

Murder on the River of Gold

Tuesday, June 21

A woman's scream ripped through the third deck corridor of the *FelicityAmour* as we were walking back to our staterooms after eating breakfast in the river cruise ship's restaurant. The high-pitched shriek came through the open door of a stateroom only two doors away from the one occupied by Martha Todd and me.

Another scream, and a woman dressed in the charcoal-gray uniform of the ship's housekeeping staff popped out of the room. Her eyes were open as wide as they could open, her mouth was agape, and her palms were pressed tight against the sides of her face. She could have been posing for Edvard Munch's famous painting.

When she saw us, she flung her hands skyward, and then aimed them both at the room from which she'd just emerged while shouting, "He looks like he's dead! The man in there looks like he's dead!"

Chapter One

Seven Days Earlier

"It looks like a great big blue and white alligator," said my friend Al.

I nodded in agreement and said, "Yeah, it does. But it also reminds me of ... uh, what's that long, skinny fish that's in the river at home?"

"You mean a gar?" Al said.

"Yeah, that's it," I said. "A gar. Only it doesn't have the long needle nose of a gar."

We were sitting in a mini-bus, looking down at a long, skinny river cruise ship that was moored about fifty feet below us at a dock in Porto, Portugal. Al and I and three others in our gadabout group were on our way to board this ship, which was called the *FelicityAmour* and was operated by *Felicity Cruises, Ltd.*, an Austrian-based line that catered to people who absolutely couldn't travel without a comfort creature. This creature feature had turned out to be a last-minute blessing for our cruise-bound quintet.

“So, what did you two clowns think the ship would look like?” asked my wife, Martha Todd, who’d been listening to this exchange. “Didn’t you look at the pictures on the website?”

“I saw the pictures, but it’s different when you see the real thing from this angle,” I said. “Actually, in the pictures it looked more like a big water snake, stretched out full-length.”

“Pictures can be deceiving if the photographer wants them to be,” said Al, who earns his living taking pictures with a camera.

The mini-bus carried us down a black-topped slope to the level of the FelicityAmour and stopped a few feet away from the ship’s shiny metal boarding ramp. The driver hopped out and started unloading our luggage while the five of us straggled out and stood waiting for our bags.

Actually, there were six of us, but the sixth traveler had four furry legs and was in a cage carried by Martha. Those of us uncaged and ambulating on two legs were Martha; Alan “Al” Jeffrey; his wife, Carol; my mother, Alice Mitchell, and me, Warren Mitchell, better known as Mitch. In the cage was a black and white neutered tomcat named Sherlock Holmes, who was traveling under false pretense as my mother’s comfort creature. Sherlock’s presence had been met with some antipathy when we checked in for our flight at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, but he’d eventually been allowed to travel in the cabin with us rather than freezing his little pink nose down below with the baggage.

We were on the dock in Porto because Mom had entered a raffle on the Internet and had won an all-expense-paid Douro River cruise for two on the good ship FelicityAmour. My widowed mother shares a large farmhouse with her ninety-one-year-old mother, my Grandma Goodie, who, when invited to accompany Mom, had said that there was no way on God’s green earth that she would cross the Atlantic Ocean in an airborne metal tube.

Who then would be my mother’s all-expense-paid companion? Since Warren, better known as Mitch, is her only offspring, the obvious answer was Warren, better known as Mitch. Warren, better known as Mitch, would not go without his beloved wife, Martha Todd, so that made us a threesome, one of whom was paying full price, which surely pleased the folks at Felicity Cruises, Ltd.

The number of cruisers grew to five when Al and Carol decided they both needed a vacation away from home and booked passage to join us at full price, which must have pleased the folks at Felicity Cruises, Ltd. even more. Al, a staff photographer, and I, a reporter, work

together at the *St. Paul Daily Dispatch* and have been best friends since we met in college, something like thirty years ago.

Al and I have covered hundreds of stories together and occasionally our actions have resulted in an outbreak of laughter in the newsroom, which has led City Editor Don O'Rourke to label us "Siamese Twins." He says we are joined at the funny bone, which in our case is the skull. I have occasionally suggested to Don that he change our label to the current politically-correct term, which is "conjoined twins." He says he will only do this when he gets a letter of complaint from the King of Siam. This does not seem likely, with Siam now being called Thailand and no longer being ruled by a king.

