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RIPTIDE

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Chapter 1

TARFAYA
MOROCCO

Trouble.

He didn't anticipate it, but Nick Cutter always planned for it. And right now the hair on the back of his neck lifted.

Good enough for him.

Eyes concealed behind both brown contacts *and* dark glasses, he stretched his long legs out beneath the table. Toying with a small cup of fragrant mint tea, he scanned the immediate area. Just because he couldn't see it, that didn't mean it wasn't here. The café was situated in the deep shade on the perimeter of a busy public square. Nick enjoyed a good meal, and since he was in control of the meeting, he'd eaten well, then pushed aside his empty plate to conclude business. The men seated across from him conversed in low Arabic, trying to come to agreement with his terms.

Two principals. Three bodyguards. All heavily armed.

Ostensibly bored, he waved a buzzing fly away from his face. He scanned the throngs of gregarious, noisy shoppers milling about the square for an indication of why he suddenly felt a brush of disquiet.

He wasn't worried that anyone would recognize him. His

disguise was solid. Like many of the people in the square, he wore a mushroom-colored djellaba, a kaftan-type robe that covered him from throat to toe. His most recognizable features were concealed behind the dark glasses and contacts. Judiciously applied makeup simulated the dusky skin tones of the majority of the people around him. And to further his disguise, his face was covered by a thick black beard that desperately needed grooming. It itched like hell. He'd had the beard for a while, now; time to shave it off.

If trouble was out there, it was for his alter ego Asim Nabi El Malamah, not Nick Cutter. Which increased Nick's sense of disquiet. El Malamah had a bad rep for good reason. Nick had made sure of it.

Nothing seemed out of place. It was lunchtime, and the old city center of the twelfth-century fortress-walled medina was crowded and off the charts noisy. The hot breeze smelled of cumin, paprika, coriander, garlic, onions, and the half-empty dishes of *tajine* on the table.

Women vying for the best produce bargained loudly, their long jewel-colored djellabas brilliant as hummingbirds in the harsh sunlight. Laughing and shrieking, their children darted in and out of the stalls and between other shoppers, adding to the noisy chaos.

Nick had metaphorically chased the two principals until they'd caught him, then intentionally priced himself high enough to make himself almost unattainable. Almost. They wanted him, they'd pay. It was a precarious call, but a calculated risk.

Calculated risks were something of his specialty. But his superpower was his extraordinary ear for dialect inflections. He was one of only a handful of people in the world capable of determining a man's history from a snippet of conversation.

He spoke eleven languages fluently, understood seven others, and even when he didn't speak the language, prided himself on his ability to pick out nuances so minute that he

could pinpoint the difference in dialect from towns fifty miles apart.

His specialized skills weren't in high demand, which made the few "assignments" he accepted a novelty. He enjoyed doing his thing—which usually meant listening in on conversations at a safe distance from actual danger.

Players on the hook, Nick wanted back on board the *Scorpion*, suited up and a hundred feet deep in the ocean doing what he loved. Treasure hunting. They'd been salvaging the *El Puerto* for several months, and he was very pleased with the results. It was almost time to take his haul back to Cutter Cay.

Sooner would suit him better than later. The original "favor" he'd agreed to should have only taken an hour, tops. Instead, it had taken him three days to make contact. Now he knew what he wanted to know, and that should have been the end of it.

But the favor was different this time.

His friends had asked him to go way beyond a quick listen to ID a person of interest's backstory, a hell of a lot more. Nick had agreed to see this through to end game.

He just hoped to hell his fascination with puzzles, his linguistic abilities, and his love of a challenge didn't come back to bite him in the ass.

Like right about now.

He swiped a hand around the back of his neck as the two men continued talking in urgent undertones. They thought he was distracted, but he had ears—as his brother Logan would attest—like a bat. Najeeb Qassem and Kadar Gamali Tamiz whispered in *darija*, the informal Moroccan Arabic spoken by the locals, but the inflection was definitely Krio.

The fact that Qassem and Tamiz were both from Sierra Leone, although they'd informed him they'd been born and raised in Rabat, was not his concern. But the people he'd report this meeting to in a couple of hours would have one more piece in their intricately constructed puzzle.

