



Ellie endured a teeth-jarring taxi ride into the city. Of course, she would get the only un-air-conditioned cab in the line of exhaust-emitting jalopies. When the driver finally jerked the vehicle to a stop, Ellie limped into the five-star Azalai Hotel, stopping at the hotel's shiny reception desk. The thick carpet and soft music were a welcome treat, a level of quality she was surprised to see in this poor West African country.

Lifting her foot, she stood in a flamingo pose to take the pressure off her toes. "Hello, I'm Elliana Bendale. I have a reservation." She set her bag on the desk and pulled out her passport for the registrar.

The Malian woman with glowing skin looked up from her desk and smiled. The headdress covering her hair matched her African print dress.

"Hello, *mademoiselle*. Welcome to Bamako and the Azalai Hotel. My name is Grace, and I have your reservation. Your employer wanted us to see to your needs while you are with us." She noted Ellie's passport number in her ledger and gave a key to the bellman, who had Ellie's luggage. "Suite 107 for

Mademoiselle Bendale.” She handed Ellie an envelope. “This came for you.”

Above & Beyond Magazine was imprinted on the stationary. Ellie opened the note and read the message, then looked up and said, “Grace, could you reserve a table for two in the hotel restaurant for seven o’clock? I’m meeting my interpreter for dinner.” She pocketed the note.

“Absolutely. I will see to it. Anything else?” Grace made a note on a tablet.

Ellie shouldered her camera case and paused. “Do you have a lockup area for my large piece of luggage? The weight of it would be too much for our small plane tomorrow to Timbuktu.”

“Yes. We have a closet that stays locked. We can put it there. Would you like something refreshing from the bar, a soft drink maybe?” She smiled at Ellie.

“A cold Coke would be great. Thanks.” Ellie noticed the man with her luggage was leaving her behind.

“I will have it sent to your room. Have a nice evening.” Grace picked up the phone to place her order.

“Thank you. I think I will.” Ellie followed the bellman as closely as she could with her throbbing toes, anxious to finally remove her shoe—if the swelling would allow it.

If bumper-to-bumper traffic didn’t slow their progress to Azalai Hotel, Beau could get checked in and have time for a shower before meeting the photojournalist. He hoped he wasn’t irritating, whiney, or demanding. The success of his mission depended upon this trip to Timbuktu.

The receptionist was efficient. She recorded his passport number and gave him a key. His room wasn’t a suite but was

nice enough, and his shower was hot—both rare in third-world countries.

Two minutes before seven, early by his watch, he stepped into the hotel restaurant and took a deep breath. The place was high-class for West Africa with its service, exquisite cuisine, and ambiance.

“Good evening, *Monsieur*. May I show you to a table? Are you dining alone?” The restaurant manager wore a three-piece suit—out of style long ago but prestigious attire in Mali.

Beau gave a slight bow. “I’m meeting an American for a dinner meeting. Has L.E. Bendale arrived?” Beau scanned the restaurant but didn’t see a gentleman sitting alone. The floors were clay tiles, and the tables were covered with pricey blue linen tablecloths and napkins that added a *pop of color* to the room, as his sister-in-law would say.

“Follow me.” The man walked to a table overlooking the outdoor pool. “I hope you enjoy our territorial cosmopolitan entrees.”

“Thank you, *Monsieur*. I’m sure I will. The buffet looks amazing. I’ll start with a cold bottle of water.” Beau shook his napkin out of its fancy fold and put it across his lap.

“I will send it right away.” He bowed slightly before returning to the restaurant’s entrance to seat more guests.

Beau got comfortable and watched through the window as a swimmer took the high dive into the pristine pool. Beau often jumped into the deep end, but not usually into water. He took in a breath and blew it out.

The waiter poured water into a goblet. Knowing he wouldn’t have this finery in Timbuktu, Beau lifted the glass and took a long drink. Over the rim of his glass, he saw a tall blonde in a blue flowing sundress headed to his table with a plate of food. *Oh, no. The tourist from the airport.*

Stopping, she stared, shook her head, and limped to the

table. “Really? Wow! What are the chances?” She set her plate on the table.

As he stood to pull out her chair, he questioned her reaction. Women didn’t usually frown when they saw him. They would normally capture his gaze, wink, and smile. But not this lady. *And—who is she?* He pulled a business card from his pocket.

“You’re a pretty woman whom I would love to invite to dinner, however, this is a business meeting. I’m waiting for a gentleman named L. E. Bendale.” He showed her the card.

She scanned it and turned away when a waiter arrived with a bag of ice. She propped her swollen foot in the chair on her left and carefully placed the ice on her toes, sucking in a breath.

Beau took a seat that put his back to the window, giving him a complete view of the restaurant and the attractive female.

“Thank you,” she said to the waiter, then sat back. “So, since I am Elliana Bendale, I’m assuming you’re the interpreter who will accompany me to Timbuktu.” She slung her linen napkin across her lap and met his gaze.

