

A photograph of a woman from the waist down, wearing a bright orange coat, black trousers, and black high-heeled shoes. She is carrying a black briefcase with gold-colored hardware. She is walking on a stone-paved area next to a large, textured stone pillar. The background is a stone wall.

ORANGE ALERT

A Carla McCarthy Adventure

Gretchen Stone

Author of Kaleidoscope: A Carla McCarthy Adventure

Orange Alert

Also by Gretchen Stone:

Kaleidoscope, a Carla McCarthy Adventure

Orange Alert

A Carla McCarthy Adventure

Gretchen Stone

Author of

Kaleidoscope: A Carla McCarthy Adventure

iUniverse, Inc.

New York Lincoln Shanghai

Orange Alert

A Carla McCarthy Adventure

Copyright © 2007 by Gretchen Stone

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

iUniverse books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

iUniverse
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com
1-800-Authors (1-800-288-4677)

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, names, incidents, organizations, and dialogue in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

ISBN: 978-0-595-43016-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-595-87357-9 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

Characters and Organizations in the Book

- Carla McCarthy: (American) Publisher of *Candid Times*
- Nan Lawson: (American) Retired Chief of Police/Author
- Eleanor Ward: (American) Director of LAP/covert Anti-Terrorism Agency
- Maria Morgan: (American) Proprietor of the Italian Villa Restaurant
- Renee Martin: (French/American) Owner of Art & Antique Gallery
- Benedicte Najor: (French/Persian) Interpol agent based in France
- Deborah Crowley: (English) Educated in France, primary school teacher in England
- Diana Crowley: (English) Curator of Baghdad Museum in Iraq—Deborah's sister
- Fiona Quinn: (American) Homeland Security Special Agent—Carla's cousin
- State Department: Screens visa applications against list of known terrorists
- CIA: Investigates terrorist suspects abroad
- FBI: Spies on terrorist suspects within the United States
- Immigration and Naturalization Service: Deports foreigners who overstay visas; detains those who pose security risks

- Interpol: Facilitates cross-border criminal police cooperation
- LAP: Covert organization formed after 9/11 to keep track of subversive groups in the United States

Prologue

June 1994. The Isle of Corsica.

“Crossing the Mediterranean on this tiny ferry brings back memories of being six and having to cross the big street all alone to get to school.”

“Don’t tell me your first graders understand analogies like that.”

“Probably not, but when school starts in the fall I’ll ask them how they spent their holidays, and I’ll tell them about my trip to Corsica.”

“Do you tell the ankle-biters *everything* you do during summer vacation?”

“I tell them as much as I think they can handle. What about you? Do you tell your co-workers what *you* do on holiday?”

“My co-workers aren’t curious six-year-olds. They’re too busy to care about what I’m doing, and I certainly don’t tell them.”

“Six-year-olds just want to know why. They could grow up to be Interpol agents like you if they started asking where or who; but no—it’s always why, why, why.”

“So, tell *me* why. Why does crossing the sea remind you of crossing the street?” Benedicte asked.

“You want to do it. You have to do it. But that doesn’t stop your heart from pounding or butterflies from taking over your stomach.”

“Fear or anticipation?”

“Both.”

Section 1: Detroit, Michigan

One of America's largest cities, Detroit hardly lacks name recognition. Unfortunately, since the decline of the auto industry and the urban exodus of the mid-20th-century, Motor City has battled with image problems. The highly pronounced gay population here lives and plays mostly in the nearby towns of Montrose, Ferndale and Royal Oak, but downtown Detroit itself has among the nation's most vaunted cultural treasures: historic theaters and performance halls, the estimable Detroit Institute of the Arts, and such outlying attractions as the Henry Ford Museum and Cranbrook Art Museum. This is a city whose star is rising.

—Andrew Collins, travel writer and editor

Chapter 1

May God Bless Her

September 2001–March 2002. Montrose, Michigan.

She's dead.

The reality seeped in through my eyes and ears despite my attempts to resist, and the words kept repeating in my head—*dead. She's dead.*

The facts ground on in every newscast, on every car radio. Every voice in the newsroom hammered at me ... thousands were dead in New York and Washington, but Kerry's was the only face I could see, the only voice I wanted to hear.

There were moments, in the days and weeks following the attack, when I didn't know if I would be alive for another hour myself, but knowing that my first love, my college sweetheart, was no longer in the world took precedence over my fears. She was dead, killed by terrorists.

Kerry, the friend who understood my scattered thoughts and who collected them for me, who had learned about love with me and taught me how to fly with the feelings it brought. When I had dared to write a book, she built me up and told me I was good enough. When fame came too early to me, she gently pulled me back to earth.

She had watched me walk away from our home a decade ago and had never shut the door. I'd thought it would always be open and she would always be there.

When the grief and fear exhausted me, I left the newspaper office and went home to hug my animals. As my thoughts slowed and I gave myself over to sleep, I promised Kerry that if there was anything at all I could do to stop the terrorists, I would.

A dirge droned relentlessly through my head and heart all through that first month, through the wait for search and rescue teams to identify her body and bring it home to Michigan. But I could never get the words exactly right.

I went down to St. James' Infirmary
 I heard my baby moan
 I felt so brokenhearted
 She used to be my very own
 I tried so hard to keep from crying
 My heart felt just like lead
 She was all I had to live for
 Oh, I wish that it was me instead

She's gone, she's gone and may God bless her, wherever she may be.

* * * *

Six months had gone by since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and my immediate fears of the annihilation of Detroit had gradually ebbed into a cloud of daily anxiety that I attempted to appease with cumbersome preparations for disaster. I stubbed my toe at least once a day on the six gallons of water sitting on the kitchen floor, under the microwave. A sticky note on the dashboard reminded me to keep the car's gas tank at least half-full. My laundry room, comfortably cluttered before 9/11, now looked like a Costco annex stocked with cases of tuna, peanut butter, and dog food.

Any unsuspecting sleepover guest who looked into my nightstand's top drawer would get an unsettling surprise. How could I explain the two N-95 gas masks stored there?

The sharp grief I felt when Kerry had been killed on a New York street turned into an unrelenting sadness, which often threatened to roll over into full-blown depression. No one admitted it, but I know my family worried. My mother had a master schedule posted on her refrigerator. She assigned a square to each of my brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, cousins and even in-laws. That was their day to call me, visit me, or take me out to lunch. The younger cousins showed up with a six-pack or a bottle of wine; the aunts were more likely to invite me to a home-cooked meal.

Today it was my cousin Fiona who just happened to be in the neighborhood with an extra dozen still-warm cookies she didn't know what to do with. The brown sugar scent was familiar; my guess was oatmeal.

"How are you, Carla? I mean how are you *really*? I know how hard this has been on you. It's been hard on everyone, of course. But Kerry...."

I was so tired of everyone asking me how I really was, as though they thought I was continually acting for their benefit. This was the first time Fiona had asked me, though, so I felt like I should try to give her an answer.

"I'm okay, as okay as anyone can be. I blame myself, in a way."

"You can't blame yourself. No one could have possibly have predicted it."

"Someone must have known. You work for the FBI; didn't anyone there have a clue? The CIA? Somebody?" I wanted someone to blame, and Fiona would be an easy target.

"You're right. Somebody should have known. Somebody *will* know next time, and things will be different."

"If I'd stayed on the farm with her, things would've been different."

"A lot changes in ten years."

"All of the berries are picked by the end of August. September is supposed to be a lazy month. If I was there, we would have been making jam."

"All of these what-ifs are not doing you any good. In this case, doing something positive would make you feel better."

"I know you're not crazy about the president, but at least he has a plan. The Citizen Corps is a place to start. If they can get enough volunteers...."

"I know about them; I own a newspaper, remember? Matt wrote an article about them recently. They go around reminding people to change their smoke alarm batteries and stockpile food and water."

"Oh, so that's why you have a gazillion gallons of water in your kitchen."

Fiona knew how to make me laugh, always had. I was ten years older, so I had done my share of babysitting her. I had watched her grow up. After a disastrous relationship with a bully when she was eighteen, she had concentrated on her career. If she had other boyfriends, she never brought them home.

"The president is ready to take the Citizen Corps to the next level. Next week, my director is going to roll out a plan for Michigan. I'm one of the agents who have been chosen to participate."

"Really? Good for you. You must be doing well there."

"I hope so. This assignment is important to me—and to my career."

"I'm happy for you. You're making a difference. I wish I didn't feel so helpless. There must be something I can do."

“Do you mind if I look at this?” Fiona had noticed the old photo album on my cluttered coffee table and begun to extricate the heavy volume from beneath its blanket of unopened mail and expired Kroger coupons.

My heart sank—I’d hoped she wouldn’t see it.

“Sure, go ahead. No laughing allowed, though. Mulletts were very popular in the eighties. I was very cool.”

“I’m sure you were cool even with a bad haircut. All the little kids in the family looked up to you.”

Flattery is the best medicine for a Leo. I couldn’t really be annoyed with my baby cousin. The least I could do was offer her some tea.

“I’ll make some tea, and you can help me eat those cookies. I hope they have raisins.”

“They do. It’s your recipe; the whole family uses it.” Fiona knew me, all right.

I waited in the kitchen for the teakettle to boil, wanting the evening to be over so I could go to sleep. The nightmares had stopped, thanks to the sleeping pills I routinely took. Dr. Sabbota was warning me that it was time to wean myself off them. The crisis was past, he said.

Fiona leafed slowly through pictures of the senior McCarthy’s wedding and into the pages that gradually began to feature me and my siblings. My second grade picture, taken the year my mother gave up on my unruly hair and sent me to school on photo day with pigtails, had her howling.

I perched stiffly on the edge of my leather couch, fearing my reaction to seeing pictures of Kerry. I had dragged the album out of the hall closet weeks ago, but I hadn’t yet found the courage to open it.

There she was. High school graduation, my favorite picture. She’d looked exactly like that when I met her—long, straight hair, Mona Lisa smile, eyes that could see into me in a way that no one ever had before.

Pictures of us with a Frisbee on the sand dunes along Lake Michigan, Kerry in her Detroit Dynamos softball uniform, Kerry on the bank of the Looking Glass River with her t-shirt sleeves and pant legs rolled up, both of us barefoot even though the river bed was too rocky to wade in.

The pictures stopped more than ten years ago, even before I moved back to Montrose.

My heart ached. I would never forget.

Chapter 11

The Patriot Act Section 215

March 2002. The Federal Building, Detroit

Five men arrived, one-by-one, at the office on the twenty-third floor. With each arrival, the clock ticked closer to 10 AM. The door-mounted scanner checked the blue ID cards that verified the identity of each entrant and the exact time of entry.

With less than thirty seconds to spare, a woman approached the locked door. Her dark blue pantsuit and white oxford shirt under an aged, but still respectable, khaki trench gave the impression of a woman comfortable in her own skin. A weathered Coach briefcase, slung over her shoulder, carried her agency ID card, the documents for today's meeting, a small paperback dictionary, and three candy bars.

None of these FBI agents was the cream of the crop, but they all had a high likeability quotient, which was crucial to the success of this assignment.

A lean, dark-featured man standing near the window acknowledged each arrival with a curt nod and returned his attention to the line of cars and trucks burrowing under the swirling Detroit River. Ten minutes in the sub-aquatic tunnel, and they would emerge in Canada and technically outside his jurisdiction.

He strode to the front of the room, taking stock of the handpicked recruits. He had chosen these six only after in-depth background checks and personal interviews had uncovered well-hidden weaknesses along with the needed people skills.

“Failure of the pilot program is not an option.” He paused a moment to emphasize the importance of this statement. Two surgeries and months of rehab

had repaired his severed vocal chords, but had not been able to soften the startling low-pitched hoarseness of his voice.

“The President is depending on you. He wants mail carriers, delivery personnel, meter readers, and home repairmen enlisted as a first defense—anyone who can legally enter a private residence without a warrant and without raising suspicion.”

Fiona fidgeted in her chair and cleared her throat conspicuously but did not speak until Bob Archer acknowledged her.

“Agent Quinn, do you have a question?”

“Sir, that sounds unethical—if not actually illegal.” Her voice seemed to her ears to be coming from someone else; Archer awed her, but she would not let him intimidate her.

“A congressional resolution has declared eavesdropping legal.”

“Spying on American citizens without reasonable cause is something you would expect in a police state.” Fiona held her ground.

“I expected someone to bring this issue up, and I’m not surprised it was you. Let’s get this out in the open so we can move on. Does anyone else have any comments?”

Charley Underwood, the youngest of the agents, spoke up. “The Patriot Act gives us carte blanche for letters, computer records, bank records—things we had a devil of a time getting before.”

Cleveland Moore interjected, “We may not like it—I don’t like it—but it’s always gone on. My grandfather worked at Western Union in the 1950s, when the NSA intercepted every telegram sent in or out of the country. The employees complained, but the company was under political pressure to cooperate.”

“Agent Garcia, what is your opinion?”

“If people valued privacy, they wouldn’t use e-mail or fax machines. Everywhere you look, someone is on a cell phone. There aren’t any secrets once the words are in the air; they’re out there floating around saying ‘Hear me! Read me!’ So, when we do, the public shouldn’t be surprised.”

The ensuing laughter relieved the tension Fiona’s words had raised, and everyone around her relaxed.

“Let’s focus on the issue. The Department has handed down guidelines, but we have some latitude in how we want to handle recruit identification. I assume that you came prepared with solid suggestions.”

The agents avoided looking at each other. There was a moment of nervous coughing and paper shuffling before Charley Underwood spoke up.

“Sir, since there are six of us, I propose we break out the population as follows.” He went to the front of the room, where there was a flip chart set up with a box of colored markers.

1. Federal and state employees: postal and DMV workers
2. UAW/CIO Leadership: union stewards and above
3. Arab-American shopkeepers: grocery and party stores
4. Unmarried working women: teachers, business owners, medical personnel
5. The media: journalists, news photographers
6. Existing informers: drugs, robbery, street crime

“There will undoubtedly be some crossover,” Underwood laid down the marker, his pale blue eyes focused on the department head for some sign of approval.

“Your list is similar to mine, Agent Underwood, with the exception of group four. I’m curious why you think they are a target worth being classified as a separate unit.”

“My Aunt Louise falls into that category, sir, and so do her friends. Without families to care for, they have time to keep track of what everyone else is doing.”

Scattered laughter ricocheted around the room again. Fiona’s lips tightened with disapproval but she decided to choose her battles and didn’t comment.

“Women like her have two things going for them that make them perfect candidates for the Citizens Corps—they know everyone’s dirty laundry, and they’re looking for a way to feel important.”

“You convinced me, Underwood—you’ll take group four. I expect your aunt will be your first recruit, and you’ll only have nine to go.”

Looking at his watch, he asked, “Now for the rest of you, who has an in already established with one of these groups?”

When no one answered immediately, he announced, “We will not be leaving here today until each group has been assigned. Since I have plans for this afternoon, you can convince me you are the man for the job, or I will assign you. Last one to volunteer gets group number six.”

Chapter III

Orange Alert

March 2003. The Federal Building, Detroit.

Entrances at the Federal Building in downtown Detroit had been heavily guarded since 9/11. Round-the-clock security required all visitors and employees to show identification when they signed in and out.

The desirable corner office on the twenty-third floor had recently been reassigned to Eleanor Ward. Not surprisingly, given the nature of her position, most of the citizens summoned to her office found it amusing to think of her privately as “the warden.”

Her visitor this Saturday morning was Carla McCarthy, owner and publisher of a small, suburban newspaper. She paced the square room and refused Eleanor’s offer of a seat in one of the two upholstered Queen Anne chairs meant to make guests feel at ease.

“Why is there so much extra security around the building today? I counted four police cars outside when I came in. The flatfoot in the parking garage even made me show him my driver’s license and registration.”

“There’s a Federal Court trial starting Monday.”

“That’s what courts are for. What’s the big deal?”

“National Security has issued an elevated orange alert.”

“Why now? What’s going on?”

“It’s that conspiracy case against the four Arab terrorists,” Eleanor answered impatiently, standing abruptly to face her visitor as a reminder that she was in charge in this room.

“It’s a case against four immigrants. Last time I looked, not all immigrants are automatically terrorists. Do you need a refresher course in the Constitution, the part that says innocent until proven guilty?”

“Please sit down.” Eleanor’s clipped tone signaled that her stress level was elevated, also. “You’ve missed two appointments. Is there something you need to tell me?”

“No, I’ve been busy. And you knew I was going to be out of town.”

“I want a report every month. Why is that so hard to understand?”

“It was winter break. Who wants to be in Detroit in February? It’s not like anyone went to Afghanistan.”

Eleanor permitted herself a chilly smile and continued to sort through stacks of papers on her desk. “I must know when people leave town. If you can’t do this, we’ll have to get someone who can. There are numerous women who would jump at the opportunity to help their country.”

A pewter candy dish on her desk was filled with chocolate-covered coffee beans, in case anyone who entered her office was not producing enough adrenaline on their own. Her guest this morning had already eaten half of the beans and was putting some into her pockets.

“I know all of these women; they are definitely not doing lunch with terrorists. You’re paranoid.”

“It’s my job. This country would be in even more trouble if everyone was as trusting as you.”

“But you’re *too* suspicious. When Maria Morgan imported French snails, you immediately thought there was a connection with the Detroit Water Tower being on zoo grounds and Maria being a docent there. You conveniently forgot that Maria owns an Italian restaurant, and the snails were for New Year’s Eve dinner—not terrorism. French snails are not the same as Chinese Mystery Snails—they don’t spread parasites or diseases.”

“The potential danger was huge, and I don’t have to justify what I choose to investigate to you.”

“This investigation is a waste of time. A dead end.”

“Don’t be so sure. The CIA has files on three of your friends.”

“The CIA? I seriously doubt that any members of my book club are a threat to our American way of life.”

“Stop assuming they’re all innocent. This is not the first time they’ve been under governmental scrutiny. Some of them have files going back to the seventies.”

“Who?”

“You tell me who. Get them to talk about their politics, whose campaigns they’re contributing to, where they’re going.”

“I’ll try, but I’ve known these women for years, and the most they say about politics is to repeat the latest Bush jokes.” After looking at her watch again, she started edging toward the door. “I’ve gotta go. Anything else?”

“Remember, I expect detailed itineraries and schedules. I need to know where everyone is traveling and with who.”

“Whom.” The door shut quietly behind volunteer number seven.

Chapter IV

Camel Toes and Merkins

March, 2003. A Detroit Suburb

Our book club was at Lauren's, and when I arrived fifteen minutes early it was already dusk. Daylight savings time wouldn't begin until next week.

The front door was open, and Lauren was arranging yellow daffodils on the buffet table. Seeing Lauren's tree branch sculptures of life-size angels flying through her high-ceilinged rooms sometimes helped alleviate my chronic insomnia. I was hoping for a much needed dream flight with Morpheus later that night.

"Carla, you're early. Good. You can help me put out the food."

I heard a car purr into the driveway; it was my friends Laverne and Shirley in their silver PT Cruiser. The license plate said SISTERS. It was good advertisement for their bookstore, but I doubt if anyone, except the few who believe the ex-teachers' names really are Laverne and Shirley, believed that they were sisters.

Right behind them, Frankie Black and Ginger Harris roared up in Frankie's black '69 Camaro. Standing on the front step, I could see Frankie grin through the windshield as she blew the horn to announce their arrival. Frankie made me laugh; she thought every safe arrival was a cause for celebration.

Nan took her usual parking spot on the street and gave me a crooked smile when she saw me waiting for her on the steps.

"You're anticipating a quick getaway?" I asked.

"Jeeps are a popular vehicle with the chop shop boys," she answered. "I park it where I can see it."

"You just want to be able to take off in a hurry. The force made a big mistake when they let you keep your scanner when you retired."

By the time Jean came in with an expensive bottle of Kendall Jackson, people were already lining up at the dining room table. “Sorry I’m late. We had parent-teacher conferences tonight after school. Only two parents showed up, but I had to wait anyway.”

Darilyn D’Angelo and Renee Martin arrived together, which raised some eyebrows. By seven-thirty, everyone was there except Maria and Robin Carlson. The conversation resembled a lesbian fantasy mosaic ... merkins, the boat, the Crazy Horse Saloon, naked women, Charlie’s Angels, camel toes, and, of course, the book.

I noticed that Shirley was unusually subdued and realized Laverne had been missing for several minutes. I found her in the dark kitchen, near the sink, whispering with Darilyn. They made an excuse about Darilyn choking and moved back to the living room, where both were very quiet the rest of the evening.

Lauren’s comments were the usual ... “If she came in that door—Oh Baby!” I didn’t try to hear who she was talking about. It could have been anyone from Jodie Foster to Hilary Clinton.

I asked if anyone thought the orange alert might affect us when we crossed the border to Canada on our annual trek to Pelee Island Winery to stock up on Ice wine.

Nomi jumped in with a familiar story. “Border Crossing guards stopped me when I was returning from Istanbul with Turkish Delights wrapped in tiny boxes. I think they suspected me of drug smuggling. I looked like a hippie in those days, but of course that was long before orange alerts.”

“I go to France every year, and I’ve never been stopped at customs,” Renee said. “Anything I’m bringing to the States has been declared and insured, and no one bothers opening it. Of course, I have so many packages they don’t want to take the time. They know French women love to shop.”

I tried again, “But, that’s my point. I wonder if being on orange alert will really make a difference. How safe are we?”

Shirley remembered that customs agents once stopped her and Laverne at the French border for attempting to sneak out dog treats.

Jean cracked us all up when she told us about an apple-sniffing dachshund busting her as she was leaving Israel. She claimed they actually put her in jail and made her pay a fine for taking apples out of the country.

Nan changed the subject and talked about her book signings in Taos and Santa Fe. “I hope I can depend on my police pension. I sold a few books, but not enough to even pay our airfare.”

I was the only tourist in the bunch who actually took vacation photos. I sat next to Renee and shared my pictures of New Mexico while we talked. (Her perfume, as always, was amazing.) She pouted when she realized that Maria wasn't coming, but seemed to feel better when I told her that she smelled almost as good as she looked. Good thing Nan wasn't the jealous type.

We spent the fifteen minutes we had left actually discussing the book. Lauren asked for announcements before we left. Darilyn reminded us that the next book club would be at her house on April 26. The book was *A Year in Paris*.

"Did you just make that up?" Renee seemed startled by our book choice.

"Of course not. It's on our list."

"What a coincidence. I'm going to Paris tomorrow morning. Did you choose that book for me?"

"Do you need a ride to the airport?" Darilyn asked before everyone else started the usual gaggle of questions.

"Can I go with you?"

"Business or pleasure?"

"Are you going shopping? Do you still buy your clothes there?"

"Are you going to see your family, or ...?"

"I'm already packed—take me with you. Please."

Renee's pale skin flushed with the attention. "I wish I could take you all with me; Paris is beautiful in the spring."

"Where are you staying? I never can remember if it's the Left Bank or the Right Bank that's the chic place to stay." Jean was in no hurry to leave and was happy to stay and talk.

"People say Rive Gauche, the left bank, is the heart of the city, and Rive Droite, the right bank, has the world's best shopping," Renee answered.

"Well, that answers my question; you'll be staying on the right bank."

"You're right, but not for the shopping. I'm staying with a friend who lives in the Marais district. It's along the Seine—with several gay bars nearby. I love the antique shops and the boutiques there."

"Like I said, shopping!"

"Don't forget—the president asked us all to go shopping!"

"I don't think he meant in Paris."

"You *are* coming back, aren't you?"

We all kidded Renee that she'd better stay away from the gay bars or she might really be there for a year as we hugged good-bye and headed for home. *Alias* was on at nine o'clock, and more than one member of the book club

thought she was in love with Jennifer Garner. I was the only one who thought I *was* Jennifer Garner.

As soon as I got home, I poured a glass of skim milk, grabbed a chunk of coffee cake, and unlocked the spare bedroom I used as an office at home. Not that my family, or even Nan, snooped—I just felt better with things locked up.

I looked at the notes I had taken at book club. It was better if I tried to make sense out of them right away while the memory was still in short-term parking.

Jean has a photographic memory

D and R make a nice looking couple

Maria—no-show (again)

D laughs at R's jokes ... danger, danger

Camel toes are replacing the need for merkins

Too many scenery details

Not enough character motivation

C brought photos of NM

L & S brought hyacinths

L & S—Caught w/dog treats smuggled from Paris

Nomi—Istanbul candy? Drugs, Ha Ha

Renee to Paris tomorrow for 1 week

Next month—A Year in Paris at D's

Asparagus quiche and strawberry soufflé ... yum

Movies???

Orange alert? Wine trip to PP???

Nino's has Ice Wine. \$50

Secrets Laverne and D—Water running, can't hear

Jean arrested for apple smuggling in Israel. Ha Ha

Lauren arrested/harassed for demonstrating against WAR. Not funny

All books need editors (Frankie)

Jean likes Lauren ... wouldn't leave

No one ever paid attention to my taking notes. As the unofficial scribe, I usually wrote a humorous summary of the evening and sent it out to everyone. I suspected they were hoping I'd write another best seller and include them.

It used to be fun, but I was starting to feel like the mob's accountant—keeping two sets of books. I'd finish later but right now, I was curious about Lauren being arrested. This couldn't be a coincidence; she had to be one of the women Eleanor was talking about.

Oh, Jean was arrested too. In Israel; I don't think that counts. And Shirley in France and Nomi in Istanbul. Could these be my three friends who have CIA records? How ridiculous.

A few minutes spent with Google, and the answers started to come together. The CIA was involved on American college campuses in the seventies. The president wouldn't believe that wholesome, white bread, American kids could protest their friends and family being slaughtered in Vietnam unless foreign agitators were secretly infiltrating their ranks and influencing them.

A light bulb went off somewhere in an unused hallway in my head.

The same thing was happening now—only it was middle-aged white women the government thought they had to protect from being influenced by faceless terrorists. Instead of the CIA, now it was the LAP. I suddenly remembered Kent State.

I had to talk to Lauren. She could tell me more about this. It was only ten o'clock, and I knew she would still be up.

My report would have to wait.

She answered the phone after nine rings; I wondered if Jean was still there. I told her I needed some research help. After talking to her for an hour, my perspective on the surveillance of American women was beginning to change. According to her, the U.S. government kept tabs on any woman who had an opinion that they didn't like. She boasted that she had an FBI Red File to prove it.

During Nixon's reign, some brainwashed Americans thought it was all right for the police to harass, beat, and kill people, even schoolchildren, if they disagreed with government policy. If you said the Vietnam War was illegal, you risked losing the fourth amendment umbrella you assumed would be there when a rainy day came along.

Chapter V

You Big Boob

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

As soon as I realized that the hot, stinky air blasting my face was not coming from a voluptuous, fire-breathing dragon, but was Skip's everyday doggy breath, I grudgingly got up, even though it was far too early. I was on my second cup of coffee and struggling with Eleanor's reports when the phone rang.

"Hello, my little punchki." I heard the smile in her voice and let Nan get away with calling me an overstuffed pastry.

"Nan, I'm so glad it's you."

"Who else would it be? Are you up? What are we doing today?"

"Of course I'm up. I'm waiting for you; c'mon over."

"Didn't you say you had some work to catch up on today?"

"Yes, I have work to do, but nothing that can't wait."

"Give me an hour and I'll be there."

Now I had a real deadline to finish Eleanor Ward's report. I couldn't work on it when Nan was here. Before I could get started, the phone rang again. This time it was Maria Morgan.

"I need to talk to you. Can you come over?"

"Maria, I just got up. You know this is my sleep-in day."

"Every day is your sleep-in day. Please, I'm really, really upset. I need your help."

"I couldn't leave the house if I wanted to. Nan is on her way over. She'll be here in less than an hour and I really, really need to see her."

"That's okay. I need to talk to her, too. I'll bring minestrone and breadsticks from the restaurant, and we can all have lunch at your house. 'K?"

“Sure, that’ll be fine. Just don’t stay all day, okay? Nan and I have some things planned, you know?”

When the doorbell rang twenty minutes into my report, I knew it must be Maria; Nan had her own key.

As soon as she came in, Maria stretched her ample body out on the floor, playing Find-the-Treat with Skip. When she hid store-bought dog bones under the couch cushions, he ignored them and pawed her tote bag until she gave him a meatball that was meant for our lunch.

I set the table with my favorite red-and-white-checked faux Italian tablecloth. It felt strange for the three of us to be eating together at my house. When Nan and I started dating a couple of years ago, our first dates were at Maria’s Italian restaurant. Nan and Maria don’t seem in the least bit bothered by the fact that Maria and I dated a long time ago. It didn’t last long—a fun, casual thing that meant little to either of us—but we haven’t forgotten. Maria has always been a double threat. She’s a great cook, and she makes me laugh.

When she followed me into the kitchen, I knew she couldn’t hold it in any longer, and I hoped I was up for it.

“Renee is in Paris,” she said flatly.

“I know. I saw her at Lauren’s Thursday night, remember? You weren’t there.”

“She didn’t want me to take her to the airport,” Maria complained indignantly. “I’m afraid Darilyn drove her.”

“Is this what you need advice about? You should be glad you didn’t have to drive her. The city is on orange alert, and the airports are crazier than usual; the security check-in lines will be hours long. There are extra police and canine patrols at the airport; it’s gotta be impossible to find a parking spot.”

“No, that is not what I need advice about, you big boob!”

The screen door opened with a squeak as Nan came in with her dog. “Big boobs? Who? Where? Something smells wonderful in here. Please don’t tell me it’s a doggy bag Maria brought for Skip!”

I slipped my arm around her waist and gave her a long, slow kiss that let her know I was glad to see her. “Insults! Maria is insulting me,” I complained. “Arrest her.”

“First, tell me what’s cooking!”

“Oh, okay. Maria brought minestrone and garlic breadsticks to bribe us into helping her solve some big problem.”

“A bribe? H-m-m-m. Let me think about that for a moment.” Nan sniffed loudly and then grinned. “Okay, can we eat first or do we have to solve problems first?”

“Let’s do both, the soup is hot and we can talk while we eat. Is it too early for wine?”

“As I was saying, Renee is in Paris. She left Friday morning and promised to call as soon as she got in. She must have forgotten, so I called her last night. The orange alert news was on television all day, and I was worried about her traveling alone. I had a few drinks, and I guess I didn’t think about the time difference. All I could remember was that Renee said Paris is on daylight savings time, the same as we are.”

Nan and I were looking expectantly at her. She took a deep breath and continued, “The phone only rang once, and Benedicte answered. My call obviously woke her up. I asked if Renee was there, and she handed the phone to her! They were in the same bed.”

“Who’s Benedicte? I thought Renee would be staying with her mother.”

“All I know is that she told me Benedicte is a totally straight school friend. Renee doesn’t get on so well with her mother, so she wanted to stay somewhere neutral this time.”

“Maria, most apartments in Paris are small,” Nan reassured her. “There’s probably only one bedroom. Get a grip. Jealousy is not a nice color on you.”

“I made a big mistake. I accused her of having an affair with this French tart. She was pissed and told me to cool off, and she would call me later when she got up.”

“What time was that?” I asked.

“Midnight.”

“I guess you didn’t think about the time difference. That would be six in the morning in Gay Paree, the city of late nights. I’d be pissed, too,” Nan said.

“What do I do now? I really like her, and I thought we were beginning to connect. I’ve ruined everything again with my jealousy. She’ll never forgive me.”

“Maria, honey, this is the easiest advice I’ve ever given anyone. Do what she told you to do. Cool off and wait for her to call you. Which, by the way, she cannot do while you’re here.”

“Nan, what time is it in Paris right now?” Maria asked. “I should be able to figure it out, but I’m too upset to think straight.”

“It’s almost three o’clock here, which means it’s nine there.”

“Oh, shit! I probably did miss her call. Carla, can I use your phone to call her? I’ve got to explain to her that I didn’t mean what I said last night. I can’t stand it if she’s mad at me.”

I haven't seen Maria gaga over anyone like this since her fling with the woman who owned the ice cream store when she gained twenty pounds eating a double dip butter pecan cone every day. "Go ahead, but don't let your explaining go on longer than ten minutes. Proclaim your undying love for her on your own phone bill." I remembered to soften my words with a smile. Maria acts tough, but her feelings are hurt easily—as I've learned through too many brusque, unthinking remarks.

She took the number out of her pocket and dialed the phone in the living room. I noticed that she straightened her shoulders, as though she was preparing to make a speech, but she was left talking to an answering machine.

"Ah, this message is for Renee Martin. Renee, I am so sorry. Please call me as soon as you get in. I am at Carla's, but I'm going straight home, and I will be at the restaurant later. Okay? Please call me; I am worried about you. Is everything okay there? Okay, bye."

Skip and I walked out to her car with her, and when I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring hug, I was surprised to see her blush.

"You must think I'm an idiot. Renee is twenty years younger than me. No fool like an old fool, is there?"

"Maria, age doesn't matter as much as it used to. Renee seems to be interested in you. When I saw her at book club, she asked about you. She was disappointed you weren't there."

"Biggest mistake I ever made in my life. If she just gives me another chance...."

"Go on; hurry home now. Straight home, do not pass Go and do not stop at the casino."

When I got back in the house, it was redolent with garlic and red wine. The perfect ambiance for making out with the woman I love.

Nan was standing at the sink rinsing our lunch dishes. Either she didn't hear me come in, or she was letting me know she was fed up with my friends monopolizing our time together, because she didn't turn around when I came into the kitchen.

One way to find out. I put my arms around her and carefully set down the wine glass she was rinsing. She seemed willing to let me twine my fingers through hers under the warm running water. Pulling our hands toward her mouth, she sucked my thumb into her mouth. I pulled her closer, freeing one hand to quickly turn off the tap as she ran her tongue between the fingers of the other, slowly, one at a time. She knew how much I loved feeling her warm mouth

exploring every part of my body. I rocked my torso hard against her tight behind and breathed a familiar request into her ear.

She turned and slid her damp hands under my shirt as an answer. Our eyes met, and we shared a warm smile. Our love had grown slowly from friendship, but our lovemaking style had burst fully born out of an unexpected lust. I cupped her face in my hands and gently kissed her lips.

With my hands on top of hers, I guided them upward to where my breasts began. I held her hands in mine as we explored my now erect nipples together.

Our bodies swayed as we stood in the late afternoon sun streaming into the kitchen. We didn't talk as we walked together, hand in hand, to the dark sanctuary of my bedroom.

Nan was sound asleep by ten o'clock. I wanted to stay snug in my bed and drift off to dreamland, but I couldn't get Eleanor Ward off my mind. I slid quietly out of bed, put on some sweats, and went into my office.

I sorted my notes from the book club into two documents and wondered if something sinister was actually going on. LAP, the FBI, the CIA, and even Homeland Security all seemed to be interested in this group. Bryant Gumble used to ask his guests on the Today Show, "Why?" He may have been annoying, but he knew the right question to ask.

I was getting deeper into this conundrum. Who was behind this? How could there be this much interest in a flock of middle-aged women reading puerile books and tittering over merkins? Why couldn't I see things more clearly?

If I had to serve my country, I wanted to be where the real action was. Monday morning, that was going to be the federal court building. I took two Tylenol and went to bed.

Chapter VI

The Real McCarthys

April 2003. A Detroit Suburb

I was running late for a visit with my Dad, so I didn't take time to go home and pick up Skip after my meeting with the movers and shakers at the Downtown Montrose Development monthly pep rally. He and Dad were crazy about each other, and my mother always has a doggy bag for him when we come to visit. Since Dad's stroke last year, I'd been dropping by for a few hours every week so Mom could go shopping. Dad insisted that he didn't need a babysitter, but my siblings and I agreed that someone should be with him.

They were waiting for me on the little concrete patio by the garage, enjoying the pale yellow, early afternoon sunshine. One of the uncles must have stopped over and helped Ma roll Dad's wheelchair down the kitchen steps.

I parked the DeSoto where I could reach the garden hose and opened the trunk to get out my rubber car-washing shoes. I learned the hard way a few years ago, when Ginger pushed me into her swimming pool during someone's birthday party, that Sketchers don't take well to large amounts of water.

Ma hurried over to give me a kiss and noticed a cardboard box of my books in the trunk. "Dear, will you please autograph one of your books for me? Mrs. Sinclair, you remember her, don't you? She's the cashier at Farmer Jack's, the nice one who always doubles my coupons for me. Well, her son, Reggie, is getting married, and her new daughter-in-law refuses to believe you used to live right here in Dearborn. She has an old paperback copy of your book that she's had since she was in junior high. I just know she'd be thrilled to have an autographed copy. Maybe you could come to the wedding? I'm sure the Sinclairs would love to see you again."

Dad and I smiled resignedly at each other. My mother loves to tell people about her daughter, the famous author. Fifteen years ago, the first and only book I ever wrote made it onto every best seller list in the country—and in Europe, too. It was a happy fluke, and I still cash the occasional royalty check, but the younger generation, outside of my hometown, couldn't care less. Occasionally a new group of fans will pop up in Utah or some other godforsaken place, and there will be a flurry of sales for a while. I found a used copy on Amazon.com once for twenty-five cents, and immediately lost all delusions of grandeur.

"Mom, come and sit down with me and Dad for a few minute before you leave."

"Oh dear, is something wrong? I heard about the orange alert on Channel Seven. Is it anthrax again?"

