



Day 1: Aboard the *River Nymph*, June 3rd

Five hours he'd wasted, waiting to see the captain. Jacob dug his heels into the plush carpet in front of Captain Thor Lundstrom's desk, bare except for a computer and a two-tiered wooden in-and-out box. By now he could've searched the staff's quarters and bugged the cabins of suspected terrorists. If he'd had a passenger manifest and information on the staff. A steward's uniform and a passkey. If Interpol hadn't insisted he play by the captain's rules.

Gale-force winds whipped across the Schelde River, slamming the *River Nymph* against her moorings. The picture windows shuddered in their frames. Like Interpol's plan, the storm had blown up out of nowhere.

In the forty-two hours since Noel's death, Interpol had scrambled to decipher his information, placed agents on any boat docking in Antwerp, put Jacob through refresher hand-to-hand combat courses, temporarily assigned him to Interpol's police division, and cobbled a plan for intercepting the terrorists. A plan that had more holes in it than a kitchen sieve.

He steeled himself for another tirade. He'd feel a lot more powerful in a business suit. Instead, he was dressed in the staff's white slacks and light-blue polo shirt.

The sleeves of the captain's black uniform were decked out with more rows of gold braid than a Rear Admiral's. He even looked like a white-haired Admiral, the gold buttons on his jacket concealing a few too many five-course meals. "Passenger safety and a pleasant cruise are my priorities." A purple vein bulged and pulsed at Lundstrom's temple.

Jacob's supervisor had reacted the same way when he demanded to be assigned to the *River Nymph* as the onboard Interpol agent.

"Understood?" The captain's voice thundered like an Antediluvian rockslide.

"Yes, sir." The knots in Jacob's shoulders ratcheted ten degrees. If the terrorists' plans played out the way Interpol feared, honoring the captain's request might be impossible. He owed it to Christine and Noel's son to help capture Noel's murderers. "Sir, I'm not sure you understand what's at stake."

"Of course, I do. You *think* your information *might* be accurate." Lundstrom pulled a bottle of antacids from his drawer. "A pity we're fully booked." He shook out two tablets, tossed them in his mouth, ground them between his teeth. "Traveling as a tourist would've been best."

Not really. The security checks at boarding would've uncovered the ordnance and equipment Jacob had snuck onboard with his land partner's help. "Sir, I'd like to have a steward's uniform and a passkey."

"That's highly irregular." His right eye twitched like a semaphore. "And the legalities ..."

"Sir, Interpol is hoping you'll cooperate."

The captain held up his hand. "I'll be watching you. A number of our passengers are repeat cruisers with us. The Ackelroyds, Mrs. Cochran, Mr. Molnár. Any slip-ups in your

crew position, or any complaints about your work from passengers or your cruise supervisor, you'll be terminated. Immediately."

Jacob flexed the knots in his shoulder blades. The captain read his intentions as easily as a Nesbø thriller. The man realized Interpol's predicament. If Interpol forced the cancellation of the river-boat cruises and the ships in port, HQ could lose their only lead to the capture of the terrorists. And if the captain wouldn't authorize a passkey and steward's uniform, using a lockpicking kit could attract attention.

"Sir, I'll need a list of any changes in the crew and passengers who made last-minute bookings."

"The last passenger booking was three weeks ago. Suite 408." Captain Lundstrom turned the monitor on his desktop computer toward Jacob. "Mr. Khalid Hosseni and his wife, Sora, are joining us at Cologne."

A current jolted through Jacob. The Hossenis—known Iranian assassins—could be the people Noel had tried to warn him about. Somehow he had to get into their cabin. Maybe this time Interpol would have sufficient evidence to make a conviction stick. He texted Helmut Schwarz, his supervisor, about the Hossenis.

Unless suspects surface on other boats, the *River Nymph* may be the terrorists' target.

"We've had several last-minute crew changes." Lundstrom made a few clicks on the keyboard and another spreadsheet opened on the computer. "Our singer-dancer, Miss Vielle Fréneau, was hospitalized two days ago with food poisoning. The doctor said she's fortunate to be alive."

"Oh?" He'd let Brick, his land partner, know. A terrorist might have tried to kill her to insert one of their people in the job.

“She recommended a colleague, Miss Riley Williams, an American opera singer, age twenty-eight. She and Miss Williams were classmates at the Bucharest Conservatory.”

