee and staring out the big windows at the Strait of Gibraltar.

On the threshold, I sniffed the air. "Smells delicious."

The food beckoned to me. My feet moved of their own volition toward the buffet, and I was powerless to stop them. Will followed and together we cased the offerings.

The tables, arranged to accommodate a line on each side, held stainless steel pans perched above lighted containers of Sterno. While Will poured himself a cup of coffee, I picked up a plate, utensils, and a handful of paper napkins. As I studied the delicacies, I spotted fried eggplant on the other side.

"One of my favorites." *And it's a vegetable, right?*

I reached across with my plate and napkins in one hand and fork in the other. As I stabbed several slices of eggplant, a waiter came by, set a fresh pot of coffee on a hot plate, and whisked away the empty pan directly in front of me. Now, what else looked good?

Something burned me.

"Ouch!" I cried a bit too loudly. I pulled my hand back, glancing around to see what I'd touched. I thought I'd brushed against the hot coffee pot. Instead, the napkins I held under my plate were merrily blazing away, sending sparks into the air and crinkling black ash onto the buffet table.

"I'm on fire!" I cried dropping the plate. It smashed on the floor and shattered, sending shards of pottery and eggplant in all directions.

Will rushed to my side and stamped on the napkins—now burning on the floor—to put them out.

"What happened?" I asked, watching him stomp and twist his shoe.

Behind me, the sound level of chatter in the dining room had gone up

several decibels as diners tried to find out what was causing the ruckus or chortling because they'd witnessed the show. *Well, poop.* Two waiters dashed toward us, screeching in Arabic and Spanish and running around in confusion as though the whole ship was on fire.

Will looked at me and shook his head. "You never disappoint me. You must have brushed your napkins across the burner."

Frowning, I looked back at the table with my mouth open and spotted the exposed Sterno container.

"Aw, jeez." My cheeks burned with embarrassment. I hung my head...and shrieked. "Will!"

He dropped into an alert stance, ready to take on all comers. "What?"

"Your pants! They're on fire."

He glanced down at the burning cuff of his slacks and the blazing paper napkin stuck to the sole of his shoe. He let out a cry and began slapping at the flames with his hand.

Thinking only about dousing the flames, I snatched up the pot of coffee and threw the contents on him.

"Oww!" he howled and followed with a string of curse words, blessedly delivered in a foreign language I didn't understand. He was doubled over groaning and hopping around at the same time.

"Oh, Will, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Be careful or you'll slip." I sincerely hoped I hadn't aimed too high with the hot coffee.

He turned toward me with a growl, his feet skidding on the wet floor. He caught at a table and kept himself from falling flat on his back in the mess.

There was coffee all over Will and all over the floor, along with pieces of glass—because I'd apparently dropped the carafe without realizing it—eggplant and screaming waiters in white jackets and black pants. Several were already on their hands and knees wiping the linoleum with cleaning rags. Two others were toweling off Will's legs.

Everyone in the dining room was standing up and pointing. All I wanted was to cover my face and get out of there. After an eternity of confusion, when

the floor was safe to walk on and Will's pain had apparently subsided, he glared at me, his blue eyes cold as steel and overflowing with mayhem, and pointed at the floor directly in front of him.

"Come here," he commanded. One pant leg was singed, both were soaked and stained up to the knees. His hair was mussed, and he was breathing in short hard pants through gritted teeth. A muscle in his neck twitched furiously.

I took a step back and cowered. The conversation around us died as the spectators held a collective breath and waited to see what would happen. I didn't think he would kill me right there in front of everyone, but still, I couldn't be sure. Nothing in my prior life had prepared me for anything like today.

There was no place to run, so I forced my feet to move in tiny steps until I was standing in front of him. Instead of grasping me by the earlobe the way my mother used to do when I was in big trouble, he clamped his strong fingers around my wrist with incredible force, spun me around, and marched me in front of him toward the door.

Squish, squish. He stopped. Every eye in the room was on us. *Squish, squish, squish.* His soaked shoes protested with each step. I heard them, he heard them, and so did everyone else. It felt like we had to squish for about a mile before we were out of the room.

By the time we reached the outside deck, my hand was numb, but he didn't let me go or ease his grip. He half-dragged me away from everyone in sight, backed me up against the wall and planted his palms flat against the surface on either side of my head. I was trapped.

He leaned forward, his grim face only inches from mine.

"Harriet." He said my name angrily. "This is *not* what I meant when I told you to avoid attracting attention."

Chapter Eight

I scrunched my shoulders to make myself as small as possible. "Are you going to kill me right here?" I asked in a tiny voice.

Will leaned forward and considered me through narrowed eyes. "I wasn't planning to, but now that you've brought it up, it might be a good idea. You're a menace to society. I guess I could throw you overboard."

He looked dead serious, though not quite as angry as before, and his voice was less intense.

"You wouldn't get away with it, you know. My group is bound to miss me. Someone will suspect."

He burst out laughing. Then, without moving his hands, leaned down and kissed my upturned lips. Fireworks went off inside me.

"I can't stay mad at you." His whisper was rough in my ear. His breath tickled and sent shivers through my body. He smelled like musk with an undertone of coffee and burned wool. "Besides, I have other plans."

Yikes.

"But we can't stay here." He pulled himself away from the bulkhead and took my hand.

I started to ask why, but he put a finger to my lips. "Shh. You know, I *wasn't* kidding when I asked you not to attract attention." He pulled me after him back inside the ferry and into a stairwell. "You almost got killed once. Whoever is responsible may try again."

Well, that's a turn off.

As we descended into the bowels of the ship, our footsteps *clunk-clunked* on the metal steps and reverberated off the metal hull. I wanted to cover my ears but was afraid to let go of his hand, and I needed the other to hold onto the banister.

"Do you think this murderer is deaf?" I asked finally. Wherever we were going—and the odor of wet camels and motor oil gave me the distinct impression our destination *wasn't* the tourists' lounge—Will didn't seem to be worried about the racket we were making.

He stopped short. "Do you have a better idea?" I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

"Isn't there an elevator?"

"Not in this part of the ship. They expect the crew to hoof it."

"Oh. Well, we could take off our shoes."

His lips curled into a smile. Gee, he was gorgeous.

"Good thinking. I knew there was a reason I didn't throw you overboard."

"Ha, ha. Cute. You adore me. You can't resist me. *That's* the reason you didn't throw me overboard."

He smiled a killer smile. "Yeah, that too."

We slipped off our shoes. Unfortunately, since we couldn't abandon them in the stairwell for the bad guys to find, we had to carry them. I had to give up Will's hand or let go of the railing, so...I grabbed onto him again and hoped he would break my fall if it was necessary. Besides, the thought of landing on top on him wasn't so bad, assuming, of course, that I didn't knock him out in the process. Unconsciousness is bad for the libido.

Since I was unaccustomed to really bad things happening to me, I was able to make light of the situation as long as I didn't think about it. Like, what could happen? *Yeah, right.* And what about poor old Archie?

We started down again, this time in our socks. The deafening noise was gone, but the cold metal made my feet numb in two seconds. In five seconds,

they ached with the intense burning pain you get when you leave your hand in ice water. The only time I was aware of even having toes was when I stubbed one—that hurt—which happened too often because the numbness made me clumsy. That didn't help my already-rattled nerves, and I prayed this tub had a bottom somewhere. *I'm not registered as a tour director in China.*

"Why do you think someone is after *me*?" I asked in a whisper as we passed the landing and started down the next flight.

"You're the one who went in after Archie Philpot's leg. Why would you do that unless you knew there was something hidden in it?"

"Hidden in it?" My voice rose in surprise. The thought had never entered my now-befuddled mind. I mean, usually I'm a quick study, but today hadn't exactly been my day. "How? I mean, it's solid, isn't it?"

He stopped and stared at me, muttering under his breath. He had that damned incredulous expression on his face again.

"Jesus, Harriet. Prosthetics *are* made of metal, but they're not solid. Even using the lightest materials, like carbon fiber and silicone, a solid leg would weigh so much a person couldn't lift it to walk. And it certainly wouldn't float."

Mr. Science. He sounded like he was lecturing to a group of students from a low-gravity planet in another galaxy.

"I know *that*," I said, on the defensive, "but there are mechanisms inside that move the parts, aren't there? And they take up room, so..."

"On second thought, maybe I'm wrong," he interrupted and rolled his eyes. "They might *not* be after you."

With that pointed comment delivered, he raced down the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. My legs had to move twice as fast as his long ones to keep up. I was panting by the time we reached the bottom.

There we halted in front of a door labeled Vehicle Parking Deck. Will waited until I'd caught my breath, then asked, in an offhand manner, "By the way, do you have a key to the luggage compartment under the bus?"

Now it was my turn to be puzzled. "Yes, in my backpack. Mario and I

both have keys. Why?”

“Good, we’ll go to your bus. I want to take a look at the luggage.”

“To the bus?” I cried, forgetting to keep my voice down. “You mean we’re not trying to get away from...from you-know-who?” The word *bus* echoed up and down the stairwell.

“Shh.” Air hissed through his teeth. “If I knew *who*, then it wouldn’t be necessary to use stealth, which you have apparently forgotten means ‘secret or evading detection.’ I’m afraid you aren’t much of a spy.”

Rats. I’d liked the sound of Harriet Ruby, spy extraordinaire. I dug in my heels and planted my fists, still clutching my shoes, on my hips. “That’s because I am *not* a spy. I’m a tour director.” My tone was so acid it almost burned my throat. “Tour directors are *supposed* to be loud. You don’t have to insult me just because I shouted a little.”

His eyes rolled upward again and he said nothing. Already the man knew me well enough to know I abhor silence. The void eats away at me and forces things out of my mouth.

“And,” I blurted out, “a tour director is *not* supposed to let a perfect stranger rummage in the bus’s luggage compartment.”

“I appreciate the *perfect* part,” he drawled, “but I hardly think I’m a stranger. Remember, I’ve seen you naked.” He held up two fingers. “Twice.”

“Well, gee whiz. That takes care of everything, doesn’t it?”

At that moment, I had the urge to do something incredibly juvenile, like kick him in the shins. *Seen me naked!* And I hadn’t even had a glimpse of him. *That’s so unfair.*

“I’m serious, Will. I only know what you’ve told me. You could be anybody. An international jewel thief, Prince Edward, even a *real* spy. How would I know?”

I suppose my emphasis on the word *real* was a tad tacky, and I knew at once he’d taken offense.

His stare was absolutely glacial. “You wouldn’t know. It’s a little late to check my identification, but if you want to call your office, they can verify my

credentials with Europol's Public Relations people. Do you want the phone number?"

Now *that* was a dilemma. I gazed at my unshod feet. "No. You know I don't dare call my company until...until I've gotten rid of Archie."

"You're a little late. Someone already beat you to the punch."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The relaxed expression on his face assured me that my nasty comment was forgiven, chalked off to the tension in the air. However, being a person who never lets well enough alone, to use the old cliché, I said, "You're quite the comic, aren't you? I meant, until I release the corpse to the proper authorities. Is that acceptable?"

"That's worth an A in spy-talk." He formed his fingers into a circle for an okay sign.

"Flattering a tour director won't get you anywhere." I hoped he could tell I was teasing. "You're just trying to butter me up so I'll let you search our luggage. What are you looking for?"

"I'm only interested in Archie's luggage. And I'm looking for something connected with smuggling."

"Can you get his bags open if... " *Duh!* He was a spy, right? I reconsidered and did a mental one eighty *and* a mental finger cross just to be on the safe side. I was now up to my hairline in violations of company rules, so what was one more? "Look, if Mario and I can be there to keep an eye on things, I guess it's all right to let you open his bags."

"Fine," he agreed and opened the door. "Let's find the bus."

We stepped into the part of the ferry where the vehicles were parked during passage across the Strait of Gibraltar. The door closed behind us with a loud clank. My eyes widened. The parking deck was quiet and deserted for the moment, but it was packed with cars, trucks, motor coaches, and motorcycles.

Hundreds of them, all lined up bumper to bumper, like rows of corn on a cob.

I'd always thought the Adventure Seekers purple and pink buses were so unique when it came to color, that I could spot one anywhere. But the hold

was so crammed full of vehicles and the light so diffused I couldn't distinguish the colors or see the details unless I was quite close.

There was no way I was going to find our bus in this mess unless I walked down every row.

"This could take forever. I'm going to have to call Mario." I put my shoes on and proceeded to rummage in my backpack for my cell phone, hoping it could pick up a signal. I found it and punched in all the numbers except the last one.

Chewing at my bottom lip, I lowered the phone and put my hand on Will's arm. "I need to ask you something. Did you know Mario before all this?" I waved the phone in a sweeping gesture meant to take in the ferry and everything that had happened that day.

His hands cupped my face, one finger tracing a swirling pattern on my cheek. "People who work in the same geographic area all the time run into each other," was the vague reply.

What is that answer supposed to mean? What's wrong with a simple yes or no? I closed my eyes for a moment and huffed out a sigh. Served me right for being a smartass sometimes, but he was *not* taking me seriously.

"Look, Will, I really *do* believe you're who you say you are," I whispered. "And I know that what you do is not only important but also secret." I hesitated and took a deep breath. It was important that he level with me on this. "But I need to know if Mario is...if he's in the same business you are?"

Nary a flicker showed in those hypnotic blue eyes. "We're both in transportation, you might say. We've met a few times, exchanged a few words."

I pulled away and turned my back so he wouldn't see how near I was to tears. Maybe my question sounded silly to him, but it was important to me. Someone might be trying to kill me, and I didn't know who I could trust. I was tired, scared, and had thirteen other human beings I was responsible for. I couldn't allow anything to happen to them.

And I was afraid I might never see Will again after this ordeal was over, however it ended.

Gentle hands on my shoulders turned me around. A frown puckered his brow. His lips were thin and tight with concern. "Are you okay?"

"No, I...I'm not. I don't like being played for a fool," I stuttered, feeling the sting of tears behind my eyes. My headache was coming back, boiling at the back of my skull like a teakettle. I tried to turn my head away so he wouldn't see the moisture welling, but he wouldn't let me.

"Spy's honor." He held up two fingers. "The most I can tell you is that we *have* met before. As far as I know, he's really a bus driver with an impeccable record, and a concerned citizen who is alert and has good eyes and ears."

Relief flooded through me. I nodded, but it took a lot of effort to keep my voice steady. "Bottom line. Can I trust him?"

Will seemed troubled. He compressed his lips and murmured, "As far as I know."

"Thanks." I'm afraid my smile was feeble. Still, I cleared my cell phone and re-dialed Mario's number, completing it this time. The signal was strong. It rang and rang and rang.

Finally, I clicked the phone closed. "No answer." My voice trembled. My chest tightened with worry. "When he's not with the group, Mario always stays with the bus."

"Maybe he's taking a nap," Will suggested, apparently picking up my sense of unease.

"I doubt it. We'd better look for him." Even to myself I sounded anxious. "When I spoke with him earlier, he expected to be one of the last coaches to board the ferry. That means he's parked toward the end of one of these rows. Come on."

I took off, almost running, toward the stern of the ship. Will followed, his reassuring footsteps behind me. As I approached the location where I thought our bus might be parked, I heard voices and the clank of the metal door into the stairwell. Instinctively, I hunkered down. I didn't know who I was hiding from but Will's comment that I might be a target hadn't left my mind for one

instant.

Will caught up to me and took my arm. "We must be getting close to port. People are starting to come back to their cars. We need to find the bus soon if we're going to have time to look in those suitcases."

We? Like it was my idea? "I'm sure it's back here somewhere."

Nearby footsteps nearly sent me through the roof. Another four tourists passed us, searching for their vehicle.

"Let me go ahead." Will took the lead.

Feelings of foreboding settled over me like a dark mist. I hurried to keep up and tried not to take my eyes off his back, but I couldn't do that and search for the bus at the same time.

Then I saw it, one row over, in all its purple and pink glory. Mercy, it was ugly.

"Will, I see the bus. It's over there."

He was several vehicle-lengths ahead of me. He turned and nodded at me with a finger to his lips, then made "keep low" motions with his hand.

Oops. As I crouched down to wait for him, a twinge of pain shot down my spine and spread across my lower back. Silently I cursed the gypsies. The Adventure Seekers bus was one row over, but the vehicles were packed so tight I knew we couldn't squeeze between them. To get to it, we would have to walk back the way we'd come and around the end of the row.

When I turned to look for Will, he was talking to two young women in shorts who were begging him to help them find their car. He tried to put them off, but they wouldn't shake loose. One of them had her hand on his arm and looked determined to haul him away.

If my glare could have killed, they would have disembarked the ferry in a hearse. Since that wasn't the going to be the case, I signaled to him that I was going on ahead. He looked at the girl, shook his head, and removed her hand. Then, he took a step in my direction. I figured he would catch up with me, and I was anxious to find out what was going on with Mario.

As I rounded the end of the row, I glimpsed movement inside the bus.

My heart immediately dropped to my knees, then rebounded and lodged in my adenoids. I turned on my heel and scurried to take cover behind the SUV at the end of the row. With my body flattened against it, I sneaked a peek through the tinted window. Because of the direction of the light, I could see without being seen.

In the next instant, the bus door opened and a man jumped down the steps so fast he almost tumbled. I held my breath as he ran toward me. When he got near the SUV, I dropped to my hands and knees.

My heart pounded, blood roared in my ears, everything around me seemed to spin. I lowered my head, hoping to stave off the dizziness. If he comes into this row, I thought, I'll have to run. The fumes lingering under the car choked me. My throat burned inside. I stifled the need to cough. My eyes watered.

I heard the man's quick footfalls coming closer.

A loud sound, like a metal door slamming, rang out from the other end of the deck. Right in front of my eyes, on the other side of the car I was looking under, the man's feet came to a sliding halt. He didn't move. All I could see were his black and white Nikes and the bottoms of his Levis. I didn't hear anything.

With one hand over my mouth to muffle my ragged breathing, I used the other to balance myself against the SUV and lift my body. Then I inched backward with the intent of hiding behind the rear tire.

My back, already strained from the gypsy attack and lifting Archie's body, sent a sharp spasm of pain through me. I strangled a cry. Then one of my legs cramped. Some primal instinct to put weight on my leg muscles shot me into a standing position.

And through the dark glass of the SUV, I saw the man's face. He looked familiar but I couldn't place him.

Then he took off so fast I feared he'd heard me. I let out a long sigh of relief when I realized he was running in the opposite direction. There was another loud bang as the distant door slammed again, then nothing.

I sagged against the car. My legs gave out and I slid down the side and crumpled on the pavement.

“Harriet?”

I heard my name, but at first, it didn’t register. The second time he spoke, I realized Will was standing over me. Placing one hand in his, I grasped the door handle of the car with the other and pulled myself to my feet.

“What happened?”

His question surprised me. “Didn’t you see?” I thought he’d been right behind me most of the time. It had all happened so fast and I hadn’t been thinking clearly.

“No, I’m sorry. I got here as soon as I could.”

“There was a man,” I whispered. “He’s gone now, but ...Oh, Will, he was in our bus.”

He uttered a few choice expletives. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” I forced my voice to remain steady. Now that the danger was over and Will was with me, I *was* all right, except for my aching back. I straightened and brushed the dirt off my clothes. Of course, I was all right.

Then I threw myself into his arms and burst into tears.

Chapter Nine

Two minutes later, we approached the bus with caution, Will in the lead. A few of our fellow travelers had entered the parking area, but we weren't that far from Gibraltar now. Soon everyone would be down here.

The door to the coach stood open like a dark maw.

"I don't like this," I whispered, my voice catching. "Mario would never go off and leave the door open." I worried that I might be heading for another meltdown.

"Like I said, he might be taking a nap." In spite of Will's airy tone, he didn't sound all that convinced. "Are you sure the man came out of *your* bus?"

I scrunched up my face like I'd eaten something sour and pointed. "Of course, I'm sure. Once I spotted it, there was no mistaking, and I was practically in front of it. Who else has a pink and purple bus?"

"Good point. I'll go in first." Will reached in his pocket and pulled out a tiny flashlight, then mounted the steps.

I would have preferred to wait outside, but I was curious and antsy about being alone. I scurried up behind him, hoping the flashlight was also a miniature gun. Just in case.

The inside of the coach was dim. Without turning on the flash, Will took a few steps down the aisle, his eyes sweeping the seats and overhead bins. About a third of the way, he stopped.

The flashlight went on. "Oh, shit!" His voice was almost inaudible, but I

heard the expletive.

“What?” I cried and tried to push him aside so I could see. At the same time, I didn’t want to know. A body lay across the wide rear seat, half on the floor. I let out a little squeak and cried, “*Ohmigod*, is it Mario? Is he dead?”

As any good Europol agent would do, Will held me back with his hands firmly planted on my shoulders. “Shh.”

I struggled to push him away but he had a good grip on me. He gave me a little shake. “Please don’t scream. You sound like Edith Johnson.”

Well, he sure knew how to shut *me* up, didn’t he?

He patted my hand. “Let me check it out. Stay here and don’t jump to conclusions.”

Scream? Me? Well, I did whimper, but just a little.

“I have to look. I’m—”

He held up his palm for me to stop. “Don’t say you’re responsible for him. You’re not. We’re not even sure it’s Mario. Stay here a minute, okay?”

He left me with my mouth hanging open and a mishmash of protests bubbling inside. Since none of them made much sense, I sank onto the nearest seat, tipped my head back, and closed my eyes. My body was in a tumult, but I was getting used to the erratic thumping of my heart and the raspiness of my labored breathing. The butterflies performing acrobatics in my stomach and the elephant sitting on my chest were like old buddies.

Would this ever end? In one day, everything in my life had turned upside down. Crazy events like this make a person think. I’d always been a calm, responsible, dependable, and capable person. Short, I admit, but good looking—well, at least cute—and I had a knockout figure. I was athletic and gave a hundred and twenty percent to everything I did. The best that could be done. I was smart, educated, independent, but, nonetheless, somewhat ordinary and predictable. Now look at me. What had I done wrong?

“Ugh!” came a moan from behind me. My feet touched the floor. Motion claimed me before I was aware I was up and running.

Mario perched on the back seat making guttural grunt-groan sounds.

With one hand holding the back of his head, he leaned over like he might throw up.

Will stopped me before I crashed into them. "Relax. He's okay."

"There's blood," I whispered. My voice had a sharp edge to it in spite of the muted tone. The red stuff was on Mario's fingers and Will's hands. Maybe other places I couldn't see. *Ohmigod*, maybe there was a big pool somewhere.

"He hit me from behind," Mario muttered. He put his hands over his face and shook his head, then let out a sharp cry. "Ow! That hurts."

"Mmm, let me see." With his flashlight, Will checked Mario's eyes, then bent to examine the back of his head. "Looks like a scalp wound—they bleed like crazy—and maybe a slight concussion. You'll have a nice lump, but I think you'll be okay."

Involuntarily, I touched the tender bump on the back of my head. I had another swelling on my forehead where the oar had hit me, and my back was sore from my fall and from having to lift Archie. What had happened to my nice *normal life*?

Was this supposed to be the fun and exciting life I was looking for? Or maybe I was being punished for a terrible misdeed I'd committed in a previous incarnation.

"Harriet, do you mind turning on the overheads and getting some water?" Will asked. "Oh, and bring your first aid kit, too. Thanks."

"Sure." I assumed Will wanted to ask Mario some questions while I wasn't present. That galled me, but he was doing what he judged best. I was navigating in uncharted waters, so to speak. Taking my time, I turned on the inside lights, dug in the ice chest for a bottle of Perrier, and found the box with the medical supplies in the overhead.

When I returned, Mario was sitting straight and looked less dazed. There was more color in his face. Of course, having the lights helped, but to me the fact that he wasn't dead made him look a whole lot better.

One corpse was more than I could cope with. Two dead bodies would exceed my limit.

I slipped onto the seat beside Mario, put my arm around his shoulders, and stifled the urge to call him my poor, battered bus driver.

"Here's some water." I handed him the bottle, my manner all sweetness and Florence Nightingale. I'd even removed the bottle cap for him. "Are you feeling better?" Then I followed up with an anxious, "Did you see who hit you?"

Mario glanced up at Will who was perusing my meager medical supplies, and shook his head. "Uh-uh. Whoever it was snuck up on me." He took a long swig from the bottle.

I wondered what signal had passed between the men, but knew better than to make an issue of it.

"You didn't see *anything*?" I wanted to shake him in the hope that something loose in his brain might click back into place. "Why was the door open, or did this person break in?"

Again that quick meeting of the eyes between the agent and the driver.

"I'm sorry, Harriet. The air's pretty stuffy in here. I left it open." Mario rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms.

Will lifted his chin toward me and jerked his head, a signal to back off. I patted Mario's shoulder and stood up. "Don't worry about anything. I'll make the report to the office. Do you want us to take you to the infirmary?"

"No, I'll be all right, but I need to move around a little." Gripping the back of the seat in front of him, he pulled himself to his feet. I moved out of his way, and Will took over. He helped Mario to the front of the bus and down the steps. I tagged along behind as far as the door.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" I asked Will when he bounded back up.

"Minor concussion," was his pithy reply. "Do you know where Mario keeps his keys?"

"Sure. They're right here." I reached across the driver's seat to a hook on the door and lifted off the key ring.

Will tried to take it out of my hand, but I held it away. "What do you want them for?"

"I want his key to the luggage compartment."

I shot him a disdainful glance. "You don't need Mario's keys for that. I have..." My protest faded. "*Ohmigod!* Wait, let me look at these."

He did wait, but not with any great show of patience. First, he shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other, then rocked on his heels and the balls of his feet. I must have let out a sound of disappointment, because he took me by the arm and stood close behind me to look over my shoulder, not much of a challenge for someone his height.

"Did you find it?" His breath caressed my ear and neck.

The bottom of my stomach dropped out, as though I was on a roller coaster, but this time not because of Will's proximity. This time it was fear sending me on that wild ride. "Let me run through them again."

I rechecked but the answer still came up the same. I turned and found myself in the circle of his arms. I sucked in a deep breath, looked up into his eyes, and for once I didn't forget everything and lose reality in those blue pools. It was hard to breathe because the weight of two more elephants had joined the one already sitting on my chest.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "The key is gone."

Will let out a slow hiss through his teeth. His expression remained fixed, but the look in his eyes changed. They were as dark as night. I could read his eyes.

"I need you to help me out here, Harriet." His voice was soft and encouraging. "I want you to concentrate and put yourself back in time to when the man got off the bus. Tell me exactly what happened."

Sinking my teeth into my lower lip, I squeezed my eyes closed and bit-by-bit reconstructed the moment when I glimpsed the intruder. Will's arms, still around my waist in a loose circle, seemed to disappear.

"I was going between the rows of cars to get to the bus. I was looking right at it. Something moved inside."

"What caught your attention?"

My hesitation was brief. "I'm not sure. Whatever it was, it startled me,

and I hid behind the SUV at the end of the row.” My mind slid back to the present, and I wondered why I hadn’t assumed it was Mario inside. Forget that, I told myself. *Think*. “I watched from behind the car and saw the man run down the...” My voice faltered.