And so would he, though he doubted his friends would share anything else with him. He'd baited the trap, as requested. It was past time for Asim Nabi El Malamah to disappear, and Nick Cutter to get the hell out of Dodge.

Ready to close the deal, Nick placed his cup on the table and shifted in his seat. Just then a gap opened between the shoppers, and his swiftly moving gaze snagged on a leggy brunette entering through one of the stone-arched gates. Hard to miss her killer body displayed in tight jeans and a loose white shirt among the loosely flowing djellaba-garbed people around her.

Now wasn't *she* interesting and very much out of place?

He had a thing for tall, sophisticated brunettes.

Oh, yeah, Nick thought, observing the woman as she paused to talk to the ancient man selling dried rosebuds by the gate; she was definitely his thing. Her presence here could only mean the trouble he was sensing. The old man pointed across the square. He could be indicating the nearby silk kiosk, or the jewelry maker next door to the café. The medina was so tightly packed, the old man could have been pointing to a dozen different things.

Nick's gut said otherwise.

The rose-seller was directing her to the table where he was concluding business. The woman glanced across the square in his direction, then turned back to smile her thanks, before heading his way.

Oh, yeah. Trouble with a capital T.

The only European woman in the bustling outdoor market, she stuck out like a catwalk model, and all eyes watched her saunter across the uneven stone on her high heels as though she were gliding over water. She had a loose-hipped stride that triggered carnal thoughts and turned heads. Like a heat-seeking missile, she was headed his way, her long legs drawing attention Nick didn't need.

Damn it to hell.

He didn't have the luxury of a long slow perusal. The closer she got, the faster he tried to figure out who'd sent her, what they wanted, and what her angle was. She was striking,

and walked with the confident knowledge that men would look. And want.

Yeah, she was trouble all right. And out of place in the sun-drenched, noisy, frenetic medina filled with midday shoppers. Nick leaned back in his chair as she closed in.

“You know the woman?” Najeeb Qassem asked in Arabic. He couldn’t possibly miss the intent in the woman’s long-legged stride, or the direct path she was taking.

She had a fascinating awareness of the space around her. The square was crowded, but she didn’t let anyone get within arm’s length. A nifty trick that must have taken a lot of practice. She pulled it off like she wasn’t even trying.

Fifty yards and closing.

“La,” Nick responded shortly as he swiveled to redirect his attention at Kadar Gamali Tamiz, seated on his left. No, he didn’t know her. But he suspected he knew who she was. Even though her presence here in Morocco, and specifically in the medina, made no sense.

Which made her sudden appearance in the same place as Nick Cutter suspect.

Forty yards. “The number of containers, while somewhat difficult to conceal, is acceptable,” he said, his voice cool. “The price, however, is not. Getting on board undetected with all eyes on the ship will be a risky endeavor. Cutter is no fool. And while he is docked here to find more crew members, he will have his people scrutinize each new hire scrupulously.”

“Our men will pass even the closest scrutiny undetected, we assure you.”

Nick made to rise. “Then I suggest you use these men to carry the merchandise on board,” he said with enough finality in his tone to suggest he wasn’t anteing up any more than he had already. “If it’s such a simple task, you don’t need the likes of me to assure your prize is hidden well enough to avoid discovery.”

Tamiz’s fingers closed on his wrist. Narrow-eyed, Nick glanced from the man’s hand to his face. Tamiz quickly dropped his hand. “Apologies for the insult, my friend. My

men are merely insurance that the product stays where you place it. Simple men.”

Nick settled back into his chair. “Well armed?” Thirty yards. Damn it.

“Of course.”

“Good.” Shit. Not good at all. Unknown, armed men on board his ship was just asking for trouble. “Your product would be valuable in any hands.”

“You are a hard man to negotiate with, *sadiqi*.”

“Not when the price is right.” Nick kept the woman in his peripheral vision. Twenty yards. With any luck she’d pass by, he’d enjoy a glance at her ass, and that would be that. He didn’t have excess time to admire the gentle bob of her breasts under her crisp white linen shirt. The hot breeze teased a few strands of her dark hair out of the severe hairstyle, and lovingly pressed the thin fabric of her shirt against her body, highlighting her mouthwatering shape.

