

*To Author Susan May Warren,
with gratitude for investing yourself in future novelists.*

Cruise TO DEATH

SARA L. JAMESON



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

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Brussels, Belgium
June 1st

Despite the cool night air, sweat plastered Agent Jacob Coulter's shirt to his skin. He'd never have raced over to Schaerbeek in a business suit—not even for his best bud—but panic had riddled Noel's voice on the phone like a machine gun gone rogue.

Jacob inched a few feet along the brick wall between the brothels. The beams of red light around the windows still caught his six-foot-one frame in their crosshairs. Five years of analyzing terrorist intel at an Interpol desk had left his field skills rusty.

A parade of vehicles snaked past him, filling the air with diesel fumes and raging male hormones. The odor of beer and cigarettes spilled from the bars, clogging his lungs. He yanked at his necktie, clawed its noose-like knot. Surely Noel could have picked a less seedy rendezvous. No Brussels newspaper encouraged loitering in the red-light district after dark. All too often it turned deadly.

Especially on Rue d'Aerschot.

Across the street, two teenagers cloaked in hoodies and

sweatpants shuffled outside the North Train Station's rear exit, another no-go zone for tourists after five. If they valued their lives. The two guys eyed Jacob then ducked into the shadows.

He patted his chest where his shoulder holster should've been. And would have been if office staff were allowed to carry weapons. And handcuffs.

One guy slithered his hand inside the kangaroo pouch of his hoodie then piled plastic packets in the other's cupped hands. Within seconds, the buyer stashed them in a shoulder bag and slipped the first man a white envelope. The seller pocketed it and swaggered inside the train station.

Jacob slammed his fist into his palm. He couldn't even arrest a couple of drug dealers. So far his sole contribution to mankind was pinpointing possible *jihadists* on paper. As an undercover policeman with Interpol, Noel, his buddy since boarding school, worked the streets, ferreting out terrorist cells. Sacrificing time with Christine and cuddling their three-month-old son.

Brakes squealed, and a black Peugeot stopped. In the backseat, three men elbowed each other, clamoring for the window, their shrill catcalls piercing his eardrums. The oglers' eyes ravished the scantily clad women, perched on their stools in the windows like prize parrots.

Heat surged through him. One of the girls seemed no older than his pubescent sister. Jacob resisted the urge to race inside the shop, snatch her from her stool, and take her to a Christian halfway house. No woman should have to sell her body to make a living.

He glanced toward the back door of St. Jean et Nicolas church up the block. A door that looked as if it hadn't been opened in fifty years. A door that should lead to the salvation of these girls. And the neighborhood. Instead, Belgium had declared the building a historic monument.

The Peugeot's driver leaned out the window. Tufts of greying chest hair poked between his gold chain necklace. "Hey man,

what's keeping you?" He thumbed a finger at Jacob. "Go in and have some fun."

Restraining himself from hauling the heckler out of the car by his necklace, Jacob clicked the light dial on his watch. Nine p.m. Acid coated his tongue. Three hours late. Something must have gone wrong. His bud wouldn't blow two months infiltrating a terrorist cell unless the situation was urgent. Life and death urgent. International-consequences urgent.

But why had Noel broken protocol and phoned him instead of his case manager?

Gears ground on the Peugeot and the car shot forward. Jacob walked past the red-lit windows, the corner café, and turned up Brabant Street behind the brothels. Within twenty feet, he'd left a human flesh market and entered little Mecca.

Shop signs in Arabic hawked everything from *bijabs* and sumptuous wedding gowns to housewares and electronics. As a kid, he'd never considered blond hair and blue eyes a deterrent to protecting the world. Here, his American haircut and suit might as well be draped with the stars and stripes. This was Schaerbeek, home to disenfranchised Muslims and a terrorist bomb-making factory.

The tantalizing smell of kebab shops hit him, but he headed for the electronics store. If Noel worked in the area, he might not have been able to get off work to meet him. Terrorist-cell infiltration meant he would be watched day and night. Even making the phone call could've unmasked his cover. And after two months, he might be unrecognizable if he'd grown a straggly beard and donned traditional Muslim garb.