“What?”

“No, wait. That’s not right. The door was closed. It flew open and the man jumped from the top of the steps. He landed on the deck with his knees flexed and balanced himself by putting one hand down. That’s when I dropped.”

“Could you see what he looked like?”

The memory captured in my mind was now as clear as a digital photograph. I kept my eyes closed and described what I saw. “He was short. Rotund. No, actually he was stocky. You know, big around the gut but with muscle, not fat. And agile. He had dark hair speckled with gray. It looked kind of spiky, like a buzz cut that’s grown out too long. I couldn’t really see his eyes, but I have the impression they were smallish.”

Will’s hand left my waist. Then he trailed a finger down my cheek.

“That’s good, Harriet.”

My eyelids fluttered. He placed his fingertips lightly over them. “No, not yet. Tell me what he’s wearing.”

Again I forced my lids together so tight it hurt and made my headache worse. I consulted the picture in my mind. “He had on black and white Nikes, and Levi’s or some kind of blue jeans,” I replied, “and a T-shirt. I can’t remember...hold on.” I blinked my eyes open and looked at Will’s face. “It was like the ones the ferry crew wears. And a bandanna. The man had a red bandanna tied around his forehead and...”

My voice caught and the elephant count went up. “*Ohmigod!*” I cried.

The blood drained from my face. My limbs went numb and my knees crumbled. I caught at Will. His strong arms tightened around my middle and held me up or I would have collapsed on the spot.

“What? What do you remember?”

His face was close to mine. A detached part of me sensed his urgency and the tenseness in his body.

"I...I just realized who I saw," I gasped. I didn't want to say this. I really didn't. "Oh, Will, it...it was Essi Ahmed."

Chapter Ten

“Essi?” His voice was incredulous. He dropped his arms from around my waist and took a step back. “That’s impossible.”

I shook my head in disagreement.

Inhaling a deep breath, he raked his fingers through his spiky hair and visibly calmed himself. “Are you sure?”

My stomach burned. This, I thought, must be the way a traitor feels when he’s walked to the gallows.

“Yes, I’m sure.” My insides wrenched with denial, but I knew, without a doubt, that I had seen Essi Ahmed Mutassim O’Reilly jump from the bus. “I’m sorry I didn’t recognize him right away. Even without the robe and headpiece, I might have realized who it was, but he’s shaved off his beard. That threw me.”

Will nodded but his eyes were glazed over. He sat down on the nearest seat, braced his forearms on his knees and lowered his head. He looked like he’d lost his last friend. Maybe he had.

Sitting down beside him, I placed a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. I liked the Arab. It was hard for me to believe he was one who attacked Mario. That didn’t fit my assessment of his character. Apparently, it didn’t fit Will’s, either. “I’m sorry, but it *was* Essi. Maybe there’s a good, logical explanation.”

His eyes cleared and he glared at me as though I was responsible for this turn of events. “There damn well better be!” he snapped, then apologized at once. “I’m sorry. It’s—”

My turn. I put my finger over his lips. "Not necessary. I understand."

We sat in silence for a few seconds, both of us staring off into space engaged in our own thoughts.

A small group of chattering tourists passed the open door of the bus, reminding me of our original purpose. We didn't have time to sit around brooding about Mr. O'Reilly.

I slapped my palms on my thighs. "Come on, let's take a look at that luggage."

He bobbed his head and stood. "Right." His voice was toneless.

Outside we stopped in front of the luggage compartment while I searched my backpack for my keys. I was still looking when Mario strolled up.

"What's going on?" he asked.

I looked him straight in the eye, as much to check his pupils for dilation as to be honest and straightforward with my co-worker. "Will wants to check Archie's luggage. Under the circumstances, I agreed if you and I could be present."

No emotion registered on my driver's face. "That sounds reasonable. You got the key?"

"Mine's right here." I held it up. This was not the time to mention the missing key, or tell him about Essi. I inserted it into the lock. The compartment clicked open, but I waited until an older man and woman strolled by us before I lifted the door.

Mario stuck his head inside the storage area. "Archie had a big bag. It's that black one in the back." He started to lift out the smaller cases to get at it.

"Well, there you are," a familiar voice rang out.

We swiveled in unison, the Marx Brothers—or maybe the Keystone Cops is a better analogy. The Johnsons and the Feldmans were descending on us like killer bees.

I shot a glance at Will. He put a hand on my shoulder and smiled at the four Americans, but his expression was not a happy one.

"I am so glad you have that open," Margie Feldman gasped. She looked

hot and sweaty and her face was pink. Huffing and puffing, she plunked down three large newspaper-wrapped bundles on the deck beside us. "I'm really tired of carrying this stuff around. It weighs a ton."

Bob Feldman frowned at his wife. "I told you not to buy copper pots, for Christ's sake. You can get them at home for less. How the hell do you expect to get all that junk onto the airplane? It'll cost us a fortune."

"It's not junk, and I don't see any problem," Margie replied. "I'll check them and—"

Edith pushed forward and interrupted. "Mario, be a darling and hand me that dark green carry-on." She lowered her eyes to her chest. "Thanks to Margie here, I need to change clothes."

Several safety pins held the front of her blouse together. No Victoria's Secret in sight.

"Well, it wasn't *my* fault." Red streaks of anger crept up Margie's neck. "*You* were the one who stood up."

In return, Edith shot her a nasty look. "According to you, nothing that goes wrong is ever *your* fault."

Rod grasped his wife's wrist and rolled his eyes. "Back off, Edith."

I'll bet they'd had a fun crossing.

Mario, ever the experienced diplomat, stepped between the two women. "Ladies, please let me be of assistance." The man was as smooth as a baby's bottom. He reached into the compartment, grasped a small bag and handed it to Edith.

"Here you go, Mrs. Johnson. You can change in bus. The restroom's unlocked."

After she thanked him and stomped off, he turned to Margie. "If you'll give me your packages, I'll put them back here where they won't slide around. Tomorrow, I'll see about having them packed and shipped home for you."

As Margie handed over her bundles, the ferry horn sounded a long steady blast like fingernails on a blackboard. "My God," she cried.

Rod put his hands over his ears until the grating sound ceased.

"We've only got another ten or fifteen minutes before debarkation." Will made a stiff little bow to the others and took my arm. "Ladies, gentlemen, please excuse us. I have to escort Ms. Ruby to the bridge. I'm sure Mario will help you with anything you need."

Message received, loud and clear.

"What's going to happen?" I asked once we were out of earshot. I could tell he was in a hurry but kept his pace slow enough for my shorter legs.

"Don't worry, it's only paperwork. You'll have to sign a requisition to authorize the ferry company to bill Adventure Seekers for the costs and maybe some other fees."

We reached the first landing. I stopped, planted my hands at the small of my back, and leaned over to stretch. It hurt. "That's good news"—which it *really* wasn't—"but I was referring to Archie's bags. I don't see how we can open them now."

"We can't, and when we land we'll have to turn the deceased's body over to the British authorities. They'll impound his luggage."

"Is there any way we can delay that until tomorrow? I mean, can we leave him in the refrigerator overnight and check his bags when we get to the hotel?"

Will laughed in spite of the grim situation. "No chance. Archie's no longer in cold storage and my colleague on board has already notified the government in Gibraltar about a death on board. The British officials will meet us when we dock."

I stopped again and grimaced. "How long will I have to spend with them?" I hadn't given a thought to the timing or an extended meeting with government types.

"An hour, maybe two. Depends on who they send."

Oh, boy. "And what am I supposed to do with my people for two hours? Make them wait in the bus? I can't do that."

Will took my hand and pulled me along with him. He never seemed to be out of breath. In another less intense situation, it might be interesting to put

his prowess to the test, but that wasn't where my mind was right then.

He glanced at his watch. "It's only four o'clock. Mario could take your tourists into town for a few hours. That should give us enough time to take care of things here."

The weight of worry pressing down on my chest lightened and I smiled with relief. "That will work."

We reached the bridge, and as Will predicted, the official business was a matter of agreeing to have the Adventure Seekers Travel pay for the delays, the fares for my people and the bus, and, of course, the fire in the dining room.

My lightheartedness evaporated faster than a raindrop in Death Valley. If they took this out of my paycheck, I'd be indentured to Adventure Seekers forever.

After we finished with my enslavement papers, Will and I retired to the upper deck where he prepped me for our meeting with the British officials. This was more serious, although, at the moment, a lifetime of servitude struck me as rather unappealing. When I had everything straight, I returned to the bus and consulted with Mario.

Just before the ramps from the ferry were lowered to the dock to let the vehicles off, I stood at the front of the coach, turned on the audio system, and tapped the microphone to get everyone's attention. It took longer than usual since everyone's temper was a little short by now.

"It seems I have to wait for the people coming to pick up Archie Philpot," I announced. "Since that may take a while, Mario has agreed to drive you to the main town of Gibraltar. You'll have at least two hours of free time in the village to shop—the prices are good here if you want Lladro figurines—or you can take the tour of the island. Whatever you like."

The murmurs that reached me indicated approval. *What a relief!* "According to our itinerary you're on your own for dinner tonight," I continued, "so I suggest you eat during this stop. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until we reach the hotel in Algeciras. Any questions?"

Finally, everyone was placated. The ramps went down and the vehicles

in the front rows started to move off the ferry. I told everyone to have a good time, and I'd meet them in two hours. Then I got off and went back up to the bridge to face the music.

~ ~ ~

There are things about being a tour director, and probably any other profession, that are lots of fun and other parts that aren't so pleasant. A few are downright disgusting. In less time than it took to complete the introductions, I had decided that meetings with government officials fell into the latter category.

I'd never met so many men all in one room who were so pompous and arrogant and full of their own importance.

While the medical crew went with a gurney to retrieve their British citizen from a cabin in the crew quarters, the Chief Inspector—in my mind I'd shorted his long officious title to those two words—and his staff took over the ferry captain's conference room adjacent to the bridge.

The captain of the ferry and the rest of the officers, including, I presumed, the other Europol agent, were smart enough not to get involved and were nowhere to be seen.

Chief Inspector Reginald Blain-Stevens was a large and bulky man. Muscle gone to fat with easy living. Although he occupied the captain's seat at the head of the long conference table, his body seemed to take up more than his share of space in the room. His three dark-suited minions gathered around him at the same end.

Only one man, a Mr. Something-or-other Muddington, sat toward the center of the table in his shirtsleeves operating some old-fashioned tape-recording equipment. He seemed relatively at ease. The other three swarmed about their boss like ants around sugar, all stiff, formal and subservient.

Will and I were instructed to take seats at the opposite end of the table. *Jeez. When did we become the enemy?*

Will pulled out my chair and seated me. "Remember what I said," he

whispered so only I could hear, “and cool it.”

Says you. You’re an agent. I’m the one who’s about to perjure herself.

I certainly hoped he could take care of things as easily as he said, or I was dead meat. But I had played along thus far. In for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying goes.

The esteemed—or should I say, the self-esteemed?—Chief-Inspector Blain-Stevens took a stack of papers out of his thin brief case and tapped them on the table, adjusting the edges so each side was in perfect alignment. Then, he peered down the table and studied us with a look of pity in his eyes for such ignorant and insignificant beings.

The warm air seemed to press down on us like a physical weight, almost smothering. The room reeked with touches of cigar smoke, perspiration, furniture polish, and pungent men’s cologne. Sort of a feculent smell, I thought as a blob of sweat splattered on the table in front of me. I wiped my forehead with my arm. *Ouch!* I hoped my undisciplined hair hid the bruise there.

“Recorder on, Muddington,” the Chief-Inspector commanded, his jowls jiggling. “Now, Miss Ruby, I would like you to recount, in your own words, what transpired on the day of...”

Blah, blah, blah.

For the sake of time, as well as sensitivity to Will’s dilemma, I gave my abbreviated version of everything that happened. Well, maybe not quite *everything*.

“Yesterday,” I told them, “my tour group of fourteen, plus my driver and I, took the afternoon ferry from Algeciras to Tangier. We spent the night at our hotel and the first stop on our itinerary this morning was the medina.” I looked at the men at the end of the table. They all seemed to be with me so far.

“While we were there, Archie Philpot, the deceased, became very ill. A casual acquaintance, William Talbot”—I indicated him sitting next to me—“helped me find medical assistance for Mr. Philpot and later in the day he rejoined the group.”

Yada-yada-yada. I went on to tell them about Archie losing his prosthetic on the tour boat and our being rescued by the ferry. And then my tour de force.

"As soon as Mr. Philpot boarded the ferry, he complained to me that he needed to lie down." Under the table, I crossed my fingers. "I explained the situation to one of the officers who graciously took him to a cabin in the crew's quarters where he could rest during the trip. A while ago, when I went to check on him and let him know we would arrive soon, he was...he was cold. I got Mr. Talbot immediately and he confirmed that the deceased was...ah, deceased. Mr. Talbot notified the ferry officials for me and they notified your office."

I *didn't* mention, of course, that Archie had already met his maker and was dead as a fence post through most of this. Nor did I mention that I'd just met Will that day.

Well, I did say casual, didn't I?

In fact, quite a few of the day's events conveniently slipped my mind, like Essi Ahmed and his storm troopers, the gypsies and the intruder on the bus, getting whacked with an oar, the missing leg, and my lustful feelings for the Europol agent. Minor things. Nothing, I convinced myself, of any great importance that was anyone else's business.

"Under the circumstances, I thought it best not to tell the rest of my tour group about Mr. Philpot's demise to avoid unnecessary hysteria and rumors. So if you question any of them, *they* think he's ill and going back to London." I paused and searched for a glimmer of understanding on any of the faces at the other end of the room.

Zilch. *Oh, boy.* The black weight of worry descended, and I was gifted with more elephants on my chest. I cleared my throat for a final plea.

"I would be grateful, sir, if you could forego questioning my tourists and allow us to continue our tour as planned." I was improvising now and hoped my ad-lib didn't cause problems for Will. "If you need me in the future, I will certainly make myself available to your inquiry, with my employer's blessing."

The Chief Inspector hooded his eyes like a bird. “And you’re sure that’s all that happened?”

Ohmigod, he isn’t buying it. What do I do now? “Yes, sir, that’s my official statement.”

The man’s tight mouth pursed in disapproval.

Beside me, Will stood up. In that bigger-than-life moment, his presence seemed to suck up all the energy in the room, deflating the puffed up Chief Inspector and his cronies. He strode the length of the table, leaned over and whispered in the Chief’s ear. As the official listened, his face paled. His lower lip quivered. Beside him, his assistants, who were not privy to the muted conversation, looked confused.

Will straightened. With no readable expression on his face, he asked, “Would you care to inspect the deceased’s luggage before you impound it?”

The Chief Inspector’s mouth tightened even more, but he nodded. “Is it here?”

Without answering, Will strode to the door and jerked it open. “Bring it in.”

A crew member wearing the ferry’s logo T-shirt carried in a large black suitcase and a carry-on bag. The man placed the two pieces of luggage on the table in front of the Chief Inspector and left without a word. The four Brits stared at it.

Will held out a key ring. “This was in the deceased man’s pocket.”

One of the assistants took it from him, studied each key and selected one. First, he opened the carry-on and plowed through the contents. Will watched, but I could tell he wasn’t really interested. But when the man went for the large case, my agent was right there with him.

I had no idea what Will was looking for, except that it had to do with smuggling. When he first told me, I thought he might be looking for guns or explosives, even jewelry. Then, based on his comments, I had decided it must be drugs. But now that didn’t appear to be what he was after. Drugs could be stowed away in small places, even swallowed in plastic bags and other gross

things like that. He wasn't interested in small things.

While the British officials dug through the contents of Archie's large bag, I watched the change in Will's eyes. They started as brilliant blue, flashing with anticipation, and dulled as the contents of the luggage revealed that the deceased man wore size 40 boxer shorts, extra large athletic shirts, and suspenders.

Whatever Will had expected, he was disappointed. Not that he let it show on his face. It was all in his eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Then, abruptly, the Archie ordeal was over. In an instant, Will and I were dismissed, although it seemed the conference was far from ended for the rest of them.

Not that we wanted to stay. In fact, without exchanging a word, we hotfooted it down the steps, across the ramp into the terminal building and out the entrance. I was bursting with curiosity to know what Will had said to the pompous official that had turned everything around. And why was he disappointed? What was he looking for?

I didn't ask any of the million questions flapping around in my head. *I'm a quick study, if nothing else.* He'd tell me when, and *if*, it was appropriate. Besides, I figured I could find a way to wheedle it out of him later.

We hurried to the location designated for tour buses, expecting to find Mario. But no ugly pink and purple motor coach waited there for us. I looked at Will and did some mental knuckle cracking.

"Where's Mario?" I muttered, more to myself than to him. My stomach was turning somersaults again.

Unperturbed, Will looked at his watch. "It's only five thirty. They've got half an hour."

A sense of foreboding swept through me. The hair at the back of my neck bristled and the skin tightened. "The way this day's been going..." I paused and shook my head. "...I know something's wrong. I'd better call him."

I punched in the cell phone number and waited. I was about to give up when he answered with a sharp, "Yes, Harriet, what do you want?"

I held the phone away from my ear. Since I'd met the Italian driver, he'd been calm and diplomatic. Maybe the blow to his head did more damage than I'd thought.

"Are you okay? You sound a little strung out."

"Sorry," he replied, his voice less sharp, but still stressed. "I'm upset."

My heart popped into my throat. "Upset? Why? What happened?" I knew it!

"Olaf and Helga are missing."

"Missing?" I hollered. "The Andersons are missing? What happened? Where are you?"

What had I done to deserve such punishment? Was my misdeed in some other life so awful that retribution couldn't wait until my next incarnation?

My obvious distress captured Will's attention and he moved closer, trying to hear Mario over my cell phone. I suppose he had good reason to suspect that I wouldn't react well to another crisis.

"Calm down." Mario sounded more like himself now. "We're in the parking lot behind the museum at Cathedral Square and Line Wall Road. This is where the group agreed to meet."

"For God's sake, what's going on?" My voice was still too loud.

"I'm sure they're just late," my driver said.

"Mario, spit it out!"

During a pause, while Mario cleared his throat, Will murmured in my ear, "This could only happen to you."

Under other circumstances, his soft breath against that sensitive spot would have caused me to shiver in delight. Instead, I was about to belt him one upside the head to wipe the smirk off his face when Mario spoke again.

"The Andersons took a bus tour around the island with Sven and Ingrid Ericsson and the Takamuras. The other five got back a few minutes ago, but Olaf and Helga weren't with them. No one noticed when or where they

disappeared.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. How could they *not* notice? Do you want us to take a taxi there?”

There was a long pause. “Nothing on Gibraltar is more than ten or fifteen minutes from here. Let’s give them ten more. I’ll call you. Are you still on the ferry?”

“We’re outside the terminal. I’ll fill you in on everything on the way to the hotel.” *I hope.* I didn’t even want to think about what would happen if the Andersons didn’t show up. “I’ll be waiting for...”

“Wait a minute, don’t hang up. A taxi just drove up.”

I held my breath. Will mouthed questions at me, but I waved him away.

“It’s them.” I heard the relief in Mario’s voice, then some swear words and, “Oh, *Gesù Cristo!*”

“What is it?” My heart banged against my rib cage like a trapped bird. *Boom, boom, boom.*

“*Gesù Cristo,*” Mario repeated under his breath, then, “I’ll call you back.”

“What’s the matter?” I yelled into the dead phone.

I was on the verge of meltdown again, so Will guided me into the terminal building and made me sit down. “Put your head between your legs.”

“No way,” I sputtered, thinking how ridiculous that would look. I suppose I wasn’t rational enough to realize that passing out could look worse.

Without arguing, he put his hand behind my head and gently pushed it down. I stayed that way for a few minutes, listening to my own hyperventilated breathing and trying to think peaceful thoughts. Gradually my heartbeat slowed and the nausea passed. I sat up and relaxed against the back of the wood bench with my eyes closed.

Neither of us spoke but I guessed that Will was going over the meeting in his mind and putting together the pieces of information he’d gathered.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten for a long time. I stood up and shook my clothes into place. “I’ll be right back,” I told him. “I’m going to buy a snack. Do you want anything?”

"No thanks."

I found a vending machine and purchased a chocolate bar. With the candy in hand, I was sitting down next to Will when my cell phone rang again. I stuffed the candy into my pocket and grabbed the phone. The ring tone told me it was Mario calling, and my pulse rate jumped. I answered with trepidation.

"Hello, Harriet. Everything is taken care of. We'll be there in two or three minutes."

"For God's sake, Mario, *what* is going on?" I was practically in tears again. "Are the Andersons all right? Was anyone hurt? Why were they late?"

"They're fine, but, ah, it's difficult to explain over the phone. You'll have to wait until we get there."

I noticed his voice was a little shaky. *Well, caca, so was mine.* I huffed with frustration. "All right. We're inside the terminal but we'll meet you out front."

"Okay...uh-oh, wait a minute. It looks like the entrance drive is blocked off." He paused. "They're not letting anyone through. Black cars all around...and a meat wagon."

Oh, boy. "I'm afraid that may have something to do with Archie. Got any other suggestions?"

Will plucked the phone out of my hand.

"Mario, it's Will. The terminal has a subterranean parking garage, doesn't it? Try that. If you're on Queen's Way I think there's an entrance somewhere ahead of you."

I moved close to him and took his arm. He held the phone so I could listen. Mario was silent. I was beginning to wonder if he'd hung up or we'd lost the signal.

Then he said, "There it is, on the right, and it's open. Thanks, Will."

"Good. We'll meet you on the first level near the elevators."

"Got it. You can't miss us," Mario replied and clicked off.

Right. Who could miss a pink and purple bus cruising a parking garage?

Will handed the phone back and we took off for the lift. By the time we arrived on level one of the underground garage, the bus was pulling to a stop. The door opened, we scrambled onboard and were on our way to the exit from the garage.

My eyes flickered over the thirteen people seated in the bus. Olaf and Helga huddled together at the back, deep in conversation. They looked okay. I waved a cheery “hello” to everyone, and then we settled into the tour director’s front seat behind the driver. I needed to talk to the Andersons, but first I needed a minute to calm myself. Second, I was going to nail Mario to the wall...so to speak.

I leaned forward and said to him in a low voice, “What happened? I’ve never heard you so upset.”

Without turning his head to look at me, Mario guided the bus slowly through the parking garage, following the exit signs.

“It’s a complicated story,” he replied over his shoulder, his tone as muted as mine. “I don’t think I can drive and tell it. Besides, there’s something else...”

“Mr. Talbot.” Rod Johnson’s voice came from the other front seat next to us.

I turned my head in a quick startled motion. My tourists had been rotating seats each time they boarded the bus to give everyone the opportunity to sit up front for a better view. This evening Rod and Edith were in the other front row seats across from Will and me. Rod leaned towards us.

“Mr. Talbot,” he repeated now that he had our attention, “aren’t you going back to Tangier tonight?”

“Oh, he has business in Algeciras.” I took the liberty of explaining on Will’s behalf. “He’s late for his appointment because of us, so I offered him a ride.”

Apparently satisfied, Rod nodded and leaned back in his seat. I let out a slow breath. That explanation might suffice for now, but Will couldn’t stay with us much longer or one of these folks was going to question his presence.

He was supposed to be a local guide in Tangier.

My stomach whined again, reminding me that not only had I missed lunch, I'd squelched any possibility of a snack when I set the buffet on fire. I was starving. My hand dipped into my pocket and pulled out the candy bar I'd purchased in the terminal. I broke off half and handed it to Will.

Now Edith, who evidently heard my prior comment, scooted to the edge of her seat and tapped me on the shoulder. "What about Mr. O'Reilly? Where is *he*?"

My hand flew up to cover my mouth, in part because I didn't want to spew half-chewed candy all over Mario's back, but also because I hadn't given one thought to Essi Ahmed since Will and I went to the bridge of the ferry. I didn't know where Essi Ahmed was, and I had no idea how Will intended to find out if his friend had bonked Mario on the head and stolen his key or whether there was another explanation.

Before I could answer, Will gifted Edith with one of his heart-melting smiles and said with finesse, "Mr. O'Reilly took the ferry back to Tangier. He has a contractual obligation to be available to other tour groups in case of accidents. But he said to tell you all goodbye and wishes you well on the rest of your trip."

I swallowed the rest of the chocolate in my mouth in one gulp. "After all, he's a paramedic for, ah, with...on contract with the tour companies that go into Tangier," I chimed in, then took another bite.

Sitting behind the Johnsons, Bob Feldman braced his forearms on the back of Rod's seat. "You know, I saw that guy what's-his-name O'Reilly on the ferry. I hardly recognized him without his robe and beard."

"He was naked?" Edith cried and craned her neck to look back at Bob.

Rod Johnson skewered his wife with a glare of disdain. Ever since the episode on the life boat, he'd taken on a new persona. "Oh, for Heaven's sakes, Edith, Arabs wear undershorts just like everyone else."

Bob Feldman rolled his eyes. "For cryin' out loud, I only meant he was wearing regular street clothes—you know, a T-shirt and jeans—and didn't have

the beard anymore.”

“Well, how should I know what—”

“I never would have guessed Mr. O’Reilly’s beard was false,” Margie interrupted. “It looked so real.”

“That guy’s a phony if I ever saw one.” Rod glared at me now. “He probably isn’t even a paramedic. Harriet, you better tell Adventure Seekers they ought to break the contract and demand their money back.”

What was left of the candy stuck to the back of my throat in a lump. I swallowed hard, my Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Don’t worry about it now. At the end of the trip, you’ll all fill out a questionnaire about what you liked and didn’t like about the trip. You can make suggestions there.” And maybe, with luck, some of those forms would disappear between here and the main office.

Rod crossed his arms over his chest and harrumphed. “We’re lucky nothing happened to any of us there. Those Moroccans don’t care a whit about public liability. The whole place is a hazard area. Look at the paving on their sidewalks. And the snakes.”

At that moment, I glanced up through the windshield and forgot all about questionnaires and public liability. The bus was approaching the exit ramp to the street level, and the top of the exit tunnel looked exceptionally low to me.

I tapped Mario on the shoulder and whispered, for his ears only, “Is this the way you came in?” I tried not to sound alarmed.

“No, the garage is one way. Why?”

I did a nose wrinkle. “That exit looks pretty tight. Can we make it or is there another way out for buses?”

Mario shrugged. “No. We’ll have to use this one. Anyway, according to the signs, there is enough clearance.”

I sighed with relief as we started up the ramp, the speedometer on zero miles per hour. Nonetheless, I held my breath involuntarily and peered out the side window.

"It's narrow, too," I murmured. "Do you think—"

Cru-nch!

The top of the bus hit something that made a loud scraping sound. Mario put on the brakes. We were barely moving so we jerked a little and stopped. I could already see my report to Adventure Seekers and the diminished size of my paycheck, once the cost of repainting the bus was added to the damage from the fire. I'd be an indentured servant forever. I'd probably have to write home and beg my father for grocery money. This was definitely not turning out to be a good day.