"No, Mom, nothing is wrong, I just thought it would be a good idea for us to arrange some kind of a contact plan. If anything ever happens, I want to make sure we can get in touch with one another."

Dad surprised me by immediately agreeing. "That's not a bad thing to do. We should be prepared for any kind of emergency. After Pearl Harbor, every citizen was expected to sacrifice and we did, by God. Our factories geared up to full speed making tanks and weapons. Even your Aunt Eleanor went to work at AC to help. In the fifties, when the Commies were mouthing off, we built a bomb shelter in the back yard. In those days, we knew better than to expect the government to take care of us, so we did it ourselves."

"I think everyone will feel better if we know we can get in touch with one another if something happens. If Jimmy hits the lottery, I want to know right away, so I can order my new car."

"Oh, Carla, you shouldn't say that. Your brother doesn't play the lottery anymore. He's going to save his money from now on. He even started a bank account at the Credit Union where your father and I have our accounts." Mama is sweet, but she is such a naif. She believes everything all of her kids tell her, especially Jimmy.

We made some plans to have a family powwow soon. Our big family is close, except for my oldest brother, Teddy. He lives in Seattle, and I wouldn't know how to reach him if something happened to Dad. The stress of worrying about something happening in the U.S. since 9/11 is right beneath the surface, but none of us want to talk about it.

Mom left, with two autographed copies of *The Blue Girls*, after reminding me I needed a haircut. I made sure Dad was comfortable before I worked out some of my frustrations by washing and waxing Dinah. A new, tiny, stone chip marred

her front fender, and I touched it up with a paint stick I keep in the trunk. She was an unusual shade of pink that was hard to match these days. I had to use the Mary Kay shade General Motors made for Cadillac. It wasn't an exact match, but it was close enough and kept the rust away.

Uncle Pete bought her new in 1956. When GM laid him off that year, he went to work as a car salesman, and the best job he could find was at a DeSoto dealer. He never admitted it, but the family thinks they paid him with a new car that they couldn't sell at retail. Aunt Florence complained to my mother that Uncle Pete never had any money that summer, but he worked more hours at that dang dealership than he ever did in the plant.

The truth was Uncle Pete loved cars. He and I used to joke that I must be his kid, because I love them, too.

Dinah started her life as a demo and is loaded with everything Chrysler had to offer in 1956: air conditioning, push-button drive, whitewall tires, chromed tail fins, and a record player mounted on the bottom edge of the dash. The record player sits above the transmission hump and plugs into the radio. When you push a button on the cover, the door opens and the turntable slides out. I soon learned to change records with one hand.

It came with six records and a carrying case. No one ever bothered to upgrade it with an eight track or a cassette deck, so it still plays 33s. There are only two records left, but I won't give them up. When I'm in a good mood, I crank up the volume, roll down the windows, and play "Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier." I save "My Fair Lady" for special occasions like when I drove Nan home the first time. We listened to "On the Street Where You Live." That is a very romantic song.

GM called Uncle Pete back to work, and that was the end of his days as a car salesman. My cousin Sean should have had the car next, but Vietnam came along and Sean didn't come home. After Aunt Flo's funeral, I discovered it under a tarp in the garage.

I went into the house a couple of times and tried to call Nan. No answer.

I was avoiding finishing Eleanor's report. I had to think about this some more.

Section II: Paris, France

Paris is maddening, sprawling, and chaotic. Ideally located in the heart of Europe, France is the gay-friendly destination par excellence. France is the country of the Enlightenment, the land of “liberty, fraternity, and equality.” The first nation on earth to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual preference, France has recognized gay rights since 1792. Discrimination against gays in the military is outlawed.

France encourages individuals to pursue their passions and celebrate their identity—the very definition of freedom. In Paris, you’ll find adventure, romance, and playfulness around every corner. Gay Pride in Paris attracts half a million gays and lesbians. France’s new PinkTV celebrates unity and diversity through new films from lesbian and gay film festivals, debates on current topics, music, and drama.

Whether you come to enjoy the fun of Paris Plage (the summer beach music and arts celebration all along the Seine), dance as the belle of the ball on Bastille Day, or shop for quality French designer clothes, you will have the time of your life. It is also stunningly beautiful and vibrant, rich with history, culture, and art.

With its wide sweep of boulevards and the procession of bridges across the Seine, fantastic museums, and its multicultural neighborhoods, Paris is a city that you can’t forget whether it’s your first trip or your twentieth.

—From a gay/lesbian travel brochure with information
provided by Frommers.com

Chapter VIII

Damn Tourists

April 2003. Paris, France

“Thank God, home at last! The damn crowds at de Gaulle are such a pain in the ass this time of year.” Benedicte continued muttering sotto voce—“Damn tourists ... April in Paris ... nonsense ...”—as she carried Renee’s four Vuitton bags up the steep stairs into the guest room and then went into the tiny kitchen to pour generous glasses of burgundy for them.

“I can hear you! So, you think I’m a damn tourist now?” Renee asked as she gratefully took a deep sip of the red wine. “Don’t worry; I’m not going to ask you to take the Batobus tour with me while I’m here. And when did you start swearing every other word?”

“I’m sorry. My swearing is such a bad habit. No wonder I don’t have any friends.”

“So, I was right. I am just a tourist to you, not a friend anymore!”

“You know I’m glad to see you; you’ll never be a tourist. Home is where the heart is, and I doubt your heart is in America, even though your father and business are. France will always be your true home.”

“My heart may not be there, but I do like my life there.”

“What can you possibly find to do in Michigan?”

“Well, besides fifty hours a week at my gallery, I’m teaching art classes at the women’s community center, and I’ve been asked to help the other merchants organize a street festival later this summer.”

“Ah, so now you are a merchant? What happened to the rebellious artist I knew and loved?”

“Don’t tease me! I’m serious.” Renee picked up her wine glass and walked to the narrow window overlooking the boulevard. She looked uncharacteristically

small and vulnerable, silhouetted against the glass. Renee purposefully chose tailored clothes and expensive, leather belts and shoes to create an illusion larger than life, and strangers seldom noticed her short stature and slim build; they were more often captivated by her dark eyes, red lips, and porcelain skin.

Benedicte gazed at her friend, seeing obvious changes since their last visit. Renee, who had once flashed her dark brown eyes flirtatiously at everyone, now seemed to give off only a polite “not interested” signal. Her laughter—the chortles of glee, the snickers she reserved for political jokes, the visceral belly laughs that brought tears to her eyes—was subdued, a restrained single note.

Growing up in France, Renee had adopted the French custom of bookending each greeting with kisses on both cheeks. Now, any embrace created a tiny chill of fear in her, causing her to hold herself warily. Months of having a port inserted only centimeters below her collarbone made her fear the pain of having it disturbed, even now.

Benedicte promised herself to make this trip special for her oldest and dearest friend. She would not let their different lifestyles come between them again.

Oblivious to Benedicte’s scrutiny, Renee continued talking. “You would like Montrose. It has an amazing array of things to do and see for such a small town.

“I have dinner at Vegelina’s at least once a week, and the owner is becoming a friend. She’s very intense, but nice, once you get to know her. In some ways, she reminds me of you.”

“Me? She reminds you of me? In what way?” Benedicte asked as she raised an eyebrow.

“She’s very well traveled. She went to cooking school in Italy and even lived in Africa with a tribe of women for two years.”

“A tribe of women in Africa? Why does that remind you of me?”

Renee gave her a half-hearted scowl and continued talking without a pause. “Across the street and up the block is China Jane’s. Jane’s been in prison because she killed Darilyn’s girlfriend a few years ago, but the restaurant is still open. My favorite restaurant is the Italian place right across the boulevard from my art gallery.”

“Wait a minute! Wait one damn minute! What did you say about someone killing someone’s girlfriend? You can’t just skip over that part!”

“Can you please forget the fact that you are a gendarme for just one moment?” Renee picked up a soft velveteen pillow from the couch and hugged it against her chest.

“Excuse me; first we’re talking about places to eat, and then suddenly you’re talking about a murderer.”

“It was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Jane had a flashback to Vietnam. It was just a momentary blackout. Most people in Montrose are adamant that it was self-defense. The exact details of the story depend on whom you talk to.”

“Speaking of talking to, please excuse me while I check my phone messages. I won’t forget we were talking about murder, but I also can’t forget I’m a police officer today.”

“Do you have to? I thought you were planning to be on vacation while I’m here.”

“Starting Monday I’m officially on vacation, but until then I’m still on call. It pays the bills; not everyone is rich like you, you know.”

Benedicte stepped into her bedroom and pressed the play button on her answering machine.

“*Allo, Benedicte. Celle-ci Diana Crowley. Je hope vous se rappeler moi. Je Deborah Crowley’s sœur.*”

“Is that Debbie Crowley?” Renee stood in the doorway. “I haven’t seen her since our last year of school.”

“Sh-sh-sh. It’s her sister.”

“I hope you don’t mind my mother *remettre moi* your *numéro*. I’m in a bit of a pickle. I need to leave Iraq unofficially and without being noticed. You may remember I work at the Baghdad Museum. It’s urgent that I travel to France before the war reaches here. I’m calling you because you are the only one I can trust to help me.”

When the message ended abruptly, Benedicte looked accusingly at Renee. “I’m glad that wasn’t confidential police business.”

“Me too. Sorry.” Renee quickly crossed the room and impulsively gave her hostess a hug. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I heard her say ‘Deborah Crowley.’ Her French is atrocious, but I did understand that much. We were all such good friends when we were in school together. I’m sorry I lost touch with her when I went to the States and she went back to England. We promised to stay in touch, but somehow we didn’t.”

“You don’t know what happened to her?” Benedicte’s ebony eyes fixed on Renee’s with a pensive air. “I must have mentioned her accident.”

“No, I’m sure you have never mentioned her to me. I didn’t realize you had stayed in touch with her.”

Benedicte looked away and went back to the living room, where she picked up her half-full wine glass and drank it quickly.

“After you deserted me and went to America, she and I saw a lot of each other. We became good friends. She even invited me to her family’s home in Bristol for the Christmas holidays a few times. Her family treated me like a daughter.”

“Is that where you met her sister? I don’t remember her visiting Deborah at school. I got the impression they weren’t close.”

“Yes, I suppose so. During Deborah’s summer holiday, she would come here and we would spend a week or two on the beach. The last summer we went to Corsica. That was in 1994.”

“You never went back?”

“We made plans to return, but when she was on her way to Paris the next year, the train she was on was bombed by the GIA. Eight people were killed that day.”

“You said she was in an accident. Is that when she was she hurt?”

“I’ve always blamed myself. I am the one who booked that train trip for her.”

“It can’t be your fault that the train was bombed.”

“She was in a coma for three weeks. The burns were so bad that the doctors weren’t sure she would live. She had over twenty operations.”

There was a period early in Deborah Crowley’s recovery when vending machine black coffee and salty tears swallowed secretly were Benedicte’s only sustenance. Her body barely noticed, but something changed in her voice. Something about the timbre would never be quite the same. Late at night, when she was very tired or when she was working on a difficult case, she seemed to hear the sound of rain beating against a hospital window and the cadence of a train in the distance. If that sound had a name, it might be melancholy.

“Where is she now? Who looks after her?”

“She’s in a residential nursing home in Battersea. Most of her hearing is gone, and the shrapnel damaged her eyesight. She’ll be in a wheelchair for the rest of her life, but she never complains anymore. Her parents spend time with her when they can. If she wants anything at all, she doesn’t tell anyone. She has given up hope.”

“How terrible for her! And for her family. Why do you think Diana called you now? Were you and she ever close?” Renee asked.

“She didn’t leave a number at the museum. I’ll track her down tomorrow.” Benedicte was clearly troubled and didn’t want to answer any more questions about either Diana or Deborah.

Her thoughts fell into a familiar refrain, “Why did the accident have to happen? Why was Deborah paralyzed? Why did she feel so damned guilty?” She tried

to force herself to remember that it was not an accident; terrorists had deliberately bombed the train Deborah was on. But she knew, deep down, that it was her fault. God had punished her for wanting to be happy, and Deborah had paid the price for both of them.

"I wonder what's happening, and why she would say you're the only one she can trust." Renee's curiosity was legendary and, once aroused, did not subside easily.

"I'm not surprised that she wants to leave Iraq; that's not a place I'd like to be assigned again. I could tell you horror stories about the dust storms that always seem to come along during rush hour. Can you picture five million tired, hungry people trying to get home for dinner stuck in a two-hour traffic jam?"

"No wonder they're always pissed off over there. Paris traffic drives me crazy, and there aren't any dust storms here."

Benedicte led the way back to the kitchen for wine refills. "With my Arabic, I know I'll be assigned there again. It's only a matter of time before the whole area blows itself up."

The king-sized bed, piled high with a dozen quilted pillows, was the perfect spot for a late-night chat between the two women, who had been friends since their mothers had deposited them at kindergarten. Both of their mothers were French; Benedicte's father was Persian, and Renee's was American.

Benedicte motioned for the shorter woman to sit between her extended legs as she picked up the hairbrush from the lacquered bedside table.

Renee took the familiar spot and sighed as she felt Benedicte brushing her dark brown hair.

"Are you happy? You never talk about dating or getting married. Is this the life you planned?" Renee asked.

"My job is the most important thing in the world to me now."

"You are so quiet sometimes; I'm not sure I know who you are anymore."

Before answering, Benedicte thought for a moment. "Do you remember our Friday afternoon shopping trips in the Renaissance district?"

"Of course I remember; we'd meet on the steps of Saint Jean Cathedral in Old Lyon."

"I hope you also remember that you were always late. One afternoon I picked up a day old copy of *Le Monde* someone had left on the steps of the church."

"I think I remember that day," Renee said. "You said it was fate that I was late. I thought it was just your way of being melodramatic because I happened to be a few minutes late."

“When people ask me how I got into police work, I tell them it’s my calling. The truth is, it is your fault. I tore something out of the paper that day that I kept for years,” Benedicte admitted.

“You probably still have it; you keep everything,” Renee teased.

“No, I don’t. Only the things which are important to me.”

“I saw a photo of us in your bedroom from the year we finally got out of braids and were allowed to wear lipstick. It’s got to be twenty years old,” Renee said.

“See, that was an important day; we finally looked like women! I was tired of braids, and you looked grown-up even in the pink lipstick your mother insisted you wear.”

“Get back to why you chose police work instead of being a musician like your mother, or even an artist like your father. You spent so many years taking lessons.”

“Interpol formed a new terrorism division only a few blocks from my grandmother’s home,” Benedicte explained. “As soon as I turned eighteen, I took the train to Lyon to apply. I wanted to ask you to go with me, but I knew I had to do it myself. You were already making plans to go to America with your father.”

“You have always been too independent,” Renee said. “You know I would have gone anywhere with you, if you’d only asked.”

“I sat at the station, eating croissants, for a long time. I read the newspaper clipping over and over, looking for a sign that it was the right thing to do.”

“It is hard for me to believe you’ve ever been afraid of anything,” Renee said.

“They made me take a million damn tests while they did background checks on everyone in my family. It was a big plus for me that I was already fluent in English and Arabic,” Benedicte said. “You remember that I went to the police academy right after school. That was my basic training for Interpol.”

“All of these years, I thought you’ve been writing traffic tickets or arresting annoying pickpockets. I never imagined you as James Bond.”

“Most of my co-workers are middle-aged men, but now there are quite a few women, too. They’re from all over the world, but none look like James Bond—or the girls in the movies either,” Benedicte sighed.

“It must be so cool to meet people from all over the world.”

“It’s not always so cool trying to get along with people from fifty different countries. Someone’s feelings are always getting hurt or someone is peeved about something. No amount of diversity training can solve all of the differences.”

“But you’ve always been so diplomatic. When we were little kids, you got along with everyone, even that fat kid who stole your marbles every week,” Renee said.

“I prefer to think of myself as brave, not diplomatic. All this talking is making me thirsty. Don’t go away, I’ll be right back.”

When Benedicte came back with an opened bottle of Bordeaux, Renee had gotten under the covers. “Can I sleep here?” She moved over to make room for her friend. “Go on, tell me more, I’m curious now.”

“You are always curious. Promise to keep this information from your mother. I know she means well, but ...”

“Don’t worry about my telling anyone, especially my mother,” Renee said sleepily.

“For the first year, I was on probation collecting reports from agents in the field. I don’t need to tell you how I hated that. I wanted to do something besides filing!”

“I know you get bored easily—no patience. Not like me.” Renee squirmed deliberately.

“Be still, please. I would not like this beautiful red wine to be wasted on these boring white sheets.”

“Oh, my God! You’re making a joke? Let me mark this on my calendar. No more wine for you!”

“You’re absolutely right. No more wine when this bottle is empty,” Benedicte agreed.

“Tell me about something you’ve worked on that I would know about.”

“Did you read about the truck crash in the Alpine tunnel?”

“Of course. I saw it on CNN. I had nightmares about being trapped in that tunnel.”

“Firefighters couldn’t get through in time, and two people died.”

“You can’t blame the firemen; that tunnel is eight miles long. Were you involved in the investigation?” Renee asked.

“We think smuggling was involved, but the fire destroyed the evidence,” Benedicte said. “Ten years ago the Gulf War caused a big increase in looting, but what’s going to happen now will be worse.”

“Looting? The Iraqi artifacts are supposed to be protected in the museums,” Renee said.

“Governments don’t care as much about art as they do about weapons and drugs.”

“Can’t something be done?”

“Iraq’s museums have extremely valuable collections of gold jewelry. They will be a target for every art thief in the world when and if fighting reaches Baghdad. We created an art-theft task force and added some manpower at the borders,” Benedicte explained.

“I’ll bet *that* is why Deborah’s sister was calling you.”

“I wonder. I’m worried about her; I don’t think she would call me if it wasn’t urgent.”

“I would love to see the Baghdad Museum before some idiot accidentally blows it up. Let’s go there tomorrow and look for her.”

“Renee, you haven’t changed. You’re as impulsive as ever. You probably would go there. Have you forgotten your president’s plans? There will be a battle there soon. I would guess within the month.”

“Pish tosh! I’m not impulsive—although I will admit to a little curiosity. Right now, I need to get my beauty sleep; I am not used to so much wine. I have a feeling tomorrow will be an interesting day.” Renee’s lips, tinted by the red wine, found Benedicte’s cool cheek. “Goodnight, my friend. And don’t think that I didn’t notice you only talked about your job.”

Benedicte Najor merely murmured, “*Bonne nuit, mon curieux amie,*” and hoped she hadn’t said too much.

Chapter IX

A Balcony Point of View

April 2003. Paris, France

“My favorite thing in the whole world is sitting in my pajamas and slippers on a balcony in Paris, sipping wine—or café au lait, in the morning.”

“Lucky for you, my balcony faces the courtyard. If it faced the street, you might feel compelled to put some clothes on,” Benedicte said.

“What shall we do today? I don’t plan to shop for my gallery until Monday, so we have the whole weekend to play.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Benedicte replied. She wanted to show Renee a part of Paris that she hadn’t seen before.

Renee was fondly remembering early morning strolls to the open-air food market on rue Mouffetard where plump, red cherries from Rousillon, a new goat cheese from the Alps, or a dozen varieties of wild mushrooms would be on display. The appetite she had lost during her long recovery was coming back.

“I know a market that our mothers didn’t allow us to go to when we were schoolgirls. You might find something unexpected for your shop there.”

Renee took a long time deciding what to wear. Benedicte was drinking her third cup of café noir, patiently reading the morning newspaper with only an occasional inquiring glance to see what was taking Renee so long.

“Now, don’t fuss. It’s important I don’t look like an American tourist.”

“You look fine. Wear what you wore yesterday.”

“How do I look in this red sweater? Is it too bright? Too red?”

“It’s fine. It matches your lipstick.”

Eventually, Renee was dressed. She lavishly spritzed Cristal on herself and gave Benedicte a tiny squirt behind her left ear.

“Is that your signal that you are ready to leave?” Benedicte remembered Renee’s schoolgirl habit of sharing her perfume with her and was touched that Renee did as well.

“Yes, now we’re properly prepared for a day’s adventure. Looking good, smelling good—look out, Paris, here we come!” Renee felt full of excitement and hope that the day would bring back all of the good times she remembered from her school days in Paris.

First, they took the Metro to Pte. de Clignancourt in the eighteenth arrondissement. By nine o’clock, the markets were crowded with thousands of Parisians and tourists. Some shoppers knew what they were looking for, but many were just ambling, looking for a market with the right ambience to spend their money in.

Their first stop was Marche Vernaison. Stalls filled with plunder from the estates of grand chateaux as well as small taverns lined the Vernaison market—icy chandeliers, colorful carpets, and ancient silk wall-hangings alongside vinyl bar stools, a stuffed bear’s head, and a giant wine keg. Poodles, of every size and color, were underfoot in nearly every shop. They were rarely for sale, at any price.

“Let’s cross the street and look at paintings and tapestries at Marche Dauphine,” Benedicte proposed when she had grown tired of Renee oohing and ahhing over a trio of apricot pups.

Renee agreed, but quickly grew bored with the commercial offerings at Dauphine. “I have much nicer paintings in my shop,” she declared imperiously, tucking her fingers under the taller woman’s elbow and leaning against her momentarily for support. She quickly straightened up, not wanting Benedicte to sense how easily she tired.

The two women spent a leisurely hour happily browsing at the Paul Bert Market. The morning sun was pleasant, and they enjoyed walking from stall to stall in the open air. Renee took off her wool jacket and gave it to Benedicte to carry. The merchandise was varied, and the owners pleasant and talkative. Benedicte was surprised when Renee impulsively bought expensive topaz earrings.

“I thought you only wore plain gold or diamonds! Your mother would disown you if she saw you in those gaudy earrings,” Benedicte said teasingly.

“Who said they were for me? I could be buying a gift for someone. Someone with blue eyes as crystal clear as arctic glaciers. Someone I’m trying to impress.”

Benedicte raised her eyebrows but resisted saying anything.

Renee loaded up on CDs she couldn't find in the States and inexpensive T-shirts for her friends in Montrose as they made their way back to the Metro station.

"You promised me somewhere I haven't been before," Renee wheedled, looking at Benedicte to see her reaction.

"Are you up for one more market this morning?" Benedicte asked. "I don't want you to get overtired. I think you will find it more interesting than Clignancourt."

"If you're up for it, I am too. Just promise me a cold drink, soon," Renee replied with a satisfied smile. It wasn't that she wanted to take advantage of Benedicte's good nature, but she did love to have her own way.

The fifteen-minute ride on the Metro to Porte de Montreuil on the east side of the city gave the women's feet a needed respite. When the Metro reached their stop, they headed in the direction of the triangular, tented city. Renee clutched her parcels more tightly when they found themselves suddenly caught up in a slow-moving, shuffling crowd. She looked at Benedicte for reassurance.

"Don't worry, mon ami, they are only novice pickpockets." Benedicte grinned as she walked faster, and pulled Renee along with her. "Stick with me, I will protect you; arresting pickpockets is my specialty, you know."

Renee thought her friend might be serious, until she saw the smile Benedicte was trying to hide.

The merchants here did not have shops or even stalls. They conducted their business over piles of what appeared to be rubbish. Old women circled piles of fabrics and broken jewelry heaped on the pavement. Dirty, rough-looking men stood guard over huge piles of tires, rims, and hubcaps. Much of the merchandise was damaged and looked as though its last home may have been a rubbish bin.

Renee peered around unbelievably. "Is this a joke? Why did you bring me here?"

"Look around. This is a view of the true ethnic Paris. The one privileged schoolgirls and tourists do not see: Algerian immigrants, homeless women, the crippled Vietnamese men who arrive here before dawn. Need an iron skillet, a cheap baseball cap, or a damaged case of toilet paper that fell off a truck? Do you want to get lost from your family, your job, even the gendarmes? Montreuil's your place."

"Thanks for the tour, but I don't want to get lost; can we go for lunch now? This place gives me the creeps. I had something a little more elegant in mind."

“Look again. Much of the world’s finest art passes through here. Interpol has a full time undercover agent assigned here, keeping an eye on the black marketeers that move stolen art and weapons to buyers around the world.”

“No way! This place is such a dump!”

“Seriously, if you were in the market for stolen goods, this is where you would start looking.”

“Could I get things good enough for my shop? How would I know who to talk to or what to say?”

“If you were a crook, you’d know,” Benedicte replied succinctly. “And if you did, I would have to arrest you.”

Loaded down with packages, the two women took the Metro to the St.-Germain-des-Pres area for lunch at Les Deux Magots. The popular café on the Left Bank was a good place to people watch as they enjoyed their meal. Their voices were high and bright with happiness, and they looked as though they didn’t have a care in the world.

“I’m sorry I took you to Montreuil this morning. You get to choose where we go tonight,” Benedicte said as she sipped her second glass of vin rouge. “I have this week’s *Pariscope*, if you want to check out the listings for a play or a concert tonight.”

“You have something on your mind today. Are you worrying about Diana?”

“No, I’m only thinking how nice it is to finally have you here, for a nice long visit.”

“You’re so transparent. When there’s a problem, you think you’re the only one who can fix it,” Renee admonished.

“Maybe you are right; but right now, all I can fix is planning a nice evening for us. Stop changing the subject, and tell me what you would like to do.”

Renee leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands in front of her, as though she were deciding an important matter. She suddenly leaned forward and gave Benedicte a disarming smile. “I can’t decide. What would you like to do?”

“I’m easy. I would be content to spend the evening at a Left Bank café where we can watch the boats go by,” Benedicte replied a bit wistfully.

“Then it’s a plan; your wish is my desire,” Renee agreed. “We’ll eat, drink, and talk all night long! When it gets chilly, we’ll go back to your apartment and sit under a blanket on the balcony with a bottle of Bordeaux.”

The waxing, crescent moon gleamed above the low rooftops and entered the unlit apartment windows, casting a faint radiance not unlike candlelight.

“Tonight it’s your turn. Are you happy? Is your life what you hoped for?” Benedicte asked.

“Which question do you want me to answer first?”

“Is there someone special in your life? Are you in love with the woman you bought the earrings for today?”

“It’s been a long day, with too much wine. I don’t know where to start. It feels strange to be discussing Maria with you. I know you don’t really approve,” Renee answered.

“Start wherever you want. It will be more interesting than my life,” Benedicte said. “If I close my eyes, it only means I’m listening.”

Renee closed her eyes for a moment, too, and thought about her answer before replying. “Yes, I am happy, as happy as anyone ever is for the moment. I’ve learned not to count on tomorrow, I’m glad to be alive today. The gallery gives me the opportunity that I’ve always wanted to paint.”

“I’m glad you have found your passion.”

“Passion might be too strong a word—my life revolves around my business. Dealing with customers five days a week keeps me from isolating myself, becoming too immersed in my work.”

“A nosy question, if you don’t mind; is the gallery profitable?” Benedicte asked.

“I’m making enough to live on. The checks my father sends me go uncashed some months. I wish he would give it all to me in a lump sum.”

“Your mother has always been afraid of what might happen if you got all of your grandparents’ money at one time. She doesn’t realize you’ve grown up.”

“She’s not happy that she can’t control my life anymore. We love each other, but it’s better for us not to live in the same country.”

Benedicte snickered, and Renee smiled wryly.

“I love you, Mother. I just want to live on another continent, thousands of miles away! That should discourage any meddling,” Renee laughed.

“Don’t forget that I’m on that same far-away continent, and that definitely discourages friendship.”

Renee continued, “Besides the restaurant owners, who I already told you about, some women own a bookstore near my shop. They have a different philosophy from most business people; they treat their customers like friends.”

“An interesting concept, but do they sell anything?”

“Of course. Books on recycling, vegetarian cooking, and spirituality ... all the traditional female issues. They have a section full of music and videos, and a great

many feminist books. I'm enjoying life in Montrose. It's what Americans call a 'gay friendly' town. That's important to me. It's time I lived my life my way."

Benedicte interrupted, "In case you hadn't noticed, Paris is the gayest place in the world. That's why it's called Gay Parea. Oh, and we have restaurants and bookstores here, too."

"But I didn't realize I was gay when I lived here, so it didn't do me any good. If I'd known I was gay, I wouldn't have allowed my father to move me to Michigan. I would have finished my education here."

"You were bored here. You couldn't wait to get to America," Benedict reminded her.

"I didn't have any role models here. If I had stayed, maybe I would have eventually met someone, and I'd be like my friend Laverne. She and Shirley have been living together for years but they can't get married in Michigan, so they went to Canada and had a ceremony there."

"Are those the ones who own the bookstore?" Benedicte asked.

"Yes, they invited me to join their book club. Thursday night it was at Lauren's house in the suburbs. She has four bedrooms and three bathrooms. And she lives alone with her cat!"

"If that house was in Paris our new Socialist mayor would kick out the cat, assign a new arrondissement number to it, and move in three or four thousand people."

"I hope you're very sleepy now, because I don't want you asking me a million questions about what I'm going to tell you next."

Benedicte gave a small, muffled sound of assent, so Renee continued.

"I really like the woman I bought the earrings for today. It's probably just another infatuation, and I know she's wrong for me for a lot of reasons, but it feels right for a lot more. She is vivacious, funny. And so *American*—blue eyes and blonde hair. Like a cover girl. She makes me laugh, and when she looks at me, I swear she can read my mind."

"If she makes you happy, I'm happy for you. When do I get to meet this perfect woman?"

"Oh, she's not perfect. She makes me happy, but she's a woman with a complicated past. I'm not ready to introduce her to anyone just yet."

"I love complications, but right now I'm too sleepy to give them my full attention. Tomorrow will be devoted to complications...."

Benedicte watched as St. Jean Cathedral filled with police officers and soldiers in uniform. The Batobus was dropping camera-toting tourists off at the church

steps. American and English women wearing jeans and carrying bouquets of yellow roses protested the war. When the processional music started, she knew she was supposed to enter the church, but everything seemed unreal. She wasn't at all sure if she was getting married or going to work. As she started to walk up the aisle, Renee appeared to walk with her. When they got to the front of the church, Renee was holding a jewelry box, and Benedicte thought it must be a ring. Suddenly, she realized they were getting married, and it seemed very right. When Renee opened the box, she offered it to Benedicte. It was the topaz earrings and Renee was sobbing, "Your eyes are not blue."

When Benedicte woke up, she had forgotten the dream.

Chapter X

2,500 Miles to Baghdad

April 2003. Paris, France

The phone woke them while it was still dark. Benedicte automatically reached for it without opening her eyes. “*Salut. Oui*, this is Benedicte. One moment, *s’il vous plait*.”

As she handed the phone to Renee, she wondered if this was the perfect woman they had been talking about a few short hours ago. Perhaps she should pull the covers over her head and try not to listen; but a short trip to the bathroom and then to the kitchen for coffee seemed like a better idea.

Benedicte had made an out-of-the way trip to Cafes Amazone as soon as she knew Renee was coming and had Arabica beans specially ground. The single origin coffee was an indulgence, but she remembered that it was Renee’s favorite.

When she returned with two cups of coffee on a tray, Renee was already in the shower. Later, as they sat on the balcony enjoying a fresh baguette and sipping a second cup of coffee, Benedicte asked, “Was that the perfect woman?”

“I told you, she’s not perfect! This morning she reminded me again of that fact. She makes me so angry. She tries to hide her jealousy, but when she realized we were sleeping in the same bed, she accused me of coming to Paris to have an affair with you!”

“*Désolé*, so sorry. I didn’t think to pretend I was calling you in another room. You should have warned me. I would not like to cause trouble for you.”

“Don’t be silly. This is your home. You can answer the phone any way you wish. I told her to cool off, and I would call her later. Now let’s plan our day.”

“So, you have changed your mind about going to Baghdad? You know it is only twenty-five hundred miles from Paris.”

“You’re teasing me. Of course, we could get a nap on the plane. I’m sorry my jealous girlfriend woke us up so early, but I can’t go back to sleep now.”

“It looks like a nice day, but with my luck it will rain.”

“It’s spring; it won’t rain. Let’s go for a walk. I love looking at the new leaves in the park this time of year; even the air smells green,” Renee said.

“We could walk from the Place de la Bastille to the Bois de Vincennes, or if you’d rather skate, we could rent rollerblades at a shop in Bastille. There’s a ten-K ride along the Promenade Plantée today.”

“Maybe later, but is Shakespeare’s open? I would love to go there and browse, maybe pick up a book or two. We could have a picnic near the promenade. There would be enough time before the skaters get there.”

“Ah, yes! Good idea, let’s go to Shakespeare’s. They still open at noon every day. That’s a perfect place to purchase books for your friends in your book club. I should have thought of that,” Benedicte said.

A cool, golden evening awaited the friends’ return. The sun was setting, and pink and gold rays glowed through the leafy trees along the darkened city skyline. Inside the apartment, the blinking red light on the answering machine demanded immediate attention. Benedicte hesitated only briefly before deliberately dropping her black t-shirt over the offending machine. She started to pick up the hairbrush for the women’s nightly routine, but instead lifted the pillow from behind Renee.

“Turn around with your back to me.”

“Don’t you want a glass of wine?” Renee asked.

“Sh-h-h, no talking tonight.”

Benedicte gently rubbed Renee’s neck and shoulders, smoothly stroking beneath her dark, thick hair. When she felt her start to relax, her fingertips lightly circled the sensitive area behind Renee’s ears. She lowered her thumbs and massaged the nape of her neck with a slow, sensuous rhythm that didn’t stop.

There seemed to be no good reason for Renee to hold her head erect anymore. As she allowed it to droop, she felt Benedicte lift a heavy strand of her hair, exposing her bare neck to the cool, night air.

Renee caught her breath as she felt Benedicte lean closer. She barely heard the familiar lullaby Benedicte hummed as it vibrated down her spine and throughout her body. It would be so easy to love this woman. If she only knew how much Renee cared . . . Renee reminded herself sternly how embarrassing it would be for both of them if Benedicte didn’t feel the same way. And she didn’t. She couldn’t. Benedicte was straight—wasn’t she?

Later, Benedicte softly sang the lullaby to Renee as she tucked the warm down comforter around her.

“Lullaby and goodnight ... lullaby and goodnight.”

Intimacy doesn't necessarily arouse desire—but sometimes it does.

Chapter XI

Roommate Rules

April 2003. Paris, France

In the morning, while Renee still slept, Benedicte listened to two messages. The first, a plaintive request from Maria Morgan that Renee call her the minute she got in, she deleted. The second, from Diana Crowley, she listened to carefully three times, each time adding to the note pad she kept by the phone. When she was satisfied she had all of the information written down, she deleted the call. Dressing quickly, she used the phone in the kitchen while making breakfast for Renee. Two calls and the coffee had perked; one more and the blueberries were rinsed and layered with yogurt and granola.

“The coffee smells wonderful. Why didn’t you wake me?” Renee asked as she entered the room.

“Never wake a sleeping woman. First rule of roommate survival. I haven’t forgotten.”

“OK, new rule. Pajamas are acceptable attire for all meals on the balcony.”

“I may have an assignment this week after all. Will you be all right here? I purchased a *Coupon Rebdomadaire* for you to use this week, so you can ride the Metro wherever you want, as often as you wish, without queuing for tickets. You have a key and you know Mme. Bodine, my landlady.”

“Wait a minute, don’t talk so fast. I’m barely awake. You have to go to work today? It must be important, for them to call you in from your vacation. Does it have something to do with smugglers, or is it the same old pickpockets?”

“Renee, I can’t talk to you about it, but yes, it is important. I wouldn’t consider leaving you if it wasn’t. My job sometimes requires me to go on missions at short notice.”

“Benedicte, look me in the eyes and tell me you are not going to Baghdad.”

Renee's gaze focused intently on Benedicte looking for a clue, and she was struck again by how attractive Benedicte had grown in the years since childhood. Her slight chubbiness had morphed into beguiling curves as she kept growing, until she reached five foot eleven. The nose that was too big on a child was now just a micrometer too large for classic good looks and suited her perfectly. The rich black hair and olive skin inherited from her Persian father that once seemed foreign, now seemed exotic.

Instead of answering her, Benedicte collected the cups and plates from the small balcony table and headed for the kitchen. "More coffee, *cheri*?"

"You are going to Baghdad! I want to go. Please, please, please let me go with you. It will be my only chance to see the Baghdad Museum. You know I love museums."

"It's not safe. Even journalists are not safe there now. This trip is not going to be a holiday, a sightseeing trip. It is especially not safe for Americans."

"Moi? Je ne comprends pas. Moi Americaine? Non!"

"OK, maybe you can still pass for French. Let me think about it. It is hard to say no to you, although I know I should." Benedicte had a sinking feeling that Renee would get her way.

Renee threw her arms around her in a big hug, "Oh thank you, thank you. You won't be sorry, I promise."

"I said I would think about it!"

"Yes, yes. I know. What should I pack? Can I take my camera? Will I be allowed to buy anything? I can take some pictures, can't I? How long will we be gone?"

Benedicte was afraid that a tug of war between her heart and mind was not an even match when Renee was involved. She had resolved, after Deborah's accident, never to let her feelings for anyone cloud her judgment again.

Section III: Baghdad, Iraq

Situated in a region where there is no stone and practically no timber, Baghdad was built, like all the cities of the Babylonian plain, of brick and tiles. Its buildings depended for their effect principally on mass and gorgeous coloring. Like old Babylon, Baghdad is celebrated throughout the world for its brilliant coloured textile fabrics. So famous was the silk of Baghdad, manufactured in the Attabieh quarter, that the place-name passed over into Spanish, Italian, French and finally into English in the form of tabby, as the designation of a rich-coloured watered silk.