Inside the store, dimly lit glass cases housed an array of Mac and PC computers and neat rows of cellphones. Two computers lay on the counter. One of them, tuned to AraBel FM, blared an Arab song in French.

Shoulders gyrating in time to the music, the salesclerk drummed his fingers on the counter while a young man in jeans and a T-shirt toyed with the other computer. The clerk

glanced up. He muttered something and flicked his head toward the rear of the store. The young man grabbed the computer and fled through the black curtains behind the counter.

Jacob rammed his fists in his pockets. Another missed op. First thing in the morning he'd make certain HQ put this place on its radar. He stepped outside the shop. *Focus. Focus.* He was here to find Noel.

As he sidestepped the clothing racks blocking the narrow sidewalk and strolled toward a group of women shrouded from head to toe in black *hijabs*, they averted their gaze. Whisked their baby strollers between the clothing stands, mother hens shielding their chicks from the big, bad American trespassing in Muslim territory.

Without missing a beat, the bearded keeper of the dress shop planted himself in the doorway. He folded his arms, his glower razoring Jacob like *jambiya* daggers.

Jacob hesitated. Some Muslim neighborhoods banned the entrance of any non-Muslim. Everyone knew Brussels' police officers often refused to enter certain districts without a vanload of backup assistance. Vans that might not show up.

Next door, the grocer laid down the apples and oranges he'd been arranging in his sidewalk bin and snatched a handful of broccoli rabe from the crates stacked beside him. Giving Jacob an I-dare-you stare, he wrung the stalks until their necks went limp. He spat on the ground and tossed the ruined vegetables into a bucket at his feet.

The stench of rotting greens and overripe fruit filled Jacob's nostrils. He'd never be able to convince these people he had peace-loving Muslim friends. Friends who were as horrified as he was at the rise of *jihadists*. He risked a smile. "*Bon soir*, good evening."

The shopkeepers glared at him, mute.

At the moment, his choices were minimal. Either head for St. Jean et Nicolas up the block, or the slalom-sloped Dupont Street

to his right. If he returned to his post outside the brothel, he might not find Noel.

Behind him, footsteps pounded on the pavement. Jacob whirled as a dark-haired man staggered up Brabant Street, his breaths heaving as if he'd run six back-to-back marathons. Crimson lakes splotted the midsection of his T-shirt and jeans. His white-rimmed eyes glazed like a man fleeing a half-crazed mob.

Jacob's stomach knee-jerked his heart. *Noel*. He sprinted after his friend. "Hey, man."

Oblivious to him, Noel plodded up the hill of Dupont Street.

Seconds later, two skinny men in T-shirts and jeans rushed past Jacob. The one in a stocking cap gripped a dagger in his left hand. The shorter one aimed his gun at Noel.

"Stop! Halt!" Jacob sprinted after them, his pulse pounding in his ears. His only hope was to tackle one of them. "Halt!"

The shorter man stopped, spun toward him and bull's-eyed his pistol at Jacob's chest.

He fainted to the right, but the bullet pierced the sleeve of his jacket. Hot coals seared his arm. Lurching back into the chase, Jacob pulled out his phone, dialed emergency, and requested an ambulance. "Hey, guys. You missed." Blood trickled down his wrist. If he could draw their attack, maybe Noel could make it to safety. "Hey bud, I'm coming."

Halfway up the hill, his friend tottered and sank to his knees. He flung out his arms like a marathoner too weak to cross the finish line. Then his arms fell to his side, his head flopped onto his chest.

"Don't give up, man. Run, run." Jacob's yell shrieked off the buildings. He forced his legs to pump harder, faster.

As if fueled by a bloodlust, the stocking-capped man picked up speed. Streetlights glinted on the silver blade in his grip. Six more yards and he'd reach Noel.

"No!" Jacob shot his hand toward his friend. His best friend. His only friend.