A few seconds later the air shattered with a deafening sound like an explosion, followed by a *whoosh*. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought someone else had lost a gigantic artificial leg. Then we were under a waterfall as tons of clear liquid poured over the windshield and down the side windows.

"Eek!" Edith screamed and jumped to her feet. *I would have been disappointed if she hadn't.*

"Shut up and sit down," Rod yelled, pulled her back onto the seat. "Haven't you caused enough trouble already? You damn near tipped us all out of the life boat, remember?"

Bob Feldman stood up. "What happened?"

There were shouts and questions from behind us. I was already down the steps, reciting the alphabet under my breath instead of swearing. I couldn't see a thing except the deluge of water. Or was it water?

I stopped short and clambered back up.

"Open the rear door," I shouted to Mario and ran for the other exit. Holding my breath, I pushed my way out through a smaller gusher.

Immediately, I was drenched. The water coming down on me was cold and my teeth chattered. At least it didn't stink. Somewhat confident that I wasn't swimming through raw sewage, I forced my shivering body against the spray. Once I was ten or fifteen feet from the bus, I could see again.

Above the exit ramp, hanging precariously below the twelve foot ceiling,

was a big pipe suspended on metal straps. Obviously a water pipe.

The top of our bus seemed to be just below the bottom of the pipe. But something had ripped a ragged gash in it. The violated pipe, in turn, was spewing out its guts into the subterranean parking garage. Already I was standing in water up to my ankles. The pool at the bottom of the ramp and around the bus grew as I stood there and gaped at it.

Why me?

Tearing my gaze from the small lake, I looked up at the top of the bus and began jumping up and down like a toddler having a temper tantrum. “What is that?” I shouted.

My voice was drowned out by the shrill whine of a fire alarm.

Will and Mario joined me, followed by Bob Feldman, Rod Johnson, and Bon Jovi Takamura with two cameras hanging around his neck and holding a red umbrella over his head. All of them were as soaked as I was.

Inside the bus, the others pressed their faces against the windows while all around us the garage filled with spectators who asked each other questions and pointed at the uncomfortable marriage of the terminal’s water pipe and the top of our bus. Most of them stood far enough away not to get thoroughly wet and covered their ears with their hands.

Bon Jovi, still in his three-piece business suit and dripping wet in spite of the umbrella, tore around snapping photos of the disaster.

Rod, our own engineer, wandered in a daze, speaking to no one in particular. “Don’t they have drains in here?” he mumbled as he tried to wring the water out of his trousers. “In California we’d never allow this kind of faulty design. Don’t they have building codes here?”

I grabbed Mario by the arm and shook him. “What...what is *that?*” I hollered and pointed.

Mario glanced up, then tried to push me through Niagara Falls and back toward the bus. “You’d better go inside. I’ll handle this.”

“Mario Pellicci, get your hands off me!” I twisted away and sloshed back to where I’d been able to see a protrusion sticking out from the top of the bus.

I spit wet hair out of my mouth. "Dammit, Mario, what *is* that thing?"

Even as I struggled with my driver, Will waded over to one of the spectators and asked where the telephone was located.

The man lifted his chin. "Phone's by the elevator," he answered, his eyes fixed on the water. "But someone's already called. They can't get down here to turn off the alarm."

"Why not?"

The man shrugged. "That water pipe is part of the fire sprinkler system. When it broke, the automatic alarm sealed the doors to the elevators and stairs." He tore his gaze away from the pipe and pointed at our motor coach. "What the hell is on the top of your bus?"

"That's *my* question," I shouted like a fishwife in heat. "And you better tell me, Mario, or I'm going to...to..."

I almost said I'd put my fingers around his neck and choke him until he was dead, but stopped myself in time. Not only was my reaction a little extreme, but considering today's earlier inquest about Archie, that probably wasn't a good thing to say in front of witnesses.

"It's a stalactite," Mario informed me in a soft voice.

I blinked, unsure I'd understood what he said. "A what?"

Mario kicked the water and sent it splashing into Bob Feldman's face. "Sorry. It's a stalactite that Olaf bought at St. Michael's Caves. It's probably not even from around here but he wants to mount it like an obelisk in front of his business. That's why they were late. It was too big to put in the island-tour's minibus so they had to call for a van-sized taxi."

I was speechless. A stalactite?

"How did it get up there?" I whispered, knowing the answer and not liking it.

Mario shrugged and looked sheepish. "Mr. Anderson insisted. He said he'd paid a lot for it and was going to have it shipped back to Sweden tomorrow. It was too long for the luggage compartment, and that was already full anyway. I thought it wouldn't cause any problems on the roof—not

between Gibraltar and the hotel—so we tied it up there. I had no idea we’d...” His voice trailed off as he motioned with his palms out.

Blinking back tears, I said nothing. *Like, what was there to say?* Throughout this entire day, I’d managed to hold on to my sense of humor, but that was wearing thin about now.

After what seemed like a very long time, but was probably only a few minutes at the most, the torrent from the broken pipe slowed, became a small stream, and then a drizzle.

Will came up behind me and put his arm around my waist. “I like the wet T-shirt look,” he whispered in my ear. “Very provocative.”

Taken by surprise, I glanced down. Under the thin veil of my shirt, my nipples were puckered into hard peaks surrounded by darker aureoles. I could see my ribs, my navel, everything.

“Goes nicely with your hair,” he teased. He lifted a wet blond tendril with his finger and brought it around to my face and across my cheek.

All this—and a man was dead, for God’s sake—and now this smartass was making jokes about my tits. Incapable of speech, I took a swing at him. He laughed and caught me by the wrist before I connected.

That’s when the water stopped. At once, the nerve-jangling fire alarm ceased and a few seconds later, all the doors popped open. The spectators cheered as maintenance workers streamed into the garage followed by two scowling men in suits and three British security guards.

Mario, ever discreet, had watched our exchange from a distance without speaking. Now he approached and said, “Before they launch into us, I’m going to open the luggage compartment so our folks can get some dry clothes. They can take turns changing in the rest room while we deal with the authorities.” He cast a grimace toward the men.

I closed my eyes and expelled a long breath. “What are we going to do now?” I asked Will and stepped closer to him.

“Cover you up.” He took off his jacket and set it on my shoulders. It was wet and heavy, but I let him put me into it and button up the front. Although I

was shivering, his gesture warmed me inside. I was grateful I hadn't called him a smartass out loud.

"Thanks." I tried to smile, but my heart wasn't in it. I couldn't take my eyes off the security guards.

Will put his arm around my shoulder and gave it a possessive squeeze. "Don't worry, everything will be all right. This is why tour companies carry insurance."

How would he know? He was always cool, always in control. I couldn't imagine him in a bizarre situation like this. Or maybe I was jumping to conclusions. Maybe he *did* know. I knew nothing about the man other than he attracted me like a magnet. A totally new sensation for me.

"Have you ever...gotten in trouble on the job...you know, like this?"

His gaze moved to the approaching officials. He didn't make eye contact with me. "A person does what a person has to do." His matter-of-fact tone was flat and emotionless. "Believe me, this is nothing. It's a lot worse when you kill someone."

Chapter Twelve

All the way to the Ferry Terminal office, I fretted over Will's comment. I was stunned. Had he actually killed someone, or had he said that to give me something else to think about?

Mission accomplished.

From what I understood, Special Forces operatives did that sort of thing sometimes. I wondered if someday I might learn the real story. In the mean time, it gave me something else to worry about.

Whether Will was telling the truth or not, his statement brought home the seriousness of my situation. Little shivers of dread skittered up and down my spine. I was really scared again. Anyone could be after me, even Olaf Anderson.

Death by stalactite?

Well, maybe *that* part really *was* an accident.

Will was right, as always. You do what you have to do. Mario and I gave our statements. After that, we filled out insurance claim forms and signed documents that promised Adventure Seekers Travel or their insurance company would pay for all damages. In short, I signed away my life, my first born, and all my wages for the rest of my life, and we were done with it.

The most Will had to do was provide moral support.

It was after eight o'clock when we returned to the bus, which the port officials had moved to the outside parking lot. While the members of the tour

group had plenty of time to clean up and do whatever tourists do, the three of us still had on damp clothes and soggy shoes. My shoulder-length, naturally curly hair was frizzy, and I looked like Hagar the Horrible on a bad hair day.

"Mario, would you please take out my carry-on bag?" I asked when we got there. "I've got to get out of these wet clothes."

As I shed Will's jacket, his gaze fixed on my chest and his nostrils flared. At this point, I didn't care whether he was thinking about the guy/girl thing or teasing me. I swore to myself that if he so much as alluded to my tits once more, I would belt him a good one.

I knew how, too, since one of my Italian uncles was a cop and had taught me a number of useful self-defense skills.

Mario unlocked the luggage compartment with my key, which I'd slipped onto his ring earlier. He still didn't know his was missing. I wasn't sure how I was going to replace it and get mine back, but I had no intention of mentioning that. He was hauling out my small bag when he let out a hiccup-like gasp.

"Gesù, I forgot all about that," he burst out.

I stopped with my foot on the first step. I could hardly wait to hear about this one. "Forgot about what?"

"There's something important I needed to tell you," Mario confessed, "but in the confusion, it slipped my mind. Remember when you called and asked me to send Archie Philpot's bags up to the bridge?"

Will and I nodded in unison.

"Well, I did a baggage count and..."

My blood turned to ice water. "And?" I asked.

"And...according to the master list, three suitcases are missing."

Ohmigod! Lost bags! More liability! I wondered if we ought to do another count right then and backed down the step. As I lowered my feet to the ground, Will took my arm to steady me and whispered, "Cool it."

The overhead halogen lights glinted off his eyes, reflecting the shine of anticipation I'd seen in them before Archie's bags were searched. The same emotion that faded when he didn't find what he was looking for. I didn't

understand his reaction. My first thought...well, my second thought after the liability issue, had been of Essi Ahmed.

“What?” I murmured.

His brow pulled into a frown, making that cute crease between his eyes. His gaze flicked from me to Mario, who had taken out my carry-on and was checking the compartment lock. Then the lines smoothed away.

I nibbled at my lower lip. His warning glance told me Mario didn’t know anything about Archie’s bags, the missing key, or that it might have been Essi Ahmed who knocked him out.

Maybe, I thought, my driver wasn’t even aware that Will’s current assignment involved smuggling. I hoped the signal also meant that Mario was an innocent and uninvolved bystander.

It would be nice if at least one of us was.

I inclined my head to reassure Will that I wasn’t going to blab everything. Already my left-brain was putting together different scenarios to account for the three missing bags. Will suspected something but I couldn’t know what without a chance to speak with him in private. Maybe not even then. He was tight-lipped when he wanted to be.

The excuse of leaving me in ignorance for my own safety was horse manure.

Inside the bus, the Feldmans and the Johnsons sat at the foldout table halfway to the back, playing a quiet game of Bridge. Kimiko Takamura was reading and Bon Jovi was using his laptop. The rest of the group was asleep. Will, Mario, and I had the front to ourselves all the way to the hotel.

Mario fired up the engine and pulled out of the lot. I went to the rest room, changed into dry clothes—not an easy task in a four and a half square foot box that’s bumping up and down—then chatted with the people who were still awake. When I returned to my seat, I looked a lot better.

So did Will, who wore his third set of fresh clothes that day, without benefit of any visible baggage. He must have suitcases stowed away all over Europe and North Africa. *Maybe that’s what GQ spies did.* And how did he

keep that razor-sharp crease in his pants all the time?

Who was he?

As I sat beside him, I noted that Mario's attention was on the traffic. Good, I thought. It was time to bite the bullet.

"Will," I said in a low voice, "you realize I can't keep coming up with phony explanations for your presence. You're going to have to leave, or someone is..."

He patted my hand. "I understand. If I'm the local guide in Tangier, there's no reason for my being here." He hesitated. "Except for that bullshit about giving me a ride to Algeciras."

Even that tiny hint of scorn raised my hackles, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd riled me, even for a moment. "That was a perfectly reasonable explanation."

"Hmm. You'll have to drop me somewhere before you go to your hotel."

"What about the missing suitcases?"

"Shh." He reached over to the other front seat where I'd discarded his jacket and took a pen and a damp pad of paper from the inner pocket. On one sheet, he scribbled an address.

"Mario can drop me off here." He started to hand over the paper, then pulled it back and added something else. "My cell phone number."

He folded that down to about an inch square and stuffed it down the cleavage of my V-neck T-shirt.

"Nice touch," I said. "Very personal."

"I aim to please." His voice went all limpid and sexy. Then his mood shifted like the wind and he was serious again. "The minute you're settled in your room, I want you to call me at that number. And don't..."

He let the sentence drop as I drew in my breath through clenched teeth. I'm sure he intended to warn me not to tell anyone. I'm also sure he realized that if he actually articulated that warning out loud, I would definitely have to strangle him.



Mario halted the bus at the address in Algeciras Will had given me. I was surprised it was an office building, not another hotel. Will thanked us for the ride and got off. Still no luggage.

As I watched him go, an unfamiliar sense of anxiety and loss descended on me like a gray cloud and took up residence as a chill in my bones.

That unsettling loss of wholeness was still with me when, at nearly nine thirty, we dragged our weary butts into our hotel. The stress of the long and eventful day was etched on the faces of my thirteen charges. If they had chosen this particular tour in search of adventure, they'd made the right selection. *We sure as hell delivered.*

In spite of its name, the Grand Hotel Alegria wasn't grand. We'd stayed there the night before last and found it to be a modest but clean and comfortable lodging in spite of being located in an unattractive industrialized port city.

On the morning of our departure for Morocco, the lobby, with its pink stone walls and matching columns, had been stacked with luggage and crowded with tourists in colorful attire. The air pumped through the overworked air-conditioning units had wafted with a unique mixture of floor wax, citronella, cut flowers, cigarette smoke, and a liberal application of air freshener. Voices speaking a myriad of languages had echoed off the walls and merged with the squeaking wheels of luggage carts, chimes from cell phones, and canned background music. Rows of uniformed bell boys ran to and fro hauling suitcases in and out.

Tonight the hotel lobby was quiet and deserted. It seemed larger with no one sitting there and no background conversation to fill the space. I noticed the change in atmosphere the moment I walked into the room. Even the air conditioning was silent.

Such a difference in only a day and a half.

I halted on the threshold and took stock. The realization hit me like a

lightning bolt. I had also changed. In that short period of time, my life had taken off in an unanticipated direction and seemed to demand skills and strengths I was not sure I possessed.

I'd been brought up to think and act independently. Certainly, I enjoyed the support of my family and friends, but I never relied completely on others. These new emotions challenged my self-confidence.

True, Will had given me his phone number and said to call him, but my chest tightened at the thought that I might never see him again. The sooner I was out from under his feet and out of his investigation, the better for him. There were things I wanted to know and questions I wanted answered, like what was behind Essi Ahmed's uncharacteristic behavior, but Will seemed to have plenty of reasons not to tell me anything.

Knowing he didn't trust me was like a knife through the heart and the worst part was, I didn't understand why it mattered.

Around me, my charges sank into the lobby's chairs and couches to wait for their room assignments and keys. Mario went off to take care of the luggage. I ejected Will's image from my mind and forced my limbs to move toward the registration desk.

The youthful night clerk was half-asleep behind the counter. His face seemed vaguely familiar. Probably I'd seen him on our prior visit, but I couldn't be sure.

"Harriet Ruby, Adventure Seekers Travel," I introduced myself—in *Spanish, thank you very much*. That was one of several languages I spoke. "Sorry we're so late. I called a couple of hours ago to be sure you were holding our rooms. We've had a rather bad day."

The dark-complexioned Spaniard scrambled to his feet and blinked away the sleep. His eyes widened as he took in my bedraggled bunch. Grimacing, he adjusted the lapels of his dark suit, then thumbed through the leather bound ledger spread open on the marble counter top.

"*Sí, Señorita Ruby*. We have you down for sixteen people. Five doubles, one triple, and one single, all on the fourth floor. The two singles for staff are

on the third.”

I nodded. “Perfect, but...” I was about to tell the man I didn’t need Archie’s single anymore when I was seized by a flash of intuition. Maybe it wasn’t intuition, but a little voice in my head stopped me. I glanced around to be sure no one was close by. “But I’d like to make one change that wasn’t part of our previous request.”

“Yes?” His eyes hooded and his voice was low and conspiratorial. I suppose he thought I was planning a tryst with one of my tourists or some dashing Spaniard I’d met.

No such luck. Well, it *was* possible that I was fantasizing about Will. Or maybe my inexplicable action was because I’d been through so much to keep Archie Philpot’s death a secret from everyone that I couldn’t let go.

“One of the older people in my group is very ill,” I explained. “Archibald Philpot, in the single. I’d like to have him in a room near mine, if that’s possible. Can you do that?”

Considering the season and our late arrival, I was asking a lot, but Adventure Seekers and its many affiliate travel agencies used this hotel frequently instead of something more scenic down the coast. The clerk checked his book again and smiled.

“No problem, Miss Ruby. I can give him the room adjoining yours.”

“Thank you, but I really don’t need an adjoining room. Just something near enough to be able to check on him.”

“That’s the best I can do if you want him close. Of course, the rooms lock on both sides. That’s what we normally do unless both are needed by the same party.”

“Whatever.” I didn’t expect Archie’s ghost to occupy the other room, so it didn’t matter. In fact, now that the arrangements were made, I wondered what had possessed me to do it in the first place.

Once the clerk gave me everything I needed, I motioned to Mario.

“Let’s get this over with.” I indicated our people sprawled all over the lobby, heads back, eyes closed, snores rumbling. A few were red-eyed and rigid

and looked ready to pounce on us.

I handed over his room key, pocketed the ones for mine and Archie's, and called the group together. As expeditiously as possible, we distributed the keys and gave directions to the appropriate floors.

"Your luggage will be delivered to you within the next twenty minutes," Mario told them. "You can take your small bags with you if you'd like." He pointed at the luggage from the bus stacked up by the bell captain's station.

"And remember," I added with fake cheerfulness, "tomorrow you can either have a free day or join the other Adventure Seekers group that's going to Granada for the day. If you're taking that side trip, you need to be downstairs for breakfast at seven. The bus will pick you up in front at eight and should be back by eight in the evening. We'll spend tomorrow night here and leave for Seville the next morning. Any more questions? All right, goodnight for now, and I'll see you tomorrow."

Mario and I watched the last of them shuffle into the elevator and were about to head to our own rooms when the bell captain approached. He was short and either very old or appallingly wrinkled and hunched over.

"What do you want me to do with the bags that were checked?" he asked.

I stiffened. "What bags that were checked?"

Mario and I exchanged a quick glance. Adventure Seekers Travel required the tour staff to take a count of the luggage and the passengers at every step of the trip. We were supposed to have all the baggage with us at all times.

"Three suitcases," the little man insisted. "They were checked with us the morning your group left."

Mario grimaced. He was responsible for the luggage, so this was his mistake. But at least the news accounted for the suitcases he thought were missing. His eyes darted from me to the bell captain to the storage room and back. "Let's have a look."

"Okay, but hurry it up." I was ready to drop. This had been some day.

The bell captain led us to the three suitcases set apart from the others.

The two smaller ones belonged to the Takamuras. Mario wrote the correct room number on the tags and placed them on the luggage-delivery cart. When I read the tag on the third and largest, my heart fluttered. It belonged to none other than Archibald Philpot.

“I’ll take care of this one,” I told the bell captain.

Without a word, Mario hoisted Archie’s missing bag, and we walked to the elevator. If he knew about the smuggling ring or had any idea that Archie might be carrying something of interest to Europol, he gave no hint to me.

“I’ll have to get this back to the British Embassy in Gibraltar, but that’s going to have to wait until tomorrow,” I told him as we ascended to the third floor. “It’s a good thing I wasn’t planning to go to Granada.”

The elevator stopped. We exited and walked side by side until we reached intersecting corridors. Here our paths diverged.

“My room’s this way,” I said pointing down one of the hallways. “I can take the bag from here. It’s got wheels.”

With a shrug, Mario handed it over. Since he was going to Granada with the optional excursion, we agreed to meet after he got back the following evening and prepare for the next leg of the journey.

Then we said goodnight and went our separate ways.

~ ~ ~

As soon as I reached my destination, I dropped Archie’s bag and went to the connecting door between the rooms. I released the manual lock and opened the door. In front of me was a second locked door. If the clerk’s explanation was correct—which I had no reason to doubt—it could be opened only from the other side. My hand snaked into my pocket and pulled out the other key.

“Well, what do you know?”

The adjacent accommodation was almost identical to mine. Small but clean, nicely decorated but unpretentious, with a bed that Americans would call a double and European’s would disdain as a single. I unlocked the door

between the rooms and returned to my own without going through the hallway. Satisfied that I controlled all the points of ingress and egress, I rolled Archie's suitcase into his room, in case the Travel Agency Police showed up or something, and closed both doors.

Now that I'd done all this, I wondered who would care if Archie was alive or not. He'd never talked about having any family.

That made me think about my own extended family...my parents and grandparents, my brother and his wife and children. I thought about all my Italian uncles and aunts and cousins. Some I liked, some I didn't, but they were all an integral part of my life...the fabric and texture of my existence. How sad it was to think Archie might have missed out on that.

With a sigh, I headed for the bathroom to prepare for a long hot shower. Before I got that far, there was a knock from the hallway. I jumped a foot into the air. *What was I so nervous about?* I mean, we'd already paid for Archie's accommodations, so what was the big deal? I adjusted my clothes, picked up my backpack, and opened the door.

"Your bags, *Señorita*," the bellboy said and heaved my large case and carry-on from his cart. While I dug out my wallet, he placed the big bag on the luggage rack. I gave him a generous tip and he was gone. Even before the latch snapped into place, I plopped on the bed and punched in Will's number on my cell phone.

"Hello, Harriet?" he answered at once.

"Hi, Will, I'm in room three ten. My bags are here, and I think I've found something that might be important. How soon can you get here?" My words tumbled out in rapid succession. I wasn't going to give him a chance to say he couldn't come.

Before he could respond, someone else rapped on my door. "Darn. Who could that be? Just a minute, there's someone at the door. Don't hang up."

"Okay." I heard him chuckle and I screwed up my face. He probably thought I'd set fire to the room or something.

With the phone in my hand, I dashed to the door. Most likely, my visitor

was either Mario, the bellboy seeking a bigger tip, or maybe Bon Jovi Takamura wanting me to take his photograph. I flung it open without even looking through the peephole, prepared to ream a new one for whoever was outside.

Instead, there was Will, holding his cell phone to his ear. “Yo,” he said into the receiver.

Strangling a cry of surprise, I took his arm and pulled him inside. “That was *not* fair. You startled me.”

He laughed, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Obviously, he was enjoying his little prank. “You should have seen your face.” Then he sobered and placed his hands on my shoulders. “You shouldn’t open your door without knowing who’s out there. It’s dangerous.”

There was that miniscule hint of criticism again. I bristled, wanting to hide my relief that he was there under some bravado—then compressed my lips and forced myself to relax. I didn’t want to start an argument.

“You’re right. I forgot.”

That was true. My good and predictable life had become a train wreck so quickly that I *did* forget there was good reason to be cautious. When I took this job to spice up my life, physical danger wasn’t exactly what I’d had in mind.

The color of his eyes darkened. In one day, I had learned they did that when he was concerned or worried. I liked to read eyes.

“I won’t forget again. I promise.”

“Good. So what is it you’ve found?”

Excitement rose in me and my fatigue faded. “Archie’s missing suitcase.” I hadn’t intended to tell him right off, but my curiosity always took precedence over reason—and over deviousness. I could hardly wait to show him. “C’mon, it’s in Archie’s room.”

“Archie’s room?”

I flung open the doors between the rooms. “The room was paid for, so I kept it.”

“Good thinking. I knew there was a reason I didn’t—”

“...throw me overboard when you had the chance,” I finished for him. “Well, it’s too late now. You’ll have to think of something else.” I went directly to the suitcase. “He’d checked it with the hotel instead of bringing it to Morocco like he should have. I guess Mario and I screwed up on the baggage count somehow.”

The flicker of anticipation in Will’s fascinating eyes sent shivers down my spine to my feet and curled my toes. He put his arm around my waist and kissed me on the cheek. “Oh, I am definitely going to keep you, Mez Boobies.”

Raging hormones notwithstanding, I pulled away.

“Not if you call me *that* once more, you won’t,” I snapped in mock-anger. I flopped down on the bed, but I wasn’t truly upset. I was too curious to be distracted by trivia. “Maybe what you’re looking for is in this suitcase. Can you open it?”

He gave me the eye-roll thing and took a deep breath. Sensing that he was going to call me “Mez Boobies” again as retaliation for my inadvertent questioning of his spy-skills, I held up a balled fist. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Not even in my dreams.” He put a hand in his pocket and drew out a little instrument that looked like a jack knife but was probably a sophisticated spy tool. With his back to me, he went to work on the lock and within seconds, it popped open. He moved aside so I could see.

“Ready?” He lifted the suitcase lid, and an expression of satisfaction spread across his handsome face. “Just as I suspected. Another artificial leg.”

Chapter Thirteen

My jaw dropped in surprise. “Another leg?”

I hopped off the bed and rushed to look. Nestled in the padded interior of the specially designed suitcase, was another prosthetic limb. *That* was what Will was looking for, but of course, what he wanted was the contraband inside.

“What made you think he had another one?”

“Logical conclusion. Whoever hit you with the oar and took the one Archie had been wearing, didn’t find what he was looking for. Otherwise, why the attempts to break into the bus’s luggage?”

Digesting that, I examined the unusual contents of the suitcase and wondered how Essi Ahmed fit into this picture.

“This one looks different,” I commented. “Newer, maybe?” I touched it with a finger tip and gasped. Whatever the surface material was made of, it had the hand of real skin. With my lids squeezed tight, I ran an open palm along its length. Jeez, if I hadn’t seen it first...I touched something else.

“What’s this?” My eyes blinked open. There was a folded envelope stuffed between the foot and the padding. I pulled it out. “It’s a letter addressed to Archibald Philpot from...let’s see, from Custom Prosthetics, Ltd.”

Without even looking at me, Will carefully extracted the mechanism from its case. “Hmm, very sophisticated.” His attention was focused on the false limb. Then he glanced at me. “Open it.”

It pissed me off that he didn’t take more of an interest in my discovery,

but again curiosity got the better of me. My gaze skimmed the return address. "Custom Prosthetics, Ltd. with offices in London, Paris, and Madrid..." I held the envelope closer. "And it was post marked three months ago in Algeciras, Spain. Well, fancy that."

Will made a funny sound in his throat and put down the leg. I'd never seen him appear so somber. "What does it say?"

In other words, cut to the chase. He really did need to lighten up a little. I opened the flap and took out a piece of expensive gold-embossed stationery.