—The Encyclopædia Britannica Eleventh Edition

Chapter XIII

The Hands of Saddam

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

Just before noon, Baghdad time, Robert wiped the perspiration from the back of his neck as he paced the corridors in the grimy, deserted terminal. The weight of the small radio in his shirt pocket made the cotton cling to his damp body. He returned the soiled handkerchief to his pocket and pulled out an earbud headset. An hourly update on the advancing U.S. troops was due and, although he knew it was biased, he nonetheless wanted to hear it.

He was still thinking about the earlier televised statement on Shabab TV, a station run by Saddam's eldest son, Uday. Saddam's message to the people of Iraq called for jihad, a holy war. "Don't give them a chance until they withdraw," he exhorted. "Long live our nation. God is great. They will be the losers, the evil, and the criminals. Oh, great people: Fate and history did not hesitate when they chose you as their symbol while hoisting your nation's flag of jihad."

Robert thought about jihad and what it would do to Iraq. The term meant "struggle" to most modern Muslims: a struggle within the soul, a need to defend the faith, a financial struggle to support its growth.

Robert also knew violent jihad was a constant reality in Islamic history, too often resulting in death for unbelievers.

As he waited for the plane to arrive, he snapped a few photos of the walls, which were crudely painted with exhortations of "Down, Down, America." *Le Monde* would buy rolls of undeveloped film and pay for any photos they printed.

Surprised to see the airport's director, Wafa Abdullah Jabbouri, walking toward him in the trash-strewn corridor, the journalist nodded a cautious greeting. Wafa obligingly returned the greeting with a toothy smile. "You see, it's completely safe here; the workers still turn up each day." He had been telling for-

eign reporters this for days, although the condition of the airport obviously belied his words.

At thirty-four thousand feet, the Royal Jordanian Fokker F-28, which Benedicte had chartered for them in Amman, began to descend in a spiral path. She leaned over Renee's window seat to point out the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to her.

Renee carried a single canvas carry-on as they departed from the plane, and Benedicte traveled even lighter, with only a backpack. Robert stood alone at the gate waiting for them. After only a cursory assessment, he recognized Benedicte as his contact and introduced himself as an independent French journalist without taking time to add any details.

Not lingering to sightsee, they walked briskly through the nearly empty airport car park to Robert's borrowed "hard-car," an armored Toyota Land Cruiser. The seven-mile strip into the city was a frequent target of sectarian strife and was not considered safe for anyone.

The road signs on the deserted divided highway into Baghdad read simply "Airport Street." Dry, scrubby bushes spread out in every direction from the airport, and magnificent palm trees lined the paved streets.

From the front seat, Benedicte could see low-lying buildings damaged by bombs. Blown-out windows told her the bombs had landed close by. In the backseat, Renee sat with eyes widened in disbelief, staring out of the smoked windows at the giant palm trees enclosing them from both sides. As they got closer to Baghdad, rubble from bombed buildings filled the streets.

"Iraq is a place most reporters can't wait to leave. Will you be here long?" Robert inquired, as he skillfully navigated around a slow-moving, red, double-decker bus.

"We're here only long enough to get a story on the Baghdad Museum," Benedicte replied. "Archaeologists and historians around the world want to see what is happening here. I plan on getting in and out of Iraq quickly."

She felt comfortable in her frequently used guise as a reporter and hoped Renee would not say anything to endanger her cover. It didn't matter in front of Robert, but she wasn't ready for Renee to know his role yet. The less Renee knew, the safer everyone would be.

"The Americans are threatening to take the airport and the city soon, but they have agreed not to bomb the museums," Robert reassured her.

"If the museum survives the bombing, we all know there will be looting," Benedicte replied. "There has been no authority here since '91, and with sanc-

tions in place, people are extremely poor. The reality is poor people are going to steal.”

“You may think there is a lack of authority, but Saddam has strict punishment for stealing. The first time police catch a thief, his right hand is summarily chopped off. If he’s dumb enough, or desperate enough, to do it again, his foot goes next,” Robert said.

“How terrible. Just the possibility would stop me before I even got started,” Renee said.

“It has scared off most of the amateur criminals, and the children. Instead of stealing in the city, now they dig in the desert. Dishonest antique dealers are a big part of the problem. They buy small items with no questions asked, if the price is right.”

“What about you, Robert? Why are you here?” Renee asked him, hoping to find out who this movie-star-handsome man really was without coming right out and asking Benedicte how she knew him.

“I’m young enough to still be an idealist. I want the world to know what is happening here. The Iraqi people should not be isolated from the world.”

When Renee tried unsuccessfully to roll down her window, Robert explained that the windows were sealed to keep out the dust. He didn’t think the delicate looking Frenchwoman needed to know the windows had to stay up to block small arms fire.

The road into the city followed the Tigris River south. As they passed Firdos Square, Robert pointed out the Sheraton Ishtar Hotel. “That’s the tallest building in Baghdad.”

“The Sheraton? I’m surprised they have a hotel here,” Renee said.

“Sheraton pulled out years ago. The new owners just kept the name when they took over the hotel. Reporters call it the Missile Magnet now, but before the war they all hung around to drink and watch the wide-screen TV in the lobby bar every night.”

Fifteen-foot-high steel-reinforced concrete “blast walls” surrounded the hotel. Iraqi troops in armored vehicles guarded two checkpoints, which warned in both English and Arabic, “Deadly Force Is Authorized.”

“Do you know anything about the Al Hamra, where we are staying?” Benedicte asked, as Robert dodged taxis that ignored stop signs and men who walked casually in the middle of the street.

“It’s across town in the residential Jadriyah quarter. It’s smaller and quieter, with fewer blast walls and so far no Iraqi troops. The Hamra rents mainly to western journalists and private military contractors.”

“Military contractors? Do you mean mercenaries?” Renee asked.

“In a sense, but more like a private police force. The men guarding small businesses with machine guns are mostly *peshmerga*—Kurdish warriors who are willing to work for two hundred dollars a month. They are contractors of a sort, but they can’t afford to stay at the Al Hamra.”

“But you said the Al Hamra rents to...”

“Australians, Americans, and Europeans—security personnel who go where the big money is. They are hired guns—mostly ex-commandos. Highly trained and heavily armed. Their going rate is fifteen hundred dollars per day. That’s American dollars.”

“What does a security guard have to do for that kind of money?” Renee asked.

“They work for American companies who have businesses to protect in the Middle East. Some are employed by newspaper and television networks to protect their reporters.”

“It sounds like everyone here already has a gun.”

“The city is very tense. There’s fighting only a few hundred miles away, and everyone expects the Americans here before the week is over. We have four, maybe five, days. It all depends on how much resistance they encounter. It could even be a week or two if the Iraqis really want to defend the outlying towns,” Robert said.

“Do you have a guard?”

“No. With a bodyguard I couldn’t walk on the streets looking for news. They all wear flak vests and carry assault rifles. A blind man can spot them in a crowd. That’s no good; you can’t get a story that way. No one would talk to me, so I prefer to work alone.”

“That doesn’t sound safe. How can you do that?” Renee asked.

“I let people know right away that I’m from France. No one here wants to kill French journalists,” Robert said. “They treat you much better if they know you’re French.”

“*Mon Dieu!* What is that? It looks like the Joe Louis fist I saw in downtown Detroit, but there’s two of them. And they have weapons!” Renee had spotted a pair of giant hands holding swords crossed in battle a hundred and forty feet above the highway as they drove near the parade grounds in central Baghdad.

“Saddam’s hands,” Robert snorted derisively, “officially called the ‘Hands of Victory Monument.’ He had it built to celebrate victory over Iran at the end of the war. He even had his own hands used for the models.”

“What an ego that guy has.”

“The swords are made of melted-down guns from dead Iraqi soldiers—and there must have been a lot of them, because the blades weigh twenty-four tons. And if that wasn’t enough to make the point, he had five thousand Iranian helmets taken from the battle field and placed along the base.”

The Al Hamra resembled a fortress more than it did a hotel. Steel grilles surrounding the entrance opened only wide enough to permit one person at a time to enter. Flanking the front door were two men armed with what Benedicte recognized as automatic Kalashnikov rifles.

Robert stopped the car in the middle of the street and walked the women to the front door. Benedicte held Renee’s elbow firmly as they walked up the steps to the small lobby.

After Robert rang the bell at the front desk several times, a disheveled, yawning front desk clerk appeared and rented them two adjoining rooms in the half-empty hotel. Before Robert left, he gave both women his cell phone number and reminded them that reporters in Iraq were supposed to sign a lengthy document agreeing to the military’s rules. “If your press ID is revoked, the military can kick you out of the country and seize your photographs.”

“Thanks for the tip. We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen to us.” Benedicte planned to be out of the country before the military knew she was there. She sounded more confident than she felt at that moment. Protecting Renee might be the hardest part of the task she had undertaken. She didn’t dare assess her motives too closely. Certain things were better not to think about.

Chapter XIV

The Americans Are Coming

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

Renee was relieved to find the process of negotiating a decent room and a reasonable rate easier than she expected, in large part due to Benedicte's fluent Arabic. Taking the advice of the overly polite desk clerk, the women flagged an orange-colored taxi to take them to the nearby Botan Café.

On the ride within the city, the women were relieved to see no signs of American tanks or soldiers in the streets. It was a city ready for battle with an enemy that had not yet arrived.

Ancient marble of many colors dominated the dusty desert city; many of the older buildings resembled European museums. They saw domes and tall spires everywhere, ornate facades with beautiful scrolls carved into stone. The faded colors of the desert—beige, peach, and white stone—were the city's background palette.

American and European journalists were all over the city, and Baghdad residents didn't seem to pay any attention to them. Benedicte's dark good looks allowed her to fit into many societies, a perfect undercover agent. She was dressed in worn fatigues and dusty boots with a well-worn beret pulled over her thick hair. While on the plane, Renee had coerced her hair straight back and wiped off her trademark red lipstick. In an effort to look inconspicuous, she dressed in a French woman's best friend—basic black—including comfortable, black leather shoes.

Since the current conflict, the cafe was open twenty-four hours a day. Many of the patrons at the cafe were Iraqis, but a chunk of its business also came from for-

eign businessmen and journalists who were tired of relying on pricey satellite phones to communicate abroad. The phone lines were frequently down, and foreigners in Iraq who needed to communicate with the outside world found a cup of coffee and two dollars American an hour a reasonable price to pay.

Benedicte paid for an Internet connection and sent an e-mail message to Diana Crowley asking her to meet them at the café as soon as she was able.

The old man behind the bar noticed Benedicte's interest in the television set behind the counter. It was tuned to an Iranian channel showing an old movie, a musical in the Persian language. He told her, "In Baghdad, the old people enjoy Iranian television. We grew up with it. We still trust it."

"Listen! That song is in Farsi. My father sang that lullaby to me when I was a child. I never expected to hear it on a television in a café in Baghdad!" she exclaimed happily.

Benedicte hummed along with the music and softly sang the words, *Shoma to galb ah man hasti hamishe*. She translated the words for Renee, "You are in my heart forever."

The women did not immediately recognize the tall, angular Englishwoman when she entered the café. She was dressed in a long skirt with a *makene* covering her head, neck, and shoulders, following the Muslim tradition of *hejrah* by wearing modest clothing and covering her head. Her eyes darted guardedly around the room before she approached the women sitting at a corner table. Benedicte realized she was a Crowley sister only when she noticed a small wisp of ginger-colored hair peeking from one side of the plaid scarf. She jumped to her feet to give her a hug while Renee remaining seated, watching warily.

Diana seemed tired; her shoulders drooped, and it appeared to be an effort to produce a smile when she recognized Benedicte. "Thank you for finally coming," she said as she sank down facing the door in a chair next to Benedicte. "I thought you would have been here sooner."

A very thin man wearing a spotless white apron approached their table to take their order. A large hooked nose and equally large pendulous lips gave him the appearance of an oversized, hungry bird. Benedicte ordered hummus, tabouleh, and lamb with rice for everyone.

"It's good to see you, Diana. I wish it were under different circumstances. This country is in a very bad situation," Benedicte said. "When you called, you said it was urgent that you leave Baghdad."

"You waited so long to come; I'm afraid it is too late for me to get out unnoticed now. This morning, the BBC reported that units of an American tank

infantry division were less than sixteen kilometers west of Baghdad—and that some U.S. troops had taken up positions on the edge of the airport.”

Benedicte quickly reassured her. “No, there were no American soldiers at the airport this morning.”

“I’ve heard reports say that Saddam has twelve thousand Republican Guards ready to defend the airport,” Diana insisted. “You just didn’t know where to look.”

“We saw only a few armed militia guards. It’s quiet there. The departure lounges are empty, and even the customs department has been abandoned,” Benedicte said, again trying to reassure the Englishwoman.

“Why didn’t you leave before?” Renee asked bluntly. She was quickly tiring of what she saw as Benedicte’s misplaced solicitousness.

“I’ve been very busy at the museum, trying to get everything catalogued and packed away safely. It’s a very important job, and no one else could be trusted to do it right. Besides, everybody said Saddam’s forces would be successful and the Americans would never reach Baghdad.”

“Things seem normal in the city to me. We saw passenger busses running, and the central market was open when we drove past.” Benedicte remembered seeing civilians in the city. “Why do you think you are in danger now?”

“The English aren’t popular here anymore. And I’m very visible because of my position at the museum.”

Diana pulled her chair closer to Benedicte. “You promised to get me out of here. No matter how much you’ve changed, I expect you to keep your word. It’s the least you can do for Deborah.”

Benedicte asked, “What kind of help do you need, Diana?”

“I need to get out of here. You’re still working for Interpol?”

“Yes.”

“Will you please excuse me? I need to tell my driver I will be staying, and I want him to wait for me.”

As soon as she was out of earshot, Renee asked, “What did she mean by that comment about Deborah? What does Deborah have to do with this?”

“Deborah is the reason we’re here. If I didn’t feel an obligation to her family, I would have asked someone else to come here to rescue Diana.”

“You told me you felt guilty about Deborah’s accident, but this is a totally different matter.”

“You’re right, of course. My guilty feelings have been growing heavier since Deborah’s accident, not only for the accident but for other things, too.” Benedicte said.

“Other things? What kind of other things?”

“Feelings.”

“Feelings?”

“Some things are better not talked about. Things I am just beginning to understand.”

Diana returned quickly, her cheeks pink with exertion or excitement, and continued the conversation as though she had not abruptly interrupted it.

“Can you tell me what you actually do for Interpol?”

Benedicte replied carefully, measuring her words. “I can’t tell you much more than my title; I am a Criminal Intelligence Analyst. I do operational and strategic analysis; I am also responsible for training new agents.”

The Englishwoman lowered her voice, before glancing quizzically at Renee. “Do both of you have French passports? I remember that you were friends with Deborah too, but I thought....”

“*Oui*, I was born in France. That’s all that matters.” Renee nodded quickly; she was afraid to hear the word “American” here in the café full of dangerous looking, armed men.

“Are you involved with the police, also?”

“No, I’m an art dealer.”

“An art dealer? So, is that why you’re here? Are you familiar with Middle Eastern antiquities?”

“Well, yes of course, a little. My degree is in Art History. I’m sure I don’t know as much as you do, though.”

“Do you stock items from Mesopotamia in your shop?”

“No, I stock a lot of Limoges and majolica in my shop, mainly because they’re easy to sell.”

“What’s your specialty?” Diana asked.

“I prefer seventeenth-century French and Italian art. Lately, I’ve been into art deco posters. My favorite artists at the moment are Picasso and Maxfield Parrish.”

Diana nodded decisively with each answer as though ticking off Renee’s credentials before reaching a decision to trust her. “You’ll see many things you like here.”

“Why are you so curious about Renee’s gallery?” Benedicte asked.

“I’ve been entrusted with something of extreme value. I can’t risk having it stolen now.”

Diana smoked nervously as she talked; juggling fork and cigarette, sometimes fork in one hand and cigarette in the other. Smoke from her unfiltered cigarettes drifted over the tables of nearby diners. No one seemed to notice or mind.

“I have an artifact that Gertrude Bell discovered in 1900.”

“How did you get it? Did you know her?” Renee asked.

“It’s been handed down through carefully chosen acolytes since the second World War.”

“Wasn’t Gertrude Bell the first director of the Baghdad Museum?” Renee was relieved that her gaffe about Diana’s age was apparently being overlooked.

“The western world owes her for much more than the museum. Her maps of Mesopotamia were the only reason British troops were able to cross the desert safely.”

“How did she get maps of Mesopotamia that no one else had?”

“She drew them herself before the war. She was the one who convinced the Arab tribes to help the English beat the Turks and Germans.”

“Why were the Arabs willing to help an Englishwoman?”

“After living in the Middle East for years, she’d earned their friendship. Gertrude was one of the very few foreigners to ever have the honor of dining with the sheiks.”

“Do you still have those maps? They could be very helpful to the war effort, whoever’s side you’re on,” Benedicte asked.

“It would break her heart to see what’s happened to the museum. There have been years of neglect; so many things have vanished.” The other diners didn’t seem to notice or care, as Diana nervously lit one cigarette after another.

Benedicte tried again, “What did she have that was too important to leave at the museum?”

“She found evidence of a tribe of female warriors near the Black Sea. In 1914, she went to France to work with the Red Cross. That’s where she met Sharon St. Onge.”

“This is going to be a complicated story isn’t it?” Benedicte asked. She tried to mask her impatience with Diana’s ramblings. She remembered it as a family trait that had once amused her in Deborah.

“We should go back to the hotel. Renee needs a nap, and we won’t be interrupted there.”

“That’s a good idea. There are too many people here who could be watching us.” Diana quickly stubbed out her cigarette; she seemed pleased at the invitation.

The women asked their waiter to pack up their leftovers; there was enough hummus and tabouleh to feed them for two days.

Diana's Iraqi driver, Ahmed, was waiting for her outside the café. His large, dark brown eyes quickly dismissed her two friends and returned to her. "You should go back to the museum, where you will be safe."

When she told him her plans to go to the Al Hamra, he reluctantly took her and the two French women back to the hotel. "Call me and I'll come back for you. It is not safe here for you, Miss Crowley." Ahmed warned as he helped her out of the car, "The Americans are coming."

Chapter XV

In Bedouin Robes

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

At the Al-Hamra, the desk clerk warned them that bombing near the city might cause the power to fail. To make sure they understood the consequences, he added a warning that the standby generator often didn't start either.

Not willing to take that chance, the three women avoided the elevator as they passed through the small lobby. On a sofa against the wall, three Iraqi men sat smoking silently. If they were curious about the European women, it didn't show. Several armed bodyguards sat on the stairs but politely got up so the women could make their way up the dingy stairwell.

Once they were in her room, Benedicte locked the door to the adjoining room and secured the hallway door with a brass lock she took from her backpack.

"Diana, tell me what the bottom line is; I need to make plans to keep us safe until we can leave Iraq."

"There are people in Iraq who know who I am, and when the fighting starts I'm afraid they'll find me." Diana's eyes darted around the small room as she reassured herself that no one had hidden under the bed or behind the curtains. "They will kill me, if necessary, to get the artifacts I'm protecting."

As Renee was unwrapping the food, she asked, "How did this all start?"

Diana cleared her throat and looked defiantly at both women. "In 1900, Gertrude Bell found proof of an Amazon civilization near the Black Sea."

When neither of the women made a comment, Diana rose from her chair as though she were going to make a speech but quickly sat again. "Aren't you surprised? It would change the history of the world if people learned that the Amazons are not a myth."

Renee spoke quietly, but with conviction, “Diana, when I left college in France, I went to the States and continued my education at the University of Michigan. I majored in Art History. Although there has been a lot of speculation about Amazon artifacts, no one has ever found anything definitive.”

“You say you have been entrusted with these artifacts?” Benedicte thought for a moment, before asking, “Are they stolen? Who else knows about them?”

“No, they are not stolen. They belong to history,” Diana replied.

“If you had something like that, it would be worth a fortune on the open market,” Renee said, thinking what her commission on such a sale might be.

“Tell us where and how you got them, then,” Benedicte demanded.

“I’d like to tell you the story from the beginning, if you’re not too tired. I haven’t had anyone to confide in for too long, no one who appreciates what this will mean to the world.”

“No, please go on. I can’t sleep anyway,” Renee said. Benedicte nodded her agreement.

The travelers sat on the double bed with two pillows folded over and propped behind them, but both left their shoes on. Diana took the only chair in the room. When she removed her scarf, twigs of frizzy, strawberry blond hair sprung out. “I feel safer wearing that when I’m out of the museum,” she explained. “My red hair and green eyes make me too noticeable here. So many people have seen me at the museum, and I’m afraid of being recognized.”

“Do you mind if I speak English here behind closed doors? It would be much easier for me to explain things to you. My French is rusty.”

“Please do, if it is easier for you. We both speak English fluently,” Benedicte said.

Diana began, “Gertrude Bell was born near where I grew up in Leeds. Her mother died when she was three. Her stepmother was from Paris, and Gertrude grew up speaking several languages. She went to Oxford at sixteen.

“After finishing school, Gertrude visited her uncle who was the British envoy to the Shahanshah in Persia. She had an unusually good ear for languages and learned Italian, Turkish, and Farsi easily enough. She was determined to master Arabic and took daily lessons.” The fact that Diana spoke slowly and carefully, as though she were reading from an unfamiliar book, was not lost on either Benedicte or Renee.

“I know how difficult that is. My father was Persian, so I learned Farsi as a child, but Arabic was much more difficult. My tutor made me hold my tongue down with one finger and cough—it’s hard to talk with your finger in your

mouth!” Benedicte demonstrated until Renee playfully pounded her on the back and attempted the Heimlich maneuver, while Diana fidgeted impatiently.

“She disguised herself in Bedouin robes and traveled the Persian deserts with only her male guides.”

“I remember this from school. They called her the ‘Daughter of the Desert,’” Benedicte said.

“When was this?” Renee asked. “I’m sorry to interrupt; but I’m having a hard time picturing when this happened. Persia has been Iran for as long as I can remember.”

Diana answered, “You’re right, of course. Persia became Iran in 1935, but Gertrude went to Constantinople about a hundred years ago.” She stood and looked at her reflection in the mirror above the blond dresser. “Considering the history of this region, a hundred years seems like only yesterday ... you know, people tell me I look like Gertrude. She had red hair and green eyes, and a long nose like mine.”

She went back to her chair. When she sat down, her voice softened as she added, “She never married, and so far neither have I. She was in love with King Faisal, but of course they weren’t allowed to marry.”

It was after midnight in Baghdad, and Renee had given up trying to keep track of the time changes her body had been through in the last few days. Her mind had started to wander when several loud explosions jolted her wide awake.

Benedicte shouted, “Quick! Get on the floor. Diana, get away from the windows!”

Renee was the most frightened of the three women. She was trembling uncontrollably as she tried to burrow under the metal bed frame. Benedicte scooted close to her, slid one long leg over her lower body, and wiggled closer until she covered her entire body. When the explosions stopped, Benedicte went to the bathroom to wet towels and pressed them against the doorjamb.

“If there is a fire, this will keep the smoke out,” she explained tersely.

The explosions started again and continued for nearly half an hour, some sounding very close. Gradually the blasts moved away and finally stopped.

Downstairs the cigarette smoking Iraqis watched without comment as huge plumes of black smoke drifted into the night sky and an acrid smell filled the city.

As the sun came up, the three women, one from America, one from England, and one from France, fell into an uneasy sleep huddled together on the floor of room 317 at the Al Hamra Hotel in Baghdad.

Chapter XVI

Back Before Dark

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

Diana insisted that her driver would be coming for them and that they must be ready when he got there. “I know he’ll be worried about me; I should have gone back to the museum last night. I would have been safer there.” The women occupied the sofa in the lobby where the three Iraqi men had slept overnight. Diana and Renee breakfasted on yesterday’s hummus and pita bread while Benedicte paced.

The same desk clerk was on duty, and he had a radio on this morning. The Iraqi radio station was reporting that U.S. planes had had fired at the Palestine Hotel during the night, and two cameramen had been killed.

Diana’s Iraqi driver arrived before nine with three large cups of coffee. “Good morning, beautiful ladies. I am glad to see you are all safe this morning.”

“Where have you been?” Diana asked. “Have you been at the museum this morning?”

“I have been making arrangements to send my children to the country. My family and I were awakened in the middle of the night by the bombing. I cannot risk their staying in the city any longer, and they will be glad to go.”

“I’ve been worried the museum may have been hit by the bombs. You should have stayed at the museum last night.”

“There was no mention of the museum on the radio,” Benedicte said.

“If you still want to see the museum, we should go now. The more valuable collections were moved when the museum closed in February, but I can show you what’s left.”

Ahmed was watching the women for their reactions, and said to Diana before Benedicte or Renee could reply, "I can take all of you to the museum now. Four guards have been kept on duty around the clock. You will be safe there."

"Oh yes, I'd love to see the museum. That's the main reason I came to Baghdad," Renee babbled. She still wasn't really sure why they were there, but she didn't want to return to Paris without a glimpse of the world's most famous antiquities museum. She had not forgotten her fear from the night before, but with the morning sunshine, she was willing, as always, to take a chance.

"*Oui*, I will bring our bags," Benedicte agreed. "Who knows where tonight may find us?"

Ahmed's car, parked near the hotel, was not a "hard car," like the armored car Robert had, but an older model Toyota with a cracked windshield. When Benedicte got in the back seat with their bags, Diana got in beside her. Ahmed prayed for safe passage before they set off for the museum and asked God to keep them safe from the perils of the streets of Baghdad. He turned the radio dial looking for the hourly news bulletins. Last night's bombing had closed off several main roads, but he knew the alleyways and side streets that would take them to the museum.

Ahmed seemed to be studying Renee just as intently as Renee was studying the dusty city streets through the fractured windshield.

"I heard you say you came to Iraq to see the museum." He gave her a curious smile. "Are you an artist or an archaeologist? It is a long trip from France to see another museum."

"Yes, I'm an artist, and I own a small antique store. I'm interested in the artifact collections here. How is it you speak French so well?"

"I am a mechanical engineer; I learned some French and English at school."

"An engineer? Why are you driving a taxi?"

"My family is here, but there are no jobs in my field anymore. I have four beautiful children. I must feed them. I am fortunate that Miss Crowley hires me to be her dragoman."

"Dragoman?"

"You would say interpreter. She does not speak Arabic, so I translate for her. She needs me to drive her everywhere; it is not safe for her to walk or take a bus alone anymore ... perhaps you are looking for something special for your antique store while you are here? If so, I can help. I have connections everywhere in the city."

Before she could answer, he slowed slightly as they passed the entrance to the Sheraton Ishtar, where several taxi drivers were waiting for passengers. “Those are the official Baghdad taxis. They are the drivers who have influence in the city.”

Benedicte has been listening from the back seat as well as carefully observing their surroundings. “Influence?”

Ahmed’s answer confirmed what she suspected. “They are members of the *moukhabarat*. What you would call the Intelligence Service. They were the soldiers in charge of targeting Scud missiles at Israel in 1990. As a thank you from Saddam, they each received a new car. Now they must drive those cars to earn a living.”

“Is the taxi business a good business to be in?” Benedicte asked.

“Good, not so good,” he shrugged. “Even with five million people in the city, it is hard sometimes to make two dollars a day. When there are journalists in town, they take taxis, but people who live here know their way around. Saddam bought double-decker buses from China. You may have seen them—bright red. Very popular.”

As Ahmed drove through the heart of the city, Benedicte made note of two satellite network centers near a residential area. The Iraqi military blocked some side streets, but traffic flowed freely in most areas. A dangerous number of drivers and pedestrians ignored red lights. Thick layers of dust from a recent storm remained everywhere.

Shops selling essential items, like water and bread, were doing a brisk business. Fifteen-foot high posters of Saddam Hussein were conspicuously plastered everywhere. The police and military that had kept Saddam in power for twenty-four years also kept his face in the public consciousness with ubiquitous posters and murals.

Auto repair shops and tumbledown garages surrounded the world-famous Baghdad museum. The run-down commercial area was a shock to Renee and Benedicte, who were both used to the elite museum district in Paris. The enlarged Baghdad Museum rested on the west bank of the Tigris River; you could still look across the river and see its original one-room home.

The art deco-styled building fit comfortably around a square courtyard and was surrounded by vine-covered verandas. Wrens, warblers, and white wagtails cheerfully greeted morning visitors. A solitary, palm tree grew close to a curved archway decorated with turquoise-colored rosettes. Human-headed lions, two stories high, flanked the entrance doors of the Children’s Museum.

Large placards in English and Arabic, MATHAF—MUSEUM, were placed around the building. Whoever placed them there must have hoped their presence

would serve as a talisman against intruders. Nearby, sandbags were placed generously around the perimeter of the building, looking strangely out of place this close to the desert.

“The British connection with the museum means that exhibits have always been displayed bilingually,” Diana explained as the women walked to the building. She stepped ahead to open the front door with a large key that she took from a deep pocket in the folds of her skirt.

Two armed guards stood stiffly just inside the doors, and two more sat nearby, playing a board game that resembled the European game of chess. Diana exchanged friendly greetings with all of them.

“*Salam Marhaba.*”

“Hello; good morning.”

“*Sabah El-Khair.*”

“The door we came in is called the ‘Assyrian Gate,’” Diana told the women as they caught up with her. “It was designed by Sir Seton Lloyd, the famous archaeologist.”

“It’s beautiful, but why was an archaeologist hired to design a museum?” Renee asked.

“He originally trained as an architect, before he fell in love with antiquity. The past has an addictive lure for some people; it seems more important than the present.”

Pale, golden light streamed in through windows positioned along the outer walls of the wide corridors, illuminating huge chunks of broken pottery interspersed with headless statues, some life-size.

“Before we start our tour, would you like to leave your bags in my office? I can lock it, if you’d feel safer. Every room here has a lock.” Diana jingled her brass ring as if to illustrate the number of keys required to keep the museum safe.

On a table near the door sat a dusty visitor’s register. “Sign the register, if you wish,” Diana said with a hint of anger and resignation in her voice. “The book tells the story of the museum’s ups and downs. Too, too, many downs.”

As Benedicte scanned the pages of the register, she quickly realized that Diana was right. The first entries were from 1966, the year the new building opened. There were dozens of entries, a veritable “Who’s Who” of the archaeological community and of government officials from the Arab world.

For the next twenty years, there was a steady, small stream of entries: locals, some tourists, and the inveterate visiting curator from Cairo, London, or Boston.

In 1986, the new wing opened and the same names appeared in a flurry of activity that quickly slowed down.

It was not until 1989, when the Nimrud gold was displayed for the first time, that there was a large influx of international visitors. Then the Persian Gulf War shut the museum down to visitors until 2000, when it opened briefly for an exhibition celebrating Saddam's sixty-third birthday.

Since then, visitors had been scarce and seemed to be primarily Italian, with the same names recurring every year.

"Since the museum was forced to close to the public in February, the docents have all left, but I've done the tours so often I can tell you about anything special you're interested in."

"How many employees work here?" Benedicte asked.

"In February there were over fifty, and most of them were women. Iraqi women have filled many of the archaeologists' positions in the last two decades. Since the current war started, less than a handful of us are left. None of us are getting a regular paycheck anymore."

"If the workers aren't getting paid, why do they stay?"

"Some are dedicated to the museum, and some have nowhere else to go. I actually wonder why I've stayed so long myself. No one appreciates it."

While Benedicte and Diana talked, Renee knelt on the tile floor transfixed—eye-to-eye with an ornate terra-cotta lion.

"Ah, I see you've made friends with our Guardian Lion. I'm quite partial to him myself. With our titian locks, I think we may have common ancestors."

"There's such intelligence and strength in him. How old is he, and where did he come from?" Renee was clearly entranced with her astrological symbol.

"His original home was in Old Babylon, about 1800 BC. I doubt any of us will look that good when we're nearly four thousand years old."

"Four thousand years! Remarkable. Is he the oldest resident of the museum?"

"Oh no, not at all. In the prehistoric section, the Shanidar Neanderthal collection dates back as far as sixty thousand years. You'll notice as we go along that the galleries are arranged chronologically. On days when I feel old, I only need to look around to realize one human life is only a blink in time."

"How long have you worked here, Diana?" Benedicte kept her questions pertinent and let Renee ask the usual tourist questions.

"I've been here since 1970—it seems like yesterday. Everything was new and full of hope in those days. Construction had recently been finished here; before that, the collection was in a smaller building across the river.

"I was just out of school, and I was in love with the adventure of having a career in the Middle East. Nancy and I saw so many changes for Iraqi women during that time.

“The year I came here, a new constitution was enacted that made Iraqi women and men equal under the law. Under Saddam Hussein’s rule, women’s literacy and education vastly improved. Women won the right to vote and run for political office. That’s when they began to hold jobs traditionally held by men.”

“Was that when so many Iraqi women became archaeologists?” Renee asked.

“Yes, they wanted the jobs their fathers and brothers had. Many also became doctors and scientists. Iraqi women were the most educated and professional women in the Arab world.

“During the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, women were given more power to keep the community functioning. Nancy and I were such advocates for equality and women’s rights; we felt our efforts had a part in the changes that occurred during those years.”

“What did you do during that war?” Benedicte asked, trying to remember what Deborah had said about her sister during that time.

“The Italians and the English funded several expeditions during that time; the number of artifacts in the museum increased by the thousands. We needed to expand again, so a large wing was added to the museum in 1986.

“That was when we published a catalog of the most important museum pieces. We had started to inventory everything, and we marked and photographed each piece. You’ll see the letters I and M along with an identifying number and the year it was discovered. Of course, we only had twenty galleries then.

“In 1988, the jewelry of the Assyrian Queens was put on display, and scholars and journalists came from all over the world to see it. Gold drew people here, as stone and clay were never able to do.

“Suddenly, Baghdad was a prestigious place to visit. Everybody wanted to see “the fabled Gold of Nimrud”—not just archaeologists, but everyone who had an interest in gold or jewelry. Those were the glory years.

“It wasn’t on display long before we had to hide it at the start of the war in 1990. The Gulf War ruined everything.

“We packed the most valuable collections in crates and hid them. We didn’t expect the termites that have infested the museum to damage so much of the artwork.

“I had to return to London during the Gulf War. Deborah helped me obtain a temporary teaching position,” Diana said, looking at Benedicte. “Remember? That’s when we met. The Christmas before Deborah’s accident.”

“Almost ten years ago. I can still taste the plum pudding your mother made. I was so young then. I hope I didn’t talk too much or behave too obnoxiously.”

“You were on your best behavior. I think you wanted Deborah to realize how much you had grown up since *lycée*. She was duly impressed, and when you left, she told me about your position at Interpol.”

“So, that’s how you knew. When I see Deborah, she’s in big trouble with me.”

Renee gave Benedicte a scorching look and said, “And you’re in big trouble with me. It seems like everyone knew about your job ten years ago, and I only found out this week!”

Realizing she had opened a can of worms she was not prepared to serve, Diana attempted to change the subject by leading the women to the Assyrian Hall. Winged bulls carved from limestone, that had originally guarded the Assyrian capital, now watched over the plundered pottery and jewelry once owned by kings and queens.

“I’ve seen items similar to these at the Louvre,” said Renee, “but they seem different here. It’s as though they belong here—in the sands of the desert, not in a museum thousands of miles away.”

“You’re very perceptive; everything here has a clear provenance in the region. Sand protected all of this so well for thousands of years that many things look as though they were carved yesterday.”

“The same way dry sand and air preserved mummies in Egypt?” Renee asked.

“Yes, the sands have preserved memories here in the desert that in other parts of the world would have rotted long ago. But after the Gulf War, hundreds of items started to disintegrate when they got wet. It was so unnecessary.”

“How did they get wet? What happened?” Benedicte asked.

“We stored the most valuable pieces in the Central Bank’s vault. Then a decision was made to flood the vault to prevent looters from breaking in. You see, we thought the war would be over quickly, and we would be able to restore everything.”

“When the water was eventually drained, the ivories I had wrapped crumbled from the dampness. Half of the pottery was covered with black mold.”

“That’s terrible, but couldn’t the mold be removed?” Benedicte asked.

“No. Because of the sanctions, I couldn’t get the chemicals that might have helped.”

“Diana, what’s your favorite piece here?” Renee asked, hoping to change the bitter tone the conversation was taking.

“My favorites change every day. But here, look at this.” She took the ring of keys from her pocket and opened a case filled with ivory. “I’m partial to these because they were discovered by Sir Max Mallowan.”

“I know that name. Wasn’t he Agatha Christie’s husband?”

“Her second husband, actually. When she met Sir Max on a dig in Ur, she promptly divorced her first husband so she could marry him. She was everyone’s favorite author when I was a schoolgirl in England. Now, here in Baghdad, I have items discovered by her husband! It’s those details that made working here so much fun.”

“Fun?”

“Well, it was fun once, a long time ago.” Diana replied. “I admit it’s been discouraging. I was part of the team that wrapped many of the items for safe storage before the war. I blame myself for so much that happened.”

“How can you blame yourself for a stupid war?” Renee interjected. “It’s the egocentric politicians and the greedy industrialists that cause war.”