As Jacob sprinted toward them, the knife-wielding assailant hurtled toward Noel and tackled him.

Noel's fingers scrabbled for the man's stocking cap and managed to pull it off. Long hair tumbled over the attacker's shoulders. *A woman.* Crouching behind him, she locked his neck in a chokehold and drove the blade into the front of his body. He crumpled to the asphalt.

Without a backward glance, the assassins fled up a side street.

"No, God no, please." What was taking the ambulance so long?

"Hang on. I'm right here." Jacob whipped off his jacket, knelt beside Noel and rolled him over. "I'm getting you to the hospital." He wadded the fabric against the abdominal wound, but the blood surged over his hand. "Noel, can you hear me?"

Noel's eyes fluttered open. "Nymph." His lips quivered, his words garbled.

"What?" Jacob bent toward Noel's mouth.

"Boat."

Dear God, don't let him die. "Hey man, you're gonna make it." Jacob stroked the sodden hair from his friend's forehead. "Don't you dare give up."

"Ant—"

"What was that?" Jacob leaned closer to Noel's mouth.

"River." His stale breath rasped against Jacob's ear. "Soon. Agent ..."

"You're gonna make it." Jacob squeezed Noel's hand. Already his fingers were chilled.

"Tell Chri—" Noel's chest rose and fell with three short shudders then stilled.

"No. No." Jacob cradled Noel and rocked his lifeless body, weeping for all the things he'd never said to his friend. Things it was too late to say.

Antwerp, Belgium
June 3rd

RILEY WILLIAMS EXITED the Antwerp Cruise Terminal and headed up the walking street that led to the medieval town square, her phone pressed to her ear. Overhead, a breeze whipped thickening black clouds. “Quit worrying, Frénie. Of course, I can do your job.” How hard could singing Broadway ditties be?

“But Rileeeee ...”

She grinned. Seven years after meeting Vielle Fréneau, she still found Frénie’s French accent charming. “Relax, you can count on me. I never break a promise.”

“But *chérie*, you’re an opera singer, not a cruise-ship performer.”

“No problem. I love musical-theater repertoire. With my piano skills, I can accompany myself.” Then she wouldn’t have to memorize the songs.

“But you need three twenty-minute sets with different songs every night.”

Riley’s heel caught on a cobblestone. *Wow*. Her longest opera role was only forty-five minutes of singing. “How long did you say the cruise lasts?”

“Twelve days.”

She did the mental math. Good grief, she couldn’t even name fifty Broadway tunes. “Sure. Sure. Nothing to it.” Maybe it was a blessing she had no summer gigs—no opera roles to learn, no recitals, no oratorio appearances—ergo, no income.

“And do not forget, you must dance with the guests.” The way Frénie hissed the word ‘dance’ you’d think they were discussing an outbreak of bubonic plague.

“And we both know dance was not your best subject.” Vomiting sounded in the background on the phone.

A gulp lodged in Riley’s throat. Surely Frénie hadn’t seen the Düsseldorf review of *The Land of Smiles*: ‘American Soprano flat-

foots Mi into slapstick role'. What did audiences expect from a five-foot-ten redhead playing a petite Chinese girl? Not even her black China-chop wig had saved her performance. She eased back into the pedestrian traffic and walked toward the cathedral.

"All those hours I coached you, so you wouldn't fail the course."

Riley cringed. Their Bucharest Conservatory classes. If only payback time didn't include moving her feet on a dance floor. She really ought to split Frénie's salary with her. Even her two-step was a guaranteed fiasco.

"*Chérie*, I worked so hard to get this job. Oh, ugh."

"How long does food poisoning last?" Riley zipped past an old man leaning on a cane. "Once you recover, maybe you can join the cruise in a few days." Before she ran out of songs, before the men who danced with her had to have their feet amputated. "Aren't you feeling any better?"

"*Non*. I am so seeeek."

"That's why you need to relax. Get well first."