"Dear Mister Philpot," I read aloud, "Custom Prosthetics Ltd. wishes to thank you for your participation in the testing one of our newest products...blah, blah, blah. As one of several volunteers, you will receive an all-expenses paid trip during which you can experience this new design under the most intense circumstances."

My voice trailed off and I read the rest to myself, my eyes growing wider with each line. Finally, I lowered my arm, the letter still in my hand, and blew a stray tendril of hair out of my eyes.

"Whew. Apparently Archie was one of a control group trying out experimental prosthetic designs for this outfit," I explained to Will, who by now was rocking impatiently on the balls of his feet with his hands locked behind his back. I got the impression it was quite an effort for him to restrain from ripping the letter out of my hand and pushing me out a window.

Right. Cut to the chase. I didn't want to be responsible for any more property damage.

"This trip was part of the test. For his trouble, Archie was supposed to end up with a free vacation and an improved, and very expensive, prosthetic."

I raised the letter again and reread one of the paragraphs. "And he's got an appointment tomorrow with the Research and Development Manager, one Roberto Lopez, here in Algeciras. It says they'll call and confirm the appointment on the date of his arrival."

Uh-oh! Without a word, both of us swiveled toward the telephone. For the first time, I noticed the flashing red message light. I closed my eyes. When

I opened them again, the light was still on. *How did I miss that?* I picked up the receiver and held it out to Will.

“Speakerphone,” was all he said.

There was a speakerphone? Who would have guessed? With my mind in a whirl, I found the appropriate buttons and punched them. We listened together.

“Good evening, *Señor* Feelpot, welcome to Spain.” The man leaving the message spoke heavily accented but perfect English. “This is Roberto Lopez, of Custom Prosthetics Ltd. I am calling to confirm our meeting tomorrow afternoon at one o’clock. I look forward to hearing your opinion of our experimental prosthetic, and while you are here, I will be happy to make any adjustments you might need.” He went on to repeat the address and time of the meeting.

I replaced the receiver. “Adjustments, like in *removing stolen goods?*” The old ticker in my chest was speeding up again, forcing my voice to drop to a whisper. “They don’t know he’s dead, do they?”

“Doesn’t sound like it.” Will studied me as though making a decision, then sat on the edge of the bed and patted the mattress. I eased down beside him and clamped my hands together in my lap.

He eyed me and compressed his lips, clearly in the process of assessing how much he would tell me against the “need-to-know” rule. “Okay, here’s the way I see the situation. We’re dealing with two different groups of criminals. The first is either Custom Prosthetics or certain well-placed people within that company, who are smuggling goods inside artificial limbs. It’s a clever and relatively risk-free scheme. This is the assignment I’ve been working on.”

I sighed with relief. “I *knew* such a nice old gentleman like Archie couldn’t be a slime-bag crook.” I liked to think I was a good judge of people, but I guess I’d never met any really bad ones. “He didn’t know he was carrying stolen goods.”

And at last, Will was opening up and showing some trust in me. Trust is good.

"Hmm. At first I was convinced he was part of it, but now that I see the whole scam..." He shrugged. "Well, the scale is tipping in the old boy's favor."

"But I don't understand why he'd bring both prosthetics when it meant lugging around another large suitcase."

"He'd used the other one for a number of years," Will said with so much authority I assumed he had a full dossier on everyone Europol thought might be involved. "I'd say he didn't trust the experimental model and brought the old standby just in case."

"Oh."

"Or maybe the new one was uncomfortable. It doesn't matter. The bottom line is that our second criminal—and *not* part of my current investigation—has to be some group that knows Custom Prosthetics is smuggling. Based on what's happened, I'd say that group is trying to get the goods before the fence does and is willing to kill for them."

I swallowed hard. A lump the size of a chocolate bar was clinging to the back of my throat, refusing to go down.

"Do you think this...other group tried to buy Archie off, thinking he was part of the smuggling ring? Archie wouldn't have known what they were talking about, but once they approached him, they'd have to kill him, right? And we messed up their plans, didn't we?"

Oh, boy. That would explain a lot.

Will had a strange expression on his face that neither affirmed nor denied my thoughts on the matter. On one hand, he seemed to agree and was proud that I'd figured it out. That was the good-thinking-Harriet-you're-a-quick-study half.

See. Didn't I say I'm a quick study?

The other half—a look that said you-know-too-much-and-you're-now-in-terrible-danger—wasn't so positive.

"What's inside the leg?" I lifted my chin in the direction of the suitcase. I suppose I was trying to distract him, but I really *did* want to know. And I still had those niggling doubts about his friend Essi Ahmed and what his role was

in all this.

Here Will drew the line.

“Don’t know.” He stood up and turned his back a fraction in my direction. If he had any ideas about what was being smuggled—which I didn’t doubt for an instant—he had no intention of sharing them with me.

So much for trust.

“Europol and the local police will take a look when I bring it in. If there’s anything inside, we’ll work the case from that angle as well.”

I stood up so I could see his eyes. He could keep his face inscrutable and his voice flat and steady, but his eyes always gave him away. He had beautiful eyes.

“And this other group who killed Archie, do you know who they are? What are we going to do about *them*?”

In an instant, those brilliant blue pools muddied with darkness and narrowed to laser accuracy. His eyebrows did the S thing and deepened the frown lines. Not a promising portent.

“I still don’t know *who* they are, but I do know *we* aren’t going to do anything.”

Rats. I knew that was what he was going to say. And I’d thought he was weakening. With him everything was still I, I, I. At first, his over protectiveness was sweet and cuddly, but now it interfered with what I wanted to do, and I was getting annoyed. No, I was getting pissed. After all, Archie Philpot had been my tourist, my responsibility. He was murdered on my watch. It was perfectly reasonable for me to be involved in apprehending his killer.

If Mr. Secret Agent here thought he could tell *me* what to do...

Then the phone rang.

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I froze in place. It rang again. By the end of the third ring, I’d picked it up. “Hello?”

Brilliant opening. *Am I talented, or what?*

"Who is this?" a man's voice demanded. It was rough and uncompromising.

Pushy creep. Already, I didn't like him.

"That depends on who's asking," I replied in a snitty tone. "You got a name?"

There was a pause in the conversation. "Look, *Miss Ruby*, we know you have something we want. We'd like to negotiate."

*Ohmigod!* With frantic flapping motions of my hand, I waved Will to my side and pointed to the phone. I was scared silly. This guy knew my name. He knew where I was and that I had an adjoining room with Archie...and he knew I had access to what he wanted. My confidence was not inspired.

"Negotiate?" I was beyond rational thinking. "Why should I? You don't have anything I want."

From the way Will winced and the horrified look on his face, I suspected that my current grade in spy-talk wasn't so hot. I gave him a palms-out and mouthed "Help, what should I say?" With his face scrunched into a frown, he moved closer so he could hear.

"Don't be so sure," the man threatened.

I couldn't speak. The muscles at the back of my neck tightened and every hair on my body stood on end. *Ohmigod!* He knows my name. He knows how to find me. My insides burned as though someone was pouring battery acid down my throat.

What I wanted, and what he *could* take from me, was the rest of my life.

When I didn't answer, he said, "Yeah, that's right, sweetheart," like he could read my mind over the telephone. "So, Ms. Ruby, you'd better be at the Europa Café in the town center tomorrow morning at eight thirty, outdoors, so we can discuss your options. And come alone!"

"But—"

"I know what you look like. I'll find *you*." And he hung up.

Beside me, Will's face had darkened and his body was rigid. His eyes

hooded and his mouth pulled tight into a thin line, the expression fierce and uncompromising. He clenched and unclenched his fists. At that moment, I knew William Talbot was absolutely, without a doubt, capable of killing someone if it was the right thing to do. If it was necessary to protect other innocent beings.

“And goodbye to you, *creep*,” I shouted into the telephone. I threw the receiver into its cradle, collapsed onto the bed and stared off into space. I thought about crying but right then I was too angry. Maybe later, when everything was over, I would cry.

With his chin jutting forward, Will paced back and forth for a while, then sat down near me. By then the momentary shock of the phone call was over. I had it together again, so I sat up and sniffed my nose. I was still angry, but now I was angry, indignant *and* determined to make these people pay. They’d killed one of my tourists. No one was going to get away with *that*.

“From what the guy said, and didn’t say, I don’t think they know you’re an agent. They may not even know you exist, but they sure know everything about me.”

For the first time in a while, there was the hint of a smile at the corners of Will’s mouth.

“You haven’t exactly been hard to follow. You’ve left a trail of disaster from North Africa to southern Europe. Like I said before, you’re a menace to society.”

In spite of everything, I was pleased to see his mood lighten. This was his job. He knew how to handle these things and being morose and depressed wasn’t part of the game plan.

“Don’t be so sarcastic. *Stealth* is my middle name.”

We were both starting to relax.

When Will finally spoke, his tone was flat and dead serious again. “I hope you don’t think for one minute that you’re going to meet this guy tomorrow, because you’re *not*.”

My spine stiffened with renewed indignation. I sprang to my feet and



puffed myself up like a bantam rooster with frizzy blonde hair standing out all over the place.

*Like I could intimidate him? Never going to happen.*

"What do you mean? Of course I'm going. The tour's not leaving until day after tomorrow and I'm not taking the Granada trip. I have plenty of time."

Will stood and skewered me with a glare. "Yeah, plenty of time to get yourself killed. You're only insisting because I told you not to go, right?"

*Right.* I had no intention of letting some man—and particularly one I'd only known for one day—tell me what to do. It wasn't in my Italian nature to pass up that kind of a challenge. As I've said before, nothing really bad had ever happened to me, so I was fearless and foolish. Besides, I wanted these people to pay for what they'd done to Archie.

"That's not true," I lied.

He wasn't buying any. "It's too dangerous, Harriet. Don't worry, I'll set something up. A decoy, maybe. And I'll get them, but you are *not* going to be there."

Meltdown. I went from annoyed to furious in one second flat. "Like hell I'm not! You don't think you can cut me out of this now, do you? After all I've been through?" My voice rose at least two octaves.

His tone remained even and steady...and determined. "I don't *think* I can, I'm doing it. And I'm staying here tonight to be sure you don't sneak out on me."

"That's not fair! You have no right to tell me what I can and can't do!" I cried and stamped my foot.

"Go ahead, act like a child." His calm, controlled manner was a slap in my face. "The answer is still *no*. You're not going out chasing murderers. You can stamp all you want, but that's final."

"And that's final. Now who's sounding like a spoiled brat? Why don't you put a sock in it?"

Will glared at me with so much disdain I knew I wasn't going to like his next speech.

“Look, you’ve done your part. An important part, too. Archie’s body has been released to the British officials, and I have the leg likely to contain the contraband. There’s nothing more you can do. You can go on your little tour now and never look back.”

My little tour? Never look back? *Arrogant, pompous smartass jerk!* I picked up the only loose thing in the room, a glass ashtray, and threw it at him. He ducked and it smashed against the wall.

The sound of shattering glass brought me back to my senses. If this kept up, I’d be responsible for more property damage and have to fill out another insurance form. I was seething, but I’m not a complete idiot nor did I have a death wish.

In fact, I most assuredly did not want to be dead.

Why did he always have to be right? If I went to meet with that man tomorrow, being dead was a distinct possibility.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning. In the mean time, you and your precious leg can stay in the room if that’s what you want. You can take Archie and his prosthetic to the devil for all I care. Just don’t try to come in my room and don’t interfere in my life anymore.”

With that said—yelled, actually—I stomped out, slammed both doors, and locked the one on my side.

*Damn agent!*

I turned on the shower and got undressed, then proceeded to steam away my anger under the hot spray.

## Chapter Fourteen

My hour-long shower relaxed me—so much for water conservation—and the force of the hot spray did wonders for my back, which had been aching all evening. After I dried off, I rubbed my body down with my favorite vanilla-scented lotion, wrapped myself in a big towel, and went to work on my hair.

The blow dryer gave my curly mane a life of its own and, by the time I finished, it stood out around my face like a halo. I was in a good mood again when I came out of the bathroom to put on my pajamas.

“Eek!” I screeched in surprise.

Lying on my bed, in a relaxed repose with his hand behind his head, was Will—in the buff. *Ohmigod!* My heart fluttered, my mind fluttered, my stomach turned flip-flops, and the red polish melted right off my toenails.

The only coherent thought I could muster was that I should have known it was useless to lock the door.

He propped himself up on one elbow and flashed me a heart-stopping smile. I could tell he'd showered because his hair shone with dampness and a hint of soap and aftershave tickled my nostrils.

He'd shaved? *Oh, boy.*

“Hi, there...Edith,” he drawled.

Edith? My chin dropped in outrage. Bad enough that he had the nerve to be there at all, much less without a stitch on, but to call me *Edith* because I shrieked a little from surprise. *That* was too much.

I lost it.

I dropped my towel and flew at him in anger—which was, I suppose, what he intended to happen—and in an instant I found myself flat on my back on the mattress with Will straddling me, his hands resting on his muscled thighs. His legs pinned my arms loosely to my sides.

He grinned. “Third time’s a charm.”

At last, I had more than a glimpse. I had a wide screen, full color, digital view. *Ohmigod, what a package!*

I think that’s when I stopped breathing.

All day I’d been turned on by the sight of him and wanted to jump his bones—feelings I’d never experienced before with any intensity. Like, I’d had a little experience but I’m not promiscuous by any standard. Now, I was hoping that was going to change...big time.

Then, I’d resented him for trying to tell me what to do, even for my own safety. Now, in this position, I went all girly with shyness and vulnerability. To keep my bugging eyes off *other things*, I stared up into his baby blues and was swept into a whirlpool of molten desire. I was falling. I still wasn’t able to take in air.

“Aren’t you happy to see me?”

*Happy to see him?* My tongue thickened and stuck to the roof of my mouth. I tried to close my eyes but they were propped open by wonder and curiosity. My composure was shot.

“Um, ah...I don’t think the word *see* is appropriate right now,” I murmured in confusion. All my emotions and hormones were flying off in different and conflicting directions. “Didn’t I tell you not to come in my room?”

I was shooting for an indignant tone, but that didn’t come across the way I intended because I was drooling.

“Not really. The way I understood it, you challenged me to come. Since I tend to be an overachiever, I couldn’t let that pass. So, voilà, here I am.”

His hands spanned my waist and ran up and then down the length of my torso, thumbs skimming my rib cage, my abdomen and—gulp—my thighs. My

pulse pounded in my ears. Molten heat spread out from every part of me he touched. I was melting inside, all my senses in some state of super-awareness. The texture of his hands brought every nerve ending to the surface. His scent of soap, musky aftershave and essence of Talbot maleness made my mouth water. I could almost taste the slight saltiness of his skin.

Abruptly, my emotions settled down to two intense driving needs spreading through me like a fever. I wanted this man, and I wanted him now, and I was scared out of my wits.

"Please, Will, can you give me a minute here?" I turned my head to the side, hoping he couldn't see my eyes. I didn't know what they would tell him. "I'm not sure how I feel about this. I...I think I'm...afraid."

"Afraid, or angry?"

"Afraid."

He leaned over, pressing his body against mine and gave me a gentle kiss, then pulled back. "Of me?" He sounded surprised. He put a finger under my chin and forced me to look at him.

"N-no, not you."

"Hmm," was his only verbal reply. His hands cupped my breasts and his fingertips traced lazy circles around the hard nipples. My body tightened and arched, seeking greater contact. Then he brushed his palms over the rigid tips. Fire tap-danced southward through my blood to my core. *Ohmigod.*

"Afraid of this? Of having sex with me?" He raised one eyebrow. "That's hard to believe. You've been bombarding me with sexual pheromones all day." He paused. "It's not your first time, is it?"

I shook my head. "It's not the sex. And it's not my first time, either, though I have to say, I'm *not* very experienced in that department."

"I'll take care of that." His voice was a husky whisper that made me tingle in all the right places. His nostrils flared as he continued to explore my body, sending wild sensation along every nerve. "Afraid of what then?"

I was quiet a moment, trying to organize my thoughts, but his touch had dissolved my mind. Fire consumed me, burning me up from the inside out.

"I'm afraid of us. Of me." I closed my eyes. They were full and I prayed I wouldn't cry. "It's like I've lived my whole life in the past twenty-four hours. I...I've changed. I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know what I want. And I don't know who you are. I'm afraid this may mean something different to you than it does to me."

Leaning over me, with his weight on his knees and his hands braced on either side of me, he buried his face against my chest and took one taut bud into his mouth, his teeth nibbling lightly, his tongue flicking over the hardened peak, sucking and drawing deeper. A cord of power seemed to stretch from where he touched me to my core. My belly quivered. Without volition, my body arched as the sensations rippled through me.

"Will!" I was lost in a storm of need. I didn't want him to stop, ever.

Finally, when I was strung out and ready to snap like a bungee cord, he sat back and brushed my damp hair off my forehead. *Oh, please, don't stop!* I tried to turn my head, but he bracketed my face between his hands and held it steady. Against my cheeks, his palms and fingers were hard and strong but not rough.

"Don't turn away. I don't know if I can answer your question. I'll try, but you have to look at me and listen."

Our eyes locked. His gaze nailed me in place. A jolt of energy snapped and sizzled between us, making words unnecessary to our communication.

"This morning, when we met, I saw a beautiful and desirable young woman in a dangerous situation." He ran his fingers along my cheekbone, then lifted a strand of hair and tucked it behind my ear. "I had to rescue you. That's my profession...and also my calling. Rescuing innocent people is what I do." He let out a shuddering breath. "It...it's the only way I know how to pay back a debt I owe."

He closed his eyes a moment and his lips thinned. His hands moved gently over my breasts.

"Tonight you're still a beautiful and desirable woman in a dangerous situation. You still need to be rescued, but now it's...different. I'm not sure

*what* is different, or why, or how I feel about it. I only know whatever this is between us—this magnetic attraction—it's not the same as it was this morning. It's something much more powerful."

I drew in a ragged breath. At least he was as confused as I was. He'd opened himself up to me. He'd given me everything he was able to give and I could almost taste his vulnerability. Tiny lines radiated from the corners of now-indigo eyes. The tightness on his mouth and the pulse at his throat betrayed him. I sensed he was experiencing emotions he was neither comfortable with nor accustomed to. I wanted to reach out to him and comfort him, to touch him, but I didn't know where to put my hands. I didn't want to do the wrong thing.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked softly.

My breath caught. I hadn't seen that coming and it surprised me.

"Could you?" I asked in confusion. From what I was seeing, I didn't think that was possible. His erection was gorgeous.

He blinked and let out a long tortured breath.

"Yes, I could, if you asked me to." When he opened his eyes, they drilled right through me. "Are you asking me to go?"

*No, no, no.* I grasped his wrist. "Please stay!"

"Do you have protection?"

*Not from this.* "I'm on the pill. What about you?"

He frowned. "Trust me, I'm safe. Are you committed to someone else?"

I couldn't shake my head fast enough. "No, not at all. I lived with a boyfriend for a few months before we graduated. Then it was...over. It was never serious. He went back home and I came here. I just never got around to..."

Without warning, Will rolled off me and onto his side, wrapped his arms around my pulsing body and pulled me against him, face to face. Well, it was more like face to chest, but it was definitely genital to genital. His hands moved below the small of my back and pressed my soft curves against the firm planes of his hot body.

I groaned and wiggled against his erection. His chest moved up and down in rapid jerky motions, his heart pounded against mine.

“Do you trust me?” he whispered.

“Yes.” No hesitation there either. And trust was the foundation for everything. Trust was good.

“Then why don’t we...just let it happen?” Again, his hand found my breast. His lips met mine in a long, deep and toe-curling kiss.

I did trust him. I responded with everything I had, and we *did* let it happen.

*And happen and happen and happen.*

I had no idea a man could be so understanding and gentle, so passionate and forceful, so demanding and giving, so...everything. By morning, we were both exhausted and sated, drained and filled with new life, relaxed and content. And if I’d tried to stand up, I think I might have been a bit bow-legged, too. I was definitely on the sore side.

Will Talbot wasn’t just incredible. He was Superman.

Somewhere in the process, between rounds, we must have agreed on what we would do the next day, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember any of our conversation. I remembered, quite vividly, a lot of other things—like the fact that he was never out of breath, and the things he did to me that I had never dreamed possible—but definitely not conversation.

Afterward, we dozed for a while wrapped together until the alarm clock went off at four thirty.

The raucous sound grated on my nerves until I was conscious enough to pull one arm free. With my fist, I banged around on the side table until I hit the clock. The instrument uttered a death rattle and fell on the floor with a metallic crash. The obnoxious alarm stopped. Relief at last.

Will jerked up into a sitting position, eyes wide open. “What?” he demanded in a ready-for-action, Special Forces growl. He sounded fierce and, since he was still half-asleep, I almost expected him to give me a karate chop in the neck without checking to see who I was.



But he didn't. He lifted his arms and stretched. With sleep in his eyes, his hair tousled and chest bare, he looked more delicious than ever. Mmm, just what I wanted for breakfast.

"Why'd you set that damned thing for four thirty?" I asked as his head dropped back to the pillow. I crawled into his arms and snuggled against him.

"Hmm." He stretched again long and hard. "We have to get up. We've got a lot to do this morning before your meeting."

I grunted. "Like arrange for backup and all?"

He smiled and pulled me closer, which seemed impossible since we were pretty much skin to skin. An ant couldn't have crawled between us.

"I did all that last night while you were stewing in the shower. But *we* have to check out the address Lopez left before anyone is around, drop off Archie II at the Europol office, and then get downtown early to be sure everything is in place."

"Darn. I was kind of hoping..."

He rolled over on top of me and with his weight on his elbows, cupped my face and kissed my nose. "Go brush your teeth, Tiger. With you, I'll *always* have time for a quickie."

~ ~ ~

The quickie turned into a second quickie, which wasn't so quick, and then a third. It was still early when we finally left the hotel, taking the delivery elevator so no one would see us. We exited into an underground parking garage.

"We'll take the car." Taking my arm, he guided me to a late model sporty-looking Lancia and helped me in.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Carpool." He laughed at my expression on my face. "Mario dropped me at the local Europol office last night."

"Oh." That set me to wondering about last night.

Will found a bakery that was open, and we took the time to stuff

ourselves with coffee and donuts, American style. With all that exercise, we'd both worked up quite an appetite.

After that, he headed the car toward the address on the letter we'd found in Archie's suitcase. Unlike many European cities, Algeciras was of more modern origins. At one time, it had been an elegant resort town, but now it was clearly a seedy-looking industrial port city. As we drove, I glanced at the three and four story concrete buildings surrounding us. They were nice enough but marginally maintained. The tree-lined streets were narrow and, with the morning traffic and cars parked along both sides half on the sidewalks, it was slow going.

"This doesn't look like a manufacturing zone," I commented. Commercial shops lined the street and already vendors were opening their store fronts, sweeping sidewalks, and setting up merchandise outside. At a stop light, I watched a butcher hang a whole side of beef next to strings of rabbits and chickens.

"I didn't expect it to be industrial," Will responded, his eyes alert for the address. "Most of these buildings have professional offices and apartments above the shops. We're probably looking for a combination office and residence on the second or third floor."

My gaze wandered up the facades to a proliferation of wrought iron balconies holding pots of bright geraniums and other flowers. Clothes lines had been strung across some of the small outdoor patios and there sheets, shirts, and underwear flapped in the breeze. At ground level, bronzed, thin-limbed children played on the sidewalks.

I wondered if Archie would have suspected something fishy when Lopez's address wasn't an office building or manufacturing plant.

"Is someone going to keep Archie's appointment this afternoon?"

"Depends on what we find out about Lopez this morning and what's inside the prosthetic, if anything. That's it over there."

Will stopped the car in the middle of the street and pointed to one of the older structures. The drivers behind us honked pulling around.

I checked along the street for an empty spot. "There's no place to park."

"Sure there is."

I frowned when he pulled into an alley barely wide enough for a vehicle. His Lancia blocked the exit of two other cars already parked there.

"Don't worry, we're not staying long. I only want to check the layout. Wait here."

"Not on your life." I opened the passenger door as wide as I could, which was about twelve inches, and wiggled my way out of the car before he could get out. He grimaced but didn't try to stop me. I was sure he expected me to find some offbeat way to attract unwanted attention.

*Who, me?*

To his credit, it *was* true that I'd had a run of unfortunate events over the last two days. I didn't know how to convince him that before I met him, my karma hadn't been bad. He'd think I was blaming him, which I was, so I kept my mouth shut.

Instead of going in through the street entrance, we walked down the alley, past overflowing trash bins, abandoned car parts, and a mother cat nursing her litter of kittens against the wall of a building. In spite of the venue, the cat looked clean and well fed. She and her babies belonged to someone.

We entered through a side door. As I followed Will down the short hallway to the main foyer, a young mother with three small children came trouncing down the stairs in a barrage of noise that echoed off the granite walls of the empty room. Will took out the letter I'd found and studied it.

"Here he is." He pointed to a brass plate listing the occupants. "Roberto Lopez, Custom Prosthetics Ltd., apartment twenty."

*Well, that was easy. Maybe being a special agent wasn't that difficult after all.*

An old man in baggy trousers approached us. He wore wide suspenders over a frayed athletic shirt that had once been white. "Who do you want?" he demanded in Spanish.

"He's the doorman," Will explained, although Spanish is one of the

languages I *do* speak. Rather than point that out or insert myself into the conversation, I smiled and listened to him tell the man that we had an appointment later in the day and wanted to be sure of the location. He waved the letter under the porter's nose.

The man snatched the paper and studied it. Then, he grunted and handed it back. "Third door to the left at the top of the stairs," he muttered and left.

Will returned the letter to its envelope, stuffed that into the inside pocket of his jacket, and took my hand. "Let's get out of here."

We left through the front door before anyone else could see us, and squeezed around the Lancia to get back into the alley. While I waited for him to unlock the passenger door, one of the kittens broke away from the litter and rubbed against my leg.

"Isn't it cute?" I leaned down to pet its soft black and white fur. "I love cats."

Will glanced at the kitten and nodded, but I could tell he was preoccupied with other matters. "Come on, we have to hurry or we'll be late."

Once we were in the car, he started the engine and backed out of the alley onto the street.

*Thump.*

"Will, stop!" I screeched.

"What?"

I scrambled out of the car before he'd brought it to a complete halt. My hand flew to my mouth. Will was beside me, demanding to know what was wrong. I pointed.

"You...you ran over the kitten." I was almost sobbing.

His eyes clouded and he turned pale. His face showed compassion, even for an animal.

"I'm sorry." His voice sounded uncharacteristically subdued. "I didn't realize it was behind me. Thank heavens it wasn't a kid."

I nodded ruefully and stood there, trying not to look at the squished ball

of fur and unable to tear my moist eyes away.

"It must have belonged to someone," I murmured. "We can't leave it like this. I don't want some little child to come home and see his kitten dead...and this mess."

Will gave me his I-don't-believe-this stare. "All right. I'll put it in the trash."

I looked at the overflowing containers and shook my head. "That's cold. Besides, there's no room in those cans to hide it."

