

1.

IT WAS THE PIRATE FLAG flying atop the plumbing truck that first caught his attention. The white skull and crossbones seemed to be straining to keep from being blown off the flapping black flag as the flatbed truck, apparently trying to beat the light, cannonballed through the intersection. The truck heeled over as it cut an arc around the corner. White PVC pipe rolled across the diamond plate of the truck bed, sounding like the sharp rattle of bones. At the speed it was traveling the truck looked to be in danger of capsizing.

Alex glanced to the only other person waiting at the curb with him. With his mind adrift in distracted thoughts he hadn't before noticed the lone woman standing just in front of him and to the right. He didn't even remember seeing where she'd come from. He thought that he saw just a hint of vapor rising from the sides of her arms into the chill air.

Since he wasn't able to see the woman's face, Alex didn't know if she saw the truck bearing down on them, but he found it difficult

to believe that she wouldn't at least hear the diesel engine roaring at full throttle.

Seeing by the truck's trajectory that it wasn't going to make the corner, Alex snatched the woman's upper arm and yanked her back with him.

Tires screeched as the great white truck bounced up over the curb right where Alex and the woman had been standing. The front bumper swept past, missing them by inches. Rusty dust billowed out behind the truck. Chunks of sod and dirt flew by.

Had Alex hesitated they both would have been dead.

On the white door just above the name "Jolly Roger Plumbing" was a picture of a jovial pirate with a jaunty black patch over one eye and a sparkle painted in the corner of his smile. Alex glared back as the pirate sailed past.

When he looked up to see what kind of maniac was driving he instead met the direct, dark glare of a burly passenger. The man's curly beard and thick mat of dark hair made him look like he really could have been a pirate. His eyes, peering out of narrow slits above plump, pockmarked cheeks, were filled with a kind of vulgar rage.

The big man appeared infuriated that Alex and the woman would dare to be in the way of their off-road excursion. As the door popped open there was no doubt as to his combative intent.

He looked like a man stepping out of a nightmare.

Alex felt a cold wave of adrenaline flood through him as he mentally choreographed his moves. The passenger, who seemed to be getting ready to leap out of the still-moving truck, would reach him before the driver could join in, making it one against one—at least for a brief time. Alex couldn't believe that it was happening, but it was and he knew that he was going to have to deal with it.

Calm fury filled him as he prepared himself for the unavoidable.

Everything slowed until each beat of his heart seemed to take an eternity. He watched the muscles in the man's arm bulge as he held the door open. In response, Alex's own muscles tightened, ready to meet the threat. His mind was cocooned in silence.

Just as the passenger's stout leg swung out the open door, flashing lights and the sudden wail of a siren made the burly man turn his attention away. A police car, tires squealing, launched across the intersection in a way that suggested the cops were angered by the truck's stunt. The police car had been parked beside a hedge to the side of the drive into the parking lot across the street. As they had sped past, the men in the truck apparently hadn't seen the parked police car watching traffic. Lost in his own thoughts, Alex hadn't, either.

The loudspeaker crackled to life. "Pull it over!"

The world seemed to rush back in.

The white plumbing truck, trailing a fog of dust, slowed as it rolled off the curb up ahead, the black-and-white police car right behind it. As the truck stopped, two policemen leaped out, hands resting at the ready on their guns as they approached from both sides of the truck at the same time. They yelled orders and both men carefully emerged with their hands up. In an instant the officers had them out and leaning on the front fenders of the truck.

Alex felt the tension drain out of his muscles, leaving his knees feeling weak.

As he turned his glare from the men being frisked, he found the woman's gaze fixed on him. Her eyes were the luscious color of his finest sable artist brushes. It was clearly evident to him that behind those sensuous brown eyes she appraised the world around her with an incisive intellect.

She glanced deliberately down at his big hand still tightly gripping her upper arm. He had intended to toss her back out of harm's

way so that the passenger couldn't hurt her, but the police had shown up first.

She looked up at him in silent command.

"Sorry," he said, releasing her arm. "You were about to be run down by pirates."

She said nothing.

He had meant his comment to be lighthearted, to ease the fright of what had nearly happened, but by her calm expression she didn't appear to be the least bit amused. He hoped he hadn't hurt her arm. He knew that sometimes he didn't realize his own strength.

Not knowing what to do with his hands, Alex combed his fingers back through his thick hair as he stuffed his other hand in a pocket.

He cleared his throat, changed his tone to be more serious, and started over. "I'm sorry if I hurt your arm, but that truck would have hit you if I hadn't pulled you back out of the way."

"It matters to you?"

Her voice was as captivating as her eyes.

"Yes," he said, a little puzzled. "I wouldn't like to see anyone get hurt in an accident like that."