"In a hospital? *Chérie*, you are not a realist."

"I'll try to stop by the hospital this evening."

"*Bon*. Good. Please bring my bath towel and washcloth. And a nightgown and my toiletries. They don't supply these in Belgian hospitals."

"You're kidding."

"*Non*. And *absolument* do not be late for the staff meeting at three. Today."

"I promise." Maybe she could sneak in a Belgian waffle for lunch. "Cross my heart." She blew a kiss into the phone and disconnected. Holding up her hand, she ticked off her Broadway repertoire on her fingers—eight songs. This afternoon she'd look through Frénie's songbooks and learn a few numbers. A few? Who was she kidding? She needed two-hundred-forty-two more songs.

Every café surrounding the medieval guild buildings of the town square, Groete Markt, had succumbed to hordes of red-

hatted, red-shirted tourists. She paused in front of the statue of Brabo, Antwerp's mythical rescuer. With his massive foot planted on the slain giant's body, Brabo tossed the ogre's severed hand into the Schelde River. According to legend, his courageous act saved the citizens of Antwerp from an evil tyrant.

Her shoulders sagged. Everyone needed a rescuer.

A petite, tuxedoed violinist stood beside her, a Bach gigue rippling from his nimble fingers and bow. Except for his grizzled grey hair, the man was a ringer for Joel Grey in his Cabaret role, complete with false eyelashes and red pointy lips. She dug in her purse for a five-euro bill and laid it in the open violin case at his feet.

Pursing his lips, he blew her a pouty kiss.

If her opera auditions failed, she might end up like him, warbling the Queen of the Night's arias on the back streets of Europe.

The scent of waffles and dark chocolate made her stomach rumble. While she ate, she'd feast her eyes on the guilds' step-gabled roofs, gold signs, and leaded windows. At the end of the first row of tables, a silver-haired gentleman nursed a coffee. He stroked his goatee and nodded at her.

The cruise would probably bring her even more unwanted attention. She flicked him her don't-get-any-ideas smile, then threaded her way between the tightly packed patrons and a stroller with a squalling infant whose parents seemed too frazzled to care. Her table was sandwiched between a polyester-clad couple arguing about the menu in New Jersey-speak and two dark-haired men huddling over glasses of Stella Artois.

Her feet froze to the cobblestones. The man's black leather coat, poorly fitted suit, and razor-sharp eyes unleashed a flood of memories. Memories of ten hours of interrogation in a Bucharest prison cell. Interrogation by a Romanian security police officer dressed like him.

Muscles bulged beneath the navy-striped jersey of his

stubble-jawed companion. His faucet-shaped nose seemed to have been hammered by multiple fists.

As she stood there, riveted to the pavement, portly Eagle Eyes raked her from her head to her white canvas shoes. Then Hawk Nose's rodent-like eyes fastened on her.

Sweat prickled her skin. She looked for another table. Nothing. Sitting with her back to Eagle Eyes, she gave the waiter her order in Flemish. Fortunately, her German skills bridged the language gap for her in Antwerp.

The waiter brought her hot chocolate and a Belgian waffle then slid Mr. and Mrs. New Jersey's plates of black-skinned eel, floating in a moss-green sauce, onto their table. Their chitchat died mid-sentence. Forking a bite of the crusty waffle and strawberries, Riley let the whipped cream spill across her tongue and settled back in her chair. Belgian chocolate. Waffles. Life was good.

"*Da, ştiu.* Yes, I know," Eagle Eyes' voice sounded awfully close.

Romanian. The waffle soured in her stomach. Somehow, she had to bury the past.

"He has the vials?" A nasal twang mottled Hawk Nose's voice.

"Tudor will see to everything. The bidding, the sale."

Riley sipped her hot chocolate. She really shouldn't eavesdrop.

"Who's bidding, Al-Qaeda, ISIS?"

She choked. The hot liquid sloshed through her eyelet top and scalded her skin. Terrorists. The Romanians must think no one in Antwerp spoke the language.

