



Ellie bowed her head and said a prayer over her food and their trip to Timbuktu ... “and Lord, help me. This is an amazing opportunity, and I need to prove I can do this so they’ll hire me for the magazine. Please, Lord, don’t let me blow this. Thanks. Amen.”

As she raised her head, she spied her interpreter from his boots up past his cargo pants and his tight shirt over his muscled torso to his gray eyes. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. The Lord and I have this arrangement. I talk to Him and—” She realized she was rambling. “Never mind. Get yourself some breakfast.”

“I think I will.” Beau strode to the buffet, ordered his eggs, and filled a plate with fruit, and rolls. “Café please.” He told the waiter on his way to their table. Joining her, he asked, “Did you sleep well, Ellie?”

“Yes, after my toes quit throbbing and until the Islam call to prayer pierced the air before daybreak.” She cut her watermelon into small bites and sprinkled salt on it.

“Salt ruins the taste.” Beau pointed to her plate. He reached for the black pepper for his eggs and doused his breakfast.

“The salt accents the sweetness of the melon bringing out its true flavor. To each their own.” She smiled and pointed to his plate. “You want a little egg with your pepper there, Macho Man?”

He shook the pepper twice more. “What I need is some hot sauce.”

“On your eggs? Then don’t mention the salt on my watermelon.” She bit into her juicy melon. “You ready to help me shop?”

“Sure, what are you looking for?” He smeared orange marmalade on his toast.

“Gifts for my family and friends and something to hang on my wall from Mali. Someday I’ll decorate a place of my own, but for now, I’m living with my two friends, Olivia and Jocelyn, in a condo. Olivia is engaged. I want to find something special for her as a wedding gift.” She took another bite.

The waiter served his café’ in a bowl. Beau lifted it and carefully took a sip.

Watching him, she asked, “What is that you’re drinking?”

“It’s café—half coffee, half chocolate. You should try it.” He took another sip.

“Maybe tomorrow morning.” She drank her coffee.

“So, you only have two friends? I thought you would have an entourage.” He scanned the restaurant, his gaze landing on her.

“I’ve learned to choose my friends wisely. Some people are like stray dogs—they’ll bite you when you quit petting them. And two true friends are enough for me.” She peeled a tiny banana. “But I could add a friend or two if he or she proved to be a person of integrity. Which is rare.” She took a small bite of the banana. “Do you have a plethora of friends? You strike me as a loner.”

“A plethora?” He furrowed his brow, the indentions on his forehead were vertical just above his eyebrows.

“A fancy word for a variety.” She smirked.

“Nope. I work with some great men who have my respect. We hang out sometimes. I have a brother I spend time with when I’m in France, but true friends are scarce with my vagabond lifestyle. Providing security and being an interpreter for people like you, I like working solo with no strings attached. There’s too much pain when you lose someone you care about, so I keep moving—making my way alone.” He forked a piece of bacon into his mouth.

Ellie read between the lines. Maybe it was the writer part of her brain honing in on the heart of the story. But that was for another time. She finished her coffee as he pushed his plate away. “Well, one-man show, are you ready to shop?”

Beau stood as he drank the rest of his brew. “Let’s do this.” He followed her from the restaurant to the hotel’s front doors. His job as her protector had started. Under a cloudless sky, Bamako had a slight breeze cooling its inhabitants, but that didn’t mean an enemy wouldn’t be hot on his trail.

With a light grip on her shoulder, he paused Ellie at the doors and surveyed the area for any signs of Hussein or his men. “The Taureg market has the best variety in Bamako. It’s the one across the street. How are your toes?”

“Better today. The swelling went down, and I taped them together. This shoe keeps them secure, which is good since they hurt when I bend them.”

“Sounds like a good choice.” When he didn’t see anything suspicious, he led her to the entrance of the large market that boasted concrete floors and a large A-frame building with a tin roof and walls. As she stepped inside the market, a loud bang sounded. He pivoted and scanned for the origin of the noise. A puff of gray smoke behind an old backfiring truck. He relaxed.

She stopped short. “Wow. I love it, de La Croix. So vibrant and colorful.” She pulled her phone out of her bag and took a couple of photographs.

“It’s almost overwhelming, the bold mixture of color, the staticky African music. But it all adds to the experience of *Africa*.” She took a deep breath. “Scenes like this are so alive. I wish I could portray it with my photography. People need to see this, to experience this.” She pocketed her phone and commenced shopping, limping from one kiosk to another until she found some brass carved bracelets. Studying the quality, she made her selections.

He tried to view the chaos through her eyes. The fragrance of flowers was strong as they passed a massive display of blooms. Citrus smells competed for prominence in the fruit section of the market. Ebony-skinned nationals dressed in bright mismatched attire conversed in friendly banter.

At the back of the market, the smell of leather was overly strong. Several shops had engraved pieces. She purchased a computer case for her laptop. Beau bargained for her, acquiring a good price. With each purchase, Beau helped her get a lower price, counted her unfamiliar currency, and carried her packages.

“Great choice on this laptop case.” Beau put the wrapped purchase under his arm.

“Thanks.” She smiled. “It’s one of a kind. The workmanship is superb. I’ll enjoy using it to protect my laptop, research, writing guidelines, and photography.”

“When you sell this article, you’ll become famous?” He asked.

“This opportunity could change my life. It would open the field of photojournalism. Have you ever been passionate about an assignment?”

“Yes, I have.” Beau stood to her left when people passed—

patiently protecting her foot. "I'll help you get your pictures, but writing the article is up to you."

"I write better than I use my cameras." She limped from booth to booth. "I see you scanning the market. Are you looking for unwanted guests?"

"One can't be too careful when in the company of a famous photojournalist." Beau masked his real concerns with a smile and moved her aside as a man carried a load of leather goods down the aisle toward them.