He let out a long impatient sigh. "We still have that bag from the donut shop." Clearly, he was not pleased with the delay, but willing to indulge me.

I sat down in the car, found a tissue, and wiped my eyes while Will used a piece of discarded box to scoop up the poor animal and put it in the paper sack. Looking in the rear view mirror, I reapplied my eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick, and contemplated the fragility of life. In an instant, any one of us could be gone.

The thought made me wonder, for the umpteenth time, what Will meant when he made the comment about killing someone. And, I recalled, he'd said some other creepy things as well. The man was carrying some heavy-duty baggage.

He got into the driver's seat and placed the donut bag on the floor of the back seat. "I'll find another way to dispose of it somewhere, but we don't have time to do it right now. We have to drop off the prosthetic."

Soon we were in the historic center among taller office buildings. As we rounded a corner, I recognized the place where Will had left the bus the night before.

"Is this where you work?" I must have sounded dumbfounded because he laughed.

"Of course not. Our real work is in the field. Europol has small offices everywhere for writing up reports, meetings, turning in expense forms, things like that."

A young man in a suit was waiting at the curb. Will pulled over next to a

parked car and popped the lock on the trunk. The youth took Archie II out, slammed the lid, and Will pulled back into the traffic. The stop took less than sixty seconds, and then we were on our way to the Europa Café.

I stared at Will, my eyebrows raised. It was obvious that last night, in addition to setting up security for this morning's meeting, he also made arrangement for the transfer and inspection of the artificial leg.

"What?" He glanced at my frown, then smiled with understanding and said, "You take long showers."

## Chapter Fifteen

Ten minutes later, we arrived at the Europa Café. It was on the corner of Calle Baluarte and another busy street, and sported two large blue awnings with the name of the café in white letters. Outdoor tables, covered with white cloths, were scattered around on the wide sidewalk. Concrete planters filled with Lantana and other blooming plants separated the pedestrians from the café patrons, creating a large patio.

Will squeezed the car into an empty parking spot right in front. When I got out, I retrieved the donut bag from the back, put it on the passenger seat, and rolled down the window. "For easy retrieval," I explained, "in case I see a place to dispose of it."

He guided me to the entrance of the restaurant, then hesitated on the threshold before opening the door. "Are you sure you want to go this alone?"

"I have to. The man on the phone didn't seem to know you're an agent, so why expose yourself unnecessarily? Besides, if I'm with someone, they might decide not to mess with negotiating. What if he has a gun?"

What a novel idea. *And why hadn't I thought of that possibility before now?* I knew how to shoot, but firearms were not among my favorite things.

"We've got people all over this place."

I looked around. "Where?"

*Oh. Another stupid question.*

It was still early for the meeting but I went in, and Will melted out of

sight. I asked for a table outside, and a Moroccan waiter showed me to a spot off to one side where I had a visual shot along the sidewalk and through the door into the restaurant. Beyond the widely spaced planters, I noticed Will's car parked at the curb not more than a car length from where I sat.

And I'd thought finding that space was a lucky coincidence. Wow. He had been almost as busy while I was in the shower as he was afterward.

I ordered coffee and hoped I wouldn't have to go to the bathroom in the middle of intense negotiations. All around me were the normal sounds of traffic, clinking silverware, honking, and chatter. I sipped from my cup, savoring the rich aroma of the brew and ignoring the scents of burnt rubber from the street and the smoke in the air. I pretended to read the magazine I had taken from my backpack, but I was thinking about the upcoming meeting.

Europol knew someone in the upper echelons of Custom Prosthetics was smuggling stolen goods. Will was convinced Lopez was the fence. But who was this other group trying to cut into the profits? That was the question Will wanted answered.

But *I* was the one who almost got killed over this in Tangier...the one who knew absolutely *nothing* about anything. And I was still the person in danger. *What kind of crapola was that?* While I'd never been a vindictive person, in the past twenty-four hours my life had changed. This suppressed trait in me had leaped to the fore, and I wanted to nail these criminals to the wall. That was *my* agenda. I wanted action.

*Unfortunately, I didn't have a clue.*

I could only assume the individual meeting me represented the "bad guys" who wanted whatever was hidden in Archie's prosthetic. They thought I had it, and since they'd killed Archie, I knew they wouldn't hesitate to kill me.

*Nice.* Unconsciously, I rolled and unrolled a corner of the magazine with two fingers. The situation was making me nervous. I couldn't see Will, and no one else in the café looked like an agent, at least to my untrained eye. I was beginning to wish I had brought a gun instead of something to read.

Last night on the telephone, the man had said *he* would find *me*. I



checked out the people seated around me but none of them seemed a likely suspect. Some were tourists. Most were Spaniards or Moroccans with their noses buried in the local newspaper, innocent bystanders who had stopped on the way to work for a cup of coffee.

I turned my attention to the sidewalk and watched with wary eyes as each pedestrian walked by.

Among the foot traffic, which increased with each passing minute, I noticed a scruffy-looking man in worn clothes several sizes too big for him. He had at least two days growth of beard on his face and his hair looked like it had been styled in an altercation with an eggbeater.

The second time he went by, walking in the opposite direction, I paid closer attention. He appeared to be younger than I'd first thought and was probably one of the many homeless who gravitate to the warmer climates. Still, I wouldn't have noticed him if he hadn't passed by several times, peeking into the cars parked along the curb.

*Can that be the man I'm waiting for?*

I was beginning to wish I'd taken Will up on his offer to come with me. Thank the good Lord I hadn't been foolish enough to refuse him last night. If anything happened to me this morning, at least I would have that incredible memory to sustain me while I guided tours for demons to the River Styx for the rest of eternity.

Until Will came into my life, I hadn't realized I was not a complete person. He had given me a great gift...a wholeness I'd never experienced before or even believed possible. He filled the empty places in me I didn't know existed.

*If I live through this, I'm going to have to deal with that.*

Why was I thinking about dying all of a sudden? I was only going to a meeting, not a shootout. In spite of Will's protests, it hadn't seemed dangerous when I'd insisted on coming here. Had my resentment over being told what to do overshadowed my better judgment?

What a concept. But this was a public venue and there were police and

agents all over the place. How dangerous could it be?

As I concentrated on recapturing the curiosity and enthusiasm I'd experienced when I thought about trying my hand at being an agent-extraordinaire, the magazine slipped from my fingers. I leaned over to pick it up, heard a scraping noise beside me, and something jabbed me in the ribs.

"Come up nice and slow, sweetheart, and smile," a harsh voice ordered close to my ear.

The unpleasant voice from the telephone call last night. How had he gotten there without my hearing or seeing him? My heart skipped several beats. Sweat beaded on my forehead and my elephants were back. I straightened little by little, forcing a toothy grin and hoping he wouldn't see how nervous I was, until we were face to face.

"Now, we're going to get up and move to another table. I'm going with you, so don't try anything stupid."

He had a gun, so I suppressed my trembling and did what I was told. I stood, picked up my cup of coffee and magazine, and walked to the table he was pointing at. As I sat down, I remembered Will saying the place would be bugged, but maybe that was only where I'd been seated before.

I glanced around and noticed Will's car parked directly in front of me, on the other side of the planters, but I no longer had a view of the interior of the café.

The man pulled another chair close, sat down beside me, and draped his left arm over the back of my seat. The scumbag's right arm was in a fabric sling which obscured the gun pointed straight at me.

"You scared the crap out of me," I snapped at him without thinking about consequences.

He scowled. He was older than I expected, in his fifties maybe, but trim and physically fit, with blue eyes and a fair complexion. His long dark hair was dappled with gray and tied back into a ponytail which disappeared between a black turtleneck and the collar of his gray tweed jacket.

"Ms. Ruby, you're a real piece of work," he sneered. He sounded rude

and coarse and disdainful.

"Takes one to know one," I replied, strong on bravado, weak on good sense. Any second he could pull that trigger and I doubted that Will or anyone else could stop him. I would be toast.

"Well, did you bring it?" he demanded.

Everyone kept talking about *it*.

Then I placed the slight accent I heard in his voice. He's Irish, I thought, and the realization struck me. I knew, without a doubt, that he was a terrorist.

Now, I'd never seen a terrorist before, or even imagined what one looked like, but I was sure that was what the man was. And with an Irish accent.

Oh, boy. Not the IRA? Hadn't they been put out of business by the situation in the Middle East?

"You don't think I'm that foolish, do you?" I was afraid to take my eyes off his face. First, because I wanted to be able to describe him later, but mostly I didn't want to glance around searching for Will or the man might realize I hadn't come alone. Who knew what he might do?

"I don't think you're foolish," he snarled. "I think you're downright stupid."

"Well, thanks a bunch. That makes me feel a whole lot better. Just out of curiosity, why is that?"

So, *that* was the reason this guy was being so casual. I had sensed that no one had been watching me since I entered the hotel last night, and most likely the man had come alone this morning. *Go right ahead. Just keep thinking I'm stupid.*

"All of you are stupid if you believe anyone would buy your ridiculous bumbling-tour-guide cover, but you've got enough smarts not to leave something that valuable in the hotel. Now, hand it over."

*It* again. Not only did these people think Archie was part of the prosthetics scam, they thought I was, too.

And he called *me* stupid?

Mustering up my courage, I laughed and raised my eyebrows. "Get real."

*Think. Buy time. Dammit, do something, Harriet.* Since I didn't have the loot he wanted and didn't even know what it was, my options were limited. But if I didn't give him what he wanted, this maniac would either off me or take me as a hostage. Neither sounded too appealing.

*Good thinking, Will. Thanks for filling me in on all the little details I need to get through this alive.*

"I thought you said you wanted to negotiate," I replied, all cool and in control. Yeah, right. "The word 'negotiate' does imply some sort of quid pro quo, you know. I'm afraid 'hand it over' doesn't quite cut it."

"We've changed our minds. No negotiations."

*Oops.* This was not sounding good.

"That's very interesting, Mister...ah, do you have a name?"

"Call me Joe."

*Terrorist Joe. Nice touch.*

"Fine...Joe, here's the way I see it. As long as I have the goods"—whatever they are—"and you don't, I've got something to bargain with."

"Not any more you don't, sweetheart." He emitted a vicious laugh, an ugly, evil sound. "We've got your phony raghead as a hostage. You'll have to give it to us or he'll come back in little pieces."

*Ohmigod.* My heart dropped to my feet. The blood drained from my head and pooled in my stomach. My first thought was that they had Will. But that was impossible. Feeling weak and nauseated, I grabbed onto the table for support.

He cocked the gun. I heard the click and froze.

"Don't like that, do you, Ms. Ruby?"

I couldn't move. Beads of sweat erupted all over my body, plastering my clothes to my skin. Phony raghead? Was that what he said? I wasn't thinking straight. Did I have elephants in my head, too?

Then it dawned on me. Raghead was a derogatory term for people who wore turbans, but this dunce might not know the difference between a turban and a *keffiyeh*.

They hadn't taken Will as a hostage. They had Essi Ahmed Mutassim O'Reilly.

It was all I could do not to sigh with relief. I'm sorry, Essi, I thought, but that's the way it is. I picked up on what the terrorist was saying in mid-sentence.

"...start with the digits and cut off one piece at a time. You'll cooperate, all right."

I was glad he wasn't talking about Will. I intended to reserve the pleasure of dissecting Will for myself—for not trusting me enough to tell me everything he knew. But I still couldn't let this happen to Essi.

To buy time, I picked up the cup of now-cold coffee. My hand shook so much I could barely lift it to my lips. When I finally managed to take a sip, it tasted awful.

How could I signal Will? When we planned this, I thought I'd be sitting where I could see him. What if something had happened to him, too? What if there were other terrorists here besides this man? My stomach clenched and my eyes watered at all the possibilities reeling through my head. Damn overactive imagination.

I didn't realize my gaze was darting all around, searching, until I found myself staring between two of the planters at Will's car. And the same homeless man I'd seen before was on the sidewalk beside it. In that instant, his hand darted through the open window as fast as lightning.

Without thinking, I half rose and pointed at the man. "He's stealing it."

The terrorist followed my gaze and popped out of his chair, his blue eyes alert. "That's it? You *do* have it."

My jaw dropped to flycatcher mode for a second or two. What I'd had—and now *didn't* have—was a dead kitten in a donut bag. *Could I build on that?*

I tried to speak but couldn't force out any words. What could I say? Before I came up with anything, the thief strode between the barrier of planters and onto the outdoor patio where we were sitting.

*Academy awards, here I come.*

Leaning into Terrorist Joe's face, I hissed at him with vehemence. "We can't let *him* take it."

I held my breath and prayed my improvisation sounded sufficiently greedy and anxious to be coming from a smuggler. Playing the role he'd bestowed on me seemed my only hope. His finger was on the trigger, already squeezing, so to speak. I figured that if two thieves were robbed by a third, they'd join forces.

The homeless man who'd stolen the bag ignored us and took a seat at a nearby table. As a waiter with a white towel over his arm approached, TJ a.k.a. Terrorist Joe eased back into the chair beside me. He adjusted his sling and the gun, which was still aimed in my direction.

"One more word and you're dead," good ol' Joe whispered to me.

*And I'd thought this wouldn't be dangerous? What planet am I living on?*

Standing only a few feet from our table, the waiter took one good look at the scroungy newcomer and puckered his mouth as though he'd been sucking lemons. The man's lips were so stiff and disapproving he could barely speak.

"May I take your order, sir?"

"Just coffee with cream, thanks."

Next to me, TJ had one eye on me and the other on the donut bag. I could almost see the wheels spinning inside the guy's head. I wanted to laugh, but like a good little spy-trainee, I didn't even crack a smile.

*Call me stupid, would he?* He'd totally misread my reaction to the theft of the cat-in-the-bag. He thought the sack contained the contraband he wanted. This was a turn of events neither of us had anticipated. And it told me that the stolen item was small enough to fit in there. Jewels? Drugs?

*Dammit, Will.*

The waiter brought the man's coffee, and our subject of interest took his time adding sugar and stirring it until the waiter moved out of sight. By then the sidewalk café had cleared out some. There were only a few other customers sitting outside, although the sidewalk was busy. The scruffy man glanced around, then placed the donut bag on the table in front of him. His eyes

glittered, and he licked his lips.

I sucked in a breath. Time's up. It was now or never.

"Don't just sit there, you idiot," I ordered with disdain, hoping I had mustered up enough anger to be convincing. "Do something."

Terrorist Joe shot me a scowl and lifted his chin. "Stand up, sweetheart, you're coming with me. A second hostage won't hurt."

We both rose. He pushed me ahead with his sling arm and forced me to walk in front of him. As I passed the homeless man fumbling to open the sack, I turned my head to watch and held my breath. In the same moment, my unfriendly neighborhood terrorist reached out with his left hand, snatched the bag, and kept going without missing a beat.

"Hey," the man shouted. "That's mine."

With surprising speed, he was on his feet. From behind us, he lunged at Terrorist Joe, grabbed at the sleeve of his tweed jacket, and in doing so, pulled Joe's arm out of the phony sling.

"*Chiach ort!*" Joe swore in Gaelic. He swung around, the loose sling flopping around his neck, his weapon exposed.

Out of the line of fire, I skittered backwards until my rear end slammed into another table. With one hand behind me, I caught at it to keep my balance.

My left-brain told me this was a good time to get the hell out of Dodge. Unfortunately, I was too terrified to transmit the message to my feet. Instincts for survival took control. My fingers, already splayed against the table, grasped the only thing within reach—the neck of a liter bottle of Perrier.

Terrorist Joe, with the pistol in one hand and the donut bag in the other, raised his fists and slammed them into his much smaller assailant.

The homeless man flew through the air and landed in the chair he'd been sitting in. His arms flailed. He clutched at the table, snagging a corner of the tablecloth as he and the chair went over backwards. His head smacked against the concrete with a dull *whomp* that sounded like a watermelon hitting the pavement. Hot coffee, the cup and saucer, the sugar bowl, little pots of

jam, and the flower arrangement crashed on top of him.

Startled patrons jumped to their feet. An empty chair tipped over with a crash. A few women customers screamed. Waiters rushed to the scene in confusion.

Everyone's attention was focused on the homeless man, out cold on the sidewalk with an entire table setting on top of him. No one seemed to realize how he'd gotten there or noticed Terrorist Joe slithering out of the lime light.

Well, he was not going to get away if *I* could help it. Taking advantage of his momentary focus on the prize clutched in his hand, I inched toward him from behind. I was a mere yard away when he plunged his free hand into the paper sack held in place between the crook of his gun arm and chest.

"Ahi!" he cried and dropped the bag. His eyes grew round and protruded, his face turned red. He waved the gun around as he gasped for breath.

For a split second, I thought he was having a heart attack. Then I realized it was shock and anger. Once he got himself under control, he would start shooting.

*And I would be his first target.*

Unwilling to stick around for that to happen, I swung the unopened Perrier from behind my back and brought it down on his head hard enough to crack the bottle. He let out a sharp cry and crashed back into the wall of the restaurant, the impact sending the pistol flying. His body slithered down the vertical surface into an unconscious heap.

Quickly I replaced the leaking bottle on a table and wiped my hands on my slacks.

"Help! Help!" I shrieked.

The focus of attention shifted. Everyone rushed toward me to see what I was screaming about. Before I could distance myself, just in case Terrorist Joe came to, I was stopped by a wide-eyed, slack-jawed waiter. Behind him, another man in a business suit looked so anxious and flustered I decided he must be the manager.

I seized the manager's lapels and shouted in his face. "Call an



ambulance! He's having a heart attack!"

"It's on the way," he assured me. "Calm down, ma'am. We'll take care of everything."

*Too late. Been there, done that.*

The panic I'd managed to hold tenuously at bay all morning lifted its ugly head within me. Where was Will? I had a burning need to get out of there, but I couldn't go without him. I had to find him.

Then I remembered the gun. My stomach tightened. Will would want the gun. I closed my eyes, pushed my mental recall button, and tried to visualize which direction it went when TJ hit the wall.

A siren sounded, first in the distance, then closer. Louder and louder.

Frantically, I began to search. Yes! There it was, half obscured under a nearby potted plant. By the time I scooped it up with a napkin and slipped it into the zippered pocket of my backpack, the ambulance was screeching to a stop behind Will's parked car. Four men in uniform hopped out and dashed to the café's patio.

I thought I saw Will inside the restaurant, but with the light reflecting off the window glass, I couldn't be sure.

Where the hell was he? Where had he and his agents been through all this? Weren't they supposed to protect me? I was working myself up into a froth, probably so I would forget that he'd told me not to come and I had insisted. Besides, he never actually said the agents were there to protect *me*, only that they were there.

*Denial and I were becoming close friends.*

With my back against the wall, I watched two of the paramedics head for the "cat burglar." The other two bent over the unconscious terrorist, and with quick economic motions, checked him out, took readings with sophisticated equipment, and finally rolled him onto a stretcher. I hoped they wouldn't mention the knot on his head or finding bottle glass in his hair. That might tend to spoil the heart attack ploy.

As the medical team picked up the stretcher to carry Terrorist Joe to the

ambulance, a grim-faced waiter retrieved the donut bag from the sidewalk and placed it on TJ's chest.

Hands clamped on my shoulders from behind. I squeaked, but in all that confusion, no one noticed. I was spun around, and there was Will, holding me at arm's length. A faint smile curved his mouth but little lines around his eyes and the deep crevice between them told me how stressed he was.

## Chapter Sixteen

"Harriet Ruby, you are amazing," Will declared. "You never let me down."

Relief flooded through my body. He was here. I was safe.

I'd been all geared up to yell at him for not being there for me, for not telling me everything. But I was so grateful to see him—so grateful to be alive and able to see him—all I wanted was to throw myself into his arms. I needed to be held.

His fingers pressed into my shoulders, his rigid arms keeping me at a distance. This was Europol business, I realized. His job. Some of these people were his colleagues—maybe even his superiors. I was aching inside, but I didn't want to do anything to compromise him.

"Thanks, I aim to please." I warned my own needs to back off.

He didn't let me go. "Jesus, Harriet," he whispered.

That was all it took. Without warning, the shock set in. My knees shook. Tears prickled behind my eyes. I couldn't catch my breath.

"Where were you?" I sobbed and bit into my lower lip to keep it from trembling. "I was so scared. I thought he was going to kill me." My eyes filled, but I staved off the flow. No matter the trauma I was experiencing, I wasn't going to embarrass Will.

"Do you think I didn't know that? That I wasn't worried sick?" he whispered in a rough voice. "Jesus, Harriet. Why do you think I didn't want you to come?"

He raised his hands as though he intended to cup my face, then let them drop.

Expelling a long breath, I pulled myself together. I had to. I really hated it when he was right. It made me feel as though I had to defend my actions, even when I knew I'd done something a wee tad...hmm...unwise.

"If I hadn't come, we wouldn't know as much as we do now." My voice was steady now. When he raised one eyebrow in question, I took that as an "okay" to continue. "I think I've figured this out. Can we sit down?"

Focusing my mind on the problem would keep me from reliving the fear and helplessness. I didn't need to be reminded how naive and overly trusting I'd been.

Around us, the restaurant was settling down after all the commotion. The medics had carried away the homeless man. In their wake, waiters were already sweeping up and setting tables. The customers returned to their seats or departed. The aroma of fresh ground coffee permeated the air. Nearby, a uniformed officer from the local police talked with the manager while other men unhooked wires and equipment that was completely invisible before.

"Let's get out of here. Tell me on the way." Will put his hand on my shoulder and guided me out of the café.

"I think these people are either IRA or a terrorist group that supports them," I explained my theory as we walked to his car. "They seem convinced that all of us are members of the smuggling ring."

He opened the door for me and, once I was inside, went around the car and slipped behind the wheel. When we were both settled and buckled up, I took a deep breath and said, "They're holding Essi as a hostage until we give them whatever is hidden in Archie's prosthetic."

"Essi?" That got his attention. He swore under his breath. "Essi doesn't have anything to do with this. What makes you think he's a hostage?"

Why was he always asking me these what-makes-you-think questions as though I was deductive-reasoning-impaired?

"Didn't you hear the terrorist say they'd captured the phony raghead and

were holding him as a hostage? And neither of us has seen Essi since he came out of the bus on the ferry.”

Because of the change in tables at the café, I wasn't sure Will *had* heard, but I was getting impatient. I wanted action. I wanted the whole thing over and done with so I could get back to a real life and feel like myself again.

Besides, I liked Essi Ahmed. From the first, I'd found it hard to believe he'd attacked Mario, and now, knowing he'd been taken hostage, I was convinced the terrorists were responsible. Essi was Will's friend. And Will...was Will.

He didn't say anything. Without looking at me, he jabbed the key into the ignition, fired up the engine, and pulled the Lancia out of the tight space onto Calle Baluarte.

“The man had an Irish accent,” I continued on with my analysis as Will drove through the historic downtown. “Any Irishman worth his salt would consider an Arab named O'Reilly a fake. And the raghead part...” I shrugged. “His ignorance was showing, but I made the connection. And if these people have been following me, they must have seen the three of us together.”

Will glanced at me and his eyes clouded. “Did he act like he knew the authorities were involved?”

“I don't think so. I'm positive he believes we're all smugglers. He seemed too arrogant and sure of himself to be aware of police surveillance.”

“I'm *not* with the police.”

“Well, sorry. I thought they were with the good guys.” I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at him. “Do you want my take on this or not?”

With a slight lift of his chin, he gave me the go-ahead. He must have realized that talking about what happened was more for my benefit than his, like releasing steam from a pressure cooker. He kept his eyes on the traffic, but listened patiently, muttering occasionally to keep me going.

“This Terrorist Joe person might be acting on his own, but I don't think so. I know you can't divulge privileged information, but based on what you already have, does this make sense?”

Will took one hand off the steering wheel and stroked his chin.

“Yes, it makes good sense. The locals have evidence that points to IRA support coming from this region, but Europol has never made a connection between this particular smuggling ring and terrorists. I suspect this organization intercepts smuggled goods, fences them, and buys guns and munitions to send to Northern Ireland.” He paused and ran the tip of his tongue across his lower lip.

*Oh, man. He is so sexy.*

“How would they know about Custom Prosthetics?”

“If you’re in the right circles, the word gets around. It isn’t a stretch to imagine that a terrorist group would have their own spies to tip them off when something valuable was coming through. And when the goods go missing, the smugglers can hardly complain to the local police.”

“That *would* be awkward,” I agreed, “but does this give you any idea where we should look for Essi?”

He shot me a sharp look of reprimand. The you-know-better-than-to-suggest-that glare. “We? You’re still into this *we* thing?”

I stared out the window and thought about how I’d felt looking at the barrel of that gun, just inches away and pointed straight at me. I thought about the noisy heart, the inability to breathe, the feeling of helplessness, the fear pricking me like knives. Not a pleasant sensation.

Even though I was already in way over my head, intuition told me if I didn’t participate in bringing these people down, the fear would never go away. Never.

“The *we* thing seems to work for us...on several levels,” I reminded him.

As he pulled The Lancia to a halt at a red light, Will shifted slightly and studied me for what seemed a long time, then murmured, “Good point.”

With the slightest upward roll of his eyes, he pursed his lips and frowned. I could almost hear the audible grinding of wheels turning inside his head. I wished I knew what he was thinking.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know what assignment Essi was working on,” he

admitted. "Even that much might help narrow down where he might be."

I gaped at him. "Can't you ask? You have a boss, don't you? Somebody in your organization knows. If it means saving him, wouldn't they tell you?"

"I told you, he and I are colleagues. That doesn't mean we both work for Europol. Law enforcement agencies are notoriously uncooperative when it comes to sharing information with each other."

*So, he isn't a policeman, but he is in law enforcement. Go figure.*

"Maybe that accounts for their *agents'* attitudes." I hoped he would get my drift about his own inability to share. I was getting my head of steam back.

"That's right. The official policy is to not trust anyone with anything, including the people you work with. It's called the 'need-to-know' rule."

"I see." I tried to raise a single eyebrow the way he did. I didn't *see* at all, but I wasn't going to admit the rule didn't make any sense to me. "And I imagine *you* fit right in."

"I did...until now," was his terse reply.

Hmm. This wasn't just heavy-duty baggage. We were getting into some *serious* heavy-duty baggage here.

I planted my hands on my hips, attack mode, which is not very intimidating when you're short and sitting down. It's a reflex action. Really. "So, what are *we* going to do to find Essi?"

He glanced at me, then turned his attention back to the road. "I'll probably regret this, but *we* are going to Punta Europa Hospital to interrogate your, hmm...latest victim."

Abruptly he turned the car off Calle Baluarte and onto a narrow side street. There, he parked the Lancia at the curb and shifted in the seat to look at me, his left arm resting on the steering wheel. I couldn't read his expression.

"Where are we?" I asked, glancing around. I didn't see anything that looked like a hospital.

He took my hands in his. "Harriet...thank you for understanding back there." His voice low and rough.