Fifteen feet.

Her footsteps slowed. A calculated move? Or indecision?

“We would double your fee should you escort the merchandise to its final destination.” Qassem, a stick-thin man in his late sixties with a sun-lined face and bottomless black eyes, leaned forward. Nick had no intention of spending weeks on board his own ship in disguise.

“Tempting. But *mal de mer* must limit my participation in this endeavor,” Nick told him easily, watching the woman close the gap between them. She looked innocuous enough, but as he well knew, looks were deceiving. Her shiny black hair was slicked back to reveal high cheekbones, freshly glossed red lips, and a smooth olive complexion. Her eyes were hidden, like his, behind dark glasses. His gaze skimmed her body for a weapon, and his muscles tensed in anticipation. The jeans were tight, the shirt loose, and the leather bag over her shoulder looked heavy. She could be carrying an arsenal on her and nobody would know it.

He shifted so he had better access to the Sig Sauer covered in the folds of his loose clothing. “I have no desire to take an extensive ocean voyage,” he told Qassem. “I negoti-

ate only for safe delivery of the merchandise to the ship, and making sure that it is well hidden so that it arrives as safely as a babe in his mother's arms at its destination."

Nick's pulse picked up a different rhythm as the woman stepped into the shade mere feet from the table. She was close enough now for him to smell the heated perfume of her skin. Spiced peach. Sophisticated. Sexy. Exotic.

"*Excusez-moi, messieurs.*" Her contralto was naturally husky. Black velvet and incense. "Which of you is Asim Nabi El Malamah?" She spoke French with intriguing and subtle layers, doing a credible job pronouncing the unfamiliar name.

Too bad Nick didn't want to hear it from her. Especially here. And sure as hell not now.

Her dialect gave her away. The second she'd said the first couple of words he knew *exactly* who she was.

Princess Gabriella Visconti.

Still didn't answer why she was there. Or who'd sent her.

People were stopping what they were doing to stare. At her. At him. At his lunch companions. She looked expensive, chic, and perfectly at ease. Not a bead of perspiration marred her perfectly made-up matte complexion in the afternoon heat. Her hair, twisted into a coil at her nape, caught the sunlight with blue-black highlights, her olive skin hinted at the Mediterranean, and her accent was layered with more than enough to pique Nick's interest. He ruthlessly tamped down his curiosity.

He knew the gist. More than enough.

"I'm busy," he told her without inflection in Moroccan French. Asim Nabi El Malamah was notorious for doing anything. For a price. But his skills weren't for the likes of her. And her contact with him, at this time, in this persona, could get her killed. Or worse.

Unfazed, she readjusted the heavy-looking leather tote up on her shoulder. "I'd like to hire y—"

"I repeat," Nick's voice was cold. Dismissive. Final. "I'm busy. Leave us, woman."

"You to transport me to a ship . . ." She waved a slender

hand in the general direction of the marina as if he hadn't said a word.

Nick ran a bored finger around the rim of the gold cup, sharing an amused glance with the men at the table. Women, his shrug said, what can a man do?

Qassem scratched his beard. "What ship?"

Her hesitation was infinitesimal before she answered. "The *Scorpion*." She turned back to Nick. "Do you know it?"

His ship? "No." Nick slouched back and lifted his cup; the metal was warm from the tea. He glided his thumb across the smooth surface and wondered what her breast would feel like under his hand. Yes, she was definitely his type. Brunette, long-legged, and sophisticated. As if she'd been fashioned especially for him.

And she wanted on board the *Scorpion*.

He didn't believe in coincidences.

Someone knew his tastes. Gold glinted at her ears, around the base of her slender throat, and around one wrist as she said pleasantly, "I'll pay you many dirhams for a few minutes of your time."

