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TROUBLED WATERS • BOOK 3

Vengeance IN VIENNA

SARA L. JAMESON



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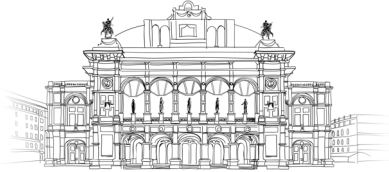
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*To my dear friend, Peggy A. Bell,
who has faithfully prayed for every book I've written.*

*And to my uncle, Robert C. Goodwin,
for our mutual love of books and precious conversations.*



Velden am Wörthersee, Austria

Romantic was the last thing he'd call a moonlight sail. More likely deadly.

Interpol Special Agent Jacob Coulter gripped the mainsheet, the rope almost unfamiliar in his fingers. Sweat slicked the tiller in his right hand. Sailing lessons as a ten-year-old were a gazillion years ago. Why had he given in to Riles' badgering? Haunches clenched against the seat, he loosened the mainsheet, tacked the fifteen-foot dinghy to port.

Short puffs of air rasped from his mouth.

"Relaaax." Seated on the molded fiberglass bench across from him, Riley Williams flicked wavy auburn strands from her cheek. "We're having fun, remember?"

"Who, me—tense?" So far, he'd avoided the illuminated disks jetting water in the Wörthersee. Why on God's great earth had Austrians built a fountain in the lake?

Face tilted toward the star-studded sky, she curled her legs, rested her hand on the boat's rim. The facets in her diamond engagement ring sparkled like flames beneath the full moon.

A grin worked across his face. He'd never expected the Lord to hook him up with an opera star fiancée. But not a diva-bone in her body. Apart from her Mae West life vest, Riles was an ethereal vision in white. Pompom hat, turtleneck, down puffer vest, and cords. Perfect for October.

He tacked again. Booking their first vacation had been a good idea—if they survived the obstacles in the water.

Tonight, her thousand-watt smile lit her face nonstop. “Admit it. Aren't you glad we rented the boat?” The lilt in her voice rippled like one of her opera arias.

“Uh-huh.” He'd have preferred something less risky. Something that might not endanger her. Danger he couldn't prevent. Or protect her from. Not with a terrorist financier determined to kill them.

Out of habit, he patted his waterproof-covered phone in his pocket. Scanned the port and starboard shores. Moonlight glimmered on the inky water, silhouetted the treetops and houses, mostly gated estates. Best he could tell, no movement on land. If Armand's goons showed up, he and Riles would be easy pickings.

Eighteen days since their last fiasco. Austria was hundreds of miles from London, but how long could their luck hold out? Forgiveness wasn't on Armand's must-do list. Jacob flexed his neck, but the cramps in his muscles refused to budge. It was hard to forget Interpol's insistence he make their holiday his cover. Even for an hour.

The dinghy's bow sliced through the water and glided past the last house. He glanced over his shoulder. Where was that water-ski ramp?

A gust hit the sail and whisked the boat toward the port shore. He tacked again, zigzagged them away from the dense forest looming at the water's edge.

“How about a kiss, lover boy.” Riles slid from the bench and scooted across the cockpit floor. Arms draped across his

knees, she lifted her face toward his, lashes framing hazel eyes, a hint of lip gloss on her generous mouth. “Let’s make a memory.”

“Okay, doll.” They could use some new memories. Good ones. If they couldn’t carve time out from his life-and-death assignments, she’d never set a wedding date. He bent toward her and pressed his lips to hers. One whiff of her Chanel No. 5, and he released his hold on the tiller, fingers itching to weave through her curls.

Craaack.

The tiller shattered. Fragments scattered everywhere.

“Sniper!” Heart clobbering his chest, he shoved Riles to the floor, dove on top of her.

Wood splinters geysered, pelted the water, *thunked* inches from his legs.

Stifling a shriek, Riles flinched beneath him.

He shielded her head with one hand, clutched the mainsheet. Somehow, he had to get her out of here.

“Armand?”

“Probably hired an assassin. At this distance, must be a high-powered rifle.” Shrewd. Waiting until night, unlikely to be identified.

Or caught.

Their pizza dinner churned his stomach. How long had the killer been watching them?

He swiped his palm across his face. *Thank You, God.* If he hadn’t released the tiller, the bullet would’ve severed his hand.

Stocking cap tugged over his hair, he angled his head over the stern-side rim, squinted toward the shore. The shooter was probably wearing night-vision goggles. Jacob rolled off Riley, and she huddled in a ball, quaking against his chest.

“Do you think he left?”

“I doubt it.” Armand would insist on proof of their deaths. Jacob slammed his fist on his thigh. “How many more

assassination attempts before Interpol lets intel analysts carry weapons? Or make arrests?"

"Must be under quota."

The quiver in her voice tore at him. How could he protect Riles in the middle of a lake?

The dinghy wobbled like a rubber duck in a bathtub.

Adrenaline jolted through his veins. No tiller meant no rudder control. Saliva fled his mouth. To reach the dock, he'd have to row or work the sails.