"Perhaps it wasn't an accident."

Her expression was unreadable. He could only wonder at her meaning. He was at a loss as to how to respond.

The memory of the way she'd been standing at the curb still hung in the shadows in the back of his mind. Even lost in distant, dejected thoughts at the time, he had noticed that her body language hadn't been quite right. Because he was an artist, a person's balance, either at rest or in motion, stood out to him. There had been something out of the ordinary about the way she had been standing.

Alex wasn't sure if, by her answer, she was simply trying to do the same as he had been doing—trying to lighten the heart-pounding

scare of what had nearly happened—or if she was dismissing his chivalry as a presumptuous line. He imagined that a woman as attractive as she was had to deal with men constantly trying clever lines in order to meet her.

The satiny black dress that hugged her curves looked to be either high fashion or oddly out of time and place—he couldn't quite decide which—as did the long, deep green wrap draped over her shoulders. Her luxuriant fall of soft, summer-blond hair could have gone either way as well.

Alex figured that she had to be on her way to the exclusive jewelry store that was the anchor of the upscale Regent Center across the street. The slanted glass façade was just visible beyond the shade of ash and linden trees spread across the broad grounds separating the upscale shops from Regent Boulevard.

He glanced over at the plumbing truck sitting at the curb. The strobing lights from the police car made the white truck look alternately blue and red.

After getting handcuffs on the passenger, the police officer pointed at the curb and told the man to sit beside the driver. The man sat and crossed his legs. Both wore dark work clothes covered with grime. While both men quietly did as they were told, neither looked to be the least bit cowed.

One of the officers started toward Alex as the other spoke into the radio clipped to his shirt at the shoulder.

“Are you two all right?” the man asked as he approached, his voice still carrying an adrenaline edge. “They didn't hit you, did they?”

Both of the cops were young and built like weightlifters. Both had bull necks. Black, short-sleeved shirts stretched over the swell of their arms served only to emphasize the size of their muscles.

“No,” Alex said. “We’re fine.”

“Glad to hear it. That was quick thinking. For a minute I thought you two were going to be roadkill.”

Alex gestured toward the men in handcuffs. “Are they being arrested?”

With a quick glance he took in the woman, then shook his head. “No, unless they come back with warrants. With guys like this you never know what you’ve got, so we often cuff them for our own safety until they can be checked out. When my partner is finished writing up that ticket, though, I don’t think they’ll be in the mood to pull a stunt like this again for a while.”

That two cops this powerfully built would be worried about the guys in the truck to the point of cuffing them made Alex not feel so bad for being spooked when he’d looked into the dark eyes of the passenger.

He glanced at the badge and extended his hand. “Thanks for coming along when you did, Officer Slawinski.”

“Sure thing,” the man said as he shook Alex’s hand. By the force applied to the grip Alex figured that the man was still keyed up. Officer Slawinski turned away, then, eager to get back to the pirates.

The driver, still sitting on the curb, was thinner but just as mean-looking as the burly passenger. He sat stone-faced, giving brief answers as the officer standing over him asked questions while writing the ticket.

The two officers spoke briefly, apparently about the results of the warrant check, because Officer Slawinski nodded, then uncuffed the passenger and told him to get back in the truck. After climbing back in, the passenger rested a hairy arm out the side window as the other cop started uncuffing the driver.

In the truck’s big, square side mirror, Alex saw the man’s dark

eyes glaring right at him. They were the kind of eyes that seemed to be out of place in a civilized world. Alex told himself that it had to be that in such a newly built, luxurious part of town the work-worn construction vehicles, despite there being a lot of them, all seemed to be out of place. In fact, Alex recalled having seen the Jolly Roger Plumbing truck before.

Alex's small house, not far away, had once been at the outskirts of town among a cluster of other homes built in the seclusion of wooded hills and cornfields, but they had long since been swallowed by the ever-expanding city. He now lived in a desirable area, if not exactly on a desirable street or in a desirable house.

Alex stood frozen for a moment, staring at the grubby, bearded face watching him in the truck's mirror.

Then the man grinned at him.

It was as wicked a grin as Alex had ever seen.

As the black flag atop the truck lifted in a gust of wind, the skull also gave Alex a grim grin.

He noticed then that the woman, ignoring the activity, was watching him. As the light turned green, Alex gestured.

"Would you allow me to escort you safely across the street?" he asked in a tone of exaggerated gallantry.

For the first time she smiled. It wasn't a broad grin, or a smile that threatened to break into laughter, but rather a simple, modest curve of her lips saying that this time she got the lighthearted nature of his words.

Still, it seemed to make the world suddenly beautiful on what was otherwise a rather depressing day for him.