"What difference does it make? As long as we get our money."

Keeping her back to the men, she scanned the square for a policeman or woman. Not a blue uniform or cap in sight. She dug her phone from her purse and tapped the recorder button.

"But where are—"

The baby in the stroller wailed, drowning out Hawk Nose's words.

She tilted the phone at her ear toward Eagle Eyes. Every muscle in her legs tautened, urging her to run, sound an alarm. But if she left, they'd probably vanish. The police would have no leads. Unless she could snap the Romanians' photos.

"Tudor will give us the vials the day of the transaction."

"Think of what you can do with your cut." Hawk Nose snickered.

"And what the highest bidder can do with the vials."

"*Da*. Agent X will bring governments to their knees."

A chill shot through her. New York City or Washington D.C. could be targets.

"In two weeks, we'll be wealthy."

"Make sure you're not in the same country or you won't be around to spend the money."

Behind her, a phone rang. "*Da*. Yes," Eagle Eyes said. Seconds later, the sound of coins clinked on the table, chairs scraped the cobblestones.

Summoning an innocent tourist's smile, she shut down the voice recorder app. Hawk Nose cut between the tables at the other side of the café and loped across the square like a just-docked sailor. Eagle Eyes trailed behind him. Despite the summer heat, he'd put on the black leather coat and flipped up the collar.

Imagine that—she drops by a café for a waffle and overhears a terrorist plot. Frénie would never believe her. Riley slid ten euros beside her plate and strolled toward the men. The police would need every bit of information she could give them. Descriptions. Decent photographs.

Waving her red pennant, the tour guide motioned her red-hatted flock to follow her to the statue of Brabo. As the tourists surged toward her, the street violinist grinned and swung into "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain."

Hawk Nose disappeared around the opposite side of the statue, but Eagle Eyes paused in front of it and lit a cigarette.

Ten more feet and she could snuff out his match. Riley dug her cell from her purse and faked a phone conversation in German. "*Ja, ja. Wunderbar.*" With her heart climbing into her throat, she activated the camera app on her phone.

Red-shirted tourists swarmed in front of the two men.

No, no, not yet. Riley aimed the lens at Eagle Eyes and snapped a photo. She glanced at her picture. Red hats blocked the Romanian's face.

Overhead, black clouds released the first raindrops.

Hawk Nose headed toward the Meir, the main shopping street. Eagle Eyes strolled toward the cathedral.

Which one should she follow? If Eagle Eyes had worked for the Romanian secret police, he'd never let her escape with her camera. Like a salmon swimming upstream, she shouldered past the last of the red-hatted tourists and followed Hawk Nose. Raindrops pelted her hair, dripped down her neck. Thirty feet ahead of her, Hawk Nose kept his head down and wove between the crowds scurrying for shelter inside specialty shops and department stores.

The stoplight changed, and he crossed the ring avenue that bordered the medieval city center. She zigzagged around the pedestrians huddled in front of shop windows. Central Train Station was only two more blocks. With three levels of incoming trains, the building had more hidey-holes than a rabbit warren.

Maybe the men were staying in Brussels. The city had attracted a large Romanian community and had a history of home-grown terrorist attacks. She dared not let Hawk Nose disappear.

Yellow warning tape blocked a construction site. As she skirted it, she skidded on a patch of mud. Wind-milling her arms, she two-stepped on the slippery cobblestones. Murky water squished between her toes and splattered her white slacks.

Mud dripped from her hair and stained her top. She squinted at the crowded sidewalks leading to the train station.

A tram bell clanged a warning, and the streetcar to Mortsel glided past. Seated beside the fifth window, a man turned and stared at her. Hawk Nose.

Ice slid down her spine. The men may have realized she'd understood their conversation. She did a slow three-sixty, looking for a police officer, a police car, a police station.

Riley checked her watch. Yikes—ten minutes until the staff meeting. Her mind whirled. *You can trust me, Frénie. I always keep my promises.*

But if she waited to report the men, millions of people could die.