“I should have been more careful.”

“This is an interesting place, but not very user-friendly. I have to squint to see the details in some of the exhibits. It seems all good museums are too dark,” Benedicte observed as they continued their walk around the museum.

Renee was in her element. “The lighting has to be kept dim to prevent fading.”

“Yes, the dim lighting is an artifact-preservation matter,” Diana acknowledged. “Bright lights can damage some types of antiquities, especially tapestries and paintings. It’s a shock when you go down to the vault and see bright sodium lamps in the hallways.

“Shall we have some tea? I’m suddenly feeling very tired.”

“You’ve kept your afternoon tea habit after all of these years?” Renee asked.

“Iraqis love their tea as much as the English do. People here drink tea at every meal.”

Benedicte said, “Please go ahead, have some tea, take a nap, if you wish. I would like to continue to look around for a while, if you don’t mind. We won’t touch anything, I promise.”

Renee added, “We’ll have tea later, if that’s all right.”

As soon as Diana left them alone, Renee grabbed Benedicte’s hand to pull her into the courtyard and steered her to a concrete bench.

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you alone. I’ve been thinking about Diana’s story. I’m not sure the artifacts she has are real—or if she even has anything of value.”

“I am beginning to have some doubts, too. The only thing left for me to figure out is if she believes it.”

“I’m not sure we should be helping Diana remove anything from Iraq right now.” Renee was thinking about having her hand chopped off if they were

caught. "I'm not willing to risk Saddam's punishment for glory of the Amazons, or even for the esteemed Crowley family."

"I know you don't like Diana, but I owe her family a lot. We'll all get out of here tomorrow with or without the artifacts, and you'll never have to see her again."

"It's not that I don't like her. I just feel left out; I have a feeling that Ms. Crowley isn't telling us the whole story about what's going on here. It seems too pat that so many artifacts are damaged beyond recovery."

"My main concern is those sandbags in front of the building. We're in the middle of the desert; I know they weren't put there because of flooding. I want to get a better look at them before dark. Someone expects a battle to take place here soon."

"I'll go with you; I don't want to stay here alone." Renee stood and moved toward the doors leading to the front grounds.

Once again, Benedicte faced the problem of having to protect Renee, and this time it seemed she would be safer tagging along. She knew Renee would not stay put anyway.

Overgrown grass vainly attempted to camouflage three trenches in the museum's front lawn. Covered with corrugated metal and earth, they were hard to miss. One slit trench had been dug beside a huge stone statue of a winged bull.

"These trenches are the same size and shape as the ones we saw at the soccer field," Renee said.

"You're right. Iraqi soldiers have dug these all over the city, wherever they expect to be fighting."

"Why here? Museums and libraries should be off limits."

"H-m-m-m. Good question."

"They may think the Americans will break their word and bomb the museum."

"Soldiers in trenches with rifles wouldn't be able to protect the museum from aerial bombing. Something else is up," Benedicte said. "I need to check a couple of things out. Please stay here; I'll be back in time for dinner."

"You can't just go out walking around. If you get yourself killed, I'll never forgive you."

"I'm going to call Robert to drive me."

"Oh, like he can protect you. Personally, I think he needs a bodyguard."

"Don't argue, Renee. I'll be safe with him, and he knows his way around the city."

Benedicte had a no-nonsense look on her face that told Renee she would not be getting her way this time.

“Take me with you,” she tried anyway.

“Do not argue. It won’t do any good.”

“Oh sure, leave me alone. I could have stayed in Paris if I wanted to be alone.”

“You will not be alone. Diana is here and there are guards at the door. I promise to be back before dark.”

Chapter XVII

Revenge Is the Reason

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

Some men did it for love; more did it for money. Not many admitted an interest in the glamour of it or the desire to travel, but it was obvious. Some claimed justice or patriotism. Robert alone claimed revenge as his reason.

When Robert was fourteen, his eight-year-old twin sisters were abducted from the family's seaside vacation villa. His family never saw them again.

As soon as he finished school, he became an investigative journalist to look for the answers he had never been given. After a year as a reporter, he realized it could never provide the level of revenge he needed. He turned to investigative police work, where punishment for the guilty was heavier.

Smuggling networks are operated by a core group of international criminals who aren't fussy about the products they transport. For a price, you could rent their underground routes and crooked border agents to move your drugs, weapons, stolen art, or women and children. It was all the same to them.

When the DEA cracked down on heroin in New York, the criminals switched to carbines in Costa Rica. Women and children were welcome commodities around the globe, and smugglers could always turn a profit in some unwatched area of the world.

In April 2003, Robert Clary was close to erecting a roadblock on a key smuggling superhighway. He had been working steadily for three months in Baghdad, establishing his undercover identity and getting familiar with the various petty thieves around town. A request from Lyon to lend a hand to an off-duty agent who would be in Baghdad for a few days on personal business seemed to be the worst possible timing as the war with the U.S. grew closer.

To his surprise, the Interpol agent was visiting the now-closed Baghdad Museum, where the English curator was a prime suspect in a rash of stolen antiquities that had recently shown up in the international black marketplace. A taxi driver, who was frequently observed coming and going at the museum, was known to be handling small supplies of stolen artwork.

Interpol was still determining what involvement the English curator had in the process. Was she a victim? Or was she actually the linchpin in the stolen antiquities marketplace that Interpol had been searching for?

Many looters hoped to make one or two big sales and return to their families middle-class, if not wealthy, men. They could make illegal deals of any sort in a small town thirty kilometers south of Baghdad. Lush date groves surrounded the town and provided cover for illicit meetings between buyers and sellers.

To an outsider, it was impossible to tell the difference between looters and traders, buyers and sellers. Everyone was afraid of being caught. The punishment for theft was swift and harsh, but as the war grew closer, Saddam Hussein's troops and police force were busy protecting his palaces and oil refineries.

With less attention from the police now, being cheated had become the overriding fear. Stories were told of farmers finding a three-inch bronze statue and selling it for fifty dollars, only to find out later it was worth twenty thousand.

The traders too, were suspicious. Fakes were beginning to appear next to authentic pieces. As the middlemen, they tried to buy at the lowest possible price to offset the merchandise that the professionals wouldn't buy from them.

Into this maelstrom, Ahmed drove his dusty Toyota twice a week. He set up shop on the shoulder of the road and waited for customers to come along. Robert had followed him there a half dozen times but had never approached him before.

Today, Robert had a five-day growth of stubble and wore sunglasses mended with twine. His loose Kurdish pants were tucked into knee-high boots with two-inch lifts. The bedraggled striped cloth wrapped around his head ensured that the casual observer would not be able to identify him as the debonair French journalist known about town as "Robere, the Ladies Man."

Ahmed took a crumpled cigarette pack from one of the many pockets in his khaki vest, extracted a wad of cotton, and unwrapped a small, polished, stone cylinder engraved with what appeared to be hieroglyphics. When Robert shook his head, Ahmed opened a black plastic bag on the seat beside him so Robert could see cuneiform tablets, some small pieces of ivory, and round bronze seals.

Robert pointed to the closest cuneiform tablet and asked how much it was. Ahmed laughed and closed the bag.

“You are not ready to deal. I am not here to sell one piece. Come back when you have some money. Maybe there will be something left.”

“I represent a well-to-do family. If I bring them fakes, they will not do business with me again. I will buy one, and if they approve, I will come back and buy all you have.”

Robert wanted at least one piece to determine the authenticity of the lot and see if its provenance could be traced to the museum. If his suspicions were correct, and the cuneiform came from the uncatalogued finds at the museum, it was the link he had been looking for.

Ahmed was hoping for the big sale that would allow him to leave Iraq. The country he once loved had become a cesspool of corruption and poverty. Whatever good Saddam had done for the country in the early days of his rule had been eclipsed by the cruelty he had shown his loyal subjects.

Coming to a satisfactory agreement pleased both men, and for the briefest of moments, they shared a flicker of the universal kinship men feel when they think have made a good deal.

Benedicte and Robert found seats at a corner table in the Botan Café. Face to face, she noticed for the first time his finely drawn, dark eyebrows and thick eyelashes, and she reluctantly admitted to herself that he was handsome in a roguish sort of way. Not her type, but she had not yet found her type. Life could proceed if only she would feel the way everyone seemed to think she should. Neighbors, co-workers, and family members had tried to fix her up numerous times, but she never met anyone she would consider dating more than once. Her friends had become so frustrated by her lack of interest in men that they were beginning to suspect she was gay and stubbornly refused to admit it either to them or to herself.

Robert abruptly broke her brief reverie when he asked, “So, what do you do for the agency when you’re not on holiday with your girlfriend? Did someone forget to tell you that Baghdad is not a prime sightseeing spot?”

“I think you have the wrong idea about this trip. Diana Crowley is the older sister of a woman Renee and I went to school with. She asked me to help her get out of Iraq.”

“It’s none of my business, but it’s way out of line for an agent to bring a friend on assignment. It’s unprofessional and worse—it’s inconvenient. I keep waiting for you to realize there’s a war going on here.”

“Speaking of ‘out of line and unprofessional,’ thanks for the advice. You don’t have all the facts. I am not on assignment. I’m here on my own to help a friend.”

“So, you brought a friend to help you help a friend? And now I’m expected to help all of you?”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“I’m just doing a job here. I don’t have any friends. Tell me what Diana Crowley has told you so far.”

“She said it was urgent that she leave without being noticed.”

“I’ll bet she did. The agency and UNESCO have been watching her for several years now. They suspect her of being a major player in the art thefts that have been occurring.”

“I know her family well. They are hard working, honest people. I doubt that she’s involved with anything illegal, but if it is true, why hasn’t she been arrested?”

Their conversation paused when the friendly old man emerged from behind the counter, bringing tea to their table. He remembered Benedicte and greeted her in Farsi, which pleased both of them. His glance took in Robert, and he nodded approvingly.

Robert took his time pouring his tea before asking, “How much do you know about the trade in stolen art and antiquities?”

“Not much,” Benedicte admitted. “Only that theft in this part of the world has been increasing over the last decade. My job has been focused on the trafficking of women and children in Asia. I haven’t had spare time to think about some stolen artwork.”

“You’ve landed right in the middle of the biggest ring of art thieves the world has seen since World War II.”

“You can’t really equate this situation with the Nazis plundering the masterpieces of Europe.”

“I can and I do. There has already been an attempt to smuggle antiquities worth more than a million dollars into France. The stolen items are museum quality, from the fourth century. Irreplaceable.”

“Can you bring me up to date on the situation here? How do Diana Crowley and the museum fit in?”

“Mesopotamian artifacts have been showing up around the globe in increasing numbers. The agency wants to confirm where they’re coming from. We know the Iraqi black market has wealthy buyers in Italy, London, and New York. Even Syria and Jordan want Iraqi antiquities.”

“Do you think the museum has been a victim of unreported thefts? Has anyone checked the inventories for missing items?” Benedicte asked.

“It’s not that easy. Each museum department keeps its own inventory, handwritten in Arabic. We can tell by the markings that some of the items recently recovered came from the museum.”

“So this appears to be an inside job?”

“It’s a logical conclusion. They were among the items the museum curators reportedly stored for safekeeping, and they haven’t been reported stolen.”

“Are you ready to make an arrest? Is Diana your only suspect?”

“If it was up to me, I would have had her in handcuffs months ago; but I’ve been instructed to take a less direct approach.”

“Frustrating, isn’t it? My preference is to make an immediate arrest,” Benedicte said.

“This situation is different from saving a load of women and children from slavery. The agency wants to identify the buyers first. We’re working on developing sources within the art smuggling community.”

“But it’s always the same story. It’s not the middleman you’re after, but the international conglomerates.”

“Exactly. It’s been proven successful with drug smuggling. We hope if we can identify the buyers, we’ll eventually break the smuggling networks.”

“They may be connected to the crimes I’ve been investigating.”

“That’s the point, it’s a continuing circle. One group sells drugs, and they use the money to buy stolen high tech weapons. They sell the guns to another group, who use the guns for extortion and prostitution.”

Benedicte was aware that the smuggling networks were well established. “Human beings are trafficked over the same routes as drugs and weapons. It’s safe to assume the stolen art is being moved the same way.”

“I want them smashed. They’ve ruined too many lives,” Robert said, suddenly sounding angry.

“I wish I had known this before. Diana says she has some Amazon artifacts which are not museum property. She’s asked me to help her get out of the country.”

“I’m not sure I believe that. I think she’s hiding something from you,” Robert said.

“We need hard evidence that Diana is the perpetrator and not the victim before we arrest her.” Benedicte felt her heart sink as the evidence grew against Deborah’s sister.

“The situation will escalate in the next few days, when the American forces take Baghdad. My job now includes keeping an eye out for you and your American friend.”

“Is that why bunkers are in front of the museum? Do you expect fighting there?”

“The Geneva Conventions require an occupying force to protect museums from damage, but I think Iraqi soldiers plan to use the museum as a combat position,” Robert answered. “If so, they’ll have already planted a cache of weapons somewhere near the museum. Hell, they could even be stashed somewhere inside.”

“So, you need me to look for them.”

“I was hoping you’d offer. You are the only one who has both the access and the skill to do it.”

“Renee needs to leave. She is a civilian and is not equipped to handle this.”

“I advise you to get your friend out of the country as soon as possible. I can’t guarantee her safety if people find out she’s American.”

“Will you drive her over the border to Jordan? From there she can go to the embassy and be taken care of.”

“Aren’t you going to be leaving with her?”

“Things are not as simple here as I originally thought.”

“Then you should see this.” Robert reluctantly handed her a large, sealed, manila envelope.

The first photo was of the museum taken from the road. The car parked by the trade entrance resembled Ahmed’s. The license plate was not visible, but the cracked windshield appeared to be the same.

The second photo was of a man leaving the museum, and walking toward the car with one hand inside his jacket. He was wearing the traditional black-and-white checked kaffiyeh scarf, which obscured his face too much for a positive identification.

The third photo was of a similar car, parked on the side of the highway. In this photo, Benedicte could see the red license plate. Dust obscured the plate numbers, but she knew the red plates were only issued to taxis in Iraq. The driver was standing on the side of the road leaning toward a man and a woman and appearing to offer them a package of Iraqi cigarettes.

The last showed two men standing at the rear of the dusty Toyota with the trunk raised. The man facing the camera was Ahmed. The other man had a large, black plastic bag in his hand.

Benedicte replaced the photos carefully in the envelope and resealed it.

As they prepared to leave, the man behind the counter called out to them, “Come back, you are always welcome here.”

“See you next time, Makeia,” Robert answered in flawless Arabic.

“Do you know him?”

“Sure, everyone knows him. Makeia is one of the good guys. Be careful: he has a fondness for beautiful women.”

Before Robert dropped her off at the museum entrance he asked, “One more question. Why do you think Diana asked you for help? If she’s guilty, someone connected with Interpol should be the last person to confide in.”

“Either she is not guilty, which I hope is the case, or she thinks I will look the other way. I just don’t know.”

Chapter XVIII

Ma'assalama Means Good-bye

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

Dinner was not served quickly at the Botan Café that night. Before the gaunt waiter could bring their order, nearby bombing shook the walls and fitfully rattled the “blast cloth” covered windows. A Canadian journalist at a nearby table switched on his shortwave radio. The unflappable BBC was reporting that forty satellite-guided bombs had pounded a heavily secured storage facility used by Saddam Hussein’s regime in Baghdad.

Diana did not want to wait for dinner; she wanted to go back to the museum immediately. “The Americans won’t bomb the museum. We’ll be safe there.”

Benedicte was inclined to agree with Diana but first looked at Renee for her approval.

“There are guards at the museum who know Diana. It feels like a safer alternative to me than the al-Hamra, at least for now. And I’d like to take a few more photos.”

“Let’s go then. We can take our dinner with us.”

“*Ma’assalama*,” the old man behind the bar called out the Arabic farewell to the women.

“*Ma’assalama*,” Diana answered automatically.

Benedicte noted the flawless accent and wondered how fluent Diana really was with the difficult language, and why she would lie about it.

When they got back to the museum, Diana encouraged Renee to take photographs while she brewed a pot of oolong tea for them.

"There has not been a photographer on staff here since 1990, when the museum closed during the Gulf War. We have hundreds of items from excavation sites throughout the country that have not yet been cataloged."

"What are all of those rooms with the doors closed? Can I look in there?" Renee asked.

"That's the area we call R and R—registration and restoration. There's no reason for you to go in there."

"Restoration sounds interesting. I know a little about that from art classes at the university."

"There hasn't been any restoration here since the sanctions were imposed. The rooms are being used for temporary storage space now. Really, there's nothing worth taking a picture of."

"I would have thought in a museum this large there would be lots of storage space."

"The storage rooms in the old building, which was new when I came here, are in execrable conditions. Don't go in there, it's not safe."

"You said you came here in 1970. In France, that would make it a new building."

"In England too, but not here. Groundwater infiltration and cracks in the waterproofing of the roof have let in humidity and dust. The heat and termites make it impossible to store anything of value there safely."

"That sounds quite unpleasant."

"It's best to stay away from that area."

"I think there's enough for me to see without going down there. I'll be back in time for tea."

While Renee wandered through the galleries taking photos, Benedicte was watching Khalil talking with another man, just outside the wrought iron gates. He was the only security guard who lived on the premises, and he seemed to come and go as he pleased.

When the two men walked away together, Benedicte was able to follow them, hidden from view by the overgrown, courtyard gardens. At the rear of the museum, Khalil unlocked the door of a small concrete storage building that opened onto the alley. As the door swung open, she saw the room was stockpiled with weapons.

Masses of rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers were propped against the wall, more guns were hanging from hooks, and there were boxes of ammunition piled on the floor.

She made her way silently through the gardens back to the museum to call Robert.

“Your suspicions were right. There’s enough gunpowder in that small room to arm a dozen men,” she said when he answered. “Renee needs to get away from here.”

Renee found her there just as Benedicte was saying good-bye. “Calling Robert again? Don’t tell me we had to come all the way to Baghdad for you to find a boyfriend,” she teased, but she found herself feeling jealous.

Benedicte didn’t bother to answer, which disturbed Renee even more.

“Benedicte, we need to talk. I thought we would have all the time we needed this week in Paris, but ...”

“I know. I’m sorry. I feel as though I have ruined everything again. It seems to be my karma to put the people I care about in danger.”

“It’s not all your fault. I wasn’t honest. I didn’t care about coming to Iraq—I just wanted to be with you.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I knew I should not have brought you here, but I wanted to be with you, too.”

“I never explained what happened.” Renee’s voice was barely audible. “Those two years when I disappeared, I know you thought I was acting like a spoiled American brat.”

Benedicte balanced on the edge of a low, brick wall and looked out at the once beautiful, now neglected garden, remembering better times with a dull ache that threatened to turn to tears at any minute. “When you stopped calling, and you didn’t answer my e-mails, I didn’t know what to think.”

“That’s what I need to explain. I realize how wrong that was.”

“At first, I wondered if your Father encouraged you to forget about everyone in France.”

“No, don’t blame him. He had nothing to do with it.”

“I thought I had lost my best friend,” Benedicte said quietly.

“No, that will never happen.”

“I felt like just another school chum that you had forgotten. No more important to you than Deborah or any of our other classmates were.”

“I told you I’d been busy and worn down but it was more than that. I had breast cancer, and I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t want anyone to know.”

“I would have been with you.”

“I needed to be alone. I thought I was going to die.”

“Oh, please don’t say that.”

"Even after the surgery and the chemo, my doctors warned me the cancer might come back. That's why I waited so long to tell you. I was waiting for my oncologist to give me the all clear."

"Renee, I haven't been truthful with you either. I knew about your illness. I wanted to be there with you, but I respected the fact that you didn't want to see anyone from the 'old days.'"

"How did you know? I made my mother swear not to tell you."

"Technically, your mother kept her promise. She didn't tell me; she told my mother, and the rest is history."

"I can't believe she told anyone."

"I'm glad she did. The yellow roses were from me."

"They came every day I was in the hospital. And I thought you didn't even know ..."

"I remembered yellow roses were your favorite. I hoped they would cheer you up."

"They did. I never guessed they were from you. I was so blind about so many things. All I could think about were my own problems."

"You were frightened. You handled it better than I would have."

"I shouldn't have shut you out. I thought I wasn't important to you; you were busy with your new job and new friends."

"I told you we were friends for life when you helped me cram for algebra every night for a week before our finals."

Renee smiled at the memory as she began to realize it was true. They were friends for life. Maybe the feelings she had harbored secretly for so long meant that they were going to be more than friends.

While the three women were having tea in Diana's quarters on the lower level, Benedicte asked the archaeologist, "I assume there is some sort of security system here. Do you have to set it?"

"The big money honchos at UNESCO fund a security system for the galleries." Diana replied without any hesitation. "They make sure the guards take care of setting it. I hope they didn't put their faith in the wrong people. But this way, if anything goes wrong, they can't blame me."

"Good, we should be safe here tonight. We have to leave the city as soon as possible though," Benedicte said. "When will you be ready to leave?"

"I can't possibly be ready quickly. I refuse to leave the things I've worked for so long behind. Anything I leave behind will be stolen."

“You can wear a *chador* for traveling and use the inside pockets for holding your valuables.” Renee had already tried on one of Diana’s cloaks and was enchanted with the hidden compartments.

“I still haven’t explained to you about the artifacts.”

“Diana, we need to leave. You can tell us all about Gertrude Bell’s discoveries while you pack.”

“Where was I before the bombs came last night? It seems so long ago.”

“You were telling us how she traveled through Mesopotamia. Did she know T. E. Lawrence?”

“She certainly did. He got credit for a lot of her work. It wasn’t hard to figure out that he was the brawn, and she was the brains. Not an unusual situation for women.”

“Can you give us the Reader’s Digest version of how you got involved?” Benedicte wanted the facts, but not all of Diana’s rambling reminiscences.

Diana began with Gertrude contracting malaria in World War One and her friend Faisal becoming the first king of Iraq in the early 1920s. “Gertrude became Director of the Iraq Museum but she died three years later. Some people who don’t know better think she committed suicide, but she wouldn’t have done that. She had too much to live for.

“Her assistant continued Gertrude’s work until she retired and passed on the legacy to her confidant and assistant, Nancy Wilcox. I met Nancy on a trip to Egypt when she was ready to retire. She chose me to become the next acolyte to carry on Gertrude’s work.”

“But can you tell us what evidence you have about the Amazons? I’m extremely curious about that. The University of Michigan Museum of Art had an exhibit last year called ‘Queens, Goddesses, and Amazons.’ I wish I had paid more attention when I was there,” Renee said.

Diana hesitated for a long moment to gather her thoughts.

“It was a coincidence, really. Gertrude was on a dig in Turkey near the Black Sea coast where the ruins of a settlement had been discovered. All of the remains were female, even the children.

“Gertrude thought there might be a connection with a small, flat island that was visible from the settlement. She found the remains of a roofless temple with an altar built of local stones on the uninhabited island.

“She postponed their departure to explore the tea plantations and hazelnut groves after one of the workers told her about an exotic and rare flower growing on the nearby mountain slopes.

“From her mountain camp she saw the full moon shine on the island. An unusual glow smoldered from the center of the island where she had found the ruined temple just days before. Her first concerns were that her workmen had left a campfire burning, and she quickly returned to the island where she located the source of the light. It was a large black stone nearly hidden beneath the altar.

“That stone was the most sacred object of the Amazons. It was where they prayed before they went into battle. I have the stone. Gertrude was certain that the Amazons lived and worshipped in Mesopotamia.”

Benedicte and Renee exchanged skeptical glances. “So it’s a stone you’re trying to smuggle out of the country? That shouldn’t be too much trouble,” Renee said, sounding disappointed.

By now the two listeners were sleepy and ready for bed. “Let’s all try to get some sleep, so we will be ready to travel,” Benedicte said.

“Tomorrow may be our last chance to leave before the troops get here.”

“Ahmed is willing to take us to the airport or to Jordan; after that, we will have to find a way to get to Europe,” Diana replied.

But during the night, all their plans were changed.

Section IV: Communications

There was a definite process by which one made people into friends, and it involved talking to them and listening to them for hours at a time.

—Rebecca West, suffragette and journalist

Chapter XX

Krispy Kremes, Federal Court, and Belle Isle

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

It's like the truth about Santa Claus. No one ever tells you, but you eventually discover it for yourself: as soon as you have a job, a real nine to five, Monday through Friday job, Monday morning comes earlier than Sunday morning.

I rolled the car windows down, hoping the chilly air would wake me up. At 6 AM, the dew on the freshly-cut grass combined with the morning air, creating an aroma that is one of the things I like best about Michigan.

When I wrote restaurant reviews and horoscopes for the Times, I never had to be at work before nine. To make it even better, the owner was a friend of mine who was just glad I showed up at all. Now that he was in jail, and I was the owner of the paper, things had changed for both of us.

Today I needed to be at work extra early so I could finish Eleanor's report and get it sent to her before my real life could interfere again.

The newspaper business had been my destiny since my aunt gave me a printing press for my eighth birthday. Writing a best selling book and buying a blueberry farm with the profits kept me busy for a few years after college.

Now that I was grown all the way up, I realized that influencing readers is a serious responsibility. Technically, it wasn't my job to influence anyone, but I was convinced that if the public knew the facts, they would do the right thing. It was a challenge just to keep up with environmental and political issues in our region. What was happening in Washington affected our communities even more, but most people won't take the time to read the national news. Thirty

minutes of nightly news on television, while they eat dinner, was enough doom and gloom for the average citizen of Montrose.

I realized that a majority of our subscribers just wanted to know what was playing at the Star Theatre on Friday night, or if it were going to rain on Sunday. My hope was that they would vote for the good guy, someone who would keep the truckloads of garbage from Canada out of our landfills, because they'd read about the issue in the Times.

Pete Brown, the paper's previous owner, had been desperate for cash. When he started running Lonely Hearts personal ads, it caused a crescendo of community protests. Some people, who didn't know the whole story, thought that was what drove his mother crazy. I had been making a lot of changes since he went to prison.

The scent of hazelnut French Roast cozied up to me as soon as I walked in. Asia knew how to make my day—or at least get it off to a good start. I don't make it a habit to brag, but taking a chance on hiring her was one of the smartest things I've ever done.

I checked the early CNN news feed for Europe and saw an anti-communist rally consisting of a hundred protestors against Vietnamese pro-democracy campaigners in Paris.

Another headline caught my eye: *First Meeting of the Latin American Competition Forum Held in Paris*. To make sure this was not some sort of Hispanic female sporting event, I read far enough to see it was about competition in the banking and telecommunications industries.

The next looked more interesting: *Mideast Violence Divides France*. I read on: An estimated 150,000 people had marched in Paris to denounce a wave of recent attacks on Jewish schools, cemeteries, and synagogues in France. Fifteen hundred police and anti-riot vehicles were deployed as marchers headed toward the historic Place de la Republique.

It didn't specify how many were injured or arrested. French newspapers were notorious about downplaying anything negative that happens in Paris. Especially in the spring, when flocks of fat American tourists were winging their way to the enchanted city.

In the quiet office, the laser printer was punching out what sounded like reams of my expensive paper. Someone obviously didn't expect me in so early; I wondered what personal contraband they were printing. I usually didn't care as long as it wasn't porn or a hundred copies of their resume listing me as a reference, but the price of paper was up thirty percent on the last invoice. I knew if I got up to

look it would be my excuse not to finish Eleanor's report. I jotted myself a note to put a sign over the copier to remind the staff it was for business use only.

I e-mailed Eleanor's report while I read the news, drank my coffee, and planned the staff meeting. It felt good to have it out of the way: I would try to find a way to talk to Nan or Laverne about it soon.

Before the rest of the employees arrived, I called Maria. She wouldn't be up, but she never hesitated to wake me anytime she wanted something. "I checked the wire services and CNN today," I said. "All the action is in Iraq. Nothing is going on in Paris except demonstrators protesting Vietnamese elections and anti-Jerusalem attacks. Would Renee have been involved in either of those?"

"No—oh, I honestly don't know. I thought I knew everything about her, but obviously I was wrong. I'll call you later."

By seven, all of the staff was in the office except for Charley Chaminski, who hustled in late enough to draw attention to the time. He was wearing his customary too-tight shirt and sheepish grin. The extra-large box of still-warm Krispy Kremes he carried was the office's newest addiction. It was also Charley's favorite Get Out of Jail Free card.

I laid out my plan for the week to focus on the orange alert and how it would affect our everyday lives. Stress levels in the city were already too high, and I wanted the paper to downplay the elevated threat level.

Gas prices had been going up in the Motor City since the war started, but most people refused to car pool. Airport security would be a big issue, too. I assigned those stories quickly, and settled a minor dispute between two staffers about vacation schedules.

Matt Blanke, my star reporter, called to report in from Federal Court. The trial of the accused terrorists would be in the headlines until it was resolved, and he wouldn't have time for much else. I knew Matt could handle the story, so the staff was surprised when I said I would be going downtown in time for the opening statements.

Out-of-town reporters filled the crowded courtroom. Speculation and rumors had swirled around the three dishwashers in the eighteen months since their arrest. The man the feds were actually looking for, Nabil al-Marabh, had moved out of the rental house months before the raid. Two days later the feds had found him near Chicago, four hundred miles from southwest Detroit. It had been bad timing for the dishwashers; they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

At first, Matt was bent out of shape when I showed up. He cooled off when he realized that I was only interested in the proceedings and that I was going to let

him do the actual reporting. I rarely bent the rules when it came to keeping the editorial and the news sides of the business separate.

The day flew by, and I made myself leave before five. I wanted time to shower and change clothes before Nan picked me up. Being with her was the best part of my day. We were celebrating spring with a picnic on Belle Isle.

Belle Isle was still a haven for nature lovers amid the grime of an industrial city. Crossing the bridge only took a moment, but it left behind the view of dilapidated buildings and vacant, trash-strewn lots that dominated much of the east side.

Nan knew about a little-used stretch of green behind the Harbor Master's island office. Underage drinkers, bikers, and pot smokers avoided the area, and families usually passed it by because it had that "off-limits" look to it.

Our two old dogs loved to run along the riverfront and show off for us by pretending to chase away the waddling Canada geese. When a Great Lakes freighter chugged up the river, the engineer gave a friendly blast of the foghorn at them. Skip made sure we were watching before he barked menacingly at the monstrous boat.

The day's troubles seemed to drift away on the warm breeze as we lay under an old willow tree. As the afternoon's glow turned into an opaque twilight, I felt Nan's soft breath on my cheek. I watched the sunset over the river until I couldn't resist her any longer. When I turned toward her, she was waiting for me.

Her fingertips played itsy bitsy spider on my ear and down my neck. They continued downward until they found buttons blocking their path. Nan's smile as she slowly unbuttoned the first three buttons on my blouse told me not to protest. This was something she needed as much as I did.

Her hand slid inside my bra, gently caressing me until my nipples hardened. I kissed her neck; our breathing became more intense until I could no longer hear the sounds of the river or anything else. Immersed in the moment, I reached down and pulled the blanket over us. I led her hand to where I was already warm and wet, and I whispered in her ear what she wanted to hear.

When we got back to my house, Nan unloaded the car while I checked my phone messages. There were several routine messages from my family, and—predictably—one from Maria.

"I know you wish I would stop bothering you, but I still can't get in touch with Renee. She hasn't called me, and nobody answers. I just remembered that Benedicte is with some special police force, and I don't know if that's good news or bad. Sorry to ramble."

I didn't want to distract Nan from our planned evening activities. I was looking forward to her spending the night and our waking up together. If she heard that message, she would want to slip on her police chief's hat and start investigating. She had retired a year ago, but she liked to keep up with what was going on in the world.

I wanted to talk to her about my assignment with the LAP, but I was afraid she'd either tell me I was in over my head or think I was a snitch and be ashamed of me. I distantly realized that I was transferring my ambivalent feelings about it to her.

Chapter XXI

Candlelight and Rain

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Maria's restaurant was a favorite stop for Nan and me after work. The main dining room was nearly empty at six thirty on a Tuesday night. We picked the half-booth by the front window so we could watch the steady spring rain splash against the plate glass windows. On rainy nights, the candlelight reflected off the white tablecloths, and romantic shadows danced around the room.

Without consulting me, Nan ordered a bottle of Sangria and calamari appetizers. If that was an indication that she was in no hurry to rush out into the deluge, it was fine with me. While our waiter poured the wine, I asked him if Maria was in. I hadn't seen her at her usual station behind the bar when we dashed in.

"She's here, Carla, but she's been in her office since she came in. Do you want me to tell her you're here?" Danny has been working for Maria for two years, and he knew that his boss and I were old friends.

"No hurry, I'd just like to say hello before we leave," I replied. We finished the first bottle of wine quickly. I was surprised, though, when Nan ordered a second bottle.

"How's the trial going?" she asked as she refilled our glasses. "I'm proud that Michigan is the first state to prosecute terrorists. It will be interesting to hear the whole story of who turned them in."

"So far, all we've heard are the opening statements. Why don't you come down and listen in?"

"Don't you have any secret informers who tell you what's happening behind the scenes? Most newspaper editors know a lot more about what's really going on than gets into the paper."

This seemed like a strange topic of conversation for Nan. Since her retirement, she had limited her conversation to travel, books, and dogs. We'd both avoided talking about work and the real world since 9/11. At the time she decided to retire, I was taking on new responsibilities at the Times, and it just seemed like a good idea to keep our relationship within narrow boundaries.

I'd had a hard time keeping secrets from her but it was easier when we didn't talk about the news or what was going on outside of our own little world.

Just then, Maria came to our table and slid in next to Nan. She looked like hell, even though it was a work night, and early.

"I still haven't heard from her," Maria blurted. "I know something is wrong."

"Hello, how are you? I'm fine, thanks." I replied with a poker face to see if she had any notion of civility left. Nan gave me a hard poke with her elbow.

"Oh, sorry Carla. Hello, Nan. It's been three days, and I don't understand why I can't reach Renee. It isn't like her to be petty and refuse to call me." Maria ran her fingers through her short blonde hair in frustration, leaving it sticking straight up. She probably had been doing that all day.

"I've called every hour, and there's never an answer." Maria grew silent and rubbed her blue-shadowed eyes, fighting back tears.

"I'll make some phone calls and have someone from the police force there look her up." Nan surprised both of us with her offer; she usually refused to get involved with personal matters.

The rain, the wine, and Nan's hand holding mine under the table made me forget the unease I felt when she had mentioned informers earlier. As the Sangria began to work its magic on me, warm, tingly feelings spread down to my toes, and I had an irresistible urge to kick off my heels and rub my toes up her pant leg. I was captivated by her profile as she looked out the window with the candlelight softly glowing upon her. God, she was gorgeous ... and I was starting to feel very sexy.

I wanted to leave before Maria's romantic problems completely overshadowed the pleasant glow I was feeling.

Chapter XXII

Jumping the Gun

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Nan knew from her years on the police force that if an adult woman were missing, nine times out of ten, it was because she wanted to be. That didn't necessarily mean that she hadn't done something foolish, though.

She wasn't surprised when her inquiry to the Paris police department met with bored skepticism. When she repeated her name for the record, she automatically added her former title, Chief of Police, City of Montrose, Michigan. That little deceit boosted her inquiry past the gatekeeper and up the chain of command. Without credentials, it would have languished at the bottom of the call log until the end of the day.

Nan's next call was to Eleanor Ward. The women had never made it past a casual friendship, but when Nan was on the force, and Eleanor worked at the FBI Field Office downtown, they'd had a congenial working relationship. When occasional special training took Nan to the McNamara Building, the two women often had lunch together.

"Eleanor, we have a problem in Montrose that I could use your help with. Unofficially, of course."

"I knew the day would come when you needed my help. Is it my cunning interrogation prowess or my lethal sharpshooter expertise you want?"

"Show off ... let's make a date to go to the shooting range. I could use the practice, and I'll take you to lunch afterwards."

"Sounds like a plan. I could use a few hours of practice to maintain my sharpshooter certification. Now, what's the problem?"

"I'm probably jumping the gun. No pun intended."

“None taken.” Eleanor chuckled; Nan was one of the few people whose teasing had that effect on her.

“A young woman, single, has opened an art and antiques shop in Montrose. She was born in France, but has dual citizenship. She seems to be AWOL in a foreign country.”

“Would that be Renee Martin?”

“You know her? Don’t tell me she is on the Bureau’s Most Wanted list.”

“No, so far the only ones looking for her are her book club.”

“Her book club? What do they have to do with this?”

“If you can wait for the target practice, I think we should have lunch today. I’ll buy this time.”

Nan made her way through the narrow aisle of a neighborhood diner. She saw Eleanor seated at a small table near the back door.

“Thanks for meeting me halfway. I hate trying to park downtown anytime before six.”

“You’re welcome. It feels good to get out of the office and get some fresh air. I’ve been working a lot of hours lately, including too many Saturdays.”

“Don’t pretend this is something new for you. I’ve never known you to take Saturdays off. When are you going to get a life?”

A nice young waitress interrupted their conversation. She did her best to give her flat Michigan accent some oomph when she told them the specials of the day were po’ boys and *étouffée*. The Creole eatery also had chicken rice soup, so Eleanor was able to skip the crawfish Nan ordered.