He hesitated, sucked in a breath, and shook his head. “I assumed I was working with a man on this assignment. My mistake.” He smiled and tipped a pretend hat on his head. “I’m Beau de La Croix.”

She shook his extended hand, then released his fingers.

“Is something wrong? What happened to your foot?”

An uncomfortable silence hung between them. Beau endured the intense glare from her stunning deep blue eyes for several beats.

Ms Bendale sat up straighter. “I think we’ve already met, Mr. de La Croix. Today at the airport, you plowed through the crowd to retrieve your duffle bag before stepping on my foot, breaking two of my toes. Then—you stole my taxi and left me on the sidewalk with an angry Iraqi soldier, holding a gun to my back!”

His body stiffened, and his hands formed fists under the table. “Did he hurt you?”

“Only a few bruises while he grilled me with questions about *you*. But he called you *Dubois*. Is that your nickname? At that moment, I could have called you a lot of names. But they’ve slipped my mind. So, yes, I think we’ve met.”

Beau’s shoulders fell. “I am so sorry.” He sat back in his chair. Waited. Then got up, put his napkin on the table, and left the restaurant. It was time to stop this conversation and start over if this was going to work. And he didn’t have a choice—it had to work.

Ellie couldn’t believe her luck. Stuck with a bull in a china shop. Yeah, he was ruggedly handsome but heavy on his feet—no, heavy on *her* foot. Would they return to Bamako in one piece—that is, *if* he returned to the table? Stabbing the meat on her plate, she cut it with force and tasted a bite of tender beef. A mix of savory spices. *Yum*. She took a deep breath and tried to relax and regain her composure. After all, she was a professional.

As she sipped her Coke, she played this interpreter’s scenario in her mind. He didn’t mean any harm and wasn’t aware he’d broken her toes. He was in too big of a hurry to notice how he’d wounded her physically. Yep, she’d been pretty rough on him. *I hope he comes back*.

She focused on her food. The potatoes had a special seasoning that put her taste buds on alert. Or maybe the handsome Frenchman had her senses pinging at the thought of spending a week with such a fine specimen of masculinity.

The manager of the restaurant approached her table with a flower bouquet. “These are from the French gentleman

awaiting your approval to join you for dinner.” He held the flowers toward Ellie and smiled.

Accepting the bouquet, she turned to face de La Croix, who stood sentry, watching for her answer. “Okay, tell him he can join me for dinner.” She smelled the blooms and laid the bouquet on the table in front of an empty chair.

The manager bowed and hurried to relay her message.

Beau de La Croix joined her. “Thank you for the invitation. I come bearing my deepest regrets for my actions that have caused you pain. Please forgive me.”

“I’m sorry for overreacting. You didn’t mean to hurt me. I know that. So—” She paused. “Since you gave me flowers, I’ll consider forgiving you. Go visit the buffet, and we’ll start over.” She took another drink of Coke, hoping it would stop the sizzle between them. He was one fine-looking man. Go figure.

Moments later, with his plate full of steaming meats, vegetables, and a scrumptious dessert assortment, Beau took his seat. “I’m so sorry I broke your toes. Have you taped them together?” He dropped his napkin into his lap.

“Not yet. They were too swollen.” She took a bite of vegetables.

“Are they straight?” He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Yes, thank the Lord. They don’t need to be reset. I’ll tape them when I return to my suite.” She buttered a roll.

They ate in amenable silence for a few moments amid the sounds of other guests, speaking a mixture of languages, French being prominent. Strong curry smells mingled with a fragrant coffee aroma. A mixture of onion and garlic rose from Ellie’s entrée. She’d chosen a pasta dish, thinking it would be fully cooked and safe to eat. She would follow her interpreter’s lead on food choices to stay healthy during the trip.

As soft strands of Kenny G’s saxophone played from mounted speakers around the restaurant, Beau scanned their surroundings. His gaze stopped on her and stayed.

“I have to say you’re not what I expected as an interpreter.” She took a bite.

“What were you expecting?” Beau watched her with his fork in mid-air, holding a stack of sauteed vegetables.

“Shorter, bald on top with a greasy comb-over, thick glasses, and a potbelly.” She laughed.

“I’m sorry to disappoint.” He ate his veggies and hid a smile as he cut into his meat. “I may not be who you expected, but despite our rough beginning, I can get you to Timbuktu, help you capture your story, and get you back safely. I’m good at what I do.” One side of his lip hitched in a smile.

“So, you do this interpreter gig a lot?” She ate her last bite of pasta.

“No, there aren’t many beautiful blondes needing my language skills, but I work freelance on various assignments, usually on security assignments. I’m familiar with the territory ... and I’m all you’ve got.”

She smirked. “Then I guess you’ll have to do.”

He offered his dessert assortment. “Please have one of these bite-size desserts as we plan our trek to the ancient city of Timbuktu.”