In full view of the sniper.

LYING on his side in the cockpit, he snatched the mainsheet in his hand. "Call the police. One-three-three. Phone's in my pocket. You can dial and speak through the cover."

Craaack.

Another bullet *thwacked* the fiberglass hull, inches from where he'd been sitting.

Riles jammed her fist to her mouth.

Cold sweat pricked his brow. He touched the hole's frayed edges, and water burbled over his fingertips. Acid pitted his stomach. A puncture below the waterline, big as a hamburger slider. How long before the boat sank?

"That's no pop gun he's using." One direct hit and they'd bleed out in seconds. Somehow, he had to get them to safety.

Shallow breaths heaved her chest, a flurry of exhales feathered his cheeks.

If she inhaled any faster, she'd hyperventilate. "You okay?"

"Yep. Never better." Fingers trembling, she unzipped his windbreaker pocket, yanked out the cell and dialed. "This is Riley Williams. I'm calling for Interpol Special Agent Jacob Coulter. A sniper is shooting at our sailboat from the north shore of the Wörthersee." Her voice revved into overdrive. "One

hit below the waterline, tiller destroyed. We're about a kilometer from the boat dock at Velden."

Good thing they were both fluent in German. There'd be no misunderstanding with the police. Wörthersee was almost eleven miles long, nearly a mile wide. Last time he'd checked, three other boats on the lake. None of them close. None a speedboat manned by an assassin.

Water gurgled into the dinghy, seeped inside his nylon slacks, sloshed around his bottom athletic shoe. Numbness crept up his ankle.

Would they capsize?

With a sniper taking potshots, no way could he bail out the inflow.

"Danke." She disconnected the call. Taut lines etched her mouth. "They're on the way."

Craaack. Another bullet pierced the boat near the joint of the stern.

Gasping, Riles yanked her knees to her chest.

In seconds a chilly gusher saturated his hip. Breath lodged in his throat.

Another hit below the waterline. God had protected them so far. But one more bullet between the last two, and the police would carry them out in body bags.

Jacob eyed the starboard shore. With buoyancy vests on, they couldn't swim below the surface. Apart from his navy-blue windbreaker and pants they were a floating target in white. Hull, sails, Riles' outfit. "How are your swimming skills?"

"I do laps." Her teeth chattered. "In a heated pool."

"The brochure said this is Austria's warmest lake."

"Right. A regular hot tub."

"If we stay with the boat, it'll be easier for the police to find us."

"And the assassin." She zipped his waterproofed phone inside his pocket. "Is he toying with us or just a lousy shot?"

A chuckle strangled in his throat. "Want me to ask him?"

"Yes." Fire flashed from her eyes. "When you catch him."

The dinghy listed to port. Soon they'd be exposed in the cockpit. They'd have to shift to the starboard side to delay capsizing. Or jump overboard. Either way the killer could pick them off blindfolded.

"Riles, the boat's sinking. Take off your Mae West, the hat, and puffer. Put on my jacket so you're not such a white bull's eye."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She wiggled on the cockpit floor, squirming out of the vests, then whipped off her hat.

"Once you're overboard, hold the life preserver away from you. Keep your legs below the surface." With one hand on the mainsheet, he shrugged out of his jacket, wadded her puffer inside her hat as best he could. "I'm going to release the boom. When I say go, slip over the starboard side. Stay away from the stern. I'll draw his fire there."

"O-okay." She zipped his jacket over her turtleneck. "See ya, lover boy." She smooched the air but a muscle tic near her eye jittered an SOS. Her back to him, she crouched below the seat, fingers twisting the life-vest strap.

God, help us. They'd have mere seconds to make this work. If the boom's shift hid Riles' exit from the boat—

Heart thudding, he released the mainsail and the boom swung to port. "Go."

She scrambled on the seat and splashed overboard. In one smooth movement, the boat careened to port, and the mainsail bellyflopped on the water.

Fingertips grasping her pompom hat, he slithered into the lake. Ice water shocked his lungs. His diaphragm seized. *I can do all things—all things—through Christ—*

Every inch of his skin pebbled beneath his sodden clothes. Arm shuddering from the chilly water, he flicked her hat

beyond the stern. The puffer dangled from inside the cap, bobbing like a giant jellyfish.

A gulp of air and he swam beneath the boat, life preserver undulating in his right hand. Once clear of the dinghy he lifted his head, gasping.

A few feet from the bow, Riles treaded water, her breaths short puffs. "Some choice. Freeze to death or bleed to death."

Craack. Riles' hat exploded. Bits of fabric, yarn, and down swirled in the air like a Minnesota snowstorm.

Bingo. The sniper had bought the deception. Now what?

"N-not s-sure I c-can sw-swim to sh-shore." She dogpaddled closer to him.

"Yeah." He tried for another stroke, but his arms splatted on the lake's surface. Already his biceps weighed a ton. How many yards could they swim before they'd succumb to hypothermia?