“Nan, are you aware of what LAP actually does?” Eleanor asked, as soon as the pony-tailed waitress had left their table. “We try to keep a low profile.”

“I’m out of the loop since I retired, but I know you report to Homeland Security and thus ultimately to the FBI.”

“That’s true as far as it goes. I’ve heard all of the jokes about LAP, as I’m sure you have. If I were in charge, the first thing I would do is have that acronym changed. Agents who should know better call it Lesbians Achieving Power. You can substitute Latinos, laid off auto workers; whatever minority you can think of that begins with L; and you can imagine what the P stands for.”

“So who are you actually investigating?” Nan asked.

“Middle-aged, mostly retired, women. Middle-aged feminists are the new invisible majority. They have disposable incomes and plenty of free time to travel.”

“Sounds like a lot of women I know.”

“My department monitors their phone calls, e-mail, and Internet use. We scrutinize their credit-card charges, travel itineraries, even their social activities. Including book clubs.”

Nan nodded thoughtfully. “Book clubs, that’s interesting.”

“That is how I found out about Renee’s trip to Paris.”

“Really? I’m surprised. She doesn’t seem to fit your profile.”

“Our campaign includes efforts to recruit the suspects’ friends and family members as government informers. Renee may not be middle-aged or retired, but she has friends who are. You may not be aware that she’s well off. Inherited money. She also travels to Europe frequently.”

“I’m middle-aged and retired; are you trying to recruit my friends and family to spy on me?” Nan’s eyes blazed, and she wished she’d had a drink. “Or am I above suspicion because I don’t have tons of money?”

“Believe me, Nan, there are things about this job that I’m not happy about.”

“Eleanor, this is pretty nasty. It’s not something I expected of you.”

“If I don’t do this, someone else will, and she might not have the discretion and common sense that I have. You should be glad it’s me.”

“Women are not the problem. It’s men who start wars.”

“It is not only women the department is investigating, it’s Democrats, immigrant Arabs, even the Klan. Southeast Michigan has a large population of all of those groups.”

“Democrats?”

“I know. Our informants all think their group is the government’s main target, but the truth is, we are just fishing. But I have to deal with some pretty scary people on a daily basis.”

“How does Renee Martin fit into this?”

“I have a contact in her book club. That segment of the population has Washington very interested. They’re frequent international travelers, and though apparently most have modest means, they’re all over the world. Before she disappeared, I knew Martin was in France, ostensibly to visit her family and do some shopping.”

“You must know that I’m a member of that book club. I’d bet my pension there’s nothing subversive going on. Is that why you wanted to see me today? Am I being watched?”

“The public doesn’t realize it, but we’re watching and listening in all the time,” Eleanor answered.

“There’s electronic surveillance of anyone traveling outside of the U.S.. E-mail messages have increased between American travelers in Europe and the Middle East. We want to know why.”

“So, in your opinion has Renee disappeared because she wanted to? The last time anyone was able to reach her by phone was Sunday morning.”

“Nan, do you think she could be in Europe buying stolen antiquities or art?” Eleanor asked bluntly, ignoring Nan’s question.

“I doubt it, but I don’t know her well. I can’t run a background check on every pretty woman I meet anymore. I’ve left a message for the Police Chief in Paris. I’ll know more when I hear back from him.”

“What help do you need from me?” Eleanor asked.

“I was hoping you could run a check on her and her friend to see if they have left France.”

“It’s possible. Since the Schengen agreement, people move between countries in Europe with way too much ease for me. Bottom line, Nan, what do you think has happened to her?”

“My gut instincts tell me something is wrong. I’d appreciate anything you can find out.”

“We want to know where she is, too. If something is wrong, we’ll hear about it soon enough.”

“Any chance you can tell me the name of your informant? I’d like to know if it’s the same person who’s asked me to find Ms. Martin.”

“You know I can’t do that. It’s not a big deal. She gives me as little information as possible, and she’s never mentioned your name. Just don’t go leaving the country.”

“You can’t possibly think that I’m involved in this.” Nan gave Eleanor the look she usually reserved for used car salesmen and the band of roving contractors who wanted to apply a coat of blacktop to her driveway every spring.

“Of course not, just a little humor between old friends. Besides, I haven’t had a chance to say that to anyone in a long time.”

After giving in to their waitress’s suggestion to try the bread pudding, the women agreed to keep in touch.

“One more thing,” Nan asked. “Is it Carla? I need to know, Eleanor.”

Eleanor looked away and busied herself determining a fifteen percent tip for the two lunches. “You’ll figure it out, Nan. I told you; it’s no big deal.”

Later, when Nan drove by the bookstore, there was one empty parking space in front. That seemed like a good omen. Years of parking a police cruiser any-

where she wanted had left her unskilled in the fine art of finding parking spaces. If one were not immediately available, she often kept driving.

She needed to talk to someone, and any of the three women who owned the store would be a good candidate. Laverne Stephenson had been a friend for many years. She wouldn't hesitate to offer advice, even if she knew Nan probably wouldn't take it. Her partner, Shirley, was one of the most understanding and patient women in the world, and she would at least make an excellent listener.

It was Ginger, though, that she hoped to find minding the store. Ginger was notorious for her ability to keep a secret, which inevitably led to everyone confiding in her. If Carla had any secrets, it would be Ginger who knew them.

Laverne and Ginger were at the store preparing for the First Thursday Singles event at the store the next night. Their newest event was bringing in customers and creating a buzz in both the straight and gay communities.

"Nan, you're here at the perfect time! Can you stop in tomorrow night and sign a few books?" Laverne was genuinely glad to see her old friend, but also never missed an opportunity to promote My Sisters Books as the place to see and be seen.

Ginger took one look at Nan's dour face, greeted her with an affectionate hug, and successfully landed kisses on both cheeks. Thanks to years of tending bar, she intuitively recognized an upset woman before she said a word.

"There's a fresh pot of coffee. Help yourself. Unless you'd rather have tea."

Nan poured herself a cup of coffee from the Mr. Coffee pot parked behind the cash register and straddled the remaining chair at the refinished wooden table where yellow tablets, paperback books, and calendars were spread out in a confused jumble.

"I could sign a few books while we sit and talk," Nan offered, as an alternative to showing up in person for a book signing. Laverne pulled a dozen volumes of Nan's poetry off the shelves and piled them on the table in front of her.

"Now tell us, to what do we owe the honor of your company?" Laverne asked. "We never see you without Carla anymore."

"Not that that's a bad thing," Ginger quickly added. She and Carla had been best friends for years, and she was glad to see Carla happy for the first time since Kerry had died.

"I'd like to know what you might know about Renee Martin that I don't. She's dropped out of sight in France. I need to know if it was her choice, or if something happened to her."

“Maria’s been in here a couple of times talking about her, but I thought it was just a lover’s quarrel. Do you think it might be something more serious?” Ginger asked.

“I’m not sure of anything right now. I had a talk with someone from a branch of Homeland Security today that has me fuming.”

“Homeland Security? What would they have to do with Renee? They can’t even find Osama.”

“I know it sounds paranoid, but I’m worried about our privacy.” Nan drew a slow, deliberate breath before she continued. “There’s a surveillance campaign in the Detroit area ... and we’re one of the primary targets.”

Laverne’s face mottled with uncustomary outrage. “We’re a target! Of what? Homeland Security is supposed to be finding terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, not investigating retired teachers.”

“Our esteemed Attorney General has transformed the FBI into an agency whose only mission is to prevent terrorist attacks,” Nan replied. “SIN is gathering information from thousands of local agencies, including some in Montrose.”

“Sin? Is that some new Bible-thumping right-wing group?”

“Oh, sorry. It’s S. I. N., short for Security Information Network.”

“Are you saying someone in Montrose is giving the FBI information about us? About me?” Ginger asked. “The only agencies who know anything about me are the Community Center and the animal shelter. My father will sue them so fast; they’ll wish they had never heard of anybody named Harris.”

“I’m saying that the FBI is recruiting average citizens to infiltrate Democrat, Arab, and Women’s groups. In plain English—informers!” Although Nan tried to remain unemotional, she couldn’t keep the indignant tone from her voice. “They’re trying to lump us with the Klan and the skinheads.”

“When you were Police Chief, didn’t the department use informers?” Laverne asked.

“Yes, of course. Thieves, drug dealers, gang members—not middle-class women spying on their friends and neighbors. Maybe even their own families, or God forbid, members of their book club.

“So how does Renee fit into this?” Laverne seemed genuinely puzzled by the turns the conversation was taking.

“I’m not sure. Just between us—Laverne, I know you’ll tell Shirley—someone’s reporting our book club activities to the LAP,” Nan said, slowly spitting the final words out. “They knew Renee flew to Paris on Friday; apparently they are interested in anyone who leaves the country.”

“Well, it’s not me or Shirley.” Laverne replied vehemently.

“I know it can’t be any of us. Ginger has a family history of being close-mouthed, and it’s certainly not me. So who can it be?” Nan wondered aloud.

Just then, two young women came into the store to purchase some sex toys as a gag gift for a friend’s birthday.

“I’ll go,” Ginger offered. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell them that’s everyone’s favorite excuse for buying a dildo.”

While Ginger was helping them, Laverne gave her old friend a hard look. The stress and unhappiness she saw in Nan’s eyes was deeper than it should be for a retired cop who wrote poetry for a hobby. Before she could ask what the real problem was, the phone rang and another customer came in. Before she had a chance to get back, Nan was rinsing out her coffee cup and getting ready to leave.

“Anything I can do, Nan, just let me know.”

“Please be careful who you talk to. This has me spooked. One more thing,” Nan looked at Ginger and Laverne, “is there any chance Renee is buying or selling stolen art?”

Ginger replied immediately. “No way. She’s a straight shooter, a sweet kid. People don’t know what she’s been through. She wouldn’t risk doing something that would jeopardize her business.”

Nan looked at Laverne, expecting her to agree with Ginger, and was surprised when Laverne wouldn’t meet her eyes. Laverne fixed her gaze on the table, doodling question marks on the yellow legal pad in front of her.

“I honestly don’t know what to say. We don’t know her that well, do we?”

Nan left the store with unresolved questions and renewed determination to find some answers.

Chapter XXIII

Mackinac Island Fudge

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

I hadn't heard from Nan all day; maybe this was a good time for both of us to get some space. I needed someone to talk to, and Ginger was a good listener, that rarest of friends with no hidden agenda. That may have come from growing up beautiful and with a trust fund. The only thing I ever had that she wanted was my dog, Skip.

"Hey, Ginger, it's me. Can you meet me for dinner tonight?"

"I'm still at the bookstore; I could meet you somewhere in Montrose."

"Twenty minutes at the Broadway? I'm hungry."

"Good. See you there."

I had ordered tea for both of us when I saw her pull into the parking lot behind the deli. The sun was already low in the sky, but Ginger hadn't taken off her Gucci sunglasses. The denim and leather combination she wore was designed for someone twenty years younger. Her Grosse Pointe hairstylist did all of the Detroit rocker's wives, so Ginger usually looked as if she should be singing back-up for the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

After hugs and a quick look at the menu, we placed our orders and made small talk until the waitress delivered our turkey Ruebens.

"Carla, what do you think has happened to Renee? Everyone's coming by the bookstore and asking us if we know anything about her."

"Funny, I was going to ask you that, too. Maria asked me to check news reports for problems in France, but I'm not sure what I'm looking for."

"We are a bookstore, not a clearing house for runaway brides."

"So, you think it's only a lover's quarrel?" I asked.

“No, I wouldn’t say that. As far as I can tell, she and Maria were getting along fine. Nan stopped by today to ask Laverne what she thinks. I get tired of everyone wanting Laverne’s opinion about everything.”

“She and Nan go back a long way.”

“Do you know what Nan’s looking for?”

“Besides Renee?”

“She asked Laverne and me what we know about stolen art.”

“That’s strange. What did you tell her?”

“Are you kidding? Bottom line, Nan is a cop. I would never tell her anything, even if I did know.”

“She’s retired, don’t forget.”

“Twenty-five years on the force until she got involved with you.”

“Is that what you think? That I had something to do with her retiring? She retired so she could write and do all the things she had missed.”

“Like being on Oprah? The fifty-year-old lesbian-police chief-poet pushing her book.”

“That was a bonus. I meant like going to Cris Williamson concerts and not being afraid someone would recognize her, or going to P’town for Womyn’s Week and being able to use her own name to register, or going out to dinner with me two nights in a row in her own hometown.”

Ginger shook her head, clearly annoyed with my defense of Nan. I wondered why.

“How well do you know Renee?” Ginger asked.

“That is the question we’re all asking now.”

“If she’s involved in art theft, that could explain what she’s doing in Paris, and why no one has heard from her.”

I thought about that for a moment and replied, “We know she has expensive taste. Her shop has been wildly successful with the old money Grosse Pointe crowd. I never thought to ask her where she buys from.”

“A third of all reported art thefts are in France. The whole country is full of old castles and museums waiting to be ripped off.”

“I don’t know what any of us can do if she doesn’t want to be found,” I said.

“I can ask my father to get a lead on her. He has contacts everywhere, and he owes me a favor.”

“That would be great. I can give you the phone number and the name of the woman she was staying with on Saturday. Since then, she could have gone anywhere, but it’s a place to start.”

“When we’re finished eating, I’ll call him. I doubt if anyone can hide from Harris Enterprises, not even in France. I know; I’ve tried more than once. Renee Martin doesn’t stand a chance.”

Oakland Mall didn’t close until nine, and the twenty-minute drive from Montrose would give me a chance to think, without too many distractions. I needed to figure out how to check if my home phone and e-mail were being tapped. There wasn’t much going on in my personal life, except for Nan. She would never forgive me if anyone had been listening in on our bedtime conversations. Her years on the force were all about keeping her private life private. After she retired and became more visible in the gay community, she got a lot of publicity as the “lesbian police chief,” but there was never any proof that she was a practicing lesbian. No “smoking gun,” as her friends liked to kid her.

If the public found out that I had voluntarily gotten involved with a government agency that was now tapping my phone, they wouldn’t have much sympathy for me. They had other newspapers they could read. My staff would all quit—I was always preaching to them about protecting their sources. Everybody hates a hypocrite.

When I was a kid, my favorite TV show was *I Led Three Lives*. I hoped I wasn’t subconsciously trying to recreate that show with myself in the lead role. I could still hear the opening narration: “The fantastically true story of Herbert A. Philbrick, who for nine frightening years did lead three lives—average citizen, member of the Communist Party, and counterspy for the FBI.”

It just didn’t have the same panache when I said “Carla A. McCarthy—publisher of a small town newspaper, member of the Detroit Women’s Book Club, and undercover agent for the LAP.”

By the time the Fourteen Mile Rd. exit appeared, I was ready to make some difficult decisions. A year of eavesdropping and snooping had not turned up anything remotely linked to terrorism. Either I was the most inept spy ever recruited, or nothing subversive was going on.

The Rockport shoe store lured me in with a sale—fifteen dollars off the second pair.

With two new pairs of shoes and a resolution to stop working for the LAP, I picked up a bag of hot, roasted, cinnamon almonds and impulsively bought a half pound of dark, walnut fudge to celebrate my independence. I tried to find something suitable for Skip, but the candy shop at the mall was decidedly canine-unfriendly.

Traffic was heavier heading south on I-75 as the final mall customers headed for home, and I had to pay attention to my driving for the first couple of miles. By Twelve Mile, the congestion had cleared. I noticed an older model blue sedan behind me for a few miles. That was unusual, because I tended to drive so slowly that no one was ever content to tail me for very long. If they were interested in the DeSoto, they usually pulled up beside me to get a good look.

The house was dark when I arrived home shortly after nine-thirty. Skip seemed to forgive me for his late supper when he saw that I was boiling hamburger for him instead of opening a can. While I was waiting for Skip's dinner to cook, I checked the answering machine in the kitchen.

No calls from Nan.

After tossing and turning for an hour and listening to Van Morrison's *Moon-dance* CD twice, I realized it was going to be impossible to fall asleep tonight.

The best way to fall asleep would be to get up and do some old-fashioned investigative journalism. I wanted to know more about how high-tech surveillance works. A peanut butter sandwich would be brain food and, if I didn't like what I found, comfort food.

The Internet was full of disturbing information. A former chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Arizona Senator Dennis DeConcini, expressed concerns about the NSA's (National Security Agency) domestic targeting. "It has always worried me. What if it's used on American citizens? It's chilling. Are they listening to my private conversations on my telephone?"

As I kept reading, I found myself in complete sympathy with him. Two projects in particular foreshadowed the lengths to which the government was willing to go.

One hundred and fifty thousand messages a month entering or exiting the United States were confiscated and scanned by Project SHAMROCK.

In the sixties, Project MINARET used watch lists to oversee "subversive" domestic activities. Among the seventy-five thousand Americans that NSA Director Lew Allen admitted to keeping tabs on was Joan Baez.

That had been over thirty years ago, before computers did the work. Technology was screwing us all. I'd known it would. Big Brother was watching in ways we'd never imagined: ECHELON.

Every day, ECHELON's network captured and analyzed three billion telephone calls and e-mails. Americans no longer had any privacy, thanks to the "open air" nature of modern communications.

I knew it. Damn! My phone calls and e-mails *were* being tapped. The only consolation is that everybody's were. Nan was going to kill me, if I didn't kill

myself first. I was glad there was a gallon of Mackinac Island fudge ice cream in the freezer.

Chapter XXIV

Candid Conversations

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Several big stories were breaking, and everyone in the office was trying to make my life hell. I was beginning to feel sorry for Pete Brown, even though he was a sexist pervert who didn't have a clue how to run a newspaper. I had more than a clue, but it was still damn hard work.

It didn't help my mood any that I hadn't heard from Nan. I had left messages for her everywhere I could think of, except the Italian Villa. I didn't want Maria to know that I might be in the same predicament that she was. I couldn't understand why she hadn't called me or been over. We touched base every day, even if we didn't see each other. I tried to remember the last time we were together and if anything had happened that would have pissed her off.

When Ginger called, I shut my office door so we could talk uninterrupted. A closed door was supposed to give the troops the idea that I needed a few minutes of privacy. Not that it would do any good if they really wanted something.

"Carla, I have some very interesting news. We may have been wrong about Renee, after all."

"Did your father find her? Where is she?"

"I don't know where she is today, but I just sent you a picture on e-mail of where she was Saturday."

"We didn't even know she was missing last Saturday. How did you get a picture of her?"

"Don't forget, you promised not to ask too many questions."

"I did? Wait a minute, while I open the picture."

"There are two. One is by herself and the other one is with Benedicte."

"Got them. Can I at least ask where they are?"

“They’re in Montreuil. It’s a well-known thieves’ market in Paris. Most of the stolen property is low-level stuff—knock off Gucci purses, Chanel fakes, that sort of thing. But, get this—major pieces of stolen art also change hands there.”

“So tell me, how did your father get these pictures, if they were taken last Saturday?”

“All I know is that they were taken by a friend of a friend sort of thing. Someone who keeps an eye on any new buyers or sellers. The pictures are an insurance policy, if they decide to do business. They identified Renee as an American art dealer, but they backed off when Benedicte’s ID came back.”

“Maria said Renee’s friend was some sort of cop. She must know what goes on there. I wonder if she was showing Renee where she could get a special deal.”

“My father is intrigued by this Renee story. Suddenly, he thinks art is a great investment. I’m supposed to ask you to have lunch with us tomorrow. Can you make it? He’s buying.”

“Sure, I haven’t seen Arch in a million years.”

“Noon tomorrow at Charley’s Crab okay?”

“I’ll be there. Thanks, Ginger. Please don’t tell Maria any of this until we know for sure what’s going on. I don’t want her to panic, but it doesn’t look good. Something stinks about this.”

When we hung up, I called Eleanor Ward. It would be just like her to know something about Renee’s whereabouts and conveniently forget to tell me.

She picked up the phone on the first ring. That was a good sign that she was alone in her office and was free to talk.

“It’s Carla. Have you heard anything about Renee Martin?”

“Hello, Carla.”

“I was wondering if you have heard anything yet.”

“Do you have a pen and paper to take notes?”

“Of course. They don’t call me Lois Lane for nothing. Shoot.”

“I started the process Tuesday morning at ten o’clock. The first call I made was to my boss at Homeland Security. I got his voice mail so I asked him to call me back.

“At 12:30, he had his secretary call me while I was downstairs getting a sandwich from the lunch truck.

“At 1:15, I got him on the phone with my next call.”

She was starting to annoy me. “Eleanor. What did he say?”

“He said I should call someone at the CIA, since she was last heard from in Paris. He reminded me that our job is Homeland Security, not French Security.”

“I don’t know why we’re having so much trouble getting along with the French. Just because they won’t drop everything and fight our enemies for us.”

“Do you want to know what I did next or not?” She sounded as impatient as I felt.

“Yes, I’m sorry. Go ahead.”

“After my next appointment left, I called the CIA. The operator wasn’t sure who I should talk to and suggested I go through the chain of command at Homeland Security. I told her to connect me with someone, anyone, who had authority.

“Some first-year grunt in the office pool rotation was unlucky enough to pick up my call. He said he would forward me to his boss, who he was sure could help me. Then the little twit disconnected me.”

“What a mess. I thought I was the only one that happened to.” I was trying to keep from laughing. I knew I had to butter her up, so she would keep trying. “I’m sure you weren’t going to let them get away with that!”

“Not yet. I checked the CIA roster and called the first name and number I came to. It was someone in public relations who is trained to handle irate callers while giving them absolutely no information or help. He suggested I call the FBI, since the woman missing was an American citizen. He patronizingly assured me that the local police and FBI could handle a routine missing person’s case.”

“By that time I had my real work to do, and it was past time to go home. I do have a life, you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know, and I do appreciate your helping me like this. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Apparently, you did know where to start. You called me,” Eleanor said.

“Look, I’m sorry this has been such a pain in the ass for you. It seems I can’t win.”

“But I can. I did find someone to help me. Renee and another French citizen flew to Jordan on Tuesday.”

“Why they would be going there? It seems a strange place to drop in on.”

“It’s the destination of choice for any westerner who wants to get into Iraq.”

“Sorry, someone’s at my door, I’ve got to go. I’ll be in touch.” I hung up quickly before she could start quizzing me about what information I might have.

This news was even more disturbing than Renee shopping at a well known black market. I wished Maria had never gotten tired of the ice-cream lady.

I needed to talk this over with some one who would look at it logically. The only one I wanted to talk to was Nan. I tried calling her house, her cell phone, the soup kitchen. The only place I got an answer was the Mid-town shelter,

where they said I had just missed her. She had chopped a bushel of carrots, diced a bushel of onions, and left for the day.

As a second choice, I called Mr. Harris to tell him he could forget about looking for Renee in Paris.

Chapter XXV

Too Late Tulips

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Charley's Crab was a big, noisy, popular place for the well-to-do lunch crowd in Troy. The place suited Archie Harris. Brash and blunt, with a cleft chin and a bushy mustache, he affected a gruff, old-fashioned avuncularity. When I went into blueberry farming a few years ago, he asked me if I could use a "silent partner." It was his way of offering me a loan.

Fortunately, I didn't need one, but it was a nice offer. Knowing Archie Harris was like having an uncle in the furniture business.

Ginger had arrived and was already seated. She looked glad to see me; I wondered if I had interrupted the usual father-daughter power struggle.

"Carla Anne—it's been too long since we've seen you." Mr. Harris got up and held out his arms for a hug. He pulled my chair out before the waiter could react: typical grandstanding, but charming nonetheless.

"How's that little newspaper of yours doing?"

"We're doing well, thank you. I hired a new ad salesperson, not too long ago. You'd like her; she's got chutzpah."

"Is she selling anything?"

"She made me a deal. If I would hire her to sell advertising space, she would sell enough that I could afford to hire her as a reporter."

"You're right. I do like her."

"When I met Asia, she had punk-pink hair. When I interviewed her for the job, it was grunge-blue, but as soon as I hired her, she showed up with dependable brown."

"A smart cookie. She's the kind of employee I need. Independent, but not too independent."

“Looks like you spent the winter somewhere with more sun than Michigan.”

“Daddy has a membership in one those chi-chi men’s clubs in Grosse Pointe. You go in for a hair cut, and you come out with a facial, a manicure, a massage, and a tan.”

“Don’t listen to her. The truth is I bought a little place in Florida on the water for Adele. She hates the cold. Why don’t you come down? Adele would love the company. Business keeps me away and I can’t be there as often as she would like. We have more bedrooms than we’ll ever use.”

“Thanks for the offer. I’ve been so busy with the paper I haven’t had a real vacation in years.”

“You’re welcome any time. If we’re not there, I’ll give you a key.”

Archie Harris and his daughter Ginger still had one thing in common. A willingness to help their friends and the resources to do it in style.

We were an easy table to wait on; we all ordered the crab, house salad, and baked potato. I was hoping Mr. H would order dessert, so I could too. Charley’s is the only place in Michigan that knows how to make a key lime pie that tastes like the lime just fell off the tree.

It wasn’t until we had coffee in front of us that Archie brought up the subject of Renee.

“This friend of yours is interesting. Do you know anything about her family?”

“All I know is her mother is French, and I think her father works at the University. Why?”

“You’ve got a point there. I wouldn’t want anyone to judge my daughter by who I am, or what I do for a living.”

“Do you know where she is?”

“Yes, I think I do. Once you told me she had left France and was in Jordan, I had inquiries made about her. I’ve always had a financial interest in the Middle East. Import export, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, I remember those freighters full of pistachios from Iran chugging up the Detroit River. I wish you could still get them; they’re the best.”

“With the war looming, supplies of all types will be in short supply and a smart man will be ready to provide whatever is needed. Pistachios aren’t on my list, but for you—I’ll see what I can do.”

“We were just kids when Daddy still got pistachios from Iran,” Ginger said.

“We were in college. Don’t you remember eating them in study hall and getting in trouble because we always left a pile of shells?”

“You’re not going to like the news,” Mr. Harris said.

He had our attention again, which is what I suspected he wanted.

“A man and a woman, claiming to be French journalists, have been taken captive in western Iraq. A paramilitary group was seen taking them from their car at a roadblock near Ramadi.”

“Do you think it was Renee?”

“Yes.”

When I got back to the office, there were two messages from Eleanor to call her immediately. I was still trying to absorb the news about Renee. Why was she in Iraq with a man? Why was she claiming to be a French journalist? Was she buying stolen art? Who kidnapped her? Why had I gotten involved with this? Why hadn't Nan called me? Where was Nan? What did Eleanor want?

There was only question I had a chance of answering right now.

“Eleanor? This is Carla. You rang?”

“There's a lot of buzz coming from the CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, and LAP in Washington today. All of those people I called are suddenly calling me back. I want to make sure I'm not blind-sided by this. Is there anything at all that you're not telling me?”

I was getting a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't tell her what Ginger's father had just told me. That would lead to questions about how I'd found out, and from whom. Mr. Harris would not be pleased to see the FBI on his doorstep asking questions about his import business or missing women.

“Can you please get me out of the middle of this? I hardly know Renee Martin. She told me she was going to Paris for a few days to look for merchandise for her store. Then she disappeared, that's all I know!”

“Your girlfriend called me looking for Renee also.”

“My girlfriend? Eleanor, believe me—I have *never* given anyone your number.”

“Oh, you didn't have to give Nan Lawson my number. I guess she never told you that she knows me. We worked together on a few cases when she was Chief of Police.”

“You didn't tell her you knew me, did you?” A terrible feeling was descending on me.

Could this be why I hadn't heard from Nan? If she knew I'd been working with LAP without telling her, she'd be furious.

“Relax, I didn't tell her who the mouth is. She called wanting my help; when I told her I was already on it, she wanted to know who told me. She's no dummy, and if she were my girlfriend, I would come clean. You didn't hear that from me, though.”

“Thanks, Eleanor. I gotta go.” I felt sick to my stomach. I had a bad feeling that I was in serious trouble.

When Nan called my private number at about four o’clock, I was so relieved to hear from her that I forgot her conversation with Eleanor Ward and what it might mean to our relationship. She sounded despondent but agreed to come by my house about eight. She refused my offer of dinner and said she wouldn’t be staying long.

On the way home, I stopped at Trader Joe’s for a bottle of good wine and some pink tulips. By seven o’clock, hors d’oeuvres were in the oven, the wine was breathing on the counter, and Billie Holiday was singing the blues.

The next few hours were going to be important. I had decided to tell Nan everything and throw myself on her limited supply of mercy. I was glad that I had never told Eleanor anything personal about my relationship with Montrose’s police chief.

When the phone rang at about seven-thirty, I grabbed it in a hurry, praying it wasn’t Nan canceling on me. It wasn’t; it was my sister.

Mom had fallen down the basement stairs. When the EMS got there, she was unconscious.

Section V: Iraq

“We ask why have the Iraqi people turned on themselves, looted their own museums, and burnt their priceless National Library. The answer is simple. Some have been dehumanized. They have been broken by sanctions, crushed by tyranny, and annihilated by the doctrine of overwhelming force. The end of the world begins not with the barbarians at the gate, but with the barbarians at the highest levels of the state.”

—Ben Okri, Nigerian poet and novelist

Chapter XXVII

Barbarians at the Gate

April 2003. Predawn, Baghdad

Boom! Benedicte was awake with the first bomb blast. The sound was muffled by the heavy basement walls, but nothing could erase it.

Her belt and boots were on the floor, next to her cot. Slipping her boots on with a practiced minimum of motion, she glided to the door and released the turn-bolt lock with one hand.

It was futile to expect her cell phone to work in the basement of this brick building. She wondered if any of the khaki-clad CIA agents she had noticed around town had a superior model. She rarely succumbed to the hi-tech game of one-upmanship, but this time it mattered. Both the military and police organizations often found themselves trumped by the criminals they were pursuing. They had learned to expect that, but it was galling when the media was better provisioned to cover a story than they were to capture the same criminals the journalists were reporting on.

The blinking red lights of the alarm system created a surreal glow in the darkened hallway and stairwell. Benedicte crept silently down the stairs to the main floor and cautiously opened the heavy door, not knowing what she might find.

“Stop!” A heavy voice found her in the dark room.

“*Salam. Ismi* Benedicte. It’s me—Benedicte Najor. Is everything all right? I heard an explosion.”

“All right for now, but the Americans are coming closer. They are in Saddam City, there will be fighting in Baghdad before the week is over.”

“Why are the lights out?”

“The city officials have cut the power off. It is not the first time,” he said. “What can we do?”

“Where are the other guards?”

“Some went to be with their families, some went to protect the airport. My cousin is on a bus, with others from Rutbah, headed to the airport with their guns right now.”

“But your cousin worked here. Why would he go to protect the airport tonight?”

The guard shrugged with the universal sign of resignation. “Saddam has asked everyone to come to the airport to help when the battle starts. Some are walking, but most are going in their pickup trucks or cars.”

A series of explosions was growing in intensity—louder—faster, reverberating around the room as if trying to get in. Suddenly, the alarm lights went out too.

By 4 AM, Diana and Renee had awakened and dressed and were sitting on the wide steps leading to the second floor. The stairwell was a good vantage point from which to see the main door. The cool, marble steps widened before they wound upstairs, and the wrought iron railing gave Renee something to lean against.

Kasem had his battery-operated radio turned up loudly enough that the women could hear it from his station near the door.

Once again, they could hear the bombardments growing closer.

They came in crashing waves for several minutes before a powerful explosion temporarily lit the starless sky with a halogen moon. The bombing subsided then, as though setting the sky on fire was its only mission, and—that accomplished—it could rest.

Pre-dawn, Saddam City

Two million stepchildren of Baghdad—Shiite men, women, and children—lived in near-poverty in a northern suburb ironically called Saddam City. They would awaken this morning, as every morning, restless and with bitterness in their hearts. Their life was not fair; why should they live in slums, surrounded by the opulence of Saddam’s empty palaces? They had no fondness for the Americans or the British who coveted their oil, but they wanted freedom from Saddam Hussein’s selfish and brutal reign.

Under Saddam, a Sunni, the middle classes were composed of other Sunnis. The poor and deprived were always the Shia Muslims.

On this April morning, before the sun could rise over the horizon to replace the moon, the city would shake with explosions, and anti-aircraft fire would be heard blazing into the awakening sky. A chorus of gunfire would interrupt the songbirds’ greeting.

The American troops were surprised to meet with minimal resistance in the northern suburb.

The U.S. Marines were in a hurry to subdue any resistance to their westward race to Tahrir Square in the heart of the Emerald City. Each marine in the Seventh Division was acutely aware of the progress of the army's V Corp regiments. Both units were heading toward the sleeping metropolis of five million this morning, and each wanted to be the first to arrive. If they could arrive a day earlier than they were expected, they would have the advantage of surprise on their side.

During the sporadic, half-hearted battle that morning, many Iraqi soldiers peeled off their green military garments and discarded them in the streets and alleys. It was time to try something different.

After seeing their comrades die, some men hurried home to check on their wives and children, family suddenly seeming more important. A few lucky mothers found their male children at their doorsteps and welcomed them with tears and hugs.

"The tyrant of the world is finished," a Shiite Muslim leader shouted to crowds in Saddam City. A toothless old woman wrapped in a black *chador* smiled broadly, showing dimples not seen in years, and proclaimed to any who would listen, "It is time now to dance!"

Men with little to lose, and everything to gain, followed the troops, looting warehouses and government buildings on the way to Baghdad. It was time to have something.

Pre-dawn, Baghdad Museum

When thirty minutes had passed in quiet, Benedicte tried to persuade Renee and Diana to go downstairs and lie down. "You'll need to have your wits about you today."

"What about you?" Diana retorted resentfully. "We don't need any martyrs here."

"Of course not. I don't need a lot of sleep, and one of us should keep watch." Benedicte replied with her usual sangfroid, but Diana's bitter tone had alarmed her. "There will be fighting here in Baghdad soon."

"We'll be safe here. The Americans have promised to avoid bombing museums, and there's a mosque right across the street. This is one of the safest places in the city." Diana managed to sound confident, but she looked even paler than usual.

“I’d like to sit here with you, if that’s okay. I’m too nervous to sleep. At least we can see the door, and Kasem is near by.” Renee said as soon as Diana left. She had things she had to ask Benedicte about, things she needed to have answers for.

“Were you in love with Deborah? Is that why you’re doing this, why we’re here?”

“I told you; I feel responsible for her accident. She’s crippled because of me.”

“But you still care for her?”

“Of course I do, but if you are insinuating . . .”

“I’m not *insinuating* anything. I think what I’m *asking* you is—did you have an affair with her?”

“It wasn’t like that. She was different; what happened in Corsica wasn’t really anyone’s fault.”

“Oh, she was different—not like me. Not a lesbian.”

“Renee, why must you say things like that? It’s not that simple.”

“No, I guess it isn’t. I always thought you were straight; now I know you just weren’t interested in me.”

The two women sat in silence for long moments before Benedicte took the stairs to the rooftop.

Chapter XXVIII

Difficult Decisions

April 2003. Baghdad Museum, Iraq

The sun burst over the horizon full born, in a hurry to relight the sleeping desert. Benedicte sat thinking, watching the day's arrival. She had chosen a spot on the rooftop behind the parapet and was invisible to anyone on the ground. Difficult decisions would have to be made today. Her thoughts went round and round with no answers. The requirements of her job, her new feelings for Renee, and the promises she had made to herself to help Deborah's sister pulled her in painfully different directions.

Benedicte leaned against a corrugated iron utility pipe to look at the pictures again.

With the dawn, the ancient words of the muezzin's chant rose from the mosque across the courtyard. At the same time, Benedicte heard the creak of the stairwell door opening on the other side of the roof and hurriedly shoved the pictures back in the manila envelope inside her jacket.

"Mind if I join you? I need a smoke." Diana had changed into jodhpurs and a light cotton turtleneck. Her unruly red hair was pulled back, and the clear morning light accentuated the freckles dotting her nose and cheeks.

"We haven't had a chance to talk alone since you arrived. I'm curious why you brought Renee with you."

"She was in Paris staying at my apartment for a few days while I was on vacation."

"Why did she agree to come to Baghdad?"

"She wanted to see the museum. I'm afraid I didn't recognize how dangerous it was here. The intelligence reports we were receiving in France indicated we had

at least one more week, probably more, before American troops would reach Baghdad.”

“A common mistake for you. I hope it doesn’t turn out to be as devastating as the one you made when you asked my sister to go to Corsica with you.”

Benedicte replied as calmly as she could. “If only we could see the future, I’m sure we would all do some things differently.” It was the same accusation she had privately faced innumerable times.

“Our family didn’t want her to go, you know. My mother thought she was getting too attached to you.” Diana started to say something else as she got up to leave, but instead smoothed out her empty cigarette package and put it in her pocket. “Don’t want to litter, you know. Old habits die hard.”

“There you are. I was getting worried about you,” Renee scolded when she saw Benedicte and Diana descending the marble stairs.

“What did you see from the rooftop? Do you think it’s safe for us to go out?”

Benedicte put her hands on Renee’s shoulders and made her meet her gaze when she said, “No! It is not safe for you to go out. Not now, not ever.”

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“Robert will drive you to the embassy in Jordan.”

“Jordan! Do you mean without you?” The hurt and confusion in Renee’s voice was palpable, and tears were starting to well up. She was shaking her head, “No, no. Why now? Are you sending me away because of what I said?”