Warning bells clanged in Jacob’s mind. Romanian dictator Ceaușescu had allowed Arab terrorist-training camps to operate on Romanian soil. Even more recently, authorities had arrested several Romanians plotting terrorist activities. For the right price, Riley might have poisoned her friend.

Years ago, the CIA had financed struggling musicians in Europe, provided they agreed to vacate the apartment periodically for CIA purposes. Terrorist cells found the practice equally useful. “Do you have a copy of her résumé?”

“Yes.” Lundstrom switched to her online bio. “Her engagements include a smattering of opera roles, concerts, and operetta in Europe. Normally we’d hire a performer with musical theater or nightclub experience.”

“Did anyone else apply for the job?”

“No one.” Lundstrom took a manila folder from his inbox and pulled out an eight-by-ten glossy photo. “And since we depart tomorrow ...” He handed him the picture.

The camera had captured her generous smile that seemed to laugh at the lens. A mesmerizing energy radiated from her luminous eyes, enveloping him with its seductive power. He caught himself wanting to run his fingers through the irrepressible waves of her shoulder-length hair. If he didn’t know better, she could be a modern-day Lorelei, luring men to their deaths.

Using his encrypted phone, Jacob snapped her photo and forwarded the picture to Interpol Headquarters in Brussels. “Will Miss Williams have a roommate?”

“No. Miss Fréneau’s contract includes a private cabin.” Lundstrom shoved Riley’s photo in the envelope. “You know singers. Divas. Every one of them.” He stamped the brads flat then passed Jacob a passport photo. “A new steward, Manuel Rodriguez, was hired two weeks ago. He’s a Mexican national.”

The grainy snapshot suggested an emergency stop in a train station photo booth. Nevertheless, the camera had exposed a glint of cruelty in his shrewd eyes. Jacob copied the picture and forwarded it to headquarters. “An unexpected replacement?”

“We ask crew to give a month’s notice, but considering our former steward Carson’s shoddy work, he probably expected to be dismissed.”

“I see.” Jacob tossed Manuel’s picture on the desk. He’d have Brick check Carson’s whereabouts and any suspicious deposits to his bank account. “Sir, about that passkey and steward’s uniform.”

“I gave you the *maitre d’s* room.” Lundstrom flicked his gold-braided sleeve over the cuff of his shirt. “A decision that guarantees both of us enemies.”

“I appreciate your decision.” No way could he carry out his undercover work with a roommate. His orders were to avoid using his electronic lock-picking equipment and to blend in with the crew. On a boat carrying 132 passengers, keeping a low profile might be tricky. “Sir, about that key.” Having a key card amounted to cruise-line permission to enter cabins.

The captain snatched another manila folder from his inbox and flipped through Jacob’s job application papers. “I see you’ve waited tables in France. Tour guide in Indonesia.” He stuffed the application in the folder. “But no experience as a steward.”

The one job critical to his undercover work on the boat. “I’m sure I can do the job. As for waiting tables, I’ll need permission to go ashore with the passengers every day. And I’d like to be assigned to the Hossenis’ table.”

“Tell Dieter, the *maitre d’*.” Lundstrom shook two more antacids into his hand. “I’ll authorize permission to go ashore.” Morosely, he eyed the tablets on his palm. “That guarantees more friction among the staff.” Then his eyes lit. “However, going ashore makes working as a steward impossible.” He poured the tablets back in the bottle and shut it in the drawer.

“Sir, I must insist on a steward’s uniform and passkey.”

“Sorry. Time for the staff meeting.”

“Then I’ll have to report your decision to Interpol.”

Lundstrom slapped his palms on his desk. “I’m certain you’d do more than make the beds. If you’re seen using a passkey, I could lose my job, my career.”

Jacob thrust his face inches from Lundstrom’s, his tone every bit as fierce. “If we don’t stop these bioterrorists, millions of people could die.”

“If a passenger or a staff member finds one of your devices and accuses Explorer Cruises of illegal surveillance—” The vein on Lundstrom’s temple throbbed a frantic SOS. “The company’s reputation would be ruined.”

“When the public hears terrorists were known passengers or staff on this boat and you refused to take steps to prevent them—”

Beet-red flushed Lundstrom’s neck, his cheeks. He pulled a key card from his pocket and slapped it on Jacob’s outstretched palm.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll do my best to keep you out of any fallout.” If he were caught.