Al and I do not even look like twins. Standing at an even six feet, I am three inches taller than Al and my carefully-trimmed light brown moustache is much handsomer than Al's rather scruffy, almost black beard and moustache. Although they've become good friends, our wives don't resemble each other either. Martha is the daughter of a Cape Verdean nurse and a British airline pilot, and she has jet black hair, dark eyes, a coffee-with-cream complexion, and lips that are perfectly shaped for kissing. Carol's ancestors were Norsk, and she has inherited their fair complexion, blue eyes, and blond hair. Both are tall and slender, and they both look ten years younger than the dates of birth printed on their passports.

Al and Carol have two children: Kevin, age 18, who just graduated from high school, and Kristin, age 16, who skipped a grade and will graduate next year. Kevin is a techie and is headed for the University of Minnesota on an academic scholarship. Kristin, who has a straight-A grade point average, pitched Central High School to the state softball championship a week ago and has heard from several college athletic departments. Although both Kevin and Kristin are more level-headed than most teenagers, they are still teenagers, and Carol's mother has been recruited to stay at the house with them as cook and caretaker so that the mice won't be playing party hosts in St. Paul while the cats are away, cruising on a river in Portugal.

Our marriage is the second for both Martha and me, and it came after spending eight years as so-called significant others, with both of us fearing a second commitment to the lifelong permanence of wedlock. She had divorced a man who knocked her down and dragged her across the floor by her hair. I had lost my first wife and six-month-old son when a jack-knifing semi-trailer smashed into her Honda Civic. When Martha finished law school, she said it was time to legalize our living together, and I agreed to tie the knot.

Oh, yes, the cat. Sherlock Holmes was a feral feline that decided to accept my offer of fulltime hospitality several months before I met Martha twelve years ago. When Martha and I travel, Sherlock usually stays with our next-door neighbor, Zhoumaya Jones, but this time Zhoumaya was doing some traveling of her own, back to visit friends in her native Liberia. Not wishing to leave Sherlock in the jungle of a commercial pet hotel, we took advantage of the cruise line's comfort creature policy and declared him to be Mom's much-needed comforter. I'm not sure how the folks at Felicity Cruises, Ltd. felt about this last-minute addition, but hey! Mom won the prize and policy is policy. Mom, who does not have a cat of her own because Grandma Goodie is allergic to feline dander, had no objection to adopting Sherlock for the week aboard the FelicityAmour.

We stood for a moment, taking our first close look at the sleek blue-and-white vessel that was to be our home on the water for the next seven days. It was almost as long as a football field but not as wide. There were stem-to-stern rows of tall windows (on river cruisers, they're much too big to call them portholes) at the upper two levels, and a row of smaller windows (closer to porthole size) just above the water line. Some of the windows on the two upper levels had outside balconies and others did not. I wondered which kind we'd be sleeping in.

Atop the ship was a sun deck. While we'd been looking down on this deck from the higher vantage point, we had seen a swimming pool with a bar and a canopy-covered seating area near the stern to protect passengers from the rays of the noonday Portugal sun. The captain's navigation bridge, which had windows on all four sides, was near the bow and a Portuguese flag, with no breeze to stir it, hung limply from a staff in front of it. Later, when we made our first trip up to the sun deck, we found two bins that contained thin woolen blankets for cover in the cool of the night and, mounted on racks near the forward rail on both sides of the deck, two bright orange life saver rings, with "FelicityAmour" printed on them, that supposedly could be tossed to any unfortunate soul who'd gone overboard. These life savers looked like they'd be about as useful as the little candies by that name in a real man (or woman) overboard situation ever occurred. Al labeled them "orange doughnuts," and we both questioned their degree of buoyancy when occupied.

When we'd gathered our bags, we were joined by two men who looked over-dressed in black suit coats, white shirts, and red bowties on a day in mid-June with the temperature at eighty degrees. They greeted us with smiles and handshakes all around and welcomed us

aboard. They told us that our bags, which bore identification tags mailed to us by Felicity Cruises, Ltd., would be transported by members of the FelicityAmour crew to our respective staterooms, and escorted us up the ramp and into an amidship reception area on the third deck.

Two women and one man stationed behind a three-sided, chest-high counter gave us additional smiles and “welcome aboards,” took our passports from us to be stored for official use at ports of call during the cruise, and said we would be led to our staterooms by the men bearing our luggage.

Martha passed the cage containing Sherlock Holmes to Mom, who would have a stateroom all to herself, and we all were led toward the stern along a corridor with staterooms on both sides. Martha and I were steered into room 312, where our luggage bearer, who wore a small brass plate that said HENRI on his chest, handed me two plastic slab keys, and said, “Welcome aboard. You are most fortunate to be joining us on this cruise. We have an exciting very important person onboard.”

“Really?” Martha said. “Who is it?”

With a wide grin and a square-shouldered posture of pride, Henri said, “Lady T.” You could almost hear an orchestral “tad-dah!” after this announcement.