“I can still hear gunfire, and it looks as though the fires are spreading. It could turn ugly here at any moment; being inside the museum won’t guarantee our safety forever.”

“I want to stay with you.” Renee crossed her arms across her chest and rubbed them as though she were suddenly chilled.

“This is what I need you to do. Go to the French Embassy in Amman and tell them you are a French citizen. Jordan will take you in; they will know what to do.”

“But why do I have to leave now?”

“Things in this city are going to get worse before they get better. I should never have brought you here. I thought we had a few more days. It would kill me if anything happened to you. Please, for once in your life, do not argue with me.”

“What are you going to do? You can’t stay here.”

“As soon as I see that Diana is taken care of, I will meet you in Jordan. If history is right, looters will be here soon. I’ll stay here and help protect the museum as long as I can.”

“Oh, of course...you’re the gendarme; I’m the tourist. It’s not fair!” Renee’s eyes blazed with hurt and anger.

“Little one, life is not fair. Never has been, never will be. But my life will be better if I know you are safe.”

Benedicte turned away from Renee’s fuming face. This was the first time she had worked with Robert, but she knew that Interpol only selected the best for undercover assignments in war-torn countries, and Renee would be safer with him than she would be staying in Baghdad.

Diana sounded upset when Benedicte told her that Robert was going to take Renee to Jordan.

“What about me? You’ll stay here with me until Ahmed comes for us, won’t you?”

Benedicte was not about to tell Diana any of her suspicions about Ahmed until she had more information.

“That may be a good plan. If we split up, it may be easier to leave town unnoticed.”

Diana unlocked an empty office and riffled nervously through some file cabinets. She offered Renee three large plastic bags of Iraqi money she found there. “You will need money; take these dinars.”

“I have some francs and a few American dollars; I don’t want to take your money.”

“Take it; you may need it to pay off the guards at the border crossings.”

“I appreciate the offer, but this is too much.”

“This looks like a lot more than it is,” Diana said. “A thousand dinars are worth about thirty five cents. If you don’t need to use it, you can always frame it and sell it at your antique shop.”

“I have *chadors* for all of us to wear. We won’t be as recognizable as Europeans in them.”

“It’s too hot for me, and I need to be able to move quickly,” Benedicte replied.

“Im used to wearing it; I’ll feel safer with it on when we leave here.” Diana stubbornly kept the long black garment with her. “When we get to France, if I’m with you, they will allow me residence, won’t they?”

“I’m more concerned with getting you out of Iraq safely than I am about getting you into France.”

“But you haven’t forgotten your promise to take me to France with you, have you?”

“I said I will try to get you out of Baghdad. You are still a British citizen; I should think you would be better off in England.”

Chapter XXIX

In Firdos Square

April 2003. Baghdad, Iraq

The Iraqi police force and all government authority simply vanished when the U.S. Army's Third Infantry Division reached the center of Baghdad. Security officers, intelligence personnel, and Baath Party operatives went into hiding. Police officers and members of the regular army simply took their weapons and went home.

Air conditioners, televisions, refrigerators still in crates. Wheeled office chairs piled high with computers, curtains, and cushions. Those lucky enough to have trucks stuffed them full with mattresses, sofas, and rugs. Children in the streets quickly picked up whatever fell off.

Fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, and sons zigzagged across the streets in a mixture of jubilation, confusion, and retribution. Some men were attempting to pack their families into cars, already filled with loot, to flee the city. Others surged toward downtown Baghdad to celebrate.

Roving gangs commandeered police cars and motorcycles, arriving in Firdos Square blowing the horns and singing raucously. A band of young men hauled rolls of carpet out of the ten-story Foreign Ministry building and placed them in a waiting yellow dump truck.

Thoroughbred horses, released from Uday's stables, ran loose on the city streets next to donkey carts and wheelbarrows that overflowed with pillaged goods.

Iraqis, young and old, came out from their homes in the center of Baghdad to see the American tanks roll in. Waving white flags, gesturing with two fingers spread and pointed to the sky, making the universal peace sign, people sang and danced as if at an ugly daughter's unexpected wedding.

The sound of a thousand voices chanting the classic Baghdadi greeting “Welcome! Welcome in Baghdad,” came floating from the center of the city interspersed with the chant “We love you; we love you.”

A convoy of four American tanks rumbled down the street and parked in front of the museum. Benedicte watched alone as heavily-armed men in military uniforms climbed out of the trucks and began foot patrols heading toward the center of the city.

Diana asked, “Did you hear the chanting? Everyone seems so glad the Americans are here.”

“The crowds are jubilant right now, but all crowds are unpredictable. Their attitude could easily change in a flash.”

Adding to the din and disorder was the heavy artillery fire, which could still be heard coming from the area around Baghdad University. Punctuating the singing and shouting was the occasional snap of small arms fire in isolated sections of the city.

The black smoke that had ringed the circular city for days was not ready to leave center stage. New fires sprung up and exhaled large gray plumes as they burned cars, debris, and homes.

Paper money—printed with Saddam’s likeness—and posters littered the streets to be shredded, spat upon, and—the greatest insult—pounded with the soles of Iraqi shoes. American boots were firmly on the ground, and Iraqi shoes could come off.

Chapter XXX

The Looting Begins

April 2003. Baghdad Museum, Iraq

“Why do I rob banks? Because that’s where the money is.”

—Willie Sutton, iconic American bank robber

The chilling sound of breaking glass inside the museum was the women’s first warning. The first looters to arrive at the museum used glass cutters to enter the rear of the building through high windows surrounded by fences.

That trickle of looters became a flood as the museum’s grounds were overrun by thousands of men, women, and children armed with rifles, pistols, axes, knives, and clubs.

Televisions and computers were grabbed by the first wave of looters. Chairs, telephones, and desks from the administrative offices were the next to go. All of the office equipment was either stolen or destroyed.

Office by office, vandals trashed files containing irreplaceable archival documents, negatives, slides, and photos. Anything they didn’t want, they threw haphazardly on the floor, where it was crushed by those who followed. When the safe in the museum director’s office was broken into, the discovery of a key ring met with a shout of approval.

The museum had been on short rations for so long that there weren’t enough everyday items to satisfy the frenzied crowds. Determined to get their fair share, they started grabbing pottery and vases that looked as though they could be of value.

Chapter XXXI

Scavengers and Thugs

April 2003. Baghdad Museum, Iraq

The Guardian Lion, after faithfully keeping watch for four thousand years, lost his head to a dull axe. Angry shouts turned to nasty laughter as the blows from clubs and shovels crushed his terra cotta body. He could never have expected to have to defend himself from such mindless rage.

Diana recoiled, shielding her eyes from the unbridled violence of the crowds. “You said there were American tanks in front of the museum. Why can’t they stop this?”

“The tanks would have stopped the looters, but they’ve left. Looks like we’re on our own again.”

Benedicte stood erect beside the two remaining museum guards, helpless to stop the looting, but carefully noting the actions of the six men who had entered together.

The half dozen men spread out among the rampaging crowds as though following a shopping list. They methodically combed the galleries with boxes, bags, and even a wheelbarrow.

Reminiscent of those American thugs who had perfected the smash-and-grab technique in mall jewelry stores, they broke only a few glass display cases. They carefully hand-selected only authentic and valuable pieces to take.

Four of the men broke down a hidden door on the main floor and uncovered the staircase leading from the museum director’s office on the second floor to the underground storage rooms.

On the lower level, securely locked doors guarded uncatalogued and unreported treasures. The sturdy wooden doors had withstood casual pilfering from unscrupulous employees, but today they opened easily with a brass key.

Two strong men headed straight for the intricately carved Samarran panels and carted them out of the museum by carrying them overhead. In the Islamic galleries, some wall paintings were stolen; other paintings were randomly smashed.

Outside the museum doors, boys watched jealously as the older, more successful scavengers swarmed out of the building. They assuaged their disappointment at missing out on the good stuff by breaking the larger statues that were left behind.

Stone gods and winged, human-headed beasts became unwilling sparring partners for the mob. Shattered bodies of Roman statues, their hacked-off heads stolen away, lay strewn across the museum floors like victims of a mythological battle.

Diana slumped against the wall with her fists clenched, fighting back tears. “This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

Section VI: Neighbors and Relatives

Distant relatives are not as important as nearby neighbors.

—Chinese proverb

Chapter XXXIII

In Nan's Neighborhood

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

The wooden porch swing didn't squeak. It was the first thing Henry fixed each spring. He and Marianne liked to sit together in the evening and enjoy the quiet. After forty years of marriage, they still held hands and watched for shooting stars to make a wish on.

"I was afraid Billy and Sarah were never going to go to sleep."

"They'll settle down in a couple of days. They're just excited to be with us."

"As soon as they get into a routine here, Kim will be back to pick them up."

"It's nice to have little ones in the house again."

A car came down the quiet, tree-lined street too fast and pulled into the driveway next door. The sound of a heavy car door slamming shut seemed loud in the sleeping subdivision. Lights came on, and the back door opened and shut with a bang. A small dog yapped noisily in their direction, as though he sensed their presence on the darkened porch. When they didn't respond to his greeting, he busied himself in a distant corner of his yard.

In a few moments, the interruption had passed. Only the glare of the lights still on disturbed the tranquility. "Let's turn in. I need my sleep; I know those grandkids will be up at the crack of dawn."

"Marianne, the phone's ringing."

"It's not ours," she sleepily replied.

"Idiots! It's the middle of the night."

"Go back to sleep."

"Why doesn't someone pick up the damned phone?"

"It's coming from next door."

The strident ringing stopped briefly, but then inexplicably started again.

“Now I’m really awake,” Henry complained.

“Shut the window.”

Henry reluctantly got out of his warm and comfortable bed, crossed the room, and shut the window with the loudest bang he could manage.

“Maybe something’s wrong over there.”

“Nothing’s wrong; if she doesn’t want to answer the phone, it’s her business.”

“Not if it wakes Sarah. She’ll never get back to sleep.”

“Neither will I, if you keep talking.”

“It’s midnight; something must be wrong.”

It was eight-thirty in the morning. Inside 1005 Patrick Street, the spring sun had entered the open bedroom window, which was protected on most mornings by tightly closed blinds. Nan sprawled fully dressed on her bed, afraid to open her eyes, afraid to move. She was too hot; sweat coated her body. This morning, the silver chain she always wore around her neck was too tight, choking her.

She turned her head slightly and the hot, bright room spun, creating a feeling of nausea. A painful pressure just above her breast felt linked with her right arm, pinned to the plaid quilt.

She tried to ignore the pounding headache so she could think rationally. Signs of a heart attack were nausea and pressure on the chest. Was this a king-sized hangover, or was she in more serious trouble?

Malcolm licked her face worriedly. She was already an hour late taking him out and feeding him; he had been watching her for several minutes before she moved. With great relief, he realized that the doggy kiss she would have refused if she were awake was the right thing to do. She opened her eyes and hugged him before she gently moved him off her chest.

Her size eight leather shoes felt like seven-and-a-halves this morning. They were laced too tightly to kick off easily, but bending over to unlace them was too painful. The stiff leather belt came off more easily, and Nan started to breathe normally again. Overnight, everything had become too tight. Her bra was a major contributor to the stress she was feeling; it had to come off.

Mentally, she prepared a short to-do list.

Take Malcolm out.

Coffee, juice, dry toast.

Aspirin.

An unopened bottle of bright red tomato juice was in the refrigerator, already chilled. She would have to watch the toaster; it had a tendency to overheat. Waiting for it gave her time to think.

Had she been wrong about Carla? What kind of game was she playing? Why would she invite her over, and then not be there? Was she the informer?

There was still half a fifth of vodka in the cupboard, not far from the jar of instant coffee. A little taste in the tomato juice would be just the thing to take away her aches and pains.

When Ginger and Maria called later that afternoon, Nan was unable to come to the phone.

Chapter XXXIV

Next of Kin

April 2003. A hospital in Michigan

“My mother is alive, my mother is fine, my mother is alive.” The chanted mantra, which was supposed to lower my blood pressure and anxiety, was working until the admitting physician found me.

“Are you Caroline McCarthy’s daughter? Her next of kin?”

“I’m her daughter; the next of kin would be my father. He’s not here. How is she?”

“Your mother has a concussion and some broken bones. I’ve ordered a battery of tests, which will tell us more. In the meantime, we’ll need you to give us a medical history. Any history of heart attack or stroke in your family?”

As I tried to answer a zillion seemingly unimportant questions, my mind wandered, and I found myself thinking that this doctor would make a fine reporter. As soon as he identified me as a person who had information he wanted, he started quizzing me. It was what we in the newspaper business called an assumptive consent. As long as I kept answering his questions, he would keep asking them, until his curiosity was satisfied.

Nurses, doctors, interns, and other unidentifiable hospital staff, all in different uniforms, came and went at irregular intervals. A worried looking young Middle Eastern couple who were expecting a baby came in and were whisked off immediately to the maternity unit. An older black man sat gripping his hat, waiting to hear if his wife would recover from chest pains. A distraught mother came in clutching a shrieking toddler. She pulled a small girl behind her. The girl was sucking her thumb and trying to block out the boy’s crying with her free hand.

A nurse accompanied a teenage girl with a cast on her arm to the waiting room. Her mother silently gripped the handles of the wheelchair while her father

went to get the car. I wondered if it was a skateboard injury. It was teenage boys who usually ended up in emergency rooms. When an intern called the old man to come in and see his wife, he carefully placed his brown cap on the chair, then changed his mind and picked it up and took it with him behind the closed doors. Thinking about everyone else's story kept my mind off mine.

A frazzled nurse came out to tell me they were checking Mom for internal injuries. Sometime about midnight, I noticed a pay phone by the vending machines. When I called my house, the phone rang until the answering machine picked up. "Nan, if you're there, please pick up. Nan...Nan...please, pick up." No answer. Next call was to Nan's house. No answer.

The candy machine required sixty cents in payment for a candy bar. That seemed reasonable. It was either that or a trip to the pharmacy to fill an outdated prescription for tranquilizers. The phone had taken all but one quarter, but I still had a slew of dimes. The candy machine was not fussy. It obligingly declared, "Any combination of coins accepted, EXCEPT PENNIES."

Chocolate, that's what I wanted: Hershey's, Almond Joy, Mounds, Snickers, anything would do.

After I deliberately inserted my last quarter and four dimes, I was crushed when I realized the machine was full of Red Hots, Juicy Fruits, Mr. Peanut bars, and two rows of Chuckles. I felt cheated, robbed, tricked. Those were all second-tier candy bars, not worth the sixty-five cents I had already put in the damned machine. It didn't give me my nickel change, and there was nothing I wanted. Nothing. When I felt tears hot in my eyes, I turned my back to the waiting room. I didn't know if I was crying for Mom or myself.

Fiona found me standing there clenching a soggy Kleenex. "You okay?"
"No chocolate."

She reached into her canvas bag and pulled out a bottle of Mountain Valley water and a king size Hershey's bar. With nuts.

"No problem, I came prepared for emergencies."

It's times like those that I loved having a big family.

Moments before the night shift was due to go home, two orderlies arrived to move Mom down the hall to the intensive care unit. By then, the ER waiting room was full of our relatives. We collected our jackets, purses, and vending machine coffee and traipsed en masse the two hundred feet to the next waiting room. My normally noisy family was quiet.

I overheard Uncle Danny trying to whisper to my cousin, Colleen, "She must be better if she's out of the emergency room."

She, in fact, was not better. She was not dead, but she was not better. Our family physician arrived, looking freshly showered and shaved on his way to play a few rounds of golf. He looked at her chart, checked her blood pressure, and told us that she was in good hands.

“Dearborn Hospital has the finest neurosurgeons and orthopedics in the country. They will take good care of her, and I’ll check in on her tomorrow.”

Before I could think of what else to ask him, he was gone, and I was once again left with strangers caring for my mother. She looked as if she were sleeping, but I suspected she had been given pain medication. I should have told someone that two generic aspirins would put my mother to sleep on a good day. Visiting time was restricted to ten minutes every hour, so I had a lot of time to pace the hallways between the vending machines in the ER lobby and the ones by the visitors’ lounge.

An unshaven, tired looking intern took pity on me and guided me to a vending machine area in the employees’ lunchroom. The McCarthys, Quinns, and Monahans have all been known to self-medicate with chocolate during crises when there was no booze available.

The next forty-eight hours passed in a blur. An overstuffed beige leather chair became my command post, as well as my bed for the weekend. I avoided my cousin Fiona. I knew eventually that we were going to have to talk about something besides Ma’s temperature, or blood pressure, or when her surgery would be scheduled.

Fiona was a rock; she was there every day, driving the old folks back and forth to the hospital and keeping her fuss-budget mother out of my hair. Our mothers are a lot alike, so I knew that was not an easy task. If the situation was reversed, and it was my aunt in ICU, I’m not sure I could have controlled my mother.

Maria got a big Irish welcome when she arrived before lunchtime on Saturday. She bustled in with several bags filled with enough food for everyone: two dozen ham sandwiches, potato salad, kosher dill pickles, and a box of brownies. Aunt Peggy took the leftovers home to “the boys,” as she euphemistically called my Dad and Uncle Joey.

Ginger delivered a tote bag full of sample size toiletries and a clean shirt. She volunteered to stay at my house and take care of Skip until I could get home. I wasn’t worried about the cats. Cha-Cha and Bunny liked feeling in charge when I was away.

I didn’t mention Nan, but Ginger instinctively knew she hadn’t been there. During the seven years that Ginger worked at a women’s bar on the east side,

Nan had been a regular customer. If anyone could find her for me, it would be Ginger.

Chapter XXXV

Losing Control

April 2003. A hospital in Michigan

I knew another day had passed when someone brought me the Sunday papers. The Detroit paper was big, filled with grocery coupons and car ads, but I wanted to see what the New York Times had to say about the war. I separated the classifieds from the editorial pages and the entertainment section, but I couldn't concentrate enough to read anything except the comics and Ms. Manners.

Fiona was smart enough to know I didn't want her hanging around when Ginger or Maria were with me. They knew my cousin was an FBI agent and always avoided saying anything more than hello to her. Ginger had been around my family long enough to fit in without presenting her family credentials. My aunts and uncles watched her grow up in my mother's kitchen, and some of their kids called her Aunt Ginger. No one in my family seemed to give a second thought to the fact that her father was Frank Harris, legendary millionaire businessman.

Whenever Maria was invited to a McCarthy gathering, she brought food, but she never talked much to anyone, except me. She said big families made her nervous, but I always thought she was afraid some of them knew that we'd dated twenty years ago. She didn't treat Fee any differently from the rest of my cousins.

Sometime later on Sunday, Darilyn came by with a bouquet of early tulips and daffodils from her garden. I was surprised to see Fiona smiling and smelling the flowers she was clutching. I was damned if I was going to introduce them if I could avoid it, so I mumbled something about "this is my cousin" and "this is my friend." It would have served Fiona right if I had said this is my cousin, the FBI agent. Having my mother in intensive care seemed a pretty good excuse for less than perfect manners.

“How beautiful; daffodils are my favorite spring flower. Did you grow them yourself?” Fiona gawked at Darilyn as though she were a real celebrity and not just a restaurant owner.

Darilyn’s good looks and checkered past would arouse curiosity in any family, but especially mine. When she was kidnapped a few years ago, the tabloids had a field day with the story. Her experiences with a female tribe in Africa were going to be made into a movie with Angelina Jolie playing Darilyn and Whoopi Goldberg playing her tribal wife.

“Thanks for the flowers,” I said. “They’re lovely, but we’ll have to give them to the nurses for now. Ma can’t have any flowers until she goes to a regular room. I’ll walk you to your car.” If Darilyn realized I was hustling her out, she didn’t let on.

Bright sunshine and fresh air were a shock. I had grown so accustomed to the sanitized, medicinal air and fluorescent lighting of the hospital that the real world looked and smelled like a Disney movie set to me. It felt good to be out of the hospital. I decided to run home for an hour to shower and check on Skip. Maybe Nan had been there and left a note for me.

My keys were still in my jacket pocket, but I had forgotten where I left my car. I thought it was in the emergency parking lot, but that was nearly empty this Sunday morning.

I walked around the lot and tried to remember Friday night. I couldn’t. It seemed like a dream I wasn’t sure I wanted to remember, or something that had happened to someone else. Maybe the security guards had my car towed because I’d left it there too long: I saw No Parking signs that I hadn’t noticed when I rushed into the hospital Friday night.

After an hour of questions and phone calls to the local police station, the impound lot, and the hospital security staff, I still didn’t know where my car was. The thought that someone had stolen Dinah was too much to deal with, so I trudged back upstairs. My big brother was there, and right then, it didn’t matter if I had spent my life telling him I could take care of myself. Suddenly, I knew I couldn’t. Too many things were happening too fast, and I was losing control.

Chapter XXXVI

A Call for Help

April 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Marianne Higgins was minding her own business that Sunday evening, reading the Sunday Free Press in her favorite club chair. She liked to sit by the picture window where the light was better, which is why she happened to see an expensive looking black sedan in the drive next door.

“Look, Henry, isn’t that the woman from Channel Seven? This is the second or third time I’ve seen her over there knocking on the side door.”

“No, she’s not on Channel Seven. I’m pretty sure she works at that pizza place on the east side we used to go to after bowling. She’s the owner’s wife.”

“She’s got dark glasses on—doesn’t she want to be recognized?”

Ginger got back in her car but didn’t back out of the driveway. Instead, she pulled out her cell phone and called Frankie Black.

“Frankie, I need your help. Can you round up Maria, Laverne, Shirley? Or whoever’s available. We have to do an intervention. Nan won’t open the door or answer her phone; we’ve got to talk some sense into her. For her sake and Carla’s.”

Chapter XXXVII

Pink Ladies

April 2003. A hospital in Michigan

Fiona was the first one to see me in the crowded waiting room. “Where have you been? Are you okay? You’re so pale.”

“Just shut up, please. No, I’m not okay. My life is falling apart. Mom, Nan, my car.”

Fiona looked at me with that helpless, “What can I say” look that was so annoying.

“I quit. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Carla, you’re upset and tired.”

“I mean it! You tell Archer, or I’ll tell him.”

“This can wait until Aunt Caroline is better.”

“This is not about my mother.”

“Sh-h-h.” Fiona looked around to see who was watching us.

“Can’t you see? It’s about my life; I should never have let you talk me into this.”

“We don’t want everyone to hear. We can talk about this later.”

I had a hard time holding back the tears. I didn’t want anyone being nice to me. I was feeling sorry enough for myself, by myself. I couldn’t take any more sympathy, or I was going to lose what little control I had left.

Jimmy saw us and came over to see what was wrong. He put his arm around my shoulder and steered me back to my chair. Two of the red haired Quinn cousins were sharing it, but they got up when they saw Jimmy and me. Jimmy pulled up a chair next to mine so we could talk.

My big brother had always been good at pretending an interest in what was going on in my life. It was funny how much he liked blueberries when I was

farming. Now, whenever he saw me, he wanted to know what was new at the Times. Everyone knew that was a subject that would keep me talking for hours.

Eventually, with a little coaxing from Jimmy, thoughts I'd shoved to the far corners of my mind since Mom's fall came out. Our discussion about the war in Iraq was a relief—talking about current events felt like a respite from our immediate concerns and a return to normality.

"The Iraqis' problems have been caused by Saddam, of course. But UN sanctions and years of war with Iran are also a big part of their problems," Jimmy said.

"Maybe you could write a series of articles for the paper about economics in the Middle East."

"Oh, no. I have opinions, like everybody else, but I don't know enough to write anything; except maybe a letter to the editor. Most Americans don't want to be involved with this war. Rather than all of us sacrificing, we want to leave all of the problems to our Armed Forces and their families. What a way to fight a war!"

"The War Against Terror," I reminded him.

"That's what the president calls it."

"What about Homeland Security and our other intelligence services?"

"In my opinion, they're all inadequate. Have we really forgotten Pearl Harbor so quickly and how all Americans need to be involved in any war?"

I was grateful that he was trying to engage me in something that had the power to temporarily take my mind off my own problems. I wondered what he would say if he knew about my involvement with LAP. It sounded reassuringly like he was in favor of citizen involvement.

He kept talking until I started to doze off in my big chair. I felt him cover me with a blanket someone had brought. Big brothers are good to have in a crisis.

"Jimmy, stay here with me, please."

"You can count on it."

The smell of coffee woke me up. The Pink Ladies had brought a restaurant-sized urn of coffee and an assortment of bagels and muffins for the early visitors as well as the all-nighters. The hospital was beginning to feel as familiar as the chain hotel I stayed at when I traveled.

I took my tote bag of cosmetics to the ladies room to start my day. Ginger had packed some sanitizing hand soap for me, to go along with her well-meant warnings: "It is so easy to catch something in the hospital. Healthy people like us aren't used to the strange germs here." I thought that made an interesting point

of view for a feature article. I made a note to assign it to Asia when I got back to the office. That reminded me to call the office and tell them Matt was in charge until I could get back. Everyone wanted to know what he could do, but no one actually offered any real help.

I peeked into Ma's room and saw two doctors in the room with her. I backed away; I didn't want to know what they were doing to her. I lost my appetite for the bagel I was holding, and I went back to the security of my chair.

I didn't recognize some of the people waiting for my mother. Women she went to church with, women on her charitable committees, and young people she had tutored came with food, magazines, even pillows. When some left after a few hours, others replaced them.

Then there were the postal workers she had become friendly with after the anthrax business. She had taken a big basket of cookies and snacks to the local Post Office. I spent a lot of time helping her select things in obviously tamper-resistant packaging so they wouldn't worry.

Finally, a smiling face headed in our direction. "Your mother is awake and asking for you. You can go in and see her." The cherubic nurse in starched whites looked angelic enough to kiss. It felt as if she had announced that the pearly gates were opening especially for the McCarthy family.

Everyone within earshot got up quickly, wanting to be the first to see his or her sister, aunt, cousin, best friend, or neighbor. Jimmy and I hurried to the door, and only Aunt Peggy continued all the way there with us.

A different nurse stopped us before we entered Mom's room. "You may all go in this time, but after this, only two at a time. Keep it short, she needs to rest." I was so grateful that this nurse would bend the rules for us. I didn't want to fight with my aunt.

There were two IV bags hanging at her bedside and an oxygen tube in her nose, but she tried to smile when she saw us. The walls, sheets, and blankets were all bleached white. I was startled when I realized there was no contrast between my mother and her room except for the dark circles under her eyes and a purple bruise on her cheekbone.

"Anything for attention. You never change." Aunt Peggy leaned over and gave Mom a kiss on the forehead.

Mom surprised me when she responded to her baby sister's teasing with what sounded like a giggle. "Did you ever see such a fuss? That good looking doctor is in my room every twenty minutes, checking to see if I'm still sleeping."

This little exchange reassured me until I saw the look in Mom's eyes and realized that she was stoned. Her eyes had had that same glassy look at Colleen's wedding when she drank too many Grasshoppers.

Her only words to me were predictable. "You look worse than I feel. Go on home and get some rest. I'll be fine."

Chapter XXXVIII

Happy Dog Dance

April 2003. A hospital in Michigan

Jimmy had been trying on the role as the man of the family since Dad's stroke, and he was the one who took charge now. He promised Mom that he would make sure I got home, check on Dad, water her plants in the garden, and talk to her doctor.

As soon as I was out of her room, I realized that I didn't know what to do.

I was close to tears again. So many emotions wanted to express themselves, like hyperactive inner children.

"Me first."

"No, me first."

Relief, Fear, Anger, and Sorrow all pushed at the door in my head marked Exhaustion. They had been beating at that door since I was a child. They knew it was their best hope of taking center stage.

How could I get home? Where was Dinah? She'd been a part of our family for so long.

For a moment, I thought I was dreaming when I saw Nan talking to the Angel nurse. When she drew me into her arms for a welcome hug, the tears I had been holding back spilled over, wetting both of our cheeks. As the tears flowed, Fear lost its grip first and was washed away.

Nan detests public displays of any kind of emotion. Since this was not about her, however, she tolerated it stoically, awkwardly patting my back. "It's all right. I'm here, it's all right. Don't cry."

My cousin, Siobhan, collected my jacket and cleared away our newspapers and half-filled box of Dunkin' Donuts as she led us to the exit.

"Where's your cell phone?" Nan knew I needed my cell phone to function.

“Don’t know. Home, maybe. Maybe in the car.”

“Where’s your car?”

“Don’t know. Stolen, maybe. Probably.”

Jimmy had been standing nearby, listening to this exchange. “I’ve filed a report with the Dearborn police. Looks like the car was taken from the parking lot here sometime over the weekend, but we don’t know exactly when.”

“No wonder she’s crying.”

That seemed like the funniest comment I had ever heard. Nan thought I was crying over Dinah. A laugh tried to make itself heard, but Sorrow and Anger were still too strong. Instead, a harsh sounding, strangled sound came out and alarmed people standing near us. People moved away from me, as though I had crossed the fine line from being worthy of their solicitude to being out of control.

“I promised Mom that I would make sure Carla goes home and gets some sleep. Can you do that for us? I’d really appreciate it,” Jimmy asked Nan.

Skip was so glad to see me that he did the happy dog dance he reserved for special occasions. Cha-Cha twisted through my legs after first smelling my shoes and pant legs to make sure I hadn’t been with any other cats.

Something was simmering in the Crock-Pot, and there were oatmeal cookies still cooling on the counter. Ginger had been there. She knew my comfort foods, but I really wanted to have a beer. Thinking about how good my friends were to me made me want to cry again. I didn’t deserve them, and soon I was going to have to tell them why.

I wanted to listen to my phone messages and check my e-mail, but Nan gently propelled me toward the bedroom. I wondered if Nan noticed the tulips and candles, and if she realized I had put them out for our date Friday night.

“I’m sorry about Friday. I tried to call you.”

“I know, it’s okay. I was here, and I waited for you for a couple of hours. I drank all the wine and left when it was gone.”

We both managed to smile at that. When she admitted to drinking and leaving too soon, that usually meant she had fallen asleep before the main event. “Can you lie down with me for awhile?” I asked, although I already knew the answer.

“I’m going to take Skip for a walk, and then I’ve got a stolen car to find.”

“There are some things I have to tell you first. I was going to tell you Friday night, but I forgot everything when I found out Mom was hurt.” I took off my shoes and socks and tossed my jeans on the floor before Nan pulled the spread over me.

“It’s waited this long; it can wait until you get some sleep. I know you must be exhausted. We’ll talk when I come back.”

Nan pulled the shades, turned off the table lamp, and shut the door. In the quiet room, I could hear sleep waiting for me. So I let him in.

Section VII: The Desert

It is the desert's grimness, its stillness and isolation, that brings us back to love. Here we discover the paradox of the contemplative life, that the desert of solitude can be the school where we learn to love others.

—Kathleen Norris, American poet and farmer

Chapter XL

Journalists or Spies

April 2003. North of Baghdad

“Chanel, isn’t it? Very nice.”

“How can you tell?” She sniffed loudly. “There’s so much smoke in the air. Why are these people burning down their own buildings?”

Robert saw the tears in her eyes but wasn’t sure if it was the acrid smoke or her unhappiness causing them. “As a Frenchman, I will always appreciate a woman who smells as good as she looks. As for the people here, there is a lot of built up resentment.”

Robert’s limited experience with abused and frightened women had led him to believe they were most comfortable talking about themselves. If that didn’t work, he had a long list of anodyne subjects for use in similar situations; anything would do as long as they didn’t expect him to talk about himself.

“This country could be, should be, a nation filled with the most prosperous people on the planet. Even without oil, Iraqi land is enormously valuable. For centuries it has been a crossroads of commerce and art.”

“I saw modern buildings and big hotels in downtown Baghdad. The library and university were a surprise. It actually is a very attractive city.”

“The UN sanctions after the Persian Gulf War stopped all new construction.”

“Oh, look, Robert! Those boys standing outside the bakery all have rifles pointed at us. They look so young—they can’t be contractors.”

“They’re probably the owner’s sons protecting the store from looters. We’re not in any danger if we just keep driving.” Old men and small boys lined the streets guarding pharmacies, optometrists, photographers, shoe stores, and restaurants.

“Renee, look at me,” Robert said, trying to divert her attention from the street in front of them. He had to slow down to avoid the crumpled body of an old man lying across the roadway.

He needn’t have bothered. On the next corner, looters had abandoned a wheelbarrow. The front wheel was broken off, and the rusted cart had become the repository for an emaciated corpse, covered in blood.

Renee gasped when she saw the first dead body, but became still as she saw more and more bodies lying in the street.

They passed the looted National Theater, marred by the black scorch marks streaked up from the windows and doors where looters had torched the place. Tangled miles of film and squashed plastic containers lay scattered on the street outside the theatre.

Robert tuned the car radio to BBC for security alerts. They laughed uneasily when they heard the commentator say that the Russian ambassador was leaving town “because of security concerns.”

“Russia opposed the invasion of Iraq; he doesn’t have anything to worry about,” Robert said. “He’s a pampered diplomat who rides around town in a white SUV with tinted windows and diplomatic license plates.”

“I wonder if we could hitch a ride,” Renee said.

“He’s probably having his SUV washed and polishing the gold tag that says ‘Russian Embassy’ in English and Arabic.”

“Oh, I get it. He wants both sides to know he’s neutral! How ironic. I can’t picture the Russians being neutral about anything.”

The streets that were crowded with cars only two days ago were empty today. There were no bright red double-decker buses and only a few orange taxis on the roads. Bombs had damaged many of the bridges and overpasses, and some streets were impassable due to debris from looters.

Looters were running out of a bank. A young man with a bag of stolen money was shot as he ran toward a waiting car. U.S. troops stood on a corner nearby and watched as the shooter picked up the bag and continued running.

Thick clouds of dust darkened the air and swept across the road, reducing visibility to only a pale glimmer. Without any warning, Robert and Renee were at the point where the main road became a bridge. The area was a pile of rubble, bombed beyond recognition.

“Let me get out—I want to get a picture of the river,” Renee said. Without waiting for permission, she jumped out of the car and ran toward the bridge. A rank odor rose from the river and permeated the dusty air, causing Renee to pull

her borrowed *chador* over her nose in an attempt to block the sickening, sweetish smell of rotting corpses.

“Come back. Renee, come back to the car right now!” Robert called urgently as he scrambled out of the car to grab his charge. A convoy of American tanks across the river appeared to be moving closer, training its guns on the bridge. The road emptied in seconds as both civilian pedestrians and Iraqi soldiers scrambled for cover.

“They’re not going to shoot us,” Robert tried to reassure Renee once he had her safely back in the car. Her realization of the dangerous situation she had put herself in was her first real moment of fear. That fear hung in the air as the car slowly backed up and moved away from the deserted bridge.

They had to find a way to cross the Euphrates to get to Jordan. Buckled and impassible bridges lined the river road for miles as Robert searched for a safe passageway.

North of Baghdad, Renee saw vivid green date palms shimmering through waves of heat and smoke. Acres of date palms, citrus trees, and grape vines had been cultivated for decades by the landowner farmers. Seeing the healthy green orchards brought her a momentary peace that Robert had not been able to produce with any of his small talk.

Several miles rolled by without incident, and Renee closed her eyes and day-dreamed about being safely home in Paris. When the car abruptly screeched to a halt, she reluctantly opened her eyes to see a group of young Iraqi men in *dishdashis*, with guns pointed, approaching their car. A primitive barricade had been erected to block the road.

“*Sahafi*,” Robert said, raising his hands. Journalists.

“*Moukhabarat*,” the fighters said. Spies.

Chapter XL1

A Violent Death

April 2003. North of Baghdad

At first, the Iraqi men did not raise their voices. Anger showed only in their tense posture, and suspicion in the guns they kept pointed at their captives.

Robert introduced himself and Renee as French journalists and produced his passport and Iraqi government documents identifying him an accredited newsman for a French newspaper. This seemed to pacify the elder of the group, who began waving his arms, denouncing Americans. “See those graves,” he said, pointing at the cemetery. “A woman from our village was in labor when a bomb hit her home. Her family lost all of their children; they were buried together in a single grave.”

“Why are you dressed in *chador*?” one young fighter asked Renee, his voice rising. “It is an insult to my mother and sisters. My mother was killed by a sniper’s bullet.” Renee’s mouth was too dry to speak, and she was grateful when Robert answered for her in Arabic.

“She is my fiancée. I do not permit her to travel in these dangerous times with her western clothes,” Robert explained. “She does not speak Arabic.”

The soldiers escorted the two foreigners at gunpoint from their car to a small terra cotta house, which was hidden from the road. As soon as Renee entered the house, she felt an overwhelming premonition. Boarded up windows added to her feelings of claustrophobia, and the blood drained from her face when she saw the occupants of the small villa.

A group of fighters armed with pistols, rocket-propelled grenades, and automatic rifles sat at a kitchen table drinking tea. So far from a city, and with so many weapons, the young vigilantes would have no problem holding her and Robert hostage for as long as they wanted.

“My sisters and my brother were killed.” A wiry man in his twenties wanted to talk to the journalists. “Tell the world we are filled with grief,” he said. “Grief has taken over our lives.”

A young, very muscular, one-eyed man lifted his shirt to reveal a white suicide belt packed with explosives and armed with two triggers. “Look at me! I am the terrorist Americans fear. I have no family left to grieve for me. Tell the Americans they will never win here.”