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AS A SUBLIMINAL SUGGESTION of Delft pottery, the designer had staged the boat’s library, bar, and dining room with blue-and-white décor and Dutch ginger jars. Jacob did a quick head count in the lounge. Thirty-plus people dressed like him, all in white slacks and light-blue polos, relaxing on the blue couches and armchairs. Except for Manuel and Riley.

Lounging against a wall in the back corner, the steward picked at his fingernails. Every few seconds, he eyed Riley, who hunkered on a couch beneath a bank of windows.

She was easily recognizable from her photograph, and taller than Jacob had envisioned. A froth of auburn curls framed her mud-streaked face. The brown splatters on her top and slacks

looked as if she'd been trapped in a paintball fight. Odd, a performer showing up poorly groomed. Maybe she'd raced to the boat from a meeting with the terrorists.

Jacob walked over to her. "Mind if I join you?"

"No." But her tone carried an I-wish-you-wouldn't.

Ignoring it, he took the vacant spot beside her and she scooted away from him. "Excuse me." He pulled a tissue from his pocket. "Looks like you found quite a mud puddle." With a smile, he offered her the tissue and pointed at her nose.

"Thanks. I barely made it back to the boat." Her smile quivered. "I didn't have time to change clothes." She moistened the tissue on her tongue and rubbed her nose. "Did I get all the dirt?"

"Almost." He rubbed a spot above the bridge of his nose. "One more speck." If he didn't watch out, she could cloud his judgment. "Looks like you've had quite an adventure." Great job, secret agent. Use a gruff voice and get an uncooperative suspect.

"You have no idea." She crossed her legs and drummed her fist on her thigh, faster than a panicked telegrapher. "I can't afford to jeopardize this job."

He tried to peel his gaze from her thick lashes, those hazel eyes, the tasteful gold earrings, the mud in her silky hair. Where had she been? "Are you new, too?"

"I'm filling in for a friend who took sick." She covered the side of her mouth. "Don't tell anyone, but it was food poisoning, onboard."

Jacob faked a grimace. "You're kidding." Sidling toward her, he slid his arm along the back of the couch. The odor of dried sweat mingled with her Chanel No. 5. His last girlfriend had liked that perfume. "How come you were free to fill in?"

"I was between gigs." She moved to the end cushion and gave his outstretched arm a would-you-mind stare. "I'm a freelance coloratura."

So much for his fatal charm. He lowered his arm to his lap. "Colora-what?"

“Soprano. The one who sings the stratospheric high notes in opera. You know, like a trapeze artist who performs without a net.”

“Wow.” He hated to admit it, but she fit the prototype of a terrorist dupe. A struggling artist short on income. But dupes had been known to become pawns. “Sounds like you enjoy a bit of risk. Or danger.”

Every inch of Riley’s shudder screamed diva. “Nope. Strictly a small-town Texan who’s gonna have a career in opera. No matter what.” She glanced out the windows. Tapped the face of her watch, the rhythm almost frenzied.

Jacob wanted to reach over and still the incessant tapping, the foot gone wild. What would she be willing to sacrifice to promote her career—her friend? Her country?

As Captain Lundstrom walked to the podium in the center of the dance floor, the murmured conversations died. Most of the staff sat to attention in their seats. Not Manuel. If anything, his slouch worsened. The captain picked up the mic and tapped it. Riley shrank on the couch. But Lundstrom’s frosty gaze nailed her.

Her cheeks pinked and Jacob almost felt sorry for her. She fingered the brown stain on her top. With those long legs, she’d never be able to hide the mud on her pants.

If only he could shield her from Lundstrom’s merciless scrutiny. *Whoa, Coulter: Get a grip. She’s a person of interest to Interpol.*

The captain launched into his welcome remarks, and the mic squealed.

But Riley stared out the windows facing the cathedral and gnawed off the last of her pink lipstick.

Tuning out the captain, Jacob angled toward her. Noel’s killer had been a woman. Maybe she was watching for her terrorist contact.

She shifted away from him, her chest heaving beneath her blouse.

If her breaths grew any shallower, she’d hyperventilate. Riley,



my girl, you're promoting yourself from a person of interest to a prime suspect. Jacob's phone vibrated against his hip. He slid his cell from his pocket, but hid the screen and text message below his left side.

Ask RW about her Romanian-Arab boyfriend.