Then he put his arms around me and held me tight. My eyes burned, and a swell of uncontrollable emotion took possession of me. I was on the verge of a meltdown.

“Just hold me,” I whispered.

He did. I clung to him for the next ten minutes, and for the first time since last night, I knew I was safe.



## Chapter Seventeen

My latest victim, Terrorist Joe, was on the third floor of the hospital, in a room guarded by two men. One was a middle-aged Spaniard in uniform. He stood at attention by the door, attending to his responsibility with glum determination. His right hand poised above his weapon.

When Will introduced me, Sergeant Rodriguez gave me a formal greeting, a little nod, and returned to his stiff posture.

The other, a younger man in plain clothes, was introduced as Agent Hassan Abdallah. I presumed he was with Europol, but neither of them said that. He was short, his build compact and solid, with dark curly hair and a dark moustache. He shook my hand with enthusiasm and smiled, his straight white teeth in stark contrast against his dark Moroccan skin.

For some reason that made me recall the child in Tangier with the flute and the rotten teeth. *Was that only yesterday?*

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Miss Ruby," he said with a tinge of accent that would have been hard to place if he hadn't been standing in front of me. His manner was pleasant and friendly. "Would you like to sit down?"

Will excused himself and went to speak with the head nurse on duty while Hassan found another chair in the hallway and brought it to me.

He shot me another wide grin. "Very nice performance this morning." He placed the seat next to his. "You did well."

"You were there? At the Europa Café?" I was surprised. I hadn't noticed

him at all.

He smiled, all teeth and moustache. "I seated you."

I tried to remember and couldn't. Maybe it was the shock of everything that happened afterward.

"You nailed it, Harriet," Will announced when he returned from the nurse's station. "No heart attack. The only thing our friend in there is suffering from is a concussion."

"Thanks to you," Hassan interjected with delight. "You whacked him a good one."

I grinned sheepishly. "I *did* nail him, didn't I? So hard I cracked the bottle," I admitted, unsure of whether or not I should be proud of that. "Do you know who he is?"

"Well, ye'll be callin 'im Liam Joseph Casey," Will replied, mimicking a decent Irish accent.

With a groan, I shook my head. "You mean the guy didn't have enough imagination to use a different name? What do you know about him?" I wanted confirmation that my conclusions were on target.

"They're running a check on him as we speak," Hassan said to Will. "Juan will bring you the full report as soon as it arrives."

Will nodded. His eyes morphed to indigo and hardened. "In the mean time, I'll have a chat with Mr. Casey and see what he has to say for himself without a gun in his hand." When he looked at me, his cool expression softened. "You'd better stay outside with Hassan. I'll let you know if I want you to come in."

"Be my guest." My desire to come with Will to the hospital was not driven by a wish to see Terrorist Joe but by the fear of being alone.

Liam Casey was only one person in a larger group. I had good reason to be afraid. This whole thing was beyond my limited experience. I had no idea how to deal with people who didn't play by the rules. I was beginning to realize how much of conformist I really was...and how little experience I had with life in general.

No street smarts.

Will disappeared into the hospital room, leaving Hassan and I glancing at each other with a lot of dead air in between.

"Have a seat Miss Ruby." Hassan's English was perfect. "So, you are a friend of Will's?"

I sat down and adjusted my backpack. "Yes." I hoped that was true, but since my tour was leaving in the morning, I'd probably never see him again after today. The thought released a whirlwind of anxiety that swept through me the way it had when he'd left the bus.

"He is amazing, isn't he?" Hassan seemed intent on making casual conversation.

I did a nose wrinkle. "Yes, quite amazing."

Now *that* was something I could honestly say, at least about what was amazing to me. Whatever the agent was referring to, I didn't know, but I was not going to share what I was thinking with anyone. Maybe not even Will.

"Do you work with Will? I mean, like a partner?"

Hassan was quick. "Our agents aren't assigned partners. We're assigned on a case by case basis, depending on necessary language skills and expertise and who is available. But I work with him whenever I can. He's my role model. He's a very smart man, and well respected."

I chewed at my lower lip. *This could get awkward.*

"Will never talks about that kind of thing to me, or to anyone else outside the, ah, organization."

His eyebrows rose imperceptibly. "Ah, so you are not in law enforcement?"

"No, I'm a tour director. I'm only involved in this because..." My reply trailed off. Now what was I going to say? I had no idea how much Hassan knew, and Will had said he didn't trust anyone, even the people he worked with. What did Hassan "need-to-know?" "Because the case involved someone on my tour."

The young Moroccan looked thoughtful and fingered his moustache. "I

suppose a tour director is required to speak many languages, also. Did you meet Will at the university?"

*The university?* Like there was only one. It didn't surprise me that Will had attended a university, yet he seemed so thoroughly military that I'd assumed that was his only background.

*I slept with a man I don't know a thing about.*

"No, actually I didn't." I hoped that was enough to keep Hassan satisfied. I groped for something safe to talk about. "You know, I don't even remember how many languages Will speaks. Do you?"

The young agent squinted and ticked them off on his fingers as though I was giving him a test, not asking a question just to have something to talk about.

"Hmm, English of course, but we have to count it, yes? All five romance languages...that makes six. Let me think. There's Arabic, Russian, German, Swedish, Chinese, Afrikaans. I'd say at least sixteen or seventeen fluently. Others, like Japanese and Gaelic, not as good, and he can read and write several others."

I nearly fell off the chair. Please, I begged silently, don't tell me anything more. After all that I'd survived in the past day or two, I didn't want to shrivel up and die of an inferiority complex.

"It's too bad about the..." Hassan began.

"Agent Abdallah," someone called out, interrupting him.

Hassan and I looked up. The same young man who'd taken the suitcase with prosthetic leg was striding down the hall in our direction.

"Excuse me a moment." He stood and walked over to meet the youth before he reached us. "Ah, Juan, do you have the report?"

They turned their backs and exchanged a few words I couldn't hear. The messenger handed a fat manila folder to Hassan and left.

"Will is waiting for this," he told me. "I'd better take it in."

He hadn't reached the door of the hospital room when it opened and Will came out with a hint of a frown on his forehead. The Spanish police officer

snapped to attention and clicked his heels.

"The report is here." Hassan handed the envelope to Will.

My agent broke the seal with his fingernail and slid out a sheaf of papers. From where I was sitting, the report, at first glimpse, looked thick. Liam Casey must have been a busy little terrorist.

Side by side, the Moroccan and Will walked down the corridor, reading in silence and exchanging a few words in muted tones. Then they reversed direction and headed back. By the time they reached me, they both wore grim expressions, and my nerves were frazzled.

"Bad news, I take it," I said to Will.

He gestured for me to come with him. I sprang to my feet and smoothed my trousers with quick agitated motions.

He then turned to his associate. "Hassan, stay here with Sergeant Rodriguez until I call you. When I have backup, I'll let you know."

"Right," the younger man answered. He didn't sound as chipper as when I'd arrived. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss Ruby. Maybe we'll see each other again."

"I hope so." I mumbled some other mindless pleasantries. I was dying to know what was in the report.

Will led me to the stairwell and we tromped down the steps, these not as noisy as the metal ones on the ferry.

"You were spot on," he told me as we made our way downstairs. His eyes darted around, checking for eavesdroppers and wires before he continued. "Casey is with a terrorist group that supports the IRA, and they've been busy." He waved the manila envelope as though that gesture told me everything. *Like I'm a mind reader or something?*

"I don't think that bit of information accounts for the doom-and-gloom look on your face. What's the matter?"

He waited until we were outside in the open and away from any potential bugs before he answered. "They've sent a formal demand for ransom."

*Big surprise.* That's what Liam Casey told me they would do. Still,

hearing Will put it into such matter-of-fact words was like a whop upside the head. It made my teeth rattle and I sucked in a deep breath, filling my lungs with the smoky air hovering over the city. Maybe I hadn't really believed it could happen.

For the first time, or at least one of the only times, in my life I wanted to say something vile. "Poop" didn't exactly cut it in this situation.

"Do these people have a name? They want what's in the leg, don't they?"

"What's in the leg and a lot more. But it's not going to happen."

Again, I skidded to a stop. "Why not?"

He stared at me for a moment, then looked off into space. "It's against policy." His voice was tight. He clenched and unclenched a fist.

This was not sounding good to me. "Rescuing someone from terrorists is against policy? That's crazy. Whose policy?"

Will compressed his lips. "The European Union has a policy that they won't pay ransom or give in to terrorists, even to save lives. All it does is encourage more kidnappings and more terrorism."

"That is crazy!"

By then we'd reached the car. Will beeped it open and helped me in, then got into the driver's seat and slammed the door.

"Unfortunately, it's not. Kidnapping used to be a way of life in some of these countries. The policy works. Essi knew the risk. I know it. Every agent in every anti-crime and anti-terrorist organization in Europe knows it. We all take the chance and pray that it won't happen to one of us." He rested his forehead against the steering wheel. "But sometimes it does."

My outrage left me speechless. These agents put their lives on the line daily. They lived constantly with the risk of death and worse. And their governments just pretended they didn't exist if they're captured in the line of duty? How could they?

"That's...appalling."

He didn't respond. His eyes were closed, and he hadn't moved. I hated seeing him that way. He looked so bleak.

"Well, if Europol or whoever it is won't rescue Essi," I snapped indignantly, "we'll have to do it for them."

Will straightened up slowly. The faintest flicker of irritation crossed his face as he raised a hand, palm up. "Hold on. I'm afraid I didn't quite get that. Would you repeat *what* we'll do for *whom*?"

I rolled my eyes. "You heard me. Don't deny that you're already cooking up a scheme to rescue him."

"Not this time." His mouth was tight and there were little stress lines around his eyes. "This is something we both have to stay out of. There's too much at risk."

"My God, Will. Essi's life is at stake. He's your friend, but you'd abandon him just like that?" I snapped my fingers in his face.

Will grasped my wrist and jerked my hand down. "Yes, he's my friend. And yes, I'll abandon him...because that's what I'm ordered to do. And if *I* were the hostage, Essi would have to do the same thing."

"You're ordered? I can't believe you're saying that."

"You'd better. If I attempt a rescue at this point in time, I'd be in as much danger from Europol and the other anti-terrorist agencies as from the terrorists."

"But why?"

He snorted with disgust. "Jesus, Harriet. Sometimes you're really dense," he snapped, then shook his head and apologized. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. You're just young and naive and much too trusting, that's all. There's no such thing as black and white any more. No more good guys against the bad guys. We live in a different world...a very political and confusing world."

With my eyes closed, I clamped my hands together between my legs and leaned forward. Maybe Will was right. I'd never realized it before but I *did* come from a simplistic "Leave-It-To-Beaver" world. My life had been pretty much black and white, good and bad, with not much in between...and heavily weighted to the good side.

While I'd always thought of myself as rebellious and independent, I was discovering that wasn't really true. I only took risks with little things like ignoring a lifetime of warnings by cutting the tag off my mattress. When there was a lot at stake, I followed the rules. No wonder the last two days seemed so traumatic. Before yesterday, everything had been safe.

Then I met the enigma, William Talbot, and learned that nothing was.

In the short time I'd known him, which seemed like forever and was only hours, I'd observed in him a strong sense of what was moral and honorable and honest. But his methods and actions were always outside the box.

Now, for no reason I could understand, he was following the rules and I was the one taking risks. It boggled the mind.

My eyes popped open and I straightened. Beside me, Will's long body relaxed against the contours of the bucket seat. His head was tipped back against the headrest, but his brilliant blue eyes were open and watching my every breath.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"Contemplating the mysteries of life." My attempt to keep my voice from shaking failed miserably.

"You're going to try to rescue him, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yes." I had no idea why, but I had the compulsion to do something to save Essi Ahmed, and I hardly even knew the man.

Will closed his eyes. "Do you have any idea at all what you're doing?"

"No."

He heaved a resigned sigh. "Stop and think, Harriet. You're in a strange city in a foreign country. You don't know who you're up against or where to look for a hostage, and you don't have any resources. You'll only fumble around, draw attention to yourself and get killed. And you'll make things worse for Essi. Please, don't meddle in things you don't understand. Let me handle it."

I huffed with indignation. "That's the problem. You're *not* handling it. You're following orders."



“And there’s nothing I can say to convince you to leave it alone, right?”

I nodded again. “Right.”

He compressed his lips and was silent for a few seconds. “That’s what I was afraid of. Jesus, Harriet, what I am going to do with you?”

## Chapter Eighteen

"I'm not *yours* to do anything with," came my sarcastic reply. "You don't trust me enough to tell me what's going on even when my life is at stake. I am *not* your responsibility."

My ire was up. Will and I had had sex. That was it. Well, not just sex, good sex. Actually, it had been a whole lot of amazing, fabulous sex, but that didn't give him the right to boss me around.

He pondered my response with a frown. I could almost see him massaging the thought around in his brain, his eyes rolled up as though he was trying to read something written on the inside on his skull.

"Maybe we can talk about trust one of these days," he said finally.

"Fine, I'll leave you my itinerary. You can send me a text message when you decide you're ready."

I don't know how he would have responded, because his cell phone interrupted. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced at the readout.

"Talbot." A series of nods and grunts followed.

Since Male Simian was not one of my fluent languages, I opened the car door with the intention of leaving Agent Talbot to do whatever it was Europol spies did.

"Hold on a second." He held the phone away and placed his hand on my forearm before I could scoot out. "Harriet, wait."

"Wait for what?"

I was indignant that he would even ask, and to tell you the truth, I was disappointed. I guess I'd expected Will to be the real Superman. At minimum, the real James Bond. *Who am I kidding?*

"Just wait, please."

Well, poop. He'd said *please*. In my world, that magic word broke down a lot of barriers. And since I was a predictable human being, I responded with a conditioned reaction. "All right, but make it quick."

*The part about quick was my own improvisation.*

Will didn't let go of me. He said a hurried "See you" into the phone and clicked off. "I want you to go with me."

"I'm afraid *that* was one of your less-than-brilliant explanations."

A stain of red crept up his neck and a muscle twitched in his jaw. My smartass attitude was almost an invitation for him to throttle me, and the effort it cost him to control his temper was evident. Gradually, the color receded.

*No one should have that much control. I'll bet the man doesn't even have a pulse.*

"It's only eleven o'clock." His voice was strained and not quite normal, but he was over it. "They've picked up Roberto Lopez and are bringing him in as we speak."

My ears pricked up. "He's the fence? They can prove it?"

"He's got a rap sheet that stretches from here to London and back, and plenty of outstanding warrants."

"So why do you want *me* to go with you?"

"The decision was to let Lopez open Archie's prosthetic. I thought you might want to be there to see what's inside."

You bet I wanted to see. Only I couldn't figure out the quid pro quo.

"And what is this peep show going to cost me?"

He shrugged and those brilliant blue eyes bored into me. "Don't know yet. Take it or leave it."

He fired up the engine.

*Damn agent.* Without a word, I settled back into the passenger seat, hooked my seat belt, and we took off.

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To my surprise, we didn't go to the Europol office but to the main Algeciras police station. There I was introduced to the Police Chief and an official from Europol as a consultant. We all smiled and shook hands. I tried to look consultant-like and everything was A-okay.

Who was Will Talbot, anyway? What kind of influence did he have? This whole thing was freaking me out.

Ensconced in a small room, Will and I watched through the one-way glass as two Spanish plain clothes detectives and one uniformed officer interrogated Roberto Lopez, alias at least ten other names. He was a white male in his late thirties, medium build, with bronzed skin and black, short-cropped hair. At first glance, he could have passed for a Spaniard. He was sitting down, but I guessed he was well under six feet tall.

And he was nervous. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead and deep stains showed under the arms of his shirt. His voice trembled when he spoke.

"This won't take long," Will told me as I watched with fascination. The closest I'd ever been to an interrogation was watching police dramas on television. "What do you make of his accent?"

"Are you asking me or the consultant?"

Will smiled. "Both."

I tuned in my language skills and I listened to Lopez deny, for the umpteenth time, that he knew what they were talking about. He was, he claimed, a research and development engineer for Custom Prosthetics Ltd.

"Well, he's not a native Spaniard, that's for sure," I said after the suspect had spoken only a few sentences. Then, after about a minute more I added, "Sounds to me like he's speaking Castilian with a Boston accent."

"Boston?" Will's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What makes you think that?"

Not the what-makes-you-think-that question again?

"Because he *sounds* like someone who grew up in Boston, that's why." I was unable to curb the sarcasm. "I went to MIT for four years. I majored in languages. I lived in Boston. I recognize the accent, okay? Is he really an engineer?"

"Yes, he's definitely a prosthetics engineer. MIT, huh?"

I scowled at him. Had he assumed I was uneducated, along with whatever else he thought about me? Chances were I hadn't accumulated a lot of brownie points in the last few hours. I hadn't exactly been on my best behavior. "How long is this going to take? I have things to do."

"Wait here." He left me alone. In a few seconds, the door to the interrogation room opened and Will stepped inside. He spoke in whispers to one of the detectives, then took over the questioning. His Spanish was perfect with no detectible accent at all.

Damn agent.

In five minutes, Lopez broke. In ten, Archie's prosthetic leg was on the table in front of him and next to it was an open packet of special tools. The uniformed officer left the room and soon there was a tap on the door behind me. The same officer stuck his head inside and said, "Agent Talbot wants you to come in."

When I entered the cool interrogation room, I nodded at the detectives and then joined Will who was standing beside Lopez's chair. The uniform took his position beside the door. All of us watched Lopez work.

I understood so little about prosthetics that I couldn't describe in coherent terms what the engineer did. But eventually the mechanisms of the leg were visible...and something else.

"Take it out," Will told him in Spanish.

Lopez looked at him, his dark eyes filled with hatred. He drew in a breath, but before he could speak, Will commanded, "Do it."

With resignation, the engineer-gone-criminal inserted a tweezer-like tool and pulled out what at first looked like a long fat cigar. He held it out. Will

squinted at it, his eyes glinting with surprise. The two detectives moved closer, also puzzled.

Clearly, it was not what any of them expected.

Lopez snarled and mumbled under his breath.

“What is it?” I asked.

One of the detectives took the cylinder out of the fake-Spaniard’s hand and turned it over and over. It was brownish and appeared to be about eight or nine inches long, maybe an inch and a half in diameter.

Muttering under his breath, the detective worked his fingernail along a faint line that ran the length of the tube. It looked like a seam. When the cylinder began to unroll like paper, the room itself seemed to hold its breath. No air movement, no sounds. Even the hum of the ventilator fan ceased as though it had been sucked up and absorbed by the heavy atmosphere.

Slowly the thin material unfurled. The sheet revealed a drawing of three jockeys in black ink and paint on the brown paper.

“*Dios!*” the detective exclaimed.

“O-oh, it’s a painting.” My voice, a mere whisper, was lost in the confusion around me. Just as well. Everyone could see what it was. But where were the drugs? The jewels? What a letdown.

Will and the two detectives crowded together and spread the brown paper out on the table. Their prisoner was forgotten. I was forgotten. Inside they found two smaller pieces of paper, both white, both sketches. One was done in pencil and watercolor, the other in charcoal.

Chatter broke out.

“May I see?” I asked. No one paid any attention. I stood on tip toe and tried to look over their shoulders as they leaned over the table. No luck.

I was vertically challenged, even in Spain.

Hunkering down, I peered between Will and one of the detectives and noticed another very small piece of paper had slipped onto the table. I reached between the men and picked it up.

Stepping back, I held it up to the light. It was an etching about two

inches square, the size of a large postage stamp. I squinted at it. It was a portrait of...

Ohmigod. My eyes widened so much I thought my eyeballs would fall out and bounce on the floor. My ears rang from my pulse pounding in my temples. Black dots floated in front of my face.

"My God!" I exploded. My fingers grew so clumsy I couldn't hold on to the paper. It fluttered to the floor.

Will turned around. "What's the matter?"

When I didn't react to his question, he took me by the shoulders and shook me. "What's wrong?"

I sank my nails into his arm and pointed with my other hand at the drawing on the linoleum. "Do...do you know what these are?"

He frowned at me, leaned over and picked up the portrait. "Ye-es." His tone conveyed a noticeable concern about my stability as though he thought I was about ride out of there on a donkey and fight windmills with Don Quixote. "Stolen paintings?"

"No," I shouted. "No...I mean yes, but...they're not just paintings. These are from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum."

The other men stopped examining the stolen drawings and stared at us. I even had the crook's attention. My gaze darted from one to the next, and back to Will. All their eyes were flat and dull.

They didn't know.

I held onto Will's arm with a death grip. "Haven't you ever heard of the Stewart Gardner Museum? It's a small but very prestigious art museum in Boston." My voice was high and excited. "In 1990 it was robbed. The thieves got away with three hundred million dollars worth of art. None of those works have ever been seen again, much less recovered."

None of the men moved. They gazed at me like so-what's-the-big-deal? The lights were on, but there was nobody home. A few sandwiches short of a picnic.

"Will, listen to me. Watch. My. Lips. *These* four painting were stolen in

that heist.” My voice was raw. In spite of the chilly air in the interrogation room, I was sweating. “These are the first to be found since the robbery. Over fifteen years. There’s a five million dollar reward.”

A stunned breathless silence filled the room.

“*Santa Maria!*” One of the detectives shot some orders at the uniform. The officer nodded and left the room.

“What makes you...” Will began.

I grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and pulled him toward me. That might have been a tad more effective if I’d been taller, but surprise was on my side.

“If you ask me one more time what makes me think that, I swear, I’m going to have to kill you.”

He unlatched my fingers from his jacket with both hands, then grasped my wrists, lowered my hands to my sides, and held them there. I was surprised he didn’t slap handcuffs on me.

“Hmm, let me rephrase my question. How do you know this?”

“Will Talbot, *you* don’t know anything about *me*, do you?” I didn’t intend to enlighten him. He let go and shot me a piercing look that said he wouldn’t hesitate to throw me in the slammer if I didn’t cooperate.

Since I didn’t want to be in jail when my tour left the next morning, I straightened my clothes and said, “All right, if you *insist*, but it has no bearing whatsoever on your case.”

“Tell me anyway.” All huff and puff and self-importance.

Men. I shrugged and kept my smile to myself.

“I minored in Art History, that’s all. Tour directors need to know more than languages, and MIT has good programs in both subjects. The Isabella Stewart Gardner heist was earth shaking when it happened, and it still gets a lot of press in Boston. Okay?”

“Not okay. You’ve just complicated my case. Why are these so valuable?”

The fact that I knew something that he didn’t made *me* feel better, but I

think it pissed him off.

"The largest one on the brown paper is a Degas. I think it's called 'Mounted Jockeys' or something like that. Actually, the other two smaller ones are also by Degas. But the tiny one is a self-portrait by Rembrandt. They're all very valuable."

"I thought Rembrandt painted quite a few self-portraits." His comment was delivered in an off-hand, doesn't-everyone-know-that manner.

Men are *such* show-offs.

"Approximately fifty. Even so, they're incredibly valuable."

Little by little, the implications of this find soaked into my brain, and they were tremendous. For nearly fifteen years, the FBI had been stumped. They had no leads, no clues, and no trace of either the artwork or the thieves. Now, someone involved with the theft itself, or with the thieves, had contacted someone at Custom Prosthetics Ltd. Somewhere, somehow, there would be a trail.

This was huge.

If I was getting the big picture here, Will's case had evolved from stopping a somewhat benign European smuggling ring into murder, from there into a terrorist plot, and now he was facing a multi-continental investigation into one of the biggest art heists of the twentieth century. While I had no doubts that my Agent-Extraordinaire was up to handling something that big, my thoughts were on the terrorists' demands.

"Didn't you tell me Casey's group wanted to exchange the contraband for Essi?" I asked softly in English, hoping the others wouldn't hear or understand.

Will studied me, his eyes darkening to deep indigo. I took that as both a definite *yes* and a threat to my life if I didn't keep quiet.

"Don't you see? Even if they know the 'loot' they're after is stolen art work, they couldn't have any idea where these paintings came from or what they're worth." I paused I wiped my sweaty palms on my thighs. "If they did, they'd know these could never be turned over to them...even if their hostage

was the President of the United States.”

We looked at each other. I chewed on my lower lip and wondered what was going on in his mind. His eyes were narrow, his lips thin, and I could see the mental gnashing again.

I was right there with him. “That leaves Essi hanging out there, doesn’t it?”

Chapter Nineteen

Timing is everything. The words were barely out of my mouth when the officer who'd left the room returned with the Police Chief, the Europol bigwig, and two uniformed officers.

While the newcomers spoke with the detectives, Will moved close to me.

"You'll have to excuse me for a while. It looks like your discovery is confirmed, and everything has changed." His voice was low, for my ears only. "I'll bet you didn't realize you were such a mover and shaker in world politics."

Yeah, right. But this was not the time for smartass remarks. There wasn't even time to ask questions. The Europol dignitary motioned for us to follow. Everyone left the room except for the uniforms and the prisoner who had already been handcuffed with his hands behind his back.

Will sat me down in the waiting room outside the Chief's office with a warning not to move a muscle or speak to anyone. He said a few words to the secretary behind the reception desk and joined the others inside the Chief's office. I folded my hands in my lap and sat there crossing and uncrossing my legs.

From behind closed doors came the rise and fall of the men's voices in the other room. I couldn't make out what was being said but suspected a heated debate was in progress regarding what they should do next. Will was wrong about my being a political mover and shaker, but I *do* keep tabs on world events and I *am* a quick study.

Enter the United States FBI.

That, of course, *did* change everything. No matter how touchy the situation with Northern Ireland might have been earlier this morning, now the United States government was involved. The stakes had been upped enough to give these gentlemen nightmares...big time.

The meeting broke up an hour later. In spite of Will's warning, I had moved several muscles. The good news was I hadn't set fire to anything or broken any water pipes. I'd even downed a whole cup of coffee without spilling it.

I would have to be content with small victories.

When Will came out, I stood. To my disappointment, he didn't acknowledge that I'd been on my best behavior. Without any conversation, he put an arm across my shoulders and propelled me, double time, out of the building to his car. I had to run to keep up with his long strides.

Once again ensconced inside the Lancia, he pressed the ignition and we were out of the parking lot in a single breath.

"Well?" I asked as he whipped through traffic. "Can you tell me anything?" I didn't intend to sound critical of him, but I must have.

He shot me a piercing scowl out of the corner of his eye.

"At my request they agreed to keep your discovery under wraps for twenty-four hours. There's a gag order on everyone who knows. I had to vouch for your discretion. One day doesn't give us much time."

An unpleasant sinking feeling attacked my stomach. The sensation was akin to swallowing-battery-acid or being hit on the head with an oar. "Essi Ahmed?"

Will sucked air, but didn't look at me. "I have to take care of Casey's terrorist organization first."

Coming out of nowhere, rage consumed me. I gripped the sides of the seat to keep from ripping him apart. I suppose I expected miracles from him. I wanted him to *be* James Bond. I wanted him to be perfect.

And he wasn't. He was a human being doing his job the best he knew

how. As unreasonable as it was to expect more, at this moment that wasn't good enough for me.