Their captors shared their lunch of yogurt and tea and talked with Robert. She couldn’t tell if he was interviewing them, or they were interrogating him. Renee sat shaking and silent on the floor in a corner of the room with her knees drawn up to her chest and her hands hidden in the folds of the borrowed garment.

Only her dark eyes would have been visible if anyone had bothered to look at her, and she kept her gaze focused downward on the dirty tiled floor. She saw a long-horned beetle lurking under a damaged tile that was soaked and curled by a leaking lead pipe under the sink. Cigarette stubs and desert sand littered the floor and created an obstacle course for the creature as it scuttled cautiously from oasis to oasis. Renee wondered what mission had sent the nocturnal beetle out in the heat of the day. Was he searching for food? Did he have a family to feed, or was he merely curious?

Several times the bug came close to being crushed under a soldier’s heavy boot, but each time he narrowly escaped. Renee found herself rooting for him to make it to the relative safety and quiet of a spot under the low table, where he would be out of the soldiers path.

The one-eyed soldier laughed harshly at something one of his comrades said and nonchalantly crushed the big bug with the heel of his boot. Renee was close enough to hear the hard protective shell shatter half a second before the sickening scrunch an insect makes when it dies violently.

Without warning, Robert and three of their captors left the room. Renee was afraid to look up or make a sound. Her fear of being left alone had to be overcome this time. If she attempted to follow she was afraid the soldiers would prevent her escape by shooting her in the back, or worse. Without Robert to protect her, there would be no one to stop them from beating and raping her.

The soldiers took Robert back to his car and made him open the trunk. He took out the plastic bags Diana had given Renee for emergencies. One of the soldiers motioned for Robert to empty the bags onto the ground around the car while the other Iraqis stood back with their guns still pointed at Robert. When they were satisfied that the bags contained no explosives or weapons, they told Robert to pick the money up and put it back into the bags.

Renee sat very still on the kitchen floor with her too large *chador* wrapped tightly around her. Before Robert could finish picking up the thousands of nearly worthless dinars, one of the older men brought Renee outside and motioned for her to get into the car. One of the town's religious leaders had intervened, urging the soldiers to release the two, noting France's opposition to the U.S.-led war, and saying journalists were not combatants.

"You're lucky we got you," one of the fighters told Robert, as he and Renee were released. "There are some very bad people in Fallujah."

Robert pulled away in a hurry, in case they changed their minds. Renee cried quietly for a few minutes before breaking into loud sobbing.

"Thank you, God. I will never ask for anything else. I just want to go home."

"Do you want to call Benedicte?" Robert offered, hoping it would stop the sobbing.

"Oh yes, please. I want to talk to her."

There was no answer from Benedicte's phone, although the travelers tried several times.

"She probably can't get a connection inside the museum. Those thick walls block the calls. She always went into the gardens when she wanted to use her phone."

Renee was disappointed, but the diversion succeeded—at least temporarily—in stopping her torrential tears.

Chapter XLII

Shock and Pain

April 2003. Badiyat ash-Sham Desert, Iraq

“You can relax; the worse is behind us now.” Robert was aware of how lucky they were. “We’re on Route 10; it’ll take us straight through the Badiyat ash-Sham desert to the Jordanian border.”

“I keep thinking about that boy wearing the suicide belt. How terrible to hate that much.”

“Look over there. Do you like horses?”

“Horses? Yes, of course. But in the desert?”

“The world’s most beautiful horses are raised right here. If you see a ranch, let me know. I’ll stop so you can take photos.”

Renee expectantly watched for the horses. As the miles fell away, the hum of the tires and the predictable landscape soothed her. Her pounding heartbeat slowed, and she gradually started to relax the farther they were from their captors. She was almost asleep when she saw a wall of dust and debris rise suddenly from the jagged, black rocks. Tens of thousands of swirling grains of fine sand darkened the desert air, blinding them within seconds.

The howling, black wind rocked the car. Unable to withstand the onslaught, it careened wildly and spun out of control, over the edge of the road. It plunged into a shallow ditch and landed, tilted precariously on one side.

The steering wheel roughly cradled Robert when he slumped over, overwhelmed by pain and shock. Blood flowed unstopped from a cut above his right eye.

The seat belt that had recently protected Renee now held her tightly and stopped her from sliding out of the car. Crushing pain in her shoulders and right

arm prevented her from loosening the strap. Disoriented and confused, she withdrew from reality into a safer place.

The dust storm whirled around them until it departed as suddenly as it had arrived. A passing SUV crawling slowly along the sand-clogged road braked to a halt. The international group of peace activists, who had also left Baghdad that morning, helped the injured couple into their vehicle. They drove back through the western desert to where Red Crescent maps showed a small children's hospital in nearby Rutbah.

Aerial bombing had wrecked the government buildings and town center, and they found the children's hospital with its roof caved in.

An English-speaking Iraqi doctor approached the SUV. When he saw their passengers were bruised and bleeding, he directed them to a small clinic nearby. Clinic workers were in T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. Without any ventilation, the temperature was at least one hundred degrees inside. The weary staff had been making rounds using flashlights since the hospital had run out of fuel for the generators two days ago. When a harried nurse recognized Dr. Bahari, she told him she could not help his patients. "All we can offer is first-aid. We have no water. No medicines or any supplies have been delivered in weeks."

The staff eventually tended to Robert and Renee, stitching up a scalp laceration for him and doing their best to make her comfortable.

The doctor told Robert, "She has suffered a cracked rib. You must get her to a hospital in Baghdad; somewhere they have x-rays and proper facilities."

"The Al Kindi Hospital in Baghdad has been looted, ransacked. The medical staff has fled, abandoning their patients. Water and electricity have been cut off."

"Then I must treat her here. If she starts to show signs of shock, I cannot help her. We have no surgical supplies. No blood for transfusions."

The metallic taste of hot blood in Renee's mouth was gradually drawn into her nose. Perhaps it was necessary for her to smell it, to make its presence real.

The decision-making part of her brain hesitated momentarily. *Is adrenaline still needed? Is the time for flight over already?* As more blood slowly seeped out around the dangling spleen hidden behind the cracked rib, the mind made a difficult decision.

Slow, slow down now.

It was too late to avoid the crash. The guardian ribs were cracked, some broken. Too late for rescue. Now, it was time for repair.

The message was sent. Blood pressure lowered, heart beat increased, breathing sped up. The stomach was unable to digest even the smallest meal, so it had to be forcibly emptied.

The message returned. *Ready, I'm ready. I will trust you to take care of me.*

Renee grew paler as blood continued to seep into her abdominal cavity. Sleep offered a safe haven, but she couldn't find a way to replace the worry that filled her mind.

"Robert, call Benedicte. Tell her where we are."

"Yes, yes, don't worry. Everything will be all right."

"The nurses don't like me. Tell them I am French."

"Everything will be all right. Don't worry, sleep, sleep."

"Don't let them hurt me. Robert, I'm afraid."

"Sleep, sleep. Don't worry. Everything will be all right."

"Tell her ..."

The time had come. The heart and soul needed to communicate, and sleep had to facilitate the meeting.

As Renee slept, she saw buildings once testaceous, now faded by wind and time to the color of sand. They had no windows or doors. A woman sat against a crumbling building, singing a French lullaby. Renee wanted to sit next to her and put her head in her lap, but as she walked closer, the woman seemed to move further away. Eventually, Renee lay down in the warm sand and listened to the singing woman, who now resembled an angel:

"Lullaby and goodnight,
Lullaby and goodnight,
Bright angels are near,
So sleep without fear.
They will guard thee from harm.
With fair dreamland's sweet charm,
So sleep without fear.
So sleep without fear.
So sleep without fear."

Robert knew Renee needed more help than he could give her. Keeping watch over this vulnerable American woman was not something he was prepared to do. The emotional impact was too heavy. His job called for him to be at the border to stop the criminals who were escaping in the chaos of war. He must reach someone in Baghdad.

His first call to the Botan Café reached Makeia.

Chapter XLIII

Smoke Laced Tears

April 2003. The Baghdad Museum

Just inside the library annex, Ali Khan found Benedicte observing the crowd in the connecting corridor. He watched her face as she read Makeia's message, but he had little experience with women outside his family and couldn't tell if it was rage or grief she was feeling. His instructions were clear. He was not to leave her side until she was safely away from Baghdad.

"I will take you to Rutbah. My family is there and it's time now for me to leave Baghdad."

"Wait for me, please. I must find Diana." Benedicte looked uncertainly at the erstwhile waiter and wondered if she could depend on him.

He bobbed his head nervously several times, "Wait. Okay. Wait."

Benedicte, followed closely by Ali Khan, hurried back to the main hall where she had last seen Diana. The gunfire surrounding the museum and the ravaging thieves and vandals inside were more danger than Ali wanted to face but he owed Makeia many favors.

Benedicte was vaguely aware of his predicament, but her mission was to find Diana and get her to safety. She had temporarily submerged her fears for Renee so she could focus for the moment on the Crowley sister. When she saw Diana talking to one of the men she had previously spotted entering the museum, she paused for only a second. If Robert's suspicions were true, this was not the time to think about them.

"Ali has brought me a message from Robert. Renee is badly hurt; they were in a car accident two hundred miles from here. They didn't make it across the border. We have to go and help her."

"What can I do? Ahmed is not here yet, I promised to wait for him."

“Ali will drive us to Rutbah; we can leave now.”

“Don’t you understand? I can’t leave with everything that’s going on here. The museum needs me.”

“There’s nothing we can do to stop the looting, unless we start shooting everyone who comes through the doors. I am not prepared to do that, are you?”

“You said you would stay with me until Ahmed gets here.” Diana reached out to touch Benedicte’s arm with a childlike gesture.

“Diana, if you want me to help you, you must tell me the truth.”

“The truth? I’ve told you the truth. The Amazon artifacts ...”

“If that is all that you are worried about, bring the damn stone with you. Let’s go.”

“You don’t understand. It’s easy for you to say let’s go.” Diana’s back stiffened with resolve. “This is not your home.”

“No, and Diana, it is not really your home either. There is nothing here that belongs to you, and it’s too late to save the museum now.”

The smell of smoke came wafting through the air vents and up the basement stairs. Something was burning in the lower levels.

“We’ve got to go; it’s not safe here, and I must find Renee.” Benedicte took Diana’s arm and pulled her toward the door.

“No, you can go without me. I’ll wait for Ahmed. I have my gun; I will lock myself in my quarters until he gets here.” Diana started to move away from Benedicte toward the basement stairs.

“You’ve made your choice then?” Benedicte felt the burden of a lifetime of failure, as she looked into Diana’s hazel eyes heavy with smoke laced tears.

“Yes, and so have you.” Diana’s harsh recrimination hit Benedicte surprisingly hard and the memory of years of regret, over which she had no control, flooded over her.

“Diana, be careful. This is a dangerous game you’re playing.”

Benedicte picked up her worn duffle bag but wouldn’t walk away until Diana turned back to the stairwell. Diana did not look back.

Ali’s relief as he led the beautiful French woman to the alley where he had left Makeia’s hard car was obvious. He wondered again who she was and why she deserved such special treatment from his boss. Makeia was one of the most powerful men in Baghdad and rarely took an interest in foreigners.

The journey from Baghdad to Rutbah was 380 kilometers.

It took Ali nearly an hour to find a way around the U.S. roadblocks. Eventually, he found a backstreet route through a low-income district of dirt roads and

one-lane streets. Burned out cars, looted stores, abandoned tanks, and devastated buildings were the only views for blocks.

In middle-class neighborhoods farther from the city, well-dressed children sat on their porches waving to the cars leaving Baghdad. When Ali slowed down to avoid a ten-foot deep crater in the middle of the street, Benedicte saw that the front windows had been blown into the houses. Shards of glass lined the steps where the waving children sat.

When they eventually returned to the main freeway, she could hear loud booms echoing across Memorial Park, followed by the sharp staccato sounds of gunfire.

Ali Khan sped away from the city toward his hometown of Rutbah, going faster and faster on the familiar road. Suddenly, there was an abandoned Baghdad taxi with a flat tire in the right hand lane. He slowed just in time to avoid a collision.

As they drove farther west, they saw more towns that were only slightly damaged by the war. Newly empty plinths stood on street corners, where Saddam's portraits had stood only a day ago. Unmapped towns, consisting of only a few blocks, passed in a blur.

The larger towns were spread around a central compound that usually contained a fancy house or two adorned with elaborate stonework. Donkeys and goats had gladly moved in, through opened doors they found hanging askew on hinges loosened by vibrations.

Some places were still untouched—grocery stores piled high with canned goods, auto repair shops with second-hand tires. The clinic near the children's hospital looked intact, but the open doors and windows gave the building a ramshackle appearance.

Chapter XLIV

Refugees and Opportunists

April 2003. Iran–Jordan Border

Iraq's borders were temporarily out of control. Hordes of amateur criminals attempting to take advantage of the benefits of illicit trade formerly available only to career criminals and Saddam's security forces, overwhelmed the inadequate numbers of border agents.

Returning émigrés, and thousands of Shia pilgrims flooded into Iraq without documentation, as did criminals, foreign agents, and terrorists. Large quantities of previously hard-to-get consumer goods now entered the country freely, along with contraband weapons and drugs.

At the same time, Iraqi military officers escaped arrest by fleeing the country, taking with them looted industrial equipment, chemical weapons supplies—and in some cases, stolen antiquities.

A groundswell of desperate people choked the departure checkpoint from Iraq to Jordan. Diana Crowley was jettisoned into this flood of refugees and opportunists. The guard waved her in without a second look, and she disappeared across the border into Jordan without a backward glance.

Chapter XLV

Maku, Maku

April 2003. Western Iraq

After many miles and hours of frantic hurry, Benedicte was suddenly afraid of what she might find here in this crowded, ill-equipped hospital. She slowly entered the dim room.

Robert was standing next to a cot in the middle of the long room. His attention was focused on the patient, and he didn't notice Benedicte enter the room until she spoke.

"How is she?"

"She's been asking for you. I didn't know if my message would reach you."

"Ali Khan came for me. Makeia sent him."

"How are things at the museum?"

"All is lost. Vandals are destroying what the looters didn't steal."

"Diana?" Robert asked.

"Tell me what happened to Renee."

"A sandstorm in the desert—the car went off the road. I tried to call you."

"No-good damned phone."

Benedicte could not take her eyes off the unconscious woman. "Has she seen a doctor?"

"Yes, we were lucky. An English speaking doctor cared for her, and it's because of him she got a bed."

"Lucky? This doesn't seem lucky to me."

"Sorry, poor choice of words. There are no supplies here. Nurses are performing first aid, but they can't do the kind of surgery she needs."

"What is wrong, do they even know that?"

"Cracked ribs, internal bleeding."

“But she’ll be all right?”

“You need to prepare yourself; if she doesn’t get a transfusion soon, she could die.”

“What are they waiting for?”

“The reality is there’s no water, no blood, and no medicine. They gave her one of the last doses of pain medicine and a cot. That is all they could do.”

When Benedicte slumped and looked as though she were going to faint, Robert lowered her to the floor next to Renee’s cot.

“Stay here. I’ll try to find you a chair.”

“Ali is outside waiting for me. Tell him this is the right place. He can leave; he wants to find his family.”

Benedicte knelt on the tile floor next to Renee’s narrow cot. The clinic had few full-sized beds, and tonight they were each occupied with two or three patients. Renee’s hands were on top of the thin sheet, cold as ice in the hot room. Cradling the two small hands between hers, Benedicte attempted to warm them.

Renee’s skin was nearly transparent; Benedicte imagined the struggle for life going on just beneath the surface.

The blue veins were looking for blood to take back to the arteries, to supply the heart. The heart was desperately attempting to conserve the rich fluid that, until recently, was so abundantly taken for granted.

This was the most important task the heart had ever been responsible for. In the past it had willingly served—continually beating, though frightened—throughout the death-like, anesthesia induced sleep, making the adjustments necessary for surgery, maintaining a clean supply of blood during long months of poisonous chemotherapy.

Renee’s heart was not willing to desert her now.

Before nightfall a team from *Medicins du Monde* reached the clinic in the tan and dusty city. Upon finding the dangerously pallid young woman with abdominal distention lying on a dirty cot, a doctor checked her pulse and blood pressure.

“Can you tell me what happened to you?”

“*Pouvez-vous m’aider?* Can you help me?” Renee tried unsuccessfully to remember if it was safe to speak English now.

“*Oui, le docteur.* How do you feel?”

“*Fatigué.*”

“Sleep, sleep. I will take care of you.”

Renee was willing to sink into a deep slumber, but although her eyes closed heavily and easily, her ears stayed attentive.

The volunteer doctor, whose specialty was emergency medicine, asked for surgical gloves. The exhausted nurse, who had been at the hospital for days, replied resignedly, "*Maku—None.*"

Robert asked, "Can you help her?"

"She has multiple injuries—broken ribs, fluid in the left and right upper quadrants. The pelvis suggests a damaged spleen. Are you her husband?"

"No. I'm a French police agent, a friend. I was helping her escape from the fighting in Baghdad when we had an accident about thirty kilometers from here. I can't let her die, I promised to protect her."

"I'll do my best, but she's lost a large quantity of blood. We must expect that shock may occur. Hypotension is a grave sign, and emergency surgical intervention must occur soon."

"If I can get a military helicopter here, can she travel? Maybe we could get her to a hospital in Jordan," Benedicte asked.

"Right now, I need plasma to balance her falling blood pressure and medication to prevent vomiting."

"*Maku, maku.*"

Reports reached The World Health Organization of many injuries in western Iraq. The Fedayeen military were using Bedouins and farmers as human shields. That same night, members of WHO left Amman with fifty surgical kits bound for Iraq. They took with them sufficient anesthetics, surgical equipment, and medical supplies for five thousand surgical interventions and several days' postoperative care.

One of their first stops was the clinic at Ar Rutbah, in the Anbar province near Jordan.

Chapter XLVI

East Toward Jordan

April 2003. Western Iraq

When the hospital staff heard a helicopter land close to the clinic, they assumed it was a third team of health professionals or a humanitarian group bringing needed supplies, and they gathered at the door to greet them.

Four men in flak jackets and fatigues exited the helicopter carrying automatic weapons. One of the men led the way into the clinic; the other three followed with drawn guns at their sides. He spoke brusquely but politely to the hospital staff, inquiring about a young American female patient. When the nurses assured him there were no Americans taking refuge in the small clinic, he insisted that Renee Martin was there.

When he was shown to a makeshift surgical recovery room, he hesitated only the briefest of moments when he saw the two Interpol agents standing watch over the woman he was there to escort eight thousand miles.

He introduced himself as a medical doctor, although Benedicte didn't catch his name. He spoke flawless Arabic, and his dark hair and eyes suggested he might have been of Middle Eastern descent, but he spoke to Renee in an unaccented American dialect.

"Ms. Martin, we are here to take you back to the States."

"*Non, non Americain,*" she murmured, still struggling to maintain her French identity through her pain and the pain medications that only partially remedied it. He bent low over her bed and whispered something to her that caused her to stop struggling and relax again.

Renee's surgeon was cautious about her recovery and her ability to travel.

“She’ll need post-operative care for at least two weeks. She’s very weak. I’ve put in a nasogastric tube to minimize the risk of a ligature failure, but you’ll need to watch for bleeding for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

“I understand the dangers, but it’s more dangerous to leave her here. We’ll make sure she has the best medical care.”

“Where can I contact you?” Benedicte asked.

“Sorry, ma’am. It’s hard to say,” the taller soldier said.

“I can’t just let you take her; I have to know where she’ll be.”

“We’re taking her home.”

Two other men in fatigues were carefully loading Renee into a black Chinook helicopter with a big, reassuring red cross painted on the side. It was all happening so fast that Benedicte couldn’t respond.

“We’ll be sure to have her family contact you as soon as she’s settled.” The blond soldier had an accent that wasn’t American or Canadian.

“Your accent is Australian, isn’t it?”

“New Zealand. Formerly special-ops, ma’am.”

Robert intervened, “Let’s have a little talk before you shove off.” He took his Interpol badge from his battered jacket and made sure the two men got a good look at it.

“Sorry, there’s no time, sir. Our first priority is to get this woman to a medical facility.”

The two men trotted to the helicopter where the other two men had finished loading Renee. Robert caught up with them.

“Who are you working for?”

“We’re going to take good care of her.”

“If I didn’t believe that, I would stop you.”

“Harris Enterprises is our employer. We go where he tells us. Confidential. This is a rescue mission, not a snatch.”

The man slammed the door, and the helicopter lifted straight up before angling east toward Jordan.

Section VIII: Guilty in Michigan

A: You're making me feel guilty.

B: You are guilty.

—Mason Cooley, American aphorist.

Chapter XLVIII

Mary Kay Pink

May 2003. A Suburb of Detroit, Michigan

A Hazel Park resident spotted the unusual car in his neighbor's driveway and alerted the local police. It wasn't like the neighbor was a friend.

Dinah looked as if she might have been understudying a skein of geese that was preparing for a long migration. Her hood had been raised and left at a precarious angle; the heathens who had taken her didn't understand that she wasn't as young as she appeared. The two front doors resembled outstretched flamingo wings, and one rear door had been flung open unceremoniously and left to shiver in the wind. Dirty trickles of WD-40 ran down the other rear door, which had refused to open.

A brutal screwdriver had forced the trunk open, and it bobbed about uneasily on timeworn hinges, unsure what to do.

From within the open garage doors, oversized speakers boomed Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama."

For a routine stolen car run, one patrol car would have pulled into the drive behind the Ford Explorer parked next to the aluminum-sided bungalow. Today, three units arrived, including the unmarked car Nan rode in. The former police chief was not officially involved in any way. If anyone would have asked, she was just passing by.

A large boned man emerged from the garage with a scowl, wiping the oil from his hands on a dark blue mechanics rag. When he saw who his visitors were, he attempted to tuck his undershirt in before reaching for something on a shelf along the wall of the garage.

"Hold it right there, partner." The first officer out of the patrol car was holding his weapon.

“I was just reaching for my beer. I wasn’t exactly expecting company.”

“Mind if I take a look in the garage?” The second uniformed officer was moving toward the opposite side of the garage, where an older model, dark blue sedan was parked. “This your car?”

“Nah, it’s my son’s car. Just getting it spruced up for him.”

“What about the DeSoto?”

“It’s a beauty, ain’t it? I plan on driving it in the Dream Cruise come August.”

“This car was reported stolen from a hospital parking lot in Dearborn. Can you explain where you got it?”

“My son cuts the grass for an old lady in Montrose who’s too old to drive anymore. She sold him the car for four hundred dollars.”

“Where is your son now?”

“Look here, nobody stole that car. Delbert paid cash money for it. He’s been yammering about getting that car for months, and how we was going to drive it in the Cruise.”

Nan had gotten out of the unmarked car to satisfy her curiosity about the current condition of Carla’s car.

“So, you’re telling us that you didn’t notice this car was hot-wired and that your son doesn’t seem to have any keys for it?” Nan asked after one look at the dash.

The patrol officer took that as his cue to say, “You are under arrest for car theft,” and to begin the familiar warning: “you have the right to remain silent ...”

A taller, thinner edition of the man in the driveway burst out of the side door. “I did it! My Dad didn’t know nothing about it.”

The loose laces on his canvas low-tops trailed behind him. He tripped on the wooden steps and flew headlong into Nan before he came to a stumbling stop against her stiffened, outstretched arms.

“I’ve been looking for that car for a long time. There ain’t many like it. When I seen that woman leave it outside the hospital ... well, nobody was around. Me and my dad was gonna fix her up real nice.”

“How old are you, son?”

“I’m sixteen, I’m old enough to drive.”

“Let’s get a flat-bed over here. We don’t want to damage this old boat by towing it.”

“I’ll let the owner know it’s in the impound lot.”

“Thanks, guys. I know Carla will appreciate getting her car back,” Nan said.

“No problem, Chief. I hope the body shop guys can help her out.”

“As soon as the insurance adjusters get done with scratching their heads over the estimates for a paint job. Not many shops carry Mary Kay pink.”

Chapter XLIX

My Mind is Made Up

May 2003. Montrose, Michigan

“I officially quit. Effective right now. Today.”

“You can’t just quit.”

“Oh, yes I can. Michigan is not a Right-to-Work state. If I can be fired without being given notice, I can quit without giving notice. It’s not like they’re paying me.”

“But you don’t report to me. You’re being irrational.”

“Doesn’t matter, you are the one that recruited me,” Carla said.

“You have to see Eleanor. You owe it to her to explain face-to-face.”

“Oh, Fee, you know she’ll try to talk me out of it or have me arrested.”

“She might try to talk you out of it, but I doubt she can have you arrested.”

“She could have me court-martialled, or arrested for treason. She’d probably try to, anyway.”

“You know better than that. You’re a low-level volunteer. Last time I looked, you hadn’t stolen any government secrets.”

“Low level? I’m the owner of a newspaper. My girlfriend, my ex-girlfriend, was the Chief of Police. The public will never believe me again.”

“The public doesn’t have to know. I’d be more worried about Nan, if I were you. Good thing she’s not still on the force.”

“My mind is made up. This might be the coward’s way out—it probably is—but I’m giving you my letter of resignation, and I’m sending copies to Eleanor and Archer.”

Carla got up and walked across the room to her desk where four envelopes were neatly stacked. She handed the top one to her cousin.

Fiona opened the letter and read it silently.

Commander Archer,

It is with a great deal of regret that I write this today. My regret covers much more than my resignation, however.

I sincerely regret that my country's leaders have chosen to ignore the intent of the Fourth Amendment. I believe our Constitution is the backbone of our success as a country. For whatever ways that I have personally abused it, I owe an apology to the entire country.

My heartfelt regrets will forever be a part of any relationships that I may salvage with my family, friends, and neighbors. I abused their trust in me when I allowed your suspicion and paranoia to surround them. This black mark will forever be on my conscience.

As a writer, editor, and publisher of a public newspaper, I have an obligation and duty to the citizens of Montrose, and to all of Michigan. My ethics and personal values affect my employees and readers. I am ashamed at my hypocrisy and duplicity.

I have no excuse for my errors in judgment. In the hysteria of 9/11 and the aftermath of feeling that we must protect ourselves at all cost, I threw aside restraint and good judgment, as did many other Americans.

I was influenced by our president's insistence that there were weapons of mass destruction poised to annihilate America. I was influenced by a member of my own family to believe that our government needed me. Ultimately, I was influenced by my own grandiose ideas of self-sacrifice and heroism. I truly wanted to help keep our country safe from terrorists.

Now that a year has passed, and our country is at war, it is clear that my friends, family and neighbors are the best examples of American citizens this country has ever produced.

I'm angry, I'm ashamed, and I'm sorry that I ever got involved with LAP.

Sincerely,
Carla A McCarthy

“Well, that says it all. What are you going to do now?”

“I’ve missed so much time at the paper since Mom’s accident, I’m going to spend time catching up at work, and I’m going to work in my yard. I have a feeling my friends are going to be avoiding me when they find out what I’ve done.”

“You don’t have to tell them.”

“Oh, yes I do. I’m sick of keeping secrets.” Carla’s eyes glistened with unshed tears.

“One envelope for me, one for Eleanor, and one for Archer. Who’s the fourth one for?”

“Nan.”

Chapter L

Mea Culpa

May 2003. Montrose, Michigan

The music at Ginger's was always good, but tonight it seemed too loud. I found the CD player and turned the Indigo Girls down a little. I helped myself to a bottle of spring water from the refrigerator and checked my watch, even though I knew everyone had arrived. I stood near the center of the room and said, as authoritatively as I could muster, "Can I have your attention for a minute?" I waited until most of the group noticed me and stopped talking.

"I want to explain this just one time, so everyone hears the same thing." I wasn't sure I was starting this right, so I tried again. "What I have to tell you isn't pleasant. I need to say right up front, that I am very, very sorry. It seemed to be the right thing to do at first, but it was the worst mistake of my life."

The group of women, some of whom I had thought would be friends for life, were suddenly very quiet. They picked up on my tone of voice and realized I wasn't preparing to tell one of my usual bad jokes.

Ginger moved silently to the front of the room. I thought I could count on her support, but I wasn't sure. I knew how she felt about cops. We were all at her house for our book club meeting, the only times all of us were together.

I had already told Nan, and I already knew I had lost her. Soon I would find out if I was going to lose all of my friends, too.

"A little over a year ago, I agreed to help an organization called LAP, The Local Assistance Program.

"Homeland Security and the FBI suspected that well-to-do older women, like us, would be targeted by our enemies. They convinced me that I could help prevent terrorists from infiltrating our community."

I was almost hoping someone would interrupt. Our usual conversations would have had several people talking at once, with opinions flying around the room. Tonight, everyone was silent.

“The bottom line is that I was asked to prepare a report for LAP on what’s going on in our monthly book club discussions. Places you’ve traveled and anything we’ve talked about that was political.

“I knew none of you would help terrorists, and I thought if I could prove that, they would stop watching us.”

Everyone started talking at once. They were saying all the things I had said to myself, and even some of the things Nan had said to me.

“The FBI is the worst. They could have arrested all of us.”

“Homeland Security? They’re such a joke.”

“How could you agree to such a stupid thing?”

“What were you thinking?”

“No, no. Nan warned us there was an informer here.”

“Wait a minute; we don’t know the whole story.”

“I see how you could have thought it might help.”

“But that wasn’t right. You should have told us.”

“Carla, what exactly did you tell them?”

“We trusted you.”

“An informer, that’s basically what you are.”

Laverne stood and made her way to the front of the room. She was the only one everyone listened to, and I was afraid of what she was going to say. Before she could reach me, I murmured a hasty “I’m really sorry,” and started backing toward the door.

Chapter LI

Big Girls Don't Cry

May 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Crayola must have had this morning in mind when it made Sky Blue and Unmellow Yellow. Overhead, the sky in my yard was a clear blue with a round and bright sun.

I planted myself in the middle of a three-foot crescent of Crayola Brown, trying to remember the beginning of my ritual rhyme for transplant day.

“The sky is blue,
The grass is riz,
I wonder where the flowers is.”

No matter what else was going on in the world, some things would always anchor me. Flower Day at Eastern Market was a staple in my yearly calendar. Going alone was the best way for me. No one impatiently tugging at me when I spent an hour rooted looking at dahlias and Gerbera daisies that I knew perfectly well would never thrive in my shady yard. Seeing hundreds of them waiting hopefully, lined up in perfect rows, made me hopeful that someone, somewhere, had enough sunlight and would take them home.

Equally hopeful were people on pilgrimages for peonies, petunias, poppies, primroses. The colors and scents were my secret intoxication, better even than a box of Binney and Smith's finest sixty-four.

I knew I was going home with two flats of mixed petunias and two flats of gin pink begonias, just as soon as I had satisfied myself with looking at every stall filled with fragrant green onions and basil, checked the prices of tomatoes and bananas, and gazed at pots of daylilies and larkspur.

Monday would be back to the real world; this weekend I was the Irish farmer tilling the soil.

On my right side, I had placed a five-gallon bucket filled with lukewarm water sprinkled with a handful of Miracle Grow, and I had a flat of forty-eight perfect begonias on my left. My trusty trowel and bare fingers were the only tools I expected to need.

It took a few tries, but I was getting into the rhythm. Pop out four or five seedlings, let them float in the bucket while I dug a few holes, carefully relocate any curious worms that came out for a look, remove one sopping wet begonia with right hand, pinch excess roots with left hand, insert into hole—then repeat forty-eight times.

It was simple, it was honest, and I knew exactly what I was supposed to do.

Bunny hung around with me; she liked to smell the flowers. Skip lay near by, keeping watch on our street while I was amused myself with begonias. He had developed his own rules over the years he had this job. If people walked by slowly and quietly, one at a time, he gave them the benefit of the doubt, but people on bikes, wearing their baseball caps backward, or laughing in an annoying, high-pitched way received one warning bark—*this is an off-limits yard protected by a DOG*—before he actually got up.

He didn't feel the need to alert me when a familiar car parked at the curb. Maybe he sensed that any warning he might have given me would have been inadequate.

"Pink begonias, again?"

I felt a flash of irrational joy when I saw Nan bending down to rub Skip's ears and pulling a treat from her pocket for him. If she still loved him ...

"I don't change my mind once I decide I like something," I said.

"I'm leaving town for a while. I wanted to tell you in person. I'll do a few book-signings here and there and take time to see the country."

"Oh." There was a hard lump in my throat. This was the trip we had talked about taking together. I didn't want to cry in front of her again. I had done enough of that.

"The reason I'm here is to ask you if Malcolm can stay here with you. He's too old to rough it on the road."

It was awkward trying to get up without stepping on a baby begonia or creating a flood with the water bucket. Both of my hands were muddy; any tears I allowed to flow would have to go unwiped.

"Of course I'll take him; I love him."

If she heard the unspoken "I love you," she ignored it. She and Skip headed toward her car where Malcolm waited, bewildered, with his bowls and blankets.

Nan whispered something in his ear, hugged him and Skip, and was behind the wheel before I could ask where she was going or when she would be back.

Would she be back?

Section IX: Heartland

A good traveler has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving.

—Lao Tzu, Chinese Taoist Philosopher

Chapter LIII

On the Road

Summer 2003. Atlanta, Georgia

There's alone, and then there's *all alone*. The freedom to make all of her choices was powerful. If her choices involved drinking too much, smoking for no special reason, and sleeping around, no one would be there to chastise her. No warnings about the dangers of alcoholism, no scares about lung cancer, and most of all, no sanctimonious moral edicts.

The road to Georgia promised new. Nan liked the idea of new. A new state offered a new state of mind.

With every piece of peach and pecan pie, Michigan apples and cherries would fade in her memory.

Red Dog Ale would become her beer of choice; she could forget Stroh's.

Ray Charles' promise, "Just this old sweet song ... keeps Georgia on my mind," would replace Motown's tempting words, "I've got sunshine on a cloudy day."

Shirley and Laverne wished her well but were obviously hurt that she seemed so excited about reading at the OutWrite Bookstore in Atlanta. She assured them that OutWrite would not replace My Sister's Bookstore, but the closer she got to Georgia, the more everything Michigan faded.

Nan was mildly surprised when she realized that she was looking forward to introducing herself as a lesbian poet to people who had never seen her in a police uniform.

If she missed anyone at all, it was Malcolm. Faithful, dependable Malcolm. Non-judgmental, loyal Malcolm. Every dog on the planet Earth possessed an intrinsic honesty that seemed to be missing in *Homo sapiens*.

The three days she had planned to stay in Atlanta turned into three weeks. A warm reception at the bookstore, juke joints filled with hot music, nights cool enough to enjoy a midnight walk under the southern sky, and women sweet enough to be the original “Sweet Georgia Brown” combined to make her fall in love with the Empire of the South.

Waking up on day twenty-two with a too familiar hangover and an unfamiliar woman made her realize that it was not true love, however, but an adolescent crush.

She unfolded her map, filled up the gas tank at Leroy’s Super Shell, checked the oil herself, and headed for Nashville.

She was gone with the wind.

Chapter LIV

A Lonely Dog

Summer 2003. Montrose, Michigan

I wasn't ready to leave; I needed a little more time to find Skip.

The skimpy oxford shirt from my mother's attic barely covered me. Most people looked away after smirking or snickering, but some were more crude.

The dimly lit loading platform felt sinister even crowded with passengers waiting to load the Greyhound bus belching out clouds of exhaust.

I wanted to avoid another argument with the ticket seller about taking my dog on board, but there was no way I was going to leave him. It was my fault he was lost, but I knew he would forgive me.

I heard him before I saw him; a regretful little whimper of parting. Somehow, he knew he couldn't go this time.

In panic, I opened my eyes in the gray light. Dusk or dawn? I didn't know. Skip was in his usual place at the foot of the bed. The polite whimper was the one he used when he really needed to go out. I stumbled to the back door to let him out and realized that the sun was setting. Now I wondered what day it was. I rationalized I was too tired to have slept long.

Bits of the last two days came back to me as the dream faded and I exchanged one world for another. Procrastination had forced me to spend thirty-four hours at the office to make the deadline for the summer garden insert. It wasn't fair to make the employees pay for my screw-ups. Asia and Matt insisted on helping; I hope they were the only ones who knew I was in seven kinds of hell.

Now that Skip had peed and pooped, I was going back to bed for another day.

Just as I wrapped the covers around me, I remembered Malcolm. Where the hell was he? He was too set in his ways to sleep with me and Skip. I got up again and walked around the house, turning on lights and calling him.

I found him sleeping with Bunny on the closet floor of what used to be Nan's room. Dirty sweat pants she had left behind padded the hardwood floor where an old bulldog and a tailless kitten had found comfort together.

Now I really felt guilty. I had promised Nan I would take care of the old guy, and here he was sleeping in a closet. I needed to shake off my self-pity and take care of those who needed me.

"I'm sorry, old boy. Your Mama will be home soon, probably tomorrow. She won't forget about you."

The look in a lonely dog's eyes can break your heart.

Chapter LV

On the Road Again

Summer 2003. I-75 North, Exit 2 toward Chattanooga/Nashville

Nashville, the City, had a big image to live up to.

Nashville, the Movie, was responsible for many of Nan's perceptions of the South. Today, as her Jeep headed toward Tennessee, her thoughts were as jumbled as the twenty-four-track dialog. The "Buckle of the Bible Belt," her new friends in Atlanta had warned her, was not friendly to their kind. She had four hours or two hundred fifty miles, whichever came first, to change.