"Thanks."

"At your service, *mademoiselle*." Beau tipped his imaginary hat again, then followed her up and down a few rows of kiosks.

Ellie stopped and faced Beau. "What are those wooden pieces on the wall behind me?" She kept her voice down as she breathed in his masculine scent, a pleasing mix of soap and toughness.

He scrutinized the display. "Those are antique tent stakes. Bedouins used them to secure their tents in the desert sand, especially during *haboobs*."

"What are *haboobs*?"

"Blinding sandstorms."

"Okay, I want those three that are grouped together on that far wall. Can you get me a good price? They would be a perfect muse for my article." She gave him her best pleading look.

With a slight shake of his head, he stepped around her and spoke in French. The shop owner responded.

"What did he say?" She leaned closer, touched his arm, and kept her voice down.

Beau leaned toward her. "He wants a hundred dollars for the three tent stakes," Beau whispered.

"That's too much. Tell him the wood looks very old and

dirty. I'll give him twenty dollars." With her hand still on Beau's arm, she pushed him toward the man to make another offer.

Speaking to the shop owner again, Beau reported his response. "He thinks you'll pay one hundred dollars."

"No, let's walk away." She shook her head and moved to the next shop.

The African man yelled out.

"He's down to ninety dollars." Beau interpreted for her.

Looking at other shops with Beau's hand on her back, she kept limping along. His protection was nice. Being with him was growing on her. *Be still my beating heart.*

"Do you want the tent stakes?" Beau whispered.

"Yes, but don't let him know that." She walked further and chose a scarf. "This is perfect for my mother to wear with her winter coat." As she paid for her purchase, an elderly gentleman rushed toward her with the tent stakes wrapped in newsprint. He held them out and spoke rapidly in French.

"He's saying twenty dollars."

Ellie grabbed the tent stakes, piled them in Beau's arms, clapped her hands, and gave the gentleman the money, adding a tip. "This is a great find."

Adding the tent stakes to his load, Beau shook his head and followed her again. "I don't think these will fit in your suitcase."

"I'm a flight attendant. I don't have to worry about that." She limped a little farther. "I think I've finished shopping. Are you ready to go back to the hotel?" She pivoted to ask him while eyeing his dark hair and stunning eyes.

"Sure, you're fast. I'm surprised." Beau smiled.

"When it comes to shopping, I don't lollygag." She limped toward the exit.

"What?" He stopped her and looked out the doors before leading her into the street.

"I don't waste time."

"So, tell me, if you're a flight attendant, is writing just a

hobby?” His eyes darted across the area and watched the traffic as they crossed the busy road being patient with her injury slowing their pace.

“My domineering mother has my life planned for me. When I got my degree, she gave me a professionally decorated office at my dad’s company as my graduation present. I thought she was going to croak when I turned it down to fly the African skies as a flight attendant. Me earning big bucks is foremost in her mind. She wants me to do something prestigious.”

Dodging a stray donkey, they stepped onto the curb. “I don’t want to fly the skies forever—I love traveling but would like it to be on a schedule I could control. Being hired by *Above & Beyond Magazine* would open that door for me. That’s where you come in, de La Croix.” She poked him in the chest with one of the tent stakes.

“Ow!” He jerked away.

“We’ve got a plane to catch.” She stepped into the hotel lobby with Beau on her trail.

“Your writing must be exceptional. They don’t invest in newbies to get a story like this.” Beau sounded surprised. He pressed the button on the elevator.

“After winning a few contests with my work, this was the next step.” Once in the elevator, her phone *dinged* with a message. She checked it. “Seven missed calls from my mom. No pressure there.” She blew out a breath and pocketed the phone, regretting she’d added the international plan.

As they approached the door of her suite, Ellie reached for her room key, turned to Beau, and took the tent stakes from his arms. She sucked in a breath as her skin touched his. “I—I will meet you in the lobby at ten.”

He took her key and unlocked the door. “See you there.”

When the door clicked, Beau ran his hand through his hair and scratched his beard, scruffy now as a disguise. *She's a beauty, but keep your guard up, de La Croix. In one week, she'll be gone. Remember the gut-wrenching pain of loss. The heartache.* He hurried to his room and packed in ten minutes, determined to shake off the effects of that blonde hair and those blue eyes framed by a long set of lashes.

Using the extra time, he checked in with two men, his bosses, Philippe Leroux in Paris, and Axel McCabe in Washington D.C. He got McCabe on the phone.

"I'm glad you called," Axel McCabe answered. "I was notified you'd arrive in Mali. I wasn't looking forward to sending this info. Our intel reports that seven men have set themselves up in Timbuktu." McCabe paused. The sound of papers came over the line. "I'm looking at the file now. From drone photos, it looks like they come and go from a building at the opposite end of town from the school."

"The church school the missionaries built?" Beau paced the room.

"Yes. And they've been visiting the mosque regularly. Which is odd. Confirm their location, their numbers, and their plans if possible. We can't allow them to get another stronghold in the area. Once your job is complete, we'll move in and eliminate the threat."

"Yes, sir. I'll send messages to Dax in Bamako when possible, if not, I'll report in as soon as I return to Bamako." He watched the busy street out his hotel window, searching for any enemy activity. Always on the lookout. "Is Hussein leading this battalion?"

"That info hasn't been confirmed, but I suspect he is." He paused.

Beau blew out a breath. "Give me a week, and I'll have this mission complete."

Escape from Timbuktu

“And we’ll be ready to finish this task—removing all enemy forces from the ancient city. Thanks, de La Croix.”

“It’s what I do, sir.” Beau ended the call and reminded himself he needed to keep his military manners at bay on this trip. He was an interpreter and a tour guide for a savvy blonde. Piece of cake. *Not.*