"Don't you have other competent people working for Europol? Can't someone else arrest these people? I don't know how it works here, but I presume you have to have enough evidence to show probable cause in order to get a warrant, or whatever you use. Don't you have that?"

"Of course we do." He sounded irritated and indignant. "And in addition to what we had before, your friend Liam Casey spilled his guts. Hassan said Mister-Tough-Guy squealed like the proverbial stuck pig."

I screwed my mouth into a sour-lemons look. "Hassan said you speak at least sixteen or seventeen languages fluently, but you also speak cliché."

He frowned, clearly unamused. *So much for comic relief.* That certainly didn't lighten the mood. He was driving so fast I was getting nervous.

"If you've got evidence enough to arrest everyone, then let Hassan handle it. He seems very capable. So do the Spanish police."

"Can't. I'm the primary."

In my gut, I knew that wasn't it.

"Oh, for God's sake, for once in your life why don't you *trust* someone?" My voice was loud, the tone disgusted and accusing. "*You* are not the only competent person in your agency, so live with it."

Damn agent. He couldn't bring himself to trust anyone else to do anything right. Most of the time that was probably a good thing. In this case, I didn't think so.

He slammed on the brakes. I careened into the seat belt hard enough to bruise my chest. Right there, in the middle of the street, in the middle of traffic, he stopped. Flat out stopped and turned in his seat.

"Do you want to get out and walk? If you don't, then zip it!"

He was angry. No, he was furious. His face was red, the pulse in his neck throbbed. His hands clenched the steering wheel with a death grip.

But there was more at work inside him than total frustration with me, which, of course, was *part* of the reason for his reaction. Under it all, deep

down, I sensed there was something else. I saw it in his eyes and the deep frown cleft in his forehead, in the fine lines around his thinned lips and his tense body. I heard it in his strained voice.

When I looked at him, I didn't see Superman or James Bond. I didn't see William Talbot, Europol Agent Extraordinaire. I saw a child. A defenseless, terrified, helpless and very hurt child.

~ ~ ~

Serious heavy-duty baggage. "Maybe someday we can talk about trust," he had said to me earlier.

Will Talbot was an attractive and sexy man. A compelling man with many layers. I liked him—a lot. In fact, the word *like* wasn't nearly powerful enough to describe my attraction to him. But I wasn't a psychoanalyst, and "someday" wasn't today.

"All right, I'll walk." I unfastened my seat belt. Without much grace, I got out and slammed the door behind me. Never looking back, I swung my backpack over my shoulder and skipped and wove my way through the moving cars to the curb. Behind me, I heard the squeal of tires as the Lancia sped off.

Good move, Harriet. I reached the safety of the sidewalk and stopped to catch my breath. Now what? Not that I minded walking. Exercise cleared my mind and gave me the opportunity to think. But I was running out of time to find Essi and I still didn't have a plan. I wasn't even sure I knew what I wanted to do, and my motivations were a complete mystery. Not an auspicious start.

For lack of any better destination, I set a brisk pace in the direction of Punta Europa Hospital. That was where Will was headed when we had our parting of the ways.

As I walked, I went over in my mind everything that had happened since that morning in Morocco when Archie Philpot got sick, I met Will, and my life as I'd known it fell apart. I needed to understand what was going on inside me.

After about a mile I came to the conclusion that Essi Ahmed Mutassim O'Reilly, as an individual, was not that important in the emotional scheme of

things, other than he was a human being and I liked him. However, *finding* him was important. It was my first goal.

As far as I could see, my life wouldn't change if I *didn't* find him, but go figure.

The sun beat down on my back and finally thirst caught up with me. Along one edge of the sidewalk, there was a low retaining wall and beyond that, a row of trees. I sat on the rough stones of the wall, taking advantage of the shade, and dug around in my backpack for the bottle of water I always carried. As I tipped my head back and took a long swig, I noticed a familiar-looking white van drive past.

Squinting against the sun, my gaze followed the van's broken tail light as it cruised down the street. I took another sip of the tepid water, my gaze never leaving the vehicle, then recapped the bottle.

There had to be more than one battered white VW van between Algeciras and Tangier, but not many were painted with flowers and Arabic letters. This was the decrepit hippie van that had been parked next to our bus outside the medina in Tangier. At the time, it had featured a portable red light on the top, and Will told me it was an ambulance.

What was that thing doing here?

With the water bottle still clutched in my hand, I watched the ancient vehicle make a U-turn about a block away and head back toward me on the opposite side of the center divider. A strong sense of foreboding swept through me. Something wasn't right. I put the water in my backpack and took out my cell phone.

After considering my options for a full second, I swallowed my pride and punched in Will's number. I'd pissed him off good. I was not at all confident he would answer when he saw who was calling, but I had to try.

While the phone rang, I got up and moved from the wall to the curb to keep the van in sight. I was surprised to hear him respond with, "Talbot here. What do you want, Harriet?"

"Thank goodness." The words escaped before I could think. I didn't

want him to know how grateful I was to make contact. “Will, where are you?”

“At the hospital. What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m being followed.”

There was a long pause. “Say again?”

The van made another U-turn and was approaching me on my side of the street.

“Please, trust me this once. Don’t hang up. Just listen.” I pushed the volume dial to maximum and stuffed the cell phone into the outside pocket of my backpack without turning it off. Intuition warned me not to let the driver, whoever it was, know I’d been on the phone.

The van pulled to a stop beside me and the darkened window rolled down. Hassan Abdallah was behind the wheel.

“Hello again, Miss Ruby. Will sent me to find you.” Still all teeth and moustache. He sounded as pleasant as before. “He wants you to meet him at the hospital.”

A shiver of cold ran through my bloodstream.

“Hello, Hassan,” I said loudly. “I thought Will was mad at me.”

“He gets over things. Get in and I’ll give you a lift.”

Something clicked. Trust was good, but I’d learned from Will that it had to be earned. In the recent past, I had been *too* trusting sometimes. But not anymore. Will would never send someone else to find me. Wasn’t that what our argument was about? If he wanted something done, he did it himself. He didn’t trust anyone, even the people he worked with.

Oh, boy. I knew in my bones that Hassan didn’t have any intention of taking me to Will.

“Well, actually, I was...” My voice faltered and I took a step away from the van. What excuse could I offer for not going with him? Would he chase me if I ran? I glanced around. The street was busy. Someone would see us if he forced me into the vehicle.

“Come on, Will is waiting for us.”

Still, I hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other. On the other hand, I

thought, if Hassan was one of the terrorists and he intended to take me as a hostage, I could end up in the same place they were holding Essi Ahmed, couldn't I? *That* was how I could find him.

"Hmm, never mind." I opened the door and hoisted myself inside, setting my feet on an irreversible path. "Thanks."

I told myself I was *not* being irrational, at least not completely. I wanted to find Essi, didn't I? All I had to do was pretend I was oblivious to what Hassan was doing. I was pretty good at playing dumb.

It wasn't until after I was firmly committed to that irreversible path that the thought struck me. If the terrorists had infiltrated the law enforcement agencies, why did Liam Casey act as though he had no idea the authorities were on to him?

Maybe he didn't know. Maybe Casey was a weak link and he'd been set up by his own people. There were a lot of "maybes" floating around. Things were not looking good.

"So, what's up?" I asked, bringing my palms down on my thighs with a slap. "Anything happen since we last talked? That you can tell me, of course."

Please, Will, listen, I begged silently. Trust me and don't hang up.

"I guess you know the prisoner talked," Hassan said. "He gave us a lot of new information."

Yeah, right. Now *that* was a good example of uninformative spy-talk...misinformation up the gazoo.

"What did the report say about the contraband?" I asked with appropriate interest. I wanted to see his reaction. "What was it? Jewels or drugs? It has to be one or the other. Anything else would be too big."

Nothing. No reaction at all. My stomach did the flip-flop maneuver and I shivered. I was sure Will hadn't told Hassan about the paintings. Gag order. Twenty-four hours. Yada-yada-yada. Was it because he suspected Hassan, or was this another example of not trusting anyone?

"You're probably right." The statement was as noncommittal as everything else that came out of Hassan's mouth. He would have given me the

same answer even if he knew what the contraband was, but there would have been some telltale sign. A tightening of his hands or whitening of his knuckles, a slight change in his position, perhaps a hooding of the eyes. Something detectable.

Already I could read Will's reactions, and Hassan was a rank amateur in comparison.

Since tour directors need a good sense of direction and make it a habit of observing their surroundings, I was aware that Hassan was not driving toward the hospital. I might not be much of a spy, but I was a good tour director. And we were on the outskirts of Algeciras, heading out of the city.

I swallowed the bad taste in my mouth and calmed the butterflies flittering in my stomach. My neck and shoulders ached from tension, so I rotated them. There was nothing I could do about the elephant, which was sitting on my chest again.

"Where are we going? This doesn't look like the way to the hospital." I didn't want Hassan to realize I knew he was taking me hostage. And I hoped with all my heart that someone was still listening at the other end of the wireless waves. If not, I could only pray that Will knew a lot more about this operation than he'd let on.

Essi Ahmed and I had less than twenty-four hours before the terrorists realized there was no value in keeping hostages.

Then it was bye-bye, *adios, sayonara*.

Hassan smiled. "A change of plans, Miss Ruby. We're meeting him somewhere else."

Yeah, right. Did my captor think I was a complete dunce? He hadn't talked to anyone since I'd been in the van. How was he supposed to know about a change in plans and meeting location? Mental telepathy? *Get real*.

"Oh?" My hypothalamus kicked into gear. Every nerve in my body screamed at me to do something, to escape, to run. The Fight-or-Flight reaction.

But if I did either, then I wouldn't find Essi. I *had* to hang, and it was

killing me. Everything was unraveling like a bad hem, and my self-assurance was coming apart along with it.

We were in the countryside now, on a decent two-lane highway that rose and twisted into the hills above the city. Around us, big houses on large lots were scattered across the landscape. Private estates.

On the way, I noticed the signs for several bull farms, so when we passed near a small town, I knew where we were. I leaned forward to get closer to the pocket that held my cell phone.

"Is this Los Barrios?" I asked in a loud voice. "I've read about it, but I've never been here. They have a new bull ring, don't they?"

Hassan frowned at me and mumbled something, but didn't answer. Between that and the position of the sun, I was sure I was right. We were headed in a northwesterly direction, away from Los Barrios. The elevation was higher and the air, cooler.

Please, Will, I begged silently. Listen. Trust me.

Eventually, the Moroccan turned the van onto a side road of buckled asphalt and gravel. We went through an open gate in a tall stone wall. My nerves tingled. A private road. Was this the place?

"Stop here, please. I have to go to the bathroom."

"Hold on. We're almost there," he snapped.

"How much further is it?" It was no effort at all to sound desperate. As soon as I said bathroom, I had the urge to go.

"Two or three miles, maybe less."

"No, you have to stop now."

The man muttered something under his breath and put his foot on the brake. The van rolled to a stop.

"Hurry it up." He wasn't so pleasant now. His smile was ruthless. Those white teeth looked dangerous, and beads of sweat glistened on his bronze skin.

I opened the door and hopped down, pulling my backpack along with me.

"Leave it," he said in a harsh voice.

“I’m going to need some tissues. You stay inside, please, and close your eyes.”

Before he could protest, I slammed the door behind me, then hunkered down by the side of the van and waited a few seconds. He couldn’t see me from the driver’s seat and didn’t open the door, so I assumed he was going to give me a minute or two of privacy.

Good, I thought, he’s left the engine running.

For a moment, I thought seriously about taking a leak. *Well, why not? How do I know what facilities might be available in the future?*

Instead, I opened my backpack, unzipped the inner pocket and slipped my hand around Liam Casey’s gun. I had intended to give it to Will but in the excitement, I’d forgotten all about it until a few minutes ago.

Thanks, TJ.

The pistol was a nine-millimeter Beretta. I studied it and tried to recall what I’d learned in the self-defense class that my uncle Mario, an LA cop, had insisted I take. We had handled a variety of weapons and one of the guns was a smaller caliber Beretta. This semiautomatic was bigger and heavier, and I wondered how I could have forgotten about it.

I tested the weight in my hand. I was never a good shot, and I hadn’t held a gun since I was in college. They scared me then. This one scared me now. But I remembered the basics and recognized the silencer on the barrel.

Click, click. I cocked the pistol and pushed down. Off went the safety. I didn’t have the skill or the inclination to shoot my captor, so I aimed at the nearby rear tire.

Wait. On impulse, I ducked my head and looked under the van. Yes! It was high enough for me to have a clear shot at the rear tire on the driver’s side. I adjusted my aim and fired.

Spttt! Then I heard a high hissing sound.

For an instant, I was tempted to throw the gun into the bushes, then quick as lightning stashed the weapon in my backpack. I stood up and pretended to zip my pants. Hoping Hassan was watching, I tossed a tissue into

the bushes and opened the door.

"Thanks, that's much better." I crammed my backpack onto the seat between my right leg and the door and tried to look more relaxed. It wasn't easy because now I *really* needed to go. The power of suggestion, or maybe it was the coffee.

He released the brake and grunted—in Simian, I presumed, which was a language that all men spoke from the day of birth. The van moved forward again, slowly at first, then gaining speed.

The road was uneven. We bumped along for a minute or two before the Moroccan swore in Arabic. He sounded like the man I'd shoved in the medina yesterday when Edith Johnson had her confrontation with the cobra.

Yesterday? Was it only yesterday? Momentarily distracted, I wondered what disaster Edith had perpetrated on the trip to Granada. I would probably get an earful from Mario and the other guide this evening—if I lived through this.

Doubt enveloped me like a dense fog. I rolled my eyes. What did I think I was doing? Trying to be a hero or teaching Will a lesson? I guess this was another of my not-so-clever impulses.

"You know, one of your rear tires needs some air." *Am I casual, or what?* "I noticed it looked low while I was, ah, relieving myself."

As I've said before, timing is everything. He turned his head toward me and frowned. At that moment a loud *whop-clunk, whop-clunk* assaulted our ears from behind. The van creaked and pitched as it listed to the driver's side.

Hassan swore again and slammed the brake pedal down hard. We lurched to a stop. Without a word, he got out and went to the back of the vehicle. After another round of cursing, he opened the rear door and took out some tools.

"You stay put while I fix this." His tone was impatient, but apparently, he thought I still believed we were on our way to meet Will. He was annoyed, but as far as I could tell, he didn't seem suspicious.

Finally, he finished changing the tire and was letting the van down. The

jack *clickity-clicked* and Hassan grumbled. I opened the door quietly. The metal groaned. I held my breath and didn't move. Another *clickity-click* and the van lowered an inch.

Whew. He hadn't heard me. I let out a long slow breath and slipped out, leaving the door ajar. With my back flattened against the side of the vehicle, I slid along its surface to the rear and peeked around.

The Moroccan's back was toward me and his attention was focused on the jack. I ventured a small step around the end of the vehicle.

Crunch. My foot slipped on the loose gravel of the road. I caught myself and swallowed a gasp. My heart stopped, then took off so fast and loud I was afraid he would hear it. He didn't even look up.

Take it easy, Harriet. Nice and slow. After waiting a moment or two, I inched forward again and bent my knees to pick up the wrench he'd dropped on the ground beside the hubcap. By now, the small spare tire was only half an inch above the ground.

Ready. I raised my arm. Perhaps sensing my presence, Hassan shifted as though he was about to turn around.

With no second thoughts, I brought the metal down hard on the side of his head behind the ear. He crumpled, unconscious. *Gosh, I'm getting good at this.*

I crouched beside the heap of arms and legs and checked to be sure he was still alive. Good, he was breathing and had a pulse. I patted him down but didn't find a gun. If he was packing heat, it was inside somewhere.

With a sigh of relief, I rose and stepped over him to remove the jack. Then I kicked the ancient hubcap out of the way, threw the tools inside, and leaned over to put my hands under Hassan's arms.

"That wouldn't be very smart." I straightened and pursed my lips. My intention had been to load him in the back of the van with the tools, but what if he regained consciousness while I was driving?

Get a grip, Harriet. A quick search revealed there was nothing I could tie him with, and I couldn't leave him there to come after me. What was I going to

do?

“Duct tape,” I cried. The miracle worker. I ran back to the cab and rummaged in my backpack for a pocketknife and the roll of duct tape a good tour director always carries.

I cut several long strips and used them to bind Hassan's wrists and ankles. Then, for good measure, I wrapped another long piece around his head and across his mouth, making sure his nose was unencumbered so he could breathe.

If I'd wanted to kill him, I could have used the gun while he was unconscious, but the truth is, I have a real issue with killing, even when it's in self-defense. That's another discussion. But I didn't mind the thought of his hair ripping out by the roots when he pulled off the tape.

“That should hold him for a while.” I slid my hands under his arms and tried to lift the dead weight enough to drag him off the road. Pain shot through my lower back, and I dropped him back onto the ground.

“Oh, man.” Breathing hard, I stared down at the limp form. I was going to have to have a talk with my boss about this. Moving dead and unconscious bodies was *not* in my job description.

“Oh well. He won't feel a thing.” With my foot, I rolled him across the loose gravel and through the brambles into the bushes. There he was out of the path of any cars, but not hidden. If this road turned out to be part of the public highway system and not a private driveway, I was in deep *caca*.

Deeper *caca*, I should say...since I was already pretty well immersed as it was.

Chapter Twenty

I hopped back into the van and drove it up the bumpy road. After about two miles, I spotted a Mediterranean type residence tucked against a hill and surrounded by trees. It was two stories of white stucco with a red tile roof and appeared to be forty or fifty years old.

As I moved closer, I saw the building was typical of the estates we'd passed along the highway. Those homes were large and expensive, occupied by people with enough money to live close to Algeciras or Gibraltar but out of the smoke and confusion of the city. The houses were far apart and between them much of the land was wooded. This was a private and secure location.

There were no cars parked outside the entrance, but there might be a garage behind the house, so I didn't take the chance of coming too close. I parked the van off the drive under a clump of trees well away from the structure.

The vehicle was not hidden from view. If anyone was in the house, I hoped that ignorance and complacency were on my side. Or maybe the occupants knew Hassan intended to bring me there and expected to see the van. I could only hope.

Having made the decision to leave my backpack hidden under the seat, I took out the gun. With the duct tape, pocketknife, and Hassan's key ring tucked into various pockets, I slithered through the bushes and approached the house from the rear. My feet softly scuffed on the damp needles under the

trees. The air was redolent with pine scent. I assumed the key ring had a house key on it so I wasn't worried about getting inside.

Where is all this confidence was coming from? I didn't feel self-assured. Goose bumps prickled along the length of my arms. Someone was operating a roto-tiller in my gut and a voice inside my head kept shrieking that this was a very stupid thing to do. And to top it off, my bladder showed signs of wanting to become part of the act.

Now that I was here and threatened by real danger, none of my decisions and actions made much sense. *Who am I trying to impress?* Did I want to prove to Will that I was capable and independent, that I was worthy of his trust? That I was Wonder Woman? My aspirations had never moved in the super heroine arena. My role model had always been Tour Guide Barbie. It was too late for second thoughts. Once I start something, I don't quit until I finish.

With the gun in my hand like a natural extension of my arm, I crept forward, testing each step to be sure of stable ground until I was as close to the back door as possible without leaving my cover. There I stopped to study the key ring and chose the one that looked most likely to open an exterior door.

"Ready?" I asked myself. Yes, I was—if that word included an accelerated heart rate, perspiration, and so many elephants on my chest I had difficulty breathing. I was glad Will wasn't with me. He would insist on going in alone, or at least first, and we would have argued. He still hadn't gotten the hang of the *we* thing.

I left the shelter of the bushes and crept from shadow to shadow to the only door on the back side. I tried it. As expected, it was locked. I inserted the key. The tumblers clicked, the handle turned, and the door swung open quietly.

These terrorists were pretty damn sure of themselves. I would have had at least two more locks.

The door opened into a dim hallway. I flattened myself against the wall and waited for my eyes to adjust, then moved along the short corridor. Gun

raised, I peeked around the corner. My heart thudded, my mouth dry as cat litter.

In front of me was a large living room filled with stacks of wooden shipping crates. The house was silent. Cautiously, I moved toward a pile of boxes near a window, which provided enough light for me to read the shipping label.

“Northern Ireland,” I whispered under my breath. I was right. I touched the label stamped on the rough wood, careful not to run any slivers into my fingers. It bore the name of a local winery, but I’d wager there were guns inside.

With caution, I searched the first floor and found most of the rooms empty or stacked with more wooden crates. The spaces held a faint musty odor, but the air was cool and dry against my skin. The house must have been air-conditioned.

Based on what I saw, I concluded that the terrorists used the place primarily for storage. There were none of the earmarks I would expect if it was part of their daily operations, whatever those were.

Still there was no sound except the scraping of my shoes, and even that was muffled by layers of dust on the floor. It swirled up under my feet, rose into the air and tickled my nose. I almost sneezed but managed to hold it back. My prickling skin warned me there was someone in the house somewhere.

Stealth is my middle name, right?

Near the staircase to the second floor, my nostrils twitched at the smell of burned food. At the foot of the steps, I found a kitchen that opened into a small bedroom and attached bathroom. All three rooms contained evidence of human habitation. Male habitation, to be exact. The odors were strong and pungent and not gentle on the nose. Yuk!

In the kitchen, spilled coffee grounds shared a counter top with a half-full pot of cold coffee, an empty cup, and containers of cinnamon, curry, and other spices. Their scents mingled with that of scorched vegetables. A dirty

pot in the greasy sink had a thin layer of black on the inside. Water dripped from the faucet with a *plink, plink, plink* I'd been unaware of when I first entered the house.

Men!

The adjacent bedroom was also messy. A pile of dirty laundry occupied one corner. The bed had been slept in and the covers thrown back in a careless wad. All four drawers in a bureau were partially open, each with a sock or some other piece of clothing hanging out. I had no doubt a man was living there.

An on-site guard? That might account for the casual security—and the stink. I couldn't help thinking that whoever owned the house was going to be an unhappy camper.

Proceeding with care, I crept up the stairs. In spite of the appalling housekeeping and high dust quotient, the structure wasn't that old and was apparently maintained, as there was no major squeaking or rotten wood to avoid.

In the hallway upstairs, all the doors were open but one. *That* had to be where they were holding Essi.

I charged forward, then stopped and pulled back. Since I hadn't run into the guard on the first level, chances were he was lurking somewhere on the second floor. What would Will do? I wasn't sure, but I doubted that he'd rush into the room like an idiot. I closed my eyes and imagined him standing to one side, out of the line of fire, then leaping at the door and giving it a heavy kick that sent it crashing open.

He could do that. I couldn't.

Taking a cue from my imaginary Will, I stood as far as I could outside the doorframe and turned the handle quietly until I heard a click. I froze and waited, holding the door closed but unlatched. Nothing happened. But in the quiet house, I heard the scuffling sounds of someone moving about inside the room.

Oh, boy. At least I knew where the guard was.

I let the door go and pulled back. Slowly, silently it swung inward. I held my breath and waited. After a few seconds, I eased forward and peeked into the room—and almost gasped out loud with surprise.

A tent was erected inside—an army green tent about eight feet by ten—with guy ropes tied to heavy furniture pushed against the walls. And leaning over the tent opening was a man.

As quiet as I'd been, somehow he heard me. He swung around, eyes wide, a startled expression on his face. He held a full syringe in one hand.

He shouted something and lunged at me. I swung my right arm up to protect my face and tried to hop out of his way, but the needle connected with my neck. My movement caught his hand and dragged the point up the side of my throat and cheek.

Someone screamed and I realized the sound was coming from me. My face burned like it was on fire. My eyes went fuzzy. For an instant, my only thought was what might be in the syringe, that it might be contaminated.

Momentum carried the man stumbling forward and past me. He caught his balance, swung around, and came at me again. The only thing I was aware of was the pain in my face. I couldn't take any more pain.

Without realizing what I was doing, I raised my right arm straight out, shoulder level, and fired the Beretta.

Screaming, he lurched backward, hit the wall and collapsed onto the floor. I was so surprised I couldn't move. I didn't even remember I was holding the weapon. I don't know how long I stood there and stared at him, my mind blank and the pistol dangling from my hand.

Finally, the man's whimpering got through to me. I gave myself a shake and my mind cleared enough for me to realize what I'd done.

"Ohmigod!" I'd shot him. I dropped the Beretta on the floor and kicked it to the other side of the room. What should I do? I didn't know where or how badly I'd wounded him, but he wasn't dead. At least not yet.

I tried to move but couldn't get the message to my muscles. My skin was cold and clammy. My chest heaved in and out, but I didn't seem to be getting

any oxygen.

“Harriet? Is that you?” I heard someone calling my name. I stared at the man on the floor. He was moaning and thrashing, but he wasn’t speaking. *What the heck?*

“Harriet? Look behind you.”

I turned and was facing the tent. *Why a tent?* I pulled back the flap and looked inside. A man lay on his back on the floor, his arms and legs bound by heavy ropes.

“Essi? *Ohmigod!*” This was no time to mess around with the formal Ahmed part.

“Take it easy, Harriet.” Essi Ahmed’s voice was calm. He spoke as though I was the one who was tied to the floor totally nude, not him.

I closed my eyes and shook my head to make the nightmare go away. When I opened them again, he was still in the buff and still tied down.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Brilliant question, but what else could I say? I was dazed already and finding him like this flustered me even more. I didn’t know what to do.

He chuckled, although I couldn’t understand what he could find so amusing. “I’m a bit drugged up, but coming around. I was due for another shot of tranquilizer when you showed up. I owe you one. What happened to my guard?”

“O-on the floor. He stuck me with a syringe and I shot him.” *Well, duh!* Essi must have heard the scuffle and the gunshot.

The Arab sucked in a breath. “Is he dead?”

“No, I...I don’t think so.” I lifted the tent flap. The man was still crumpled against the wall. “He’s moaning, and his shoulder is bleeding.”

“Good. That should keep him disabled until you can get these ropes off me.”

I closed my eyes again. “I...what happened? You, you’re...” My sputtering was completely incoherent. My hands fluttered around me like a humming bird.

“Don’t get flustered. Look at my face.”

I pried open my eyes and locked my gaze on his face. His appearance was different without the beard, but I still recognized him.

“Do you have anything to cut with?”

“Y-yes, a pocketknife.” I clamped my lids closed again.

“Good, cut me free. But, please, keep your eyes open.”

“You...you’re nude. Why don’t you have any clothes on?”

What a dumb thing to say. I could only blame it on shock.

“Get out your knife and cut the ropes. Start with the one around my right hand. Look at the rope. Forget about me. Forget the other guy. He’ll survive.”

Like a robot, I did what he told me. I took the knife from my pocket and opened it. I canceled out all awareness of the terrorist behind me. I dismissed all feelings of impropriety in relation to Essi Ahmed’s state of undress, and I went to work on the thick rope. Once I started cutting the strands of fiber, I was able to focus in spite of my disorientation.

