

EAST OF NIECE

Prologue

The silver Mercedes took the hairpin turns as easily as fingers sliding into worn leather gloves. Jules Mason held the padded steering wheel in his large capable hands as he captained the fine piece of machinery. "You know, babe, I'm thinking maybe I'll get one of these cars when we get home. Never did want a German car before, but you gotta give them credit; they know how to make a fine automobile." He glanced in the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of himself, at least a shock of his white hair, a portion of his bushy right eyebrow and his chestnut brown eyes. He was everything he could want; virile, powerful, comfortable with himself, and still in love with the same gal after all these years. "Yes indeedy, this handles like a good mare. Makes me think of Buttercup, remember her?" His smile was tinged with lasciviousness only Nan could read. Missouri. 1962. Spring. A picnic ride; Nan on Buttercup, Jules on Bruno. At the edge of a cornfield they conceived their first child, Ryan, who never made it to his eighth birthday. After all these years it still hurt.

Nan chewed her lip and glared at the road ahead of them. "Honey, slow down. Lord, I hate these curvy roads. It's easy to see how Princess Grace and that poor, dear Stephanie had an accident here. I do hope Gavin's careful - "

"Don't go there, Nan. I'm telling you it's just that kind of attitude that's turned the boy into a sissy."

"He's not a sissy," she said as she reapplied her lipstick. Her words contorted as she tightened her mouth to accommodate the same color she'd worn for the last twenty-five years. Not having seen Gavin in a year - and never having met his girlfriend, Vickie - she wanted to look her absolute best.

"Right, excuse me, *dilettante*," he said with contempt. "Let me tell you sweetheart, no true Missourian could ever be a dilettante. Rich broads with half a brain cell and time to kill are dilettantes, but not a grown man from Missouri."

"Jules, would you *please* slow down?" Nan held onto the door handle, flattened the soles of her new Clergerie shoes on the floor and said, "And I *hate* when you call me sweetheart in that tone of voice. *Slow down, God damn it!*"

Jules eased down on the brake. The car had suddenly picked up speed, though he wasn't pressing the gas. He felt no resistance when he depressed the left pedal. The car, in fact, seemed to accelerate. He held his breath and concentrated. Nan knew from one glance at Jules that there was trouble.

"Good fucking God," he muttered as he floored the brake and felt the car gain momentum. Thankfully, the road ahead - at least what he could see of it - seemed fairly clear. He didn't know these roads. Didn't know what to expect. He tried to downshift but removing his hand from the wheel, for only a second, was enough to have them fishtailing. Shit. He could feel Nan beside him, feel her fear blending with his own. "Jesus." He heard the shrieking of tires against the pavement as he frantically tried to keep the car on the road. He didn't dare look at the speedometer but he knew it had to be over 90mph. Fuck. Nan was remarkably quiet. He was able to keep the car in their lane, on the path. He pulled the emergency brake. Nothing. He felt his chest constrict as he understood, in an instant, that they were either going to have a head-on collision with an oncoming car or find themselves over the cliff. Before the thought was even fully realized, before Nan could complete her reach to extract the keys from the ignition, before they could see that the needle was over 130kmph, Jules and Nancy Mason's rental Mercedes cut through the side-railing like it was butter and sailed gracefully past the treetops to the ground below. No one would know that in their final seconds, the couple held hands in a viselike grasp, their heads drawn together, instinctively trying to shield themselves from an impact that would kill them both instantly.

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I don't like to travel. I never have. Apart from the odious task of trying to predict precisely what you'll wear on holiday (and finding a way to fit it all neatly into luggage you can carry without getting a hernia), it is guaranteed that when you return from your week at the beach or your excursion through the Pyrenees, that you will need a week of R&R to recover. If a vacation *from* your vacation is inevitable, then I pose the lucid question: why vacation?

My attitude has branded me a curmudgeon by my partner, Leslie, who can't think of anything more alluring than travel. Leslie's the sort who carries a change of undergarments and a toothbrush in her bag just in case she winds up someplace unexpectedly. In the seven years that I've known her, this has actually happened - once - when she found herself trapped in Long Island with a broken-down car (mine), and a wealthy Frenchman (not me).