Nick glanced up, saw his own surly hirsute face reflected in her dark glasses, and said with icy disdain, "I have no need of your money." Jesus. The foolish woman had no idea what she'd just interrupted. Or did she? Was she a ladybug fearlessly walking into the web of a deadly steppe spider? Or the spider herself? He looked her up and down. Slowly. "Unless you are willing to offer more than coin?"

Tamiz laughed. The other man at the table remained stone-faced.

She frowned, or possibly scowled. Hard to tell behind the big sunglasses. "I'll give you my watch, it's a—"

"You offer a watch when I suggest a fuck? I have no need of a woman's watch. A woman? Possibly. When I have completed my business here. Wait for me at the Hotel Dar El Kebira, we can . . . talk there."

Her expression didn't change. "Your exchange rate is disproportionate to the request, Asim Nabi El Malamah," she

told him dryly. “It is, after all, merely a short trip. A miserly amount of your time. I’ll find other transportation.”

As long as she managed it tomorrow, Nick was okay with that. The *Scorpion* sailed from Tarfaya harbor at dusk to-night. “You do that.”

Her lips tightened. “I will. Gentlemen.” She nodded curtly to the others, then turned to leave.

Nick reached out and snagged her wrist. “If you should find a man stupid enough to transport you to the ship, be prepared to spread your legs for him. Make no mistake, your request will imply consent, Mademoiselle.”

Lips tight, she glanced pointedly from his fingers shackling her wrist back to his face. “I’ll take that under advisement.” Her expression read “Fuck you.” She turned and walked away.

Nick turned back to Najeeb Qassem. “My time is valuable, gentlemen.” He pushed away from the table, getting to his feet. “Meet my price, or you, too, must find another mule.”

* * *

“Son of a bitch!” Bria Visconti muttered under her breath as the dragonfly-sized helicopter landed with a jarring thump on the seemingly too small helipad on the upper deck of the *Scorpion*.

Nick Cutter’s boat—ship—was a megayacht, all gleaming white paint and shiny brass, and the size of a blasted football field. It was in the middle of *nowhere* between the Canary Islands and Madeira and pretty much in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Nothing for miles around but sparkling cobalt ocean and powder-blue skies.

Either Cutter had used the money—her family’s money—to help pay for this expensive toy, or he had other investors funding his expensive taste. One thing was blatantly, conspicuously evident: He had money to burn.

Peachy. That would make her job here much easier. Bria’s jaw ached from clenching her teeth for hours. She took a

deep breath, relaxing the stress from her shoulders and jaw. She had a temper, and it had been simmering for days, but she was determined not to let it boil over. This could be handled in a civilized manner, and she was determined to be cool, calm, decisive, and above all—firm.

The trip from California on such short notice had cost her a small fortune, which she could little afford. She'd been unemployed for a year, and this trip had wiped out her meager savings. If she'd found someone to take her the short trip between Tarfaya and the *Scorpion* yesterday, she wouldn't have had to spring for an expensive, last-minute flight from Tarfaya all the way to Las Palmas. Hiring this private helicopter to take her from the Canary Islands all the way the hell and gone out here in the middle of nowhere hadn't been on the agenda either.

She'd been unhappy when she'd received the call at home in Sacramento, she'd been unhappy on her flight to Morocco, she'd gotten downright cranky when she'd realized that asking to be transported *anywhere* from Tarfaya without giving up an organ or her virtue was next to impossible. And she'd been pissed beyond belief yesterday when she'd realized that the *Scorpion* had sailed out of reach of any relatively inexpensive-to-hire motor launch.

So much for the tall, dark, and hairy Asim Nabi El Malamah who-would-do-anything-for-the-right-price. He hadn't, he didn't, and his laziness had cost her a lot of money. *Jerk*.

Each arduous, annoying step of this journey had ratcheted up her anger and frustration. She'd never met the man, but Nick Cutter was already a pain in her ass. At this point, Bria knew she'd be hard-pressed to be civil, let alone honey-sweet.

"Almost over," she told herself. She smoothed her hair back neatly, tucking nonexistent wisps into the chignon at her nape before removing a small gold compact and lipstick from her tote. Her makeup was flawless, all she needed was a fresh swipe of kick-ass red gloss to boost her courage. One last look. She was good to go.



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