“They smell like fruit with a buttery crust.” She bit into an African tart. “Very good. Thanks.” She savored the dessert. “About our time in Timbuktu, this is what my magazine expects for this assignment.” She recited the request and goals sent to her by the editor of the magazine. “Can you create a schedule to meet my needs?”

“I can do that.” Beau’s lip lifted in a half-smile.

“As for starting over, nice to meet you, Beau de La Croix. I’m Elliana Bendale, a soon-to-be world-renown photojournalist in high demand around the globe. You can call me Ellie.” She attempted a cordial smile.

“It’s nice to meet you.” He offered her another dessert. “Elliana is long, and Ellie is too common, May I call you E?”

“Okay.” She paused. “So, how many languages do you speak?” She took another bite of dessert. “I know you speak French, since you’re my interpreter while I’m in Mali.”

He swallowed. “Yes, I speak French, English, and some area tribal languages. What about you?” He finished his water.

“English, Swahili, and a whole lot of sarcasm.” She put her fork into another dessert on his plate. “*Capiche?*”

He laughed.

Beau walked her to the elevator guarding her foot when they passed other guests. “What time should we leave for the airport?” The inky darkness of nightfall could be seen through the windows as they made their way through the plush hotel lobby.

“We fly at 11:54. We can’t be late.” She limped along as gracefully as she could.

The bouquet he’d given her fanned a pleasant fragrance as they walked, or maybe it was her perfume stealing his breath. She was stunning. Tall, shapely, with long blonde silky hair, and a sprinkling of freckles on a perfect nose.

Beau pressed the UP button. “Enjoy the breakfast buffet in the morning—you won’t taste anything like it for a while. Let’s leave at ten. That will give us plenty of time to make our flight.” He held the elevator door as other guests stepped off.

“I want to shop at the market across the street. Will you go with me and help me bargain for the best prices? I’ve been told Malian jewelry and leather goods are amazing.” She looked up at him. “When I’m on assignment, I like to shop before I work so I can focus on the project without interruptions, and this project, being critical to my future employment, has forced me to plan well.”

Beau motioned for Ellie to precede him into the elevator.

“Okay. Let’s do breakfast at eight, then go to the market.” Once the elevator doors closed, Beau turned toward her. “You said the man at the airport was asking about me. Can you remember his exact words?”

“That was scary.” She hesitated, and her eyes widened. “When you took off in my cab, he held a gun at my back and asked if you were Dubois and what destination you gave your driver. I insisted I didn’t know you or where you were staying.” She gulped a breath.

“I’m so sorry.” Beau stood rigid, fists clenched.

“No harm.” She paused. “But I was terrified.”

Beau paused. “Are you okay now?”

“I think so, but when he left me standing on the sidewalk, I was afraid to move at first.” She fidgeted before continuing. “I took a deep breath and decided, after dealing with the sweaty masses, a handsome Frenchman, two broken toes, and being held at gunpoint—what more could happen? Right?”

“Oh, I agree. After all, now you have a tour guide slash interpreter.”

“Right. And we’re off on an adventure. Timbuktu has a reputation and centuries of history. I hope to do it justice. This assignment is my chance to land a permanent place with the magazine.”

The elevator doors *dinged* and opened. He stepped out, checked the hallway, then walked Ellie to her suite.

She used her key and turned toward him. “Good night, Beau.”

“You sure you don’t need help with those broken toes?” He held the door slightly open.

“No, but thanks for the offer. I can tape them, and I’ll elevate my foot to keep the swelling down.” She eyed him. “You didn’t mean to hurt me. It was an accident. Don’t feel bad.” She put her hand on his arm—but didn’t let it linger. “Thanks for the flowers.”

“You’re welcome. Rest well.” He released her door and left as soon as he heard the lock click.

Beau ran his hand through his hair as he paced the hardwood floors of his hotel room. *Hussein called me Dubois*. If he was the leader of this invasion, things could get ugly. *This could be what the intel was about*. More challenging than he’d originally thought. Elliana Bendale was passionate about her work, feisty, beautiful. And blonde—which would bring attention to her presence in the city.

He stopped pacing and scanned the activity on the street from his window. He could be leading her into trouble—giving her a bigger story than she ever expected—if she lived to tell it. Keeping his orders a secret from the photojournalist was a great plan. It would keep her safe, like she’d been at the airport. He’d go with that *what-she-didn’t-know-wouldn’t-hurt-her* adage.

After dropping the curtain, he tied the mosquito net to the post on the headboard. He threw his pillow to the side, slipped the Smith & Wesson from the holster at his lower back, and set it on the bed. Reaching inside his ankle holster, he removed his Glock and laid it on the sheet. In the side pocket of his cargo pants, he retrieved magazines for both guns and the SOG flashlight. His spring-loaded pocket knife was in his other pocket. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Having possession of his weapons felt good—it settled him. With his armory on the bed, he covered it with his pillow and stretched out, knowing he needed to rest. Once they reached Timbuktu, he’d sleep with one eye open.