As far as I'm concerned if I *have* to travel, the ideal holiday would work something like this:

1. I journey like Samantha in *Bewitched*; a simple tweak of my nose and voila, I am there.
2. Someone else makes all (first class) hotel arrangements.
3. I carry nothing more taxing than my shoulder bag.
4. The perfect wardrobe awaits me upon my arrival and I can leave it there when I return.
5. Champagne is served nightly.
6. My dog, Auggie, gets to come with us wherever we go.
7. Someone else pays for the trip

I was repeating this list again for Leslie as I steered our rental Peugeot along the Moyenne Corniche, a 19-mile stretch of mountainous winding road between Nice (where we had just arrived), and Menton (where we were headed to visit my niece, Vickie).

"Sydney, you need this vacation, trust me. I am telling you, the detective business is turning you into a cranky old poot." Leslie smiled, amazingly unfazed by our 10 hours of travel.

"Cranky old poot. Thank you, thank you very much, I needed that. Just like I need to be stuck in traffic in France rather than Manhattan. I mean, after all, there are no emission controls here, are there? Shall we just roll down our windows and take a good whiff? Would you *look* at this, at least in New York it *moves*. At this rate we should get to Vickie's by early next month." Deep breath. Sigh. Oh poor beleaguered me, a vacation in the south of France to see one of my favorite people, and I complain.

"Do you want me to drive?" Leslie lowered her sunglasses and peered at me with her enormous blue-green eyes fringed with black lashes. It is, I admit, impossible for me to maintain any vexation when peering into them there eyes.

"Nooo," I said like a brat. "Besides, this isn't driving, darling. This is called parking."

Thirty minutes later we approached the reason for the tie-up. Three police cars, a tow-truck and an ambulance were parked on the other side of the road next to a gap in the railing. Clearly a vehicle must have careened over the side of the bluff into the bank of trees below. Accidents like that are a sobering sight to witness at any time, but when one is embarking on a vacation that will entail a lot of driving

in the land of no speed limits, it is particularly sobering. As I see it, this is another reason to stay home.

"Oh my God," Leslie whispered as she brought her hand to her mouth. "How awful."

"That's strange." I followed what ought to have been the path of the ill-fated car as I inched our Peugeot past the site.

"What?"

"There are no skid marks." My years as a private detective have made suspicion one of my primary instincts.

"So?"

I took a deep breath. "So no skid marks mean the driver didn't attempt to stop. It could have been a suicide or maybe the driver had a heart attack." Once past the accident site, traffic picked up.

"What about murder?" Leslie asked, almost lightly. Though Leslie and I had met during the course of an investigation, my line of work had always been a bone of contention between us. She didn't like the hours I kept; or what she perceived as a dangerous lifestyle; or the karmic impact of dealing with crazy, angry people on a daily basis. (The last theory I shot down by simply turning it back on her; after all, she decorates interiors for the rich and meshugeneh). However, in the last year - ever since my business partner, Max Cabe, and I took on a new associate, Miguel - our lives have changed considerably. I find it only somewhat puzzling that cutting down on my workload seems to have fostered Leslie's interest in the world of detection.

I shrugged, unwilling to admit out loud that my first thought *had* been that someone had tampered with the brakes. I don't know if I'm a cynic or a realist, but I understand too well that there are people in the world who are quite facile at taking other lives, without so much as a second thought. I understand that they exist, that they have always existed, that they oftentimes become world leaders and will continue to survive and thrive in this world until they destroy it. I understand that they are *usually* men and sometimes I even understand their motives. I understand a lot - but I just don't get it. Which is why I do what I do, or maybe did what I did. This trip was meant to provide a couple of answers and maybe even a few comprehensive questions. All I knew was that this was a time of transition in my life and if Leslie wanted to start the journey with me, what did I care if it was in the Riviera?

"Honey?" Leslie's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled as I repositioned my hand on the steering wheel and gave the car a little gas and cleared my throat. "A little tired. But let's face it, I'm in France, with all of our luggage intact; I am traveling with my love during the off season while the sun is shining. My niece will be our tour guide, you both parlay Français, I ask you, what could possibly go wrong?"

Oh boy, if only I had known.

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