

ASSUMED by MHR Greer

EXCERPT

A constant stream of jubilant holiday-goers jostled my suitcase as I paced the arrivals gate, but Sandy's mobile went to voicemail a fourth time. I hung up without leaving another message and strolled past the baggage carousel. Again.

"Where are you, Sandy?" I muttered under my breath.

A man in a white Panama hat vacated a bench, and I collapsed onto the cold metal and hugged the handle of my suitcase. The other passengers exchanged greetings and gathered their baggage, and the automatic door slid open with a swoosh to receive them. Every time the door opened, humid air blasted my face.

The man in the white hat reappeared but saw me and turned away, presumably to find a bench without a slouching, scowling American. I raised my shoulders from a slump and crossed my legs.

"What now, Anne?" I asked myself, tapping the screen of my phone and resisting the urge to check the time.

A young boy, about five years old, wandered over and climbed onto the bench next to me. We exchanged nervous smiles. Couples and families regrouped near the door, and I watched their faces, expecting someone to claim the boy, but the door opened and closed, over and over, and he remained.

I was just about to ask where the boy's parents were when a tall woman entered and rushed toward us, shouting in French. Her profile was dark against the bright sunlight outside, and her long hair swirled in the vortex of the doorway. The boy pressed against me, and I almost wrapped my arm around him, but the door closed, and she smoothed her hair back into place.

She pulled the boy from the bench, gripping his arms with long, slender fingers. I couldn't understand her words, but her reprimand was clear. Her green eyes flashed with fear and anger. She blamed me for his disappearance. I shrugged, trying to remember how to apologize in French. *Je suis desole?* But I was unsure of the words, so I didn't say anything, and she didn't wait for my explanation.

He left with her, his little hand firmly inside hers, and when the door opened and whipped her hair back into the air, the boy turned back to me with a smile. I waved.

And then I was alone again.

I jumped when my phone buzzed.

Sorry, Sandy texted. *Can't make it. Take a taxi to 16 Rue de l'Aile Perdue.*

I stared at the text and considered purchasing a ticket for a return flight, but my phone buzzed again with a second text.

Please, Anne.

I squared my shoulders and pulled on my sunglasses. Then I walked through the whoosh of the doorway and into the sunlight.

The taxi line had already thinned; it took only a few minutes before a lively man ushered me into the back of a bright green sedan. The driver offered a brusque "Welcome to Saint Martin," and turned up her radio. Taxi code for no talking. Fine with me.

We sped through narrow streets, dangerously close to sunburned tourists wandering street markets. Stalls spilled out from under a rainbow of awnings, hawking loud shirts and oversized beach towels. The air was thick with cardamom and curry, mixed with the yeasty smell of a patisserie. My stomach rumbled. In my rush to make the early morning flight, I'd skipped breakfast.

We left town and traveled up and down winding roads that cut into the hillsides. The villas grew larger and farther apart and then disappeared into thick foliage behind security gates. I caught occasional glimpses of dirt lanes and even fewer paved driveways. When the driver pulled off the road, I leaned out the window to watch the tops of towering palm trees lining a long gravel driveway. We stopped on a cobbled motor court in front of a massive house.

I stared up at the imposing facade from within the safety of the taxi before I bravely stepped into the blazing sun. I thought there must be some mistake, but before I could say anything, the taxi drove away. Why had Sandy sent me to a dismal mansion and not to one of the dazzling resorts I'd passed?

Beyond the house, the sea stretched to the horizon. Sunlight reflected off the water, awakening childhood fantasies of pirate ships and mermaid tails. But the hot sun quickly melted the daydream, and I retreated into the shadow of the mansion.

Up close, the house was shabby and weather-beaten. Peeling gray paint revealed a history of more colorful choices. The porch railing leaned at a precarious angle, and as I cautiously climbed the rotting

steps, the wood complained but held, and I reached the front door and knocked. The sound echoed within the house, but only silence followed. I knocked again, louder, and waited. Nothing.

“Now what?” I asked the house.

The house ignored me, but a piece of paper stuck between two floorboards fluttered in the ocean breeze. I stepped over and picked it up. She’d left a note—an inconsiderate welcome, even for Sandy. I exhaled loudly and unfolded the scrap of paper.