“That’s right.” His voice was low and encouraging. “Watch what you’re doing. Everything is going to be all right.”

“Where are your clothes?” I asked again. I’m not sure I was hearing anything he said to me, but the sound of his voice soothed my raw nerves.

“Harriet, listen to me.”

“You sound just like Will.”

“No doubt.” He chuckled deep in his throat. “All kidnappers and terrorists know the way to effectively demoralize a victim is to deprive him, or her, of clothes. That’s a basic rule. They do it to all hostages. That’s how they achieve immediate domination. Knowing that, one can’t afford to be overly modest in this line of work.”

The rope on his right wrist gave way, and he pulled his arm free. *Look at his face.* I shifted position and began to cut the binding around his left wrist. The skin was red and raw where he’d struggled against it. *I’ll have to wrap his wrists, or the wounds will get infected.* Tour director First Aid Training 101.

“How do you deal with it?” I wanted to keep him talking. Well, actually, I don’t think my head was clear enough to form that thought. I needed to hear his calming voice.

He seemed to understand what I was going through.

“It’s not too hard once you get the idea. I think of myself as being dressed, and do exactly as I would if I were wearing clothes. It’s an acquired skill. It drives them nuts.”

Yeah, I’m quite sure it drove them nuts.

“Has Will ever been...” I stopped myself. I already knew Will was perfectly comfortable without clothes. And I’d been naive enough to think it had something to do with me.

Essi Ahmed let my half-formed question pass without any indication that I’d been talking when I should have been listening. Pretty soon, his other wrist was loose and he was able to sit up.

“I can work on these,” he said, pointing at the ties around his ankles. “Go find something for me to put on. And see if there are any towels around.”

My first thought was that he wanted one to put on his head. I have to attribute that dumb idea to my state of shock. “Are you sure? Can you hold the knife?”

“Of course.” He took it from me.

Still in a haze, I half-stumbled down the stairs to the room where the guard camped out. I intended to grab the blanket off the bed, but it looked too grungy, so I explored the bureau.

Inside one of the half-open drawers, I found a clean robe similar to the one Essi wore when I first met him in the medina. I realized, as I shook it out, that his everyday clothing did not consist of native robes and headpieces. What was I thinking?

And I thought Edith Johnson was ditzy.

The robe looked too small, but the design was intended to be loose, so it would probably work for him. I tucked it under my arm and went looking for towels. By the time I went back upstairs, he had finished cutting off the

bindings and was on his feet. I handed him the robe and turned my back while he slipped it over his head.

“Okay, you can look now.” There was a smile in his voice. When I turned, he was tying the cord about his waist as he walked across the room to pick up the gun.

He turned it over and examined it. “Nice Beretta Parabellum. Where’d you get this puppy?”

“Long story.”

He shrugged and stuck the weapon under his corded belt, then went over to the guard. The man’s eyes were open and glazed. He moaned, but he didn’t attempt to move.

“Hand me a towel, please.”

I gave one to him. He picked up the syringe from the floor and wrapped it in the towel. Then, having pocketed it somewhere in the folds of the robe, he crouched to examine the man’s bleeding shoulder.

“It’s not too bad. He’ll be okay. It won’t take long for the ambulance to get here. Give me a couple more towels.”

After he wrapped the man’s shoulder he asked, “Do you have your cell phone?”

“Yes, but it’s in the van. Will this help?” I fished around in my pockets, found the roll of duct tape, and held it out to him.

Essi Ahmed smiled broadly. I kind of missed the *keffiyeh* and the spinach between his teeth. Both gave him a lot of character.

“That will work.” He took it from me and bound the man’s ankles, then secured his good arm behind his back, wrapping the duct tape around his body. I sagged against the wall and watched with blurred eyes and a woozy mind.

After he finished tending to the guard, he rose and stared at me with a frown. “I’d better take care of your face.”

I backed away, my hand touching the nasty scratch. It still burned. The implications frightened me.

"What was in the syringe? Do you think the needle was contaminated? Am I going to get AIDS? Am I going to die?"

"They've been giving me tranquilizers, and chances are the needle wasn't contaminated. Might ruin their future credibility. Terrorists take hostages to trade for something they want. It's to their advantage to keep them in an undamaged condition...up to a certain point."

I heaved a sigh of relief. "I guess I'm okay, then. I just want to get out of here."

"Whatever you say."

We reached the van without incident. Once there, he eyed the vehicle and asked, "What are you doing with this pile of junk?" He walked around it and kicked the spare tire. "Let's see that cell phone."

I handed it over and waited while he called for backup and a police ambulance. I still had no clue as to what agency he worked for, but I didn't care. He was free and that was all that mattered.

Then he called Will.

"The police should be here any minute," he told me after he clicked off. "Will notified them as soon as he realized what was happening." Essi Ahmed paused and looked me up and down, the hint of a grin playing at the corner of his lips. "It was a smart move to leave your cell phone on so he could hear what was going on. And mentioning Los Barrios helped him pin point this facility."

A wave of relief swept over me. I *knew* he would listen. I knew, because I'd asked him to. That meant he trusted me, at least a little. That was progress.

"Thanks. I was afraid he wouldn't know where Hassan was taking me. At first I couldn't tell where we were going—only the direction—but when I noticed the bull farms, I was pretty sure."

Essi opened his mouth, then snapped it shut and took a deep breath. "Who is Hassan?"

I grimaced. With all the excitement, I'd forgotten to mention my

kidnapper. When I explained, Essi rolled his eyes, picked up the cell phone, and made another call. Just then, we heard police sirens approaching. Both of us leaned against the dirty van to wait.

“What’s the purpose of the tent?” I wanted to know.

“Keeps the hostage disoriented and deprived of any clue as to location.” He paused, then told me, “You know, Will told me you were pretty amazing.”

I looked him in the eye and wondered *when* Will had said that. Fortunately, the timely arrival of two Algeciras police cars, the ambulance, and two Europol cars saved me from asking another embarrassing question.

Chapter Twenty-One

We were not detained for long. While the ambulance attendants took care of Hassan and the terrorist I'd wounded, the local policeman in charge took separate statements from Essi Ahmed and me. Then he authorized us to leave after extracting from us promises to provide more detailed accounts the next day.

I agreed without hesitation—now that Essi was safe, I wanted to get out of there—but wondered how I would manage since my tour group was scheduled to depart at eight thirty in the morning.

When I had contacted the Adventure Seekers office the night before and given my full report, my boss, Stuart Philips, was surprisingly understanding. The accident and damage claims were already coming in, he'd told me, but as long as I kept the tour on schedule, I shouldn't worry. But he made it clear I was responsible for keeping on schedule.

"Where's Will?" I asked as casually as I followed the Arab toward the van. "I thought you said he was coming here to pick us up."

"He intended to but there were still a few of the terrorists to round up, so he made arrangements for us to drive the van back to the city. We'll probably meet up with him somewhere along the way."

I planted my hands on my hips and studied the vehicle. "I thought the police would impound this thing."

"No such luck." He chuckled and gave the door a good smack with the

flat of his hand. “This *ibn il tinayich* is an undercover vehicle that belongs to Europol. A joint agency task force will search it after we get it back to town. Get in.”

From the tone of his voice, I decided it wouldn’t be prudent to ask him to translate *ibn il tinayich*. I looked him up and down. He seemed all right, but he’d been through a lot, and they’d filled him full of drugs to keep him in a state of semi consciousness.

“I think I’d better drive,” I told him.

He shot me a questioning stare that said he didn’t believe for one minute that I should be behind the wheel of a moving vehicle. Then, with an almost imperceptible smile, he shrugged and slipped into the passenger seat. I got in on the driver’s side, wondering if Will had warned him not to argue with me.

The sun was low but well above the horizon when I pulled out of the private drive onto the highway. From there, we headed southeast toward Algeciras. A breeze stirred through the branches of the pines, but the air was hot and muggy.

Essi was right. The Europol van *was* a pile of junk. It didn’t even have air conditioning.

After five minutes, the highway took us down the main street of a nearby village where children played games in the streets and old men sat on benches around the square. Everyone turned to stare at us. I assumed these people didn’t often see a hippie Volkswagen with flowers and Arabic writing. *God only knows what’s written on it.* I was afraid to ask my companion to translate.

I glanced around nervously. “Do you think these unapprehended terrorists know where we are?”

He gave another chuckle. “If they don’t now, you can bet they will. As the saying goes, they have ‘a long eye.’ Besides, this vehicle is pretty hard to miss.”

I nodded. The van was in the same category as the Adventure Seekers’ purple and pink bus. *Maybe my karma is bad.* Being associated with two atrocious vehicles like this in a lifetime had to be more than coincidence.

Abruptly the village ended and we were in open countryside. I'd intended to ask Essi Ahmed what had happened on the ferry, but now that I was more relaxed, my attention was captured by the magnificent panorama. Endless green mountains stretched before us and below, in the distance, the blue sea shimmered. I hadn't noticed the view on the way there. Too much angst.

"Don't turn around, but I think there's someone following us," Essi Ahmed said.

I glanced into the rear view mirror. A dark colored vehicle was behind us. In a flash it was gone, hidden by a curve in the road. A few more glimpses convinced me the driver was keeping a steady distance between us to take advantage of the winding highway to stay out of our sight.

The view forgotten, I squirmed in my seat and tried to un-stick the back of my damp shirt from my skin. My mouth was dry, my tongue thick. For a few seconds the car reappeared, then dropped out of sight again. Essi didn't say anything else, but I noticed he was keeping a close watch.

"Maybe it *wasn't* following us."

I glanced at him and then into the mirror. I didn't see the car, but I doubted he would make that kind of mistake and wondered if his comment was for my benefit. *Were my nerves showing that much?*

By the time we reached the outskirts of Los Barrios, I was so freaked out that my skin was crawling. The edges of everything seemed to blur, making it hard to concentrate on driving.

At an intersection with a traffic signal, I stopped behind an ancient pickup waiting at the red light. The bed of the small vehicle was loaded down with furniture, one piece on top of the other, and secured with slender ropes.

"Look at that." My voice sounded slurry.

Behind us, tires screeched. Something slammed into the back of the van with an earsplitting crash. Our vehicle leaped forward and rammed the rear of the truck. My head snapped back, then forward. Pain shot down my back and arms.

"Oww!" I screeched.

Before the sound was out of my mouth, a large wooden table tied on top of the other furniture, dislodged from its fragile ties. It teetered, then crashed down into the front of the van with a loud metallic crunch and the sound of splitting wood. The van's ancient windshield disintegrated into a spider web of fine cracks. A few pieces of glass fell into my lap.

I palmed my neck. Every movement sent ribbons of fire through me.

"That's the car that was following us." Essi was out before I could turn to see what he was talking about. Pain spiraled from my neck through my body all the way to my fingertips as I strained to look into the rear view mirror.

Behind us, the same dark car we'd seen on the road, now with a bent bumper and smashed radiator was backing away. As I watched, the vehicle spun around in the middle of the street, barely avoiding the gathering crowd, and tried to speed away, only to be stopped by the spectators.

What next? Every time I thought this ordeal was coming to an end, something else happened. With this in mind, I watched with detached wonder as two men struggled to lift the table lodged in the front of the van. They were shouting at each other. I couldn't take it anymore.

"Stop it." I put my hands to my throbbing head. I was drenched in sweat, yet I had the shivers. Around me, the crowd seemed to press in from all sides, everyone babbling incoherently.

Before my eyes, their faces distorted into monsters. I had to get out of there. In spite of the pain, I pounded my shoulder against the door. The bent metal refused to budge. I was trapped. My heart raced. Just what I needed.

"Help!" I shouted, but no one could hear me.

Then a horrific red face pressed against my window. With the bulbous tip of a big nose flattened against the glass, it looked like the pig-man from outer space. Then the pig-man screamed at me and smashed his beefy fist into the window next to my head. Glass flew in all directions.

I screamed and passed out.

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When I came to, Will was sitting beside me holding my hand. I knew it was Will, but he seemed to have two heads with little black dots all over them. Nothing had sharp edges and the dots kept moving around like ants on a sugar high.

"Yo," he said and gave me a kiss on my eyelids. Peace and contentment settled over me. I was safe again.

"Yo, yourself." I glanced around trying not to move my head too much. "Where am I?"

"The police ambulance. You were in an automobile accident, sort of."

I sighed. "What does 'sort of' mean?"

His face swam into focus and there were those big baby blues looking at me as though he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Hmm, what else could you call a collision between a van and a table?"

The memories came flooding back. A table? *That's going to look great on my resume, not to mention my driving record.*

"This is getting to be a bad habit. Injuries and hospitals are not right up there with my favorite things. Did Essi Ahmed stop the men who rear-ended us?"

Will patted my hand. "The crowd wouldn't let them go anywhere, and I arrived with reinforcements a few seconds later. For now all the bad guys we know about are behind bars or soon will be."

"Did you get them all by yourself?"

"Nope. I had help."

I smiled, but I didn't go there.

"How long was I out this time? Do I have to go to the hospital?" If this was going to be my last night here, I wanted to spend it with Will, not hooked to an IV with a bunch of nurses around...and I didn't want to spend it arguing with him.

"Not very long. Judging from what Essi told me, you were in shock and the scratch from that syringe put a fairly strong dose of drugs into you."

"Drugs?" I put my hand to my cheek and fingered the bandage on my

face and neck. "Am I going to die?"

He grinned. "I don't think so. The paramedic who took care of your face said you'd be okay...just a little dingy for a while."

I propped myself up on my elbows. "Oo-oh, ma-an. Essi Ahmed said it was just a tranquilizer."

Will eased me back to a prone position. "Apparently that's what they'd been giving him until today. It seems they were preparing for something a little more drastic."

"A piece at time," I murmured, remembering what the terrorist had threatened to do. My stomach turned a flip-flop, and I gagged. Will held my head and steadied me until the spasm passed.

"How did they get him?" I asked as soon as I was able to speak.

"Essi? On the ferry. He'd gone to ask Mario to look at the luggage, just like we were going to do, only the terrorists got there first. Essi found Mario unconscious and saw someone running away. He gave chase and they ambushed him in the stairwell. Took him off the ferry rolled up in a rug."

*Rolled up in a rug? Oo-kay.* I let that soak in for a while. "How did they know about him? Did Hassan tell them?" I could tell by the bleak expression on Will's face that I was right. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "There's always that risk." He kept his voice flat and unemotional, but his eyes told me he was disappointed. "Hassan could have been a good agent. I don't know when or why he went bad. I'm just grateful that you listened to me and understood what I meant. If you hadn't, things might have turned out differently...and not for the best."

I shuddered, thinking of a number of not-so-pleasant possibilities.

"You did all the right things." His voice was reassuring, his smile, a proud I-taught-her-everything-she-knows kind of smile that warmed me up inside.

"What will happen to Hassan?"

"Don't think about it anymore." He stood up and paced in the small space. "This part is over for now."



I sucked in air and propped myself up on my elbows, despite my wooziness.

"This part? You mean there's *more*?" I didn't want to hear *that*. "You know, Will, I don't think I can manage a second part. Isn't there a way this can be over and done with?" In my tranked state, that seemed like a logical question.

He gave me that "Jesus-Harriet" look and raised one eyebrow. "Don't know. Like I said, we've got everyone we know about locked up tight, thanks to you."

"And thanks to Essi Ahmed, too."

"Yeah, well, thanks to Essi, too. Can't you just call him Essi?"

"He said to call him by both names. I've been trying, but I think of him as Essi. I'm so relieved that he's all right. I was afraid I might be too late."

He closed his eyes and tilted his head upward. "Lord, give me strength," he muttered.

*Now what did I say to cause that reaction?* There was so much about this man I didn't know and didn't understand.

All of a sudden, I had a terrible yearning to go home. To be somewhere safe and familiar, some place where I was loved and taken care of and protected. Only there wasn't any *home* here. I wasn't a little girl anymore, and that kind of *home* didn't exist for me now. I was on my own.

"What time is it?"

He opened his eyes and glanced at his watch. "After four."

"I'm feeling a lot better. Can we go back to the hotel now?"

"Sure, Tiger, anything you want."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Back at the Grand Hotel Alegria, I took a quick shower, washed my hair, changed clothes, brushed my teeth, and I slept like the dead for two solid hours. When I awoke, Will was stretched out next to me on the bed with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

“Mario called,” he said when he heard me stir. “Your group won’t be back until after nine tonight. You can sleep for a few more hours.”

“I’m okay.” I sat up and stretched, noticing my clothes were all wrinkled again. I glanced at Will’s trousers. They still had sharp creases in them.

*How the heck did he do that? It’s not fair.*

I flopped back down closer to him. “Why are they coming so late?” As if I couldn’t guess.

“Hmm, Mario will tell you when he gets here. They had an, ah, *incident* during the trip.”

*An incident? Oh, boy.* “I don’t suppose it had anything to do with Edith Johnson, did it?”

He put his arm around me and pulled me closer, cradling my head in the crook of his arm. “You always hit the target, Tiger.”

I snuggled against the length of his delicious body and let him hold me. “Yes, when it comes to Edith. Wow. I’m glad I missed *that* trip.”

He rolled me under him, propped himself on his elbows, and ran his fingers through my hair.

"Let's see now," he said and kissed my eyelids. *That was so sexy.* "Since we got up this morning, you've been threatened at gun point by a terrorist, who you knocked out with a bottle of Perrier. You solved a smuggling case, discovered the first evidence in a fifteen-year-old art heist, got kidnapped, shot out someone's tires, knocked out a kidnapper and disabled him with duct tape, wounded another terrorist in the shoulder, got yourself drugged, rescued a hostage, and were in an auto accident with a piece of furniture." He paused. "Yes, I'd say that *is* preferable to a day with Edith Johnson."

"You left out being sexually assaulted...sort of."

He frowned and shook his head. *I really did like that crease between his eyebrows.*

"No-o, I don't think so. You're a consenting adult over the age of eighteen. And if I remember correctly, you did a lot of eager and loud consenting. I don't think you can count that one."

I wrinkled my nose and pretended to think about it. "Well, all right, that comes off the list. Even so, it was still better than going on a bus to Granada with Edith."

Will laughed and kissed me again. "Have you ever considered changing professions?"

*Gosh, he smells good.* "Like how?"

"With a little effort to get you past your disaster-prone tendencies, you could be a good agent."

I scrunched my brow. "What disaster-prone tendencies?" My voice was laden with indignation. "I'll have you know I've always led a very normal, predictable, and un-disaster-like life. The last two days are an anomaly. Nothing like this has *ever* happened to me until...until I met *you*." I poked a finger into his chest. "Never. You've ruined my karma."

"You'll have to convince me of that one." He flashed a killer smile that made my stomach quiver. "May I remind you that Archie Philpot had already been poisoned—murdered on your watch, I might add—*before* I met you."

"No, you may not remind me." *I hate it when he's right.* "Are you trying

to recruit me or something?”

Will chuckled. His lips covered mine, his probing tongue stirring up rivers of passion deep inside me. When he broke away, I was breathless in more ways than one and tingling all over.

“Am I recruiting you? Yeah, something like that.”

I lay still. He wasn’t joking. Was he influential enough in the Europol organization to be able to do that? There was something appealing about the idea of being an agent. You might say I was even tempted.

Even discounting the sex, working with Will *had* been an exciting adventure. And with the sex...well, there were no words to describe it. But if I became an agent, I couldn’t always work with him. It took about five seconds to figure that one out, and by then the moment of temptation had passed.

Just to be fair, I gave the idea another two seconds of consideration before saying, “No, I’d better stick to being a tour director. I want to master that before I look into a second career.”

“Your job is a perfect cover.” He didn’t sound like he was kidding.

“Our terrorist friend didn’t think so. He called me stupid for even thinking about it, even though I hadn’t.”

Will cocked his head. “Casey’s an arrogant S.O.B. I hope the justice system gives him what he deserves. Anyway, if he thought it was a bad idea, maybe that makes it a good one.”

The previous tone of lightness and fun evaporated. “Why are you even suggesting this?” I asked with apprehension.

“Because watching you, and being with you, has been the most fun I’ve had in years. You’re genuine and refreshing and so damn unpredictable. You’ve given me a new perspective.”

He seemed serious. But of course, *serious* was a big part of Will’s problem.

“You *do* come across as being a little too intense, sometimes. I’m guessing you have some heavy-duty baggage you need to get rid of. And would you please get off me, you big lug?”

He smiled and rolled over, lifting me as he went until I was straddling him. *For a change.*

"Okay, Doctor Tiger. If we continue this relationship, I promise I will do my best to deal with the baggage issue."

I did a double take. "Relationship? We've had sex. That's not a relationship."

He reached up and pulled me down, forcing me to look into those blue eyes, sucking me into their cool depths.

"What did you say?" he asked without allowing me to look away. He was miffed, but I wasn't sure why. "We've had sex? That's it?"

"Well, all right. We've had a *lot* of sex."

That wasn't what he was after. He continued to stare at me with those penetrating eyes as though waiting for a particular response...or at least trying to see my underwear. It was freaking me out.

"Okay, it was a lot of really great sex," I said. "Well, actually, very fabulous, wonderful, earth shattering sex."

"And?"

"And what?" I didn't know where he was going with this line of thought.

"And you're ready to throw in the hat and say, 'Thanks, it's been fun. Have a nice life.'?"

I shot him an indignant scowl. "Why are you putting words in my mouth? I never said that and I don't feel that way." I got onto my hands and knees, backed away from him and off the end of the bed.

"Neither do I." He sat up but didn't try to stop me from putting some distance between us. *Will is a quick study, too.*

"We've done more in the last two days...together...than most people do in a life time," he continued. "It's been an incredible experience without even considering our physical compatibility, which defies description. I don't want to give that up, and I don't believe you do, either." He paused a second time and looked at me with an adorable puppy dog expression. "I'd say *that* is the beginning of a potential relationship."

I planted my hands on my hips. “Holy moly, Will, we’ve only known each other for two days.”

“Holy moly?” He mimicked, questioning my phraseology. “Where did you come up with *that*?”

“It’s an old-fashioned expression. It goes with my old-fashioned name. It’s a long story.” I paused for breath. “See, you really don’t know anything about me, do you?”

“I feel like I was born with you.”

That sounded ominous. “Thanks a lot. What am I, a birthmark or something?”

Will shrugged. “I hadn’t thought about it in quite those terms. I meant, I feel as though I’ve known you all my life, since I was a kid, like with Essi. I can be myself with you. No pretenses, no facades. Just me.”

“And how is that possible? We only met two days ago. I have no idea what your childhood was like or where you grew up. I don’t know who your parents are or what they do. Where you went to college. When you were in the army. Nothing. And I certainly don’t know what’s behind this calling of yours...your need to rescue innocent people. And that comment about killing people. Wow, that’s heavy.” I cringed.

“*That* is what’s different.”

*Different?* He’d told me last night something was different between us. I didn’t get the message then, and I wasn’t getting it now. And he was serious as hell.

I plopped down beside him on the bed. “I’m afraid you have to tell me in words I understand *what* is different.”

He took my hands. “Listen, Harriet, this is first time I’ve ever wanted to tell someone about those things...about my background and those experiences that make me what I am. What is different now is that I want to tell *you*. I want *you* to understand. I’ve never had to explain myself to anyone because it never mattered before. Now it does. The pertinent question is, do *you* want to know?”

I was flabbergasted, speechless...*and for me that is an unusual state.* This was last night all over again. My emotions were pulling me in all different directions at the same time, scaring and confusing me. My breathing had stopped again. And this didn't have anything to do with sex.

"Yes, I *would* like to know. I *do* want to understand."

My breath caught in a little gasp. *What was I committing myself to?* I wasn't ready for commitments. I pulled my hands away.

I swear, Will Talbot could read my mind. He looked at me and smiled a heart-stopping smile.

"Relax, Tiger. I don't know where things will go from here anymore than you do, but I'd like to find out. All I'm asking for is the opportunity to know who you are."

My elephants were back. My eyes stung with tears. "I want to know who I am, too. I don't know any more." I flopped onto my back, stared at the ceiling, and pouted. "This business of becoming your own person isn't all it's cracked up to be."

He ran his fingers down my cheek following the thin strip of bandage.

"Life is never simple, but growing up and finding yourself isn't so bad once you get there."

I turned on my side and propped myself up on one elbow to study his face. "How would you know? Men *never* grow up."

"I beg to differ. Some of us do."

"Yeah, yeah, I know how it goes...ex-military, Special Forces, trust me, kid." I shook my head. "Every man thinks he's the only one who ever matured."

"And this opinion is based on how many years of experience? A whole twenty-four? That's impressive."

"Don't be a smartass with *me*," I said with mock irritation. "I'm quoting ancient wisdom here. This is knowledge that's been handed down from generation to generation for millennia."

"Phooey. It's a vicious rumor perpetrated by horny old maids."

Since I didn't have a rebuttal for that, I didn't say anything. We lay side by side for a while without speaking until the tension between us passed.

I *did* want to know the real Will...although I had the sinking feeling that even *he* didn't know the *real* William Talbot. But finding out was a journey of discovery we could make together, and however it ended, it would be a memorable adventure getting there.

How and when this getting-to-know-you stuff was going to happen, I had no clue since I was based in Rome and he lived in Spain, but I trusted Will to figure it out.

In fact, I trusted Will with every fiber of my being in a way I'd never trusted anyone before. Not because I was naive and thought the world was all good—I'd learned that was not so—but because he'd earned my trust. He'd been there when I needed him.

"Have you noticed," I asked, "that we communicate pretty well when we both speak in cliché?"

"I've noticed."

"But since you're so wise and experienced, I *do* have one question. Something I'd like you to explain."

"All right, but it'll cost you."

"No way. I'm fully paid up for a long time."

"Not the way I see it, Tiger."

"Fine, I'll leave you my itinerary. You can mail me a bill."

He smiled, and I turned all squishy inside. "I will seek you out to the ends of the earth to collect in person, thank you very much, but go ahead, ask your question."

I sat up crossed legged on the bed and leaned over him so I could see his eyes. The windows to the soul and all that.

"Okay, I think I get the 'need-to-know' rule, even though I don't like it. But I want you to explain this basic rule of total and immediate domination over someone by taking away their clothes."

One eyebrow shot up and he chuckled. It was a pleasant, deep sound



that warmed me inside and made me want to laugh, too.

“You’re really worried about that, aren’t you? Essi warned me you’d ask.”

I bit my lip. I was afraid the Arab had heard my question about Will. I might have known he would tell him everything.

“Well, I *was* a little flustered. Finding him like that was so...so unexpected.”

And, I thought, the hostage could have been *me*. I could see Will was thinking the same thing, but neither of us wanted to articulate it.

“Don’t they teach the hostage rule to tour directors?” he asked instead.

I shook my head. “No, actually we don’t take many hostages.”

He pulled me down beside him and gave me a long hard kiss.

“Well, come here, Tiger,” he said and lifted my T-shirt over my head. “I’m not sure I can explain the domination rule, but I can demonstrate to you how it works.”