She had thought that when she'd taken off the blue uniform, she'd shed her police chief image. But she was beginning to realize that her erect posture and habit of looking everyone straight in the eyes still made petty criminals cross the street to avoid her—and vulnerable women swoon.

Without Malcolm riding shotgun, she was left to talk to herself.

"Everything in the movie happened in five days. That's how long I'll stay. If I don't find a women's bookstore right away, I'll go to Coco's and check out open mic night.

"No one knows me in Nashville. I can be anyone I want to be. When they find out I'm from Detroit, they'll expect Motown.

"I'll give them *8 Mile* instead."

Without Malcolm to answer her, the one-way conversation quickly lagged.

Her plan was to be settled somewhere before the day-lit sky allowed the city lights to take over. By habit, she checked her bare wrist and then fiddled with the radio dials to get the time. Not that it mattered.

No one was expecting her.

The Hampton Inn was a block from Café Coco. A hot shower washed off the road weary and she was ready to check out the infamous restaurant and bar.

Coco's was in a comfortable-looking old house. Nan was amused to see the name painted in big, block letters on the shingled roof. Loud Nashville music poured into the streets live from the trendy restaurants and bars: LePeeps, Jimmy Kelly's, and the Corner Bar.

Nan's plans were to check out the café before committing herself to getting on the stage. A sign on the wall behind the bar had the familiar Red Dog, but she wanted a change, so she switched to Sam Adams when she ordered fries and a burger. She was annoyed when her fries came in a brown paper bag.

"Miss, I didn't want this to go."

"You must be new around here, honey. That's the way we serve 'em here. Try them, you'll like them. Bag keeps them nice and moist on the inside."

Nashville was already filling her need for something different.

Signs posted around the room told her all she needed to know: Open 24 Hours a Day, Open Mic Night—Thursday 8–10, See Carol Jane to Sign Up. That was perfect; Thursday was day five. She could leave town Friday morning.

By Wednesday night, Nan had exhausted all of the tourist spots Nashville had to offer. Music City, U.S.A., was not so different from Motown, U.S.A. She had eaten biscuits for breakfast, wandered into a few Baptist Bookstores, and walked all day looking for the essence of Music Row in honky-tonk bars. There was just one thing left to do.

She had heard about a special lady who lived in a mythical place called Vandyland. One of a kind. Not to be missed. Her favorite waitress at Coco's sketched a map on a napkin and tucked it into the bag with the cheeseburgers and fries for her. "You'll like her, everybody does."

"If she's as nice as you say, I may just spend the night with her."

Fannie Mae Dees Park was easy to find near Vanderbilt University. Most Nashville residents called it the Dragon Park.

The undulating sea serpent waited patiently in the late afternoon sun of the deserted playground. It was everything Nan had hoped it would be, and nothing like she had expected. Children may have clambered onto her sturdy cement back during the day, but they had gone home for schoolwork and supper. Nighttime was the dragon's time to dream of dark seas filled by moonlight. Unexpected beauty glowed in the thousands of tesserae used to create the mosaics placed on her by schoolchildren, grandparents, street people, and artists. Each glittering tile was as individual as the fingerprint of the person who placed it during the re-birthing process.

Nan walked around and around the undulating monster as reverently as an anthropologist discovering a new species. She couldn't name many of the tiny faces imbedded in the dragon's scales, but she knew them instinctively. Amazingly real, emerald green eyes looked out at her, and when she looked back, she wondered what genie was powerful enough to imprison the soul of such a beautiful woman within the serpent.

When she was tired, she sat beneath the arched neck and shared her dinner with a tawny, scrawny, hungry cat.

The moon hid behind some slow moving clouds, and the wind whispered a wet warning. Nan was almost asleep beneath the shelter of the large body when a tentative paw touched her face. A questioning purr inquired politely if she were willing to share the warmth of her lap. The scrawny kitten took Nan's stillness for acceptance and settled down with a sigh, her tiny head positioned to the comforting sound of a human heartbeat.

Nan had packed and checked out of her hotel room. Kitten and Jeep waited near the curb the next evening. Carol Jane waited until the office types had mostly gone home before she introduced Nan. By nine o'clock, the room was filling up with the younger crowd. She didn't like the idea of scheduling a fifty-year-old woman to perform in front of a crowd of Mohawks and piercings, but Nan insisted that was her target audience.

"If you are going to walk on thin ice, you might as well dance. That's my motto," she told Carol Jane with an air of bravado.

Nan instinctively assumed her crowd-control stance as she stood rock-solid, center stage, in front of the unpredictable crowd. Twenty-five years of police work had not prepared her when she took the microphone and boldly introduced herself.

"What's up, Nashville? I'm Lady Law from the D—a. k. a—the 3-1-3. For one night only, in Nashville, Tennessee."

A titter of laughter swept around the room. The audience was used to drunks taking the stage on open mic night, along with some really bad performers.

"I'm here to let you know that I'm still in my prime

"Even if I don't always find the words that rhyme.

"But that's no reason for you to laugh at me

"I can still entertain you with my POETRY.

"I was sick and tired of the Michigan cold.

"So I packed my bags and I hit the road.

"WINTER—that just ain't the place for me

“So I brought myself here to TENNESSEE.
“HOME of the Titans, HOME of the Blues.
“HOME of Elvis Presley, and his blue suede shoes.
“The Grand Ole Opry, and Musical Row
“The Cumberland River, and Club Coco.
“Before it’s time for me to leave this vacation spot,
“I want to thank Carol Jane for giving me this shot.
“Now to make sure you haven’t forgot—who I am,
“It’s time for y’all to take one final exam.
“The name I’ve chosen—is Lady Law
“The best you ever HEARD, and the best you ever SAW.”

The audience sat silent for a moment trying to reconcile the slim, blonde, fifty-year old woman they were looking at on stage with the raucous hip-hop performance they had just heard. Their silence sounded like disapproval to Nan. She shrugged and started to leave the stage when the applause started, and the audience jumped to their feet.

“More! More!”

“Again!”

“Bravo.”

“Thank you and good night.” Nan took a half bow and gave the crowd a crooked smile.

“Come back! Come back!” A steady rumble of foot stomps on the wooden floor accompanied the crowd’s rowdy requests.

“Nashville, you’ve been wonderful! But it’s time we be geese. I’ve gotta go walking in Memphis.”

Chapter LVI

Fun Loving Woman

July 2003. Montrose, Michigan

I had been avoiding a girl's night out with Leslie for months. She should have seen that my life had been so chaotic for the last two years that hanging around with me was not the way to meet someone. She was so optimistic that she couldn't believe my bad luck would rub off on her.

Everyone knew she'd had a crush on Darilyn since Darilyn had opened Vegelina's a couple of doors away from Leslie's pajama store. I'd tried to tell her she didn't stand a chance, but it never sunk in. No matter how many ways she found to show Darilyn she was interested, Darilyn found more to show that she wasn't.

In spite of this, I agreed to have dinner with Leslie at Vegelina's and later go check out the new Singles Night event at the bookstore. Darilyn was charming as always; she was one of the few people who hadn't held a grudge. She knew what it was like to be ostracized and was always friendly to me. The story about how I rescued her and Ginger from Jane's basement had been forgotten by most people in Montrose, but Darilyn kept the newspaper clippings pinned to a bulletin board along with the four-star reviews Vegelina's had garnered in the last three years.

It was no surprise that Leslie tried to linger over coffee and crême brûlée. The restaurant was busy, and Darilyn couldn't or wouldn't leave the kitchen to sit with us. The weather was nice, so I convinced Leslie to walk together over to the bookstore. She was hopeful that she'd meet someone there. I was hoping I wouldn't.

We arrived a few minutes past seven—the event was scheduled from seven till nine—and Laverne met us at the door with a glass of white wine. The first thing I noticed were two women playing instruments near the front windows. A Viet-

name woman was making marvelous, mystical noises on an instrument with thirty-six strings called a *tam thap luc*. A large black woman, dressed in traditional African robes, was keeping the beat going playing conga drums. Lacquered trays full of interesting nibbles were set on a table, along with piles of cooking and entertaining books. At this early hour, the place was empty except for a couple of middle-aged women engaged in purposeful browsing, in an effort to look inconspicuous. A woman who looked like Star Jones was anything but inconspicuous as she checked out every new arrival. I made my way over to the Poetry section. I wanted the comfort of being near Nan's books.

Near the Women's Studies shelves, I overheard a Wayne State professor expressing astonishment that a rival university's library did not stock all the books on course reading lists. Glued to the Erotic Lesbian Fiction section there was a lady I later decided must have been the "nice, slim, dark-haired SGWF seeking good times with fun-loving woman." I was glad I had resisted a late night impulse to call her. Reading those personal ads after a few glasses of wine was always a bad idea.

We struck up a conversation. "I suppose that's what you do at these things—go up and talk to people," she said with a nervous laugh. She was eager to tell me that she had recently abandoned a "selfish lush" who had taken up with a massage therapist. That confession over, she felt comfortable enough to admit she had placed a couple of ads in the MLN, with no promising results so far, and had decided to try her luck here.

Leslie returned from the hors d'oeuvre table and we ambled around the store, which was starting to fill up. "See anyone interesting?" I asked. She picked out a soccer-mom type in a denim pantsuit. We approached her, and she eyed us suspiciously when I introduced Leslie and myself. I made small talk while the soccer mom and Leslie sized each other up. The potential conquest rocked from foot to foot with her eyes darting round the room, then edged away.

"That went pretty well, don't you think?" said Leslie. I detected an undertone of sarcasm, so I suggested we split up for awhile. I was clearly cramping her style.

Part of the fun of the evening was eavesdropping on conversations in the crowded room. One woman seemed to be looking for a Scrabble partner; she was clutching a copy of the Scrabble dictionary. "What part of 'no' don't you understand?" I heard a good-looking man from Palmer Park ask a man obviously old enough to be his father.

The overwhelming number of people I chatted with were coy about their reasons for attending the evening—professing to be accompanying a friend.

A few were more direct. "I'm here to meet someone, of course!" admitted a middle-aged dyke. In case I was remotely interested, she slipped a card with her telephone number and e-mail address in my pants pocket. It was obvious that so many homosexuals in the crowd made some people nervous. One elderly woman recoiled when I attempted to engage her in innocent conversation, her bushy eyebrows darting up in affronted horror as though I were a paid escort soliciting business.

Near the end of the evening, in desperation, I found Leslie and tugged at her sleeve: "I've had enough; I just want to go home!"

Chapter LVII

Will the Road End Here?

Summer 2003. Memphis, Tennessee

When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

—Yogi Berra, Major league baseball manager

The smell of hot road tar and dirty exhaust fumes from idling cars was unpleasant, not unfamiliar. Orange construction barrels and workers in hard hats and yellow vests were familiar, too. Nan was ready to get off the road and see the world.

When she got off the interstate, the first roadside diner she came to had a lime green box outside with “Memphis Rentals” stacked inside.

North Memphis, 38104

The 1930s design of these buildings offers several floor plans of your choice. Walk-in closets with built-in armoire, door-to-door trash pick up, on-site laundry facility, rooftop deck with grills, seating areas and great views.

Union E. to Willett, left on Madison one block, corner of McLean & Madison.

276 Sq. ft. Efficiency Apartments. From \$390 Month

Will the road end here?

Small kitchen, big enough to open cans.
Medium room, big enough to sleep.
Large bathroom, big enough for a litter box.
No yard. No dogs allowed!

Walking on Beale Street along the Walk of Fame was fun the first time. Quacking at the ducks at the Peabody Hotel was fun the first two or three times. Relaxing at sunset and watching riverboats go down the Mississippi was always nice, but sometimes lonely.

An impulsive stop to check out the Memphis Police Museum and a long chat with the desk sergeant, brought a tiny touch of homesickness to an otherwise pleasant month of idle sight-seeing. The twenty-hour-a-week volunteer position at the museum was soon filled by the ex-cop from Michigan.

Next to a large sign that told visitors to BE QUIET was a working jail cell. Nan frequently had her picture taken in it along with dozens of tourists until it no longer amused her to be behind bars. She resisted her urge to send one of the more flattering pictures to Laverne and Shirley. She wasn't ready to have her mug shot posted in the bookstore.

When she first discovered a Wal-Mart within walking distance, she had to sneak a buggy out of the lot to carry home her unexpectedly bulky purchases. After that, she remembered to take the Jeep.

Wal-Mart had an amazing selection of everything a cat could want: catnip mice, feathers on a flexible pole, a fuzzy long tailed rodent that squeaked when pounced on.

The magazine section had the usual *Good Housekeeping* and *True Romance* selections that Nan wouldn't be caught dead buying, no matter how bored she was. She was just looking when she saw *True Crime* and the *Crime Beat Gazette*. The covers drew her with their promises of Alerts and Most Wanted lists, and she was hooked when she read, "Somewhere in the world crime is happening every minute of every hour of every day. It is literally a twenty-four-hour operation." She bought every crime magazine they had, then found a couple of back issues that hadn't sold and bought those too.

In the frozen food section, she found Shrooms with a Roux, and she thought it was so clever; she ate mushrooms in sauce every night for a week. Her nightly after-dinner walks weren't the same without Malcolm, so they became shorter and shorter. Eventually, she and Curiosity would sit on the rooftop picnic area, if no one was using it, and reminisce about their first night together at the Dragon Park.

The Detroit papers reminded her why she was glad to be in Memphis and what she was missing. Homeless rates were up in the city, the mayor was up to his dirty tricks again, and an elderly man had been robbed and shot by his grandson. Someone had won a million dollar payoff at the Greek Town Casino, and Dolly Parton was appearing in the summer concert series. She would like to see Dolly.

Wal-Mart sold her a small TV with a built-in DVD player. Because her purchase was over two hundred dollars, she got a dozen free movie rentals. Detroit Detective Axel Foley in *Beverly Hills Cop* made her laugh. She found herself inexplicably admiring Charles Bronson for his portrayal of a city style vigilante. She cheered out loud when Robocop fought his way through the mean streets of Detroit. Sometimes she fell asleep before the movie was over.

One morning she woke up and asked herself, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Section X: Regrets

Regret for the things we did can be tempered by time; it is regret for the things we did not do that is inconsolable.

—Sydney Harris, American journalist

Chapter LIX

I Will Never Forget

May 2003. Paris, France

As soon as Benedicte exited the commercial flight from Amman, she spotted Anna DeVane at the arrival gate. An anomaly in the upper echelons of the male dominated French police force, DeVane was in charge of the Art Theft Squad. An improbably successful track record in arresting art thieves and smugglers made her Interpol's first choice as a consultant when a priceless antiquity turned up on the prolific black market in Paris.

"So the agency is treating my arrival as a high priority," Benedict thought, when she saw her there with Taylor Hicks. If anyone were watching the arrivals that day, their greetings could have been a family reunion, perhaps a sister coming home for a visit.

Taylor offered a self-conscious, one-armed hug. "We'll take care of your luggage."

"No luggage, just my back pack. My car is here in the lot."

"We can have someone take it home for you," her long time co-worker offered.

"No, I'll want it tonight. I want to drive out to Versailles to see my parents."

Taylor said, "I'm afraid there are a large number of people waiting to see you at HQ."

"I was hoping they could wait until tomorrow." Benedicte knew she had to pull herself together and put her personal feelings aside.

"Look, Ben, while you've been on vacation, you've managed to lose two women that the whole civilized world is looking for."

"I didn't lose either of them."

"Good. So you know where the ringleader and the heiress are?" Anna asked.

When Benedicte didn't immediately answer, Anna continued. "Interpol has issued a red alert for Diana Crowley at the specific request of ICOM. The Police here have her on the top of their Art Theft Division's most wanted list."

Taylor added, "Your schoolmate has American Special Forces looking for her. Both the CIA and the American Embassy want to know where she is."

"I'd like to know where she is, too."

It started to drizzle as Taylor pulled up to the heavy gates at Interpol's headquarters. Two uniformed security agents surrounded the vehicle, checking every cavity that could hide an explosive device. Elliot, the younger guard, and Benedicte had attended the police academy the same year, and they still got together occasionally for a beer after work. She was glad to see a friendly face when he gave her a wink. If he was surprised to see that she was Taylor's passenger today, it didn't show.

The first security check was finished in three minutes, and they were allowed to drive to an indoor parking area protected by another security checkpoint. The lot was full with the usual staff cars, but there were also two conspicuous military cars pulled close behind the building in the No Parking spots.

Once in the building, Taylor used his pass card to open several locked doors and reach the Command Centre. The assistant director was expecting Benedicte and Senior Special Agent Hicks, but seemed surprised to see the high-level police officer with them.

"Agent Najor, please have a seat."

"Thank you, sir." Benedicte's legs suddenly felt wobbly as she took the seat in front of the Director's rosewood desk.

"Are you feeling all right, Agent Najor? We'll have you seeing the medics for a complete check-up shortly."

"No need for that. I'm fine, sir. Just a little tired."

"Good, then let's review the events that have occurred. Do you have any idea where Ms. Crowley and Ms. Martin are? Are they together?"

"No, I am sure they are not together. Diana stayed at the museum, and Renee was in a car accident as she and Robert Clary were attempting to leave Iraq. Surely you have his report."

"What was the relationship between Renee Martin and Diana Crowley?"

"Renee? There is no relationship between them. Diana is the older sister of a woman Renee and I went to school with in Paris. The first time they met was last week in Baghdad."

The director's questioning continued. "Why were you and Ms. Martin in Iraq?"

In the seconds before she answered, her mind swirled with her own guilt-laden questions: Why did I take Renee? For that matter, why did I go to Baghdad? Did I think I could make up for what happened to Deborah by rescuing Diana? If so, I failed. In the end, I chose to go after Renee, and I left Diana behind, in the middle of a murderous mob. What was I thinking? I failed to rescue Renee, *and* I deserted Diana. They both trusted me.

She replied in a steady voice, “Diana phoned me, and said she needed help to leave Baghdad safely. I reported the trip before I left. I expected it to be strictly personal business.”

“What is your relationship with Ms. Crowley?”

“As I said, she is the sister of a friend.” Benedicte thought back to the summer she and Deborah had spent their vacation in Corsica. “Six-year-olds just want to know why. They could compete with those Interpol agents if they started asking where or who; but no—it’s always why, why, why.”

Summer 1994, Corsica

Benedicte and Deborah spent days in the mountainous wine country, where narrow streets ran through the remnants of medieval villages, surrounded by ancient grape fields. They meandered along eucalyptus-lined roads past a sixteenth century Genoese watchtower. When the road ended, they stopped for a picnic lunch. The clearing, encircled by red granite pinnacles, was where they first kissed.

Remote paths through the enchanted Aitone Forest took them into a squadron of chestnut trees and gnarled olive groves. Impulsively, they followed an unmarked trail bordered by Corsican pines and found themselves in Evisa.

The secluded village, protected for centuries by stone walls, did not have many visitors. The goat herders and grape farmers were nonplused to see the two young tourists, but they were friendly and recommended a bottle of Patrimonio, the local red wine, to quench their thirst.

A good deal of laughter and singing followed, and when it was time for the tavern to close, the innkeeper’s wife insisted that it was too dangerous for the strangers to walk the unfamiliar, mountain roads in the dark.

The village had no hotel, no public accommodations of any kind, so the innkeeper and his wife offered them a small room behind the bar, where the innkeeper sometimes slept when he was too tired or drunk to trudge home.

Shedding their inhibitions along with their clothes, they slept naked in the moonlight that came through the window. Stars in the night sky shone seductively, and before dawn, the cool night drew them closer.

On their last night in Corsica, the sun set slowly, its fiery glow illuminating the rocky shore. Sea birds flew between the water and the mountains, creating soaring silhouettes against the twilight sky. “We must come here again; I have lost my heart to Corsica, promise me you will never forget.”

“I will always remember you and this beautiful island,” Benedicte promised.

Chapter LX

The Ringleader and the Heiress

May 2003. Lyon, France. Interpol Headquarters

The director's questioning continued without pause.

"Why did she need help?"

"Why did she ask you to help her?"

"Why you?"

"Why?"

"Agent Najor, are you all right?" The assistant director was looking at Benedicte with unconcealed concern.

With a start, Benedicte returned from that long ago place and time, which she had promised never to forget. How could she make these cold-faced strangers understand about Deborah and why she felt an obligation to her sister? Even more difficult to explain were her motives in taking Renee to Baghdad with her, when all reason should have told her it was a dangerous and foolish thing to do.

The questions continued, "Who are Diana's friends in Baghdad?"

"She didn't seem to have any friends."

"What is your relationship with Renee Martin?"

"We went to school together; our families were friends when she lived in France."

"How often does she visit you? How often does she come to France?"

"She usually stays with her mother when she comes to France."

"Where does she buy art while she is in Paris?" Anna asked.

"I don't know."

"What is Renee Martin's relationship with Diana Crowley?"

“They’d just met. I don’t think Renee particularly liked Ms. Crowley.”

Anna persisted with her own agenda. Her only interest was in the stolen artifacts. “Were there any purchase or sales discussions between Ms. Martin and Ms. Crowley?”

“No, definitely not. Diana never gave us any indication that she had anything for sale.”

“Did you see any evidence that Diana Crowley was involved with smuggling networks?”

“Did I see any smugglers at the museum? No. Not that I recognized. Robert Clary indicated that the Agency had been observing her for some time. He could answer that question better than I can.”

“A courier has been photographed leaving the private quarters at the museum. Did you observe Ms. Crowley with him at any time?”

“Yes, if you mean Ahmed. She employed him as her private driver and dragoon. I saw them together several times. She was waiting for him when I left her at the museum.”

The questions went on for hours. Sometimes the assistant director would leave the room, and Taylor or Anna would ask her the same questions he had asked her. Benedicte answered readily but offered nothing more. She realized with growing alarm that they suspected Renee was involved somehow with the thefts from the museum.

“To your knowledge, did either woman have money problems?” The French police officer was polite but determined to get the facts she needed.

“Ms. Martin was seen at Montreuil with you. Did she express an interest in purchasing stolen goods while she was there?”

“Did Renee plan the trip to Baghdad?”

“Whose idea was it for her to go?”

“Why did you agree for her to go?”

“Is it possible that Martin and Crowley are working together?”

The more questions the debriefing team asked her, the more she realized what a dilemma it was to try to explain her actions without explaining her feelings. She knew she would not be able to do that. Once again, her feelings had caused tragedy for a woman she loved.

When Benedicte returned to her apartment in Paris, after hours of debriefing and filing reports in Lyon, she half expected the lights to be on and Renee to be waiting for her, with warm brie and a glass of wine.

She poured her own glass of wine and looked at the two coffee cups sitting in the sink, one with a bright red lip line still clinging to the rim. She lifted it from

the sink and pressed her lips against it. There was no scent, no glossy feel left of Renee.

Listlessly, she listened to the messages on her machine. The first few were from Maria Morgan, looking for Renee. She wondered if the American woman appreciated the accident of genetics that gave her blond hair and blue eyes.

Next, in increasing levels of urgency, were calls from someone in the Montrose Police Department, a courtesy call from the Paris Chief of Police, and an inquiry from the International office of the LAP. There was an apologetic note from her landlady shoved under the door asking Benedicte to have her house-guest call home.

All of these people could wait; tonight she needed to sleep. The thought that Renee was missing was paralyzing.

The next morning, the news from Iraq was increasingly bad. The local stringers and independent journalists had pulled out; the only news being reported was by the U.S. and UK military operatives, the homogenized version the major networks were reporting.

Late that afternoon when the phone rang, she let the answering machine pick up. It was the assistant director making a rare personal call.

“Benedicte, I wanted you to know that items from the Baghdad Museum have shown up in London in the last twenty-four hours. ICOM will want you to try to identify them. We think they were pilfered before the museum was looted. No need to come in tonight. First thing in the morning will be fine.”

Chapter LXI

Red Lipstick Traces

Summer 2003. Paris, France

She sat snugly tucked into a wooden desk chair that wasn't quite comfortable. Determined not to complain about the too small chair or anything else, she fidgeted. Reading and re-reading stacks of files, looking for a clue, a pattern, anything that might have been missed, gave her raging headaches until she got new glasses and remembered to wear them every day. Although not officially a demotion, a desk assignment was a subtle reprimand.

Her legs grew numb by 10 AM until she learned to do toe raises and ankle swirls. Her neck and back were stiff with fatigue from leaning over a keyboard, but she warily refused her office mate's offer of a shoulder rub.

Benedicte filled her weeks with long overtime hours at the office and her weekends with mindless, obsessive housecleaning. She washed every towel in her linen closet, every sheet, every tablecloth, and then ironed every pillowslip. Glasses and dishes were pulled from cupboards and washed and dried until they shone. The tables, lamps, and baseboards were dusted, some for the first time in their long lives. The only object that was not subjected to soap and water was the china cup that still bore red lipstick traces.

When she had nothing left to scrub, she visited her parents in Versailles. When they asked too many questions, she stayed in town and took her widowed landlady to the cinema. In August, she searched boutiques and wandered through large department stores looking for a gift for Renee's birthday. For so many years, she had completely forgotten or sent a belated card; this year had to be different.

Chapter LXII

Reflections of Love

Late Summer, 2003. Paris, France

At Shakespeare's Bookstore, where book-lined walls reached twelve-foot ceilings and skinny, railed ladders leaned haphazardly, as if exhausted from rescuing a recalcitrant and dusty tome, she hopefully browsed the vast poetry section. W. H. Auden caught her attention, as did a slim volume of poetry by Rumi.

An elderly man with a halo of softly curling hair drifting around his collar approached her and asked if he could offer his assistance in finding something.

Benedicte hesitated before answering. She wasn't sure if she wanted to confide her need for something so intimate to a stranger. Then she realized secrets are often safer with strangers than with anyone else and she replied, "I'm looking for a special book for a friend. For her birthday—she lives in the U.S. now. In Michigan."

"I have something that just came in. It isn't on the shelf yet, but it might be just the thing."

With a pleased smile, he unwrapped a glossy paperback and handed it to Benedicte. At first, she was chagrined to think that the handsome old man so readily recognized her as a law enforcement officer. The title of the book was *Reflections of a Police Officer in Love*.

She sank into a reader's chair, which was only slightly more comfortable than her chair at work, and turned the book over to read the blurb on the back. A smiling, blonde woman with piercing blue-grey eyes looked out at her over her title: Nan Lawson, former Chief of Police, Montrose, Michigan. This must be one of the women Renee had talked about. As she read a few of the poems, she tried to see what Renee saw: the neighborhood streets, the women, the trees and

lakes of Michigan. She looked for a clue why Renee loved it there; why she wanted to live there instead of Paris.

Nan's poetry was unique and insightful, but it didn't help Benedicte find the essence of Renee in America. She knew her friend probably had the paperback poetry book, but she added two copies to her other selections. She would send one copy to Renee for her birthday and keep one for herself.

Section XI: Home

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.

—e e cummings
American Modernist poet

Chapter LXIV

Smile, Dammit

August 2003. a Suburb in Michigan

Smile, just remember to smile ... don't drink too much ... don't talk about Iraq. Smile ... remember it's your birthday, one you never expected to have. Here's the house ... no place to park ... I hope they don't think it's going to be a surprise. Oh good, there's Shirley ... she'll park my car.

The only ones missing in the crowded room were Carla and Nan. Book Club members, Renee's art students, and the staff from the Women's Community Center were mingling with the owners and staff from all of the Nine Mile restaurants.

Pink helium filled balloons tethered to vases of pink and white roses seemed to dance to the music. Only a few people in the room realized the significance of the pink decorations on Renee's birthday, but everyone knew it was a special day.

Smile ... they don't know you hate pink ... most of them don't know about the breast cancer.

Leslie came in with a new, silver-haired girlfriend in tow. They both carried packages from Mr. and Mrs. Goodnights.

"I hope it's not too tacky that I brought things from my store, but Maria helped pick out things she said you'd like."

Smile ... Leslie means well ... just because she's sleeping with this new girlfriend ... she assumes Maria would actually know what I might sleep in ... if only they knew.

"Can I bring you some sparkling white grape juice?" Maria asked for the third time. "The brie appetizers are really good. Darilyn made them for you herself. Or maybe some fruit?"

Smile ... she doesn't realize how tired I am of being treated like an invalid ... she doesn't know me well enough to realize I wouldn't drink sparkling grape juice on my dying day in the middle of a desert.

"I'm fine, really. You don't have to wait on me. I'm fine." Renee was determined to avoid being treated like an invalid tonight; she wanted everyone to know that the independent and capable Renee was back. Maria hovering around her did not fit into that picture.

She was ambivalent about being the center of attention and a part of her was eager to go home so she could open the package she had received from France earlier in the afternoon. The parcel was from Benedicte, marked BOOKS. She had never received a book as a gift from her long-time friend and was curious about what kind of books they would be.

Chapter LXV

Have You Seen Her?

Autumn 2003. Montrose, Michigan

Oh, I see her face everywhere I go
On the street and even at the picture show
Have you seen her, tell me have you seen her?
Oh I hear her voice as the cold winds blow
In the sweet music on my radio
Have you seen her, tell me have you seen her?¹

“Nan’s back in town. Have you seen her?” Only Maria would dare call me this late.

“No, not yet.”

“She came in tonight for dinner. I know it’s late, but I had to call you.”

“This better be important. I have to be up at five for an early meeting at the paper. What time is it?”

“It’s only midnight. You’re working twelve hours every day—that’s too much even for you.”

“I’ve nothing better to do—the paper comes first now.”

“Aren’t you going to ask?”

“What? How did she look? What did she say? If she was with someone, I don’t want to know.”

“She was by herself. She sat up front in the booth you two always sat in. She looked really, really, good. Rested. We talked a little bit.”

“So ...?”

1. As recorded by the Chi-Lites Copyright 1971 by Julio Brian Music, Inc.

“She asked about you.”

I peered anxiously out the front door and saw tree branches whipped into an arboreal rain dance by the wind. The sky was darkening too early for seven o'clock. The storm was going to hit any second now, hours before predicted. Maybe Nan would not come after all.

A few minutes later, she parked on the street. She reached my walk as the first raindrops fell. Before she could take another step, rain was coming down in sheets, accompanied by the rumble of far off thunder. She hit the front porch steps at a run as the lashing rain tried to hold her back. My eyes took in every detail; her blonde hair plastered to her head, her thin cotton sweater clinging to her body. She stood motionless in the doorway and looked at me for a long moment, ignoring the pounding rain that was pummeling her.

I reached out and pulled her in before I slammed the door shut against the storm outside. She's home.

Chapter LXVI

It's Over

Late Autumn 2003–Winter 2004. The Right Bank, Paris

Autumn came; the apartment was dark when she left for work, and darker still when she came home. Benedicte frequently stopped for dinner and a glass of wine after work, hoping to make the dark hours in the apartment pass more quickly. Cafes and bars crowded the Right Bank neighborhood surrounding her apartment, but she couldn't find a favorite.

At first, frequent phone calls and daily e-mails from Renee gave Benedicte something to look forward to, but as Renee gradually recovered and depended less and less on Benedicte, the calls became shorter and less frequent. Benedicte told herself that she didn't really care, and she had no reason to expect anything else. After all, it was her fault that Renee was kidnapped and nearly died in a car accident. One thing she had learned working for Interpol was that people usually got what they deserved.

Sometime during the long descent into winter, Benedicte recognized that she was depressed, and she self-prescribed long, therapeutic walks throughout the city. Striding purposefully through acres of city park, she neglected to look up to see the winter sun as it dressed the beautiful old buildings in flattering pale shades. When the long afternoon shadows created patterns along the parkways where she walked, she refused to see the herringbone and Burberry inspirations.

She fooled her co-workers at the agency, her friends, and even her mother with her stoic façade; they all assumed her morose air was due to the unhappy situation at work. Only her father sensed his daughter's deeper despair. Sabah Najor started making frequent trips into the city and always found an excuse to see his only daughter. They would have lunch, or he would take her to the galleries where his paintings were for sale. When he hugged her good-bye one Saturday

afternoon, he told her, "It's okay to grow up now—it really is your life." She was puzzled at first, and then grateful.

The bookstore where she had found Nan Lawson's poetry became a weekly trip for her. She was looking for an explanation of who she was and if there was a remedy for the heartsick emptiness she was so tired of feeling. On the crazy patchwork of crowded shelves she found books by Sarah Waters, Ann Marie McDonald, and Helen Humphries—all of which left her feeling less alone, but more lonely.

The cool, dark rooms lit by circles of glowing light from three-bulb chandeliers offered a place she could feel anonymous. No one recognized her or even acknowledged her presence except the black mouser who occasionally woke up when Benedicte called to her with a small tin of tuna held out for her approval.

George, the white haired owner, sometimes inquired if she were reading his recommended book-a-day, not waiting for a reply; he seemed to assume that she had, as handsome men always assumed that women listened to them and took their advice.

When a gay bar near her Metro stop started a Women's Happy Hour, she went a few times, more out of curiosity than expectation. Some of the women did seem happy—mostly the ones who left in twos—but seeing them had the opposite effect on Benedicte.

During the holidays, she volunteered for extra hours so those with something to do could leave early or take time off. Gradually she felt she was earning her way back into the mainstream life of the agency. Her job was such a large part of her identity that she wouldn't be happy until she had redeemed herself for the poor judgment she had shown during her summer vacation. It was ironic that the two biggest mistakes she had ever made were during vacations. Another good reason for being a workaholic.

The rainy season ended, and the tourists returned—although in smaller numbers, this second year of the war against Iraq. Nearly a year had passed since Renee's visit, and Benedicte wondered if she would ever see her again. She was beginning to fear that work and her family could not make a complete life for her. She continued reading books by and about women, and it strengthened her resolve to recognize who she really was.

In early March, a package arrived from the U.S. with silk pajamas and a small watercolor Renee had painted of the streets of Baghdad. A birthday card was enclosed, but there was no phone call that day, and Benedicte fell asleep on the couch in the breeze from the open balcony doors.

It had been one of those difficult days and increasingly frequent nights when she didn't want to sleep in her bedroom, where the framed photo of herself and the teenage Renee still sat on her bedside table next to a growing stack of books.

The chirping of a few hopeful songbirds joined the all-music radio station in the pre-dawn gray haze when the doorbell buzzed.

"Have-I-overslept?" panic was replaced by "Who-is-here-this-early?" irritation when she realized that the room was still dawn gray.

"*Salut.*" She called through the door. "Who is it?" She would be civil in case it was someone from the office.

"Does Paris have room for one more damned tourist?"

Benedicte's heart speeded up as she recognized the voice she had last heard in her dreams. She unlatched the chain and unlocked the heavy door.

"You can never be a visitor where your heart lives."

"*Shoma to galb ah man hasti hamishe.*" Renee carefully repeated the lyrics to the Persian love song, in case Benedicte had forgotten, "You are in my heart forever." "My heart lives where you are," Renee said quietly, "I'm home."

Epilogue

2004. Canada

The mongrel cities of the twenty-first century welcomed strangers to a new proving grounds with a generous refugee policy. A cosmopolitan, multi-cultural Canadian city embraced the exhausted refugees warmly. When their new countrymen seemed to accept them without any undue scrutiny, their personal relationship blossomed.

In the beginning, the couple was inseparable. Their relationship flourished in the temperate days of early autumn, while they explored city neighborhoods on foot. A short bus ride took them to the Toronto waterfront, where they could openly hold hands for the first time in their long alliance.

The halcyon days of autumn turned too soon to the windy chill of winter in a waterfront town. The hot fear of reprisal and arrest cooled as each week went by uneventfully. No longer needing to pose as employer and employee, they now posed as husband and wife.

A private girl's school hired Diana without a valid teaching certificate. Ahmed obtained an engineering position while his immigrant status was still being processed.

A routine formed: Go to work, come back to the apartment, eat the dinner that Diana was expected to prepare, and go to bed early. For the first few weeks, they made a game of deciphering routes and comparing schedules on the transit system. At first, their only priority was getting to their new jobs on time. Later, they looked for stops that would take them to the cafes and pubs—as well as the museum districts.

Their furnished apartment included one large bed with a traditional pairing of nightstands on each side. On her side, Deborah placed an ornately framed five-by-seven photograph, taken in 1988, of herself and Omar Sharif with the

Nimrud gold exhibition. Ahmed left his side empty for a few months and then put a small, candid snapshot of his four children on the nightstand.

Ahmed discovered the Yorkville subway line had a stop called Museum; at first he wasn't sure what it meant. Taking a chance on being late for dinner one evening, he exited and found himself in a neighborhood full of museums. It took him several days before he decided to share his discovery with Diana.

After that, they spent long weekend days at the museums. They soon knew all of the permanent exhibits, the floor plans, and when the rotating exhibits were going to change. Several nearby cafes provided a place to eat cheaply, although they often brought a lunch and ate sitting on the steps in the sun.

The staff called them 'the regulars' and treated them like friends. The red-haired schoolteacher was unusually knowledgeable about art and her handsome, shy husband was polite and always smiling.

When there was a docent position available, Diana was the logical choice.

As of March 20, 2007, the U.S. is still at war with Iraq. The casualties to date are 3,223 U.S. and estimates of 60,000 Iraqi civilians. Saddam Hussein was executed December 30, 2006.