The name rated no tad-dah! with me, and Martha’s face looked as blank as mine felt.

“Would that be spelled Lady T-e-e, as in golf, or Lady T-e-a, as in a cup of?” I asked. Mitch Mitchell, always the reporter seeking all the facts.

“Oh, neither of those,” he said. “It’s just the letter T. It’s Lady T, with nothing else.”

“Nothing else? Doesn’t she have a last name?” I asked.

“She does, but one rarely hears it,” he said. “I’m not even sure how you would spell it. You’re not familiar with Lady T?”

“I’m afraid her fame hasn’t spread to the midwestern United States,” I said. “Is she quite a celebrity here?”

“Oh, good gracious, yes,” Henri said. “She’s from a historic Hungarian family of great wealth and she has appeared as a guest on many television shows in many different countries. We feel quite honored to have Lady T aboard the FelicityAmour. I believe that she chose us over some more luxurious lines because of our comfort creature policy. No one else allows animals onboard.”

“What sort of comfort creature does she have?” I asked.

“She is accompanied by a small dog known as a Corgi,” he said. “She has named it Laddie T.”

Martha smiled. “I hope we get to meet the lady . . . and her Corgi named Laddie T,” she said.

“Perhaps you will,” Henri said. “It might be difficult because she’ll be escorted at all times by both her personal aide and the executive officer of this ship, but she may choose to honor you with an introduction. She’s staying in Suite 319, one of the two luxurious suites at the forward end of this corridor. Have a wonderful day and a wonderful week with us.” With that, Henri was out the door.

“He didn’t hang around looking for a tip,” Martha said.

“The little handbook that describes the cruise says that tips will be requested at the end,” I said. “It even suggests the amount to leave for the crew and for the cruise manager, who is not a member of ship’s company.”

“You’ve really been doing your homework,” Martha said.

“Always,” I said. “I’m the paper’s star reporter, remember? And speaking of homework, I saw you scrolling away on your phone while Henri was telling us about Lady T. Did you learn something about the *very important* Lady?”

“I learned that when fully addressed, she is Lady T-Khuppschane, but she prefers to be identified merely as Lady T in the press and on her TV appearances. She’s described as a *personality*. Apparently, she’s Western European TV’s equivalent of all the American Kardashians rolled into one.”

“Wow! Glad I don’t have to spell that piece of Hungarian goulash in any story I might write about this cruise. Referring to her as plain old Lady T will be just fine. Shall we unpack?”

“Let’s do that, and then let’s go to the ship’s lounge and see if maybe we can get a glimpse of the renowned Lady T-Khuppschane,” said Martha.

“If we chance to meet her, we must address her merely as Lady T,” I said.

“But of course. Hey, wasn’t there a professional wrestler who called himself *Mister T*?”

“There was. My Grampa Goodie used to watch wrestling on TV, and I remember him yelling words that a child my age shouldn’t have been hearing at a nasty guy with that name.”

“Do you think that Lady T and Mister T could be man and wife?”

“Not likely. I think Mister T would be about Grandma Goodie’s age by now.”

“Judging from Henri’s description and from what I just read online, Lady T has to be at a much more active age,” said Martha.

We emptied our luggage, stowing the contents in a sliding-door closet that contained both a rack with ten hangers and a set of three dresser drawers. The room was furnished with a small round wooden table flanked by two comfy-looking armchairs, and a queen-size bed flanked by two small square tables. Facing the outboard wall was a desk with a roller chair, and behind the desk was a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out over the river. I was pleased to see that to the left of the desk there was a glass slider that opened onto an outside balcony with a tiny round table and two chairs. We had scored the best room available, second only to the famous Lady T’s luxury suite. A bathroom not much bigger than our walk-in shower at home was located on the opposite side—the inboard side—of the room.

On the wooden table between the armchairs was a bottle of port wine and two long-stemmed glasses, along with a note welcoming us aboard. This form of welcome would be passed along to Al and Carol because I am an alcoholic and haven’t had a drink since going through an excruciating rehab almost twenty years ago. Martha will drink wine at parties or at dinner in a restaurant, but never does so when the two of us are alone at home. There are no alcoholic beverages in our half of the duplex—even our mouthwash comes in a bottle with a label that says: “ZERO ALCOHOL.”

We were looking out at the river through the slider when we heard a man’s voice behind us. We both spun around to see who had slipped silently into the room and discovered that the television set on the wall facing the bed had been turned on by an unseen hand. The voice was alerting us to an invitation to attend an orientation meeting in the lounge, which was being pictured on the screen, at 6:15, which was fifteen minutes away.