

Chapter 2

Jewelle's breathing was labored as she came back to reality from her horrible thoughts of that night seven years ago. She focused and realized she wasn't in that hotel room. She wasn't awaiting trial. There was no knife. She wasn't dead. She was here on an airplane heading to the Mediterranean to have fun and get her life back.

She studied her cruise tickets for the *Emerald of the Seas*, the luxury cruise ship that would take her on four weeks of exotic ports, new faces, and hopefully, new friends. It might take her to her ultimate port of call, but she was willing to take that chance. After all, God didn't say, "Here, Jewelle, here's a safety net that's invisible, but always under you in case of emergency." No, life was a stage with each day a new act; no net included.

She reclined her seat as far back as it could go, leaned her head on the headrest, and closed her eyes. Scenes from her past hazily surfaced, unbidden.

She recalled the hotel room where the FBI had hidden her until the trial. It was done in burgundy and rose, right out of the '80's. The bedspread was striped in the same colors, many of the threads torn. She remembered picking at them for hours while trying to pass the time. There were pictures of faded vases filled with some unknown type of flower in gold plastic frames. The carpet was worn and stained. She waited for days for the time that she would testify.

The FBI had been trying to take down the Gambrellini Crime Family for years when Elinore Hanson appeared from out of nowhere, telling them about a multi-million dollar fraud operation she discovered during a consultation with a medical practice.

With Elinore's experience and expertise in the medical billing industry, she led the Office of the Inspector General right into the heart of the Gambrelini's operation. Better still, Elinore agreed to testify, one of the first witnesses in years. Her willingness to cooperate brought forth a slew of other witnesses, and for the first time in years, the Government had a chance at getting a conviction of not only the top dog, Paul Gambrelini, but also several of his captains and their crew.

The Gambrelinis were known for violence and had cops and judges on their payroll everywhere. Making sure that their key witness was safe until the trial was vital, so the FBI kept Elinore in a safe house, where exactly she never knew. She was protected around the clock by uniformed cops who took turns guarding her room. They knocked on her door every hour to make sure everything was OK. Food was brought to her that she didn't order, didn't want, or didn't like.

But Elinore wanted to be a good citizen. She wanted to stand up for what was right and do her part to keep her country strong and respected. She was tired of everyone always turning away and not getting involved. Elinore wanted to make a difference, which forced her to abandon the life she knew and loved, give up her identity, and give up her freedom forever. So she testified and the Government got their first conviction. It was a deadly blow to the mob family resulting in the imprisonment of several captains and their crew. In addition, it crippled much of their operation for many years.

She was now Jewelle Dawson, living in a remote Minnesota city, hidden from the world.

She recalled how John had tried to talk her out of the trip.

"You can't do this Jewelle," John Murray said to her. "Christ, I've worked hard to protect you these past seven years. You're safe, they don't know where or who you are; I'm sure of it. For God's

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sake, you've got a great job, a super little house overlooking Lake Superior, and flexibility to live your life. Do you really want to risk all that?"

"John, I appreciate everything you've done for me over the years. More than your job required. And I know that to most people, my job would be great, but you know what my life was before. I traveled first class all over the states. I stayed in the best hotels and resorts. I've been the featured speaker at countless medical conventions. My name has been on the cover of national medical journals, and I've been consultant to some of the nation's leading pharmaceutical companies. I earned over two million a year and took exotic vacations. Do you really think my job as Medical Record Administrator at St. Luke's Hospital in Duluth compares to the life I had? Do you really think being stuck in this small, freezing town is my idea of fulfilling?"

"John, I need my life back."

"But Jewelle, this is your life we're talking about, not some spa weekend. If you leave my jurisdiction and go on this cruise, I can't offer you protection. Don't put this on me, Jewelle."

"I would never do anything to hurt you, John. You know that. I've had seven years to think about this. It's quality of life that matters to me, not quantity. Even if I only have one month of excitement, adventure, and romance, it would be worth it," she said.

"So, it is romance that's making you so restless? You're horny, is that it?" asked John as he got up from his metal desk, piled high with stacks of files and papers and old fast-food containers.

"What about that school teacher you've been seeing? I thought you liked him."

"There's nothing wrong with Mark. He's kind and thoughtful...He's also boring. Do you know, John, he has never

even French kissed me in all the months we've been dating? I feel like I'm thirteen and wondering what a real kiss would feel like."

"See, you *are* horny, Jewelle! I know some real fantastic men I could set you up with to satisfy your fantasies without you putting your life in the way of a bullet in the head." John leaned against the edge of the old, scratched desk, his hands supporting his six-foot-two physique as he towered over Jewelle, who was seated in a metal chair with green Naugahyde covering.

"Jewelle, you can get laid without risking being laid out in a coffin!"

"Cute, John. If getting laid was the main point of all this, I'd call Betty and ask her permission to have you lay me. I know she loves me too and would gladly share you," joked Jewelle. "She's told me more than once that she'd gladly give you to me; anything to get you out of her hair!"

Jewelle knew she was being outrageous and loved John for all his concern. John and Betty Murray had become dear friends. She knew John had done things for her that he probably shouldn't have and didn't do for the others assigned to him as Field Representative in the Federal Witness Protection Program. John had fifty-seven witnesses under his auspices. Once a witness was assigned to him, his job was to interview them extensively, create a new identity, and help them transition into their new environment, provide support, keep the monthly payments coming, and keep up with any possible threats.

Inviting a witness over to his house, extending invitations to Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, and developing a relationship of love and caring went way beyond the job description. John was like the brother she never had but had always wished for.

He was fifty-eighty, overweight, and not particularly handsome. And with three teenage kids ready for college, not to

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mention a mortgage, his money went to everything but his personal appearance. Gray slacks that showed absolutely no evidence of a crease, a tie that looked like it was purchased at a garage sale over ten years ago, and a shirt that sported several pen ink marks around the breast, gave him the appearance of the overworked and underpaid government employee that he was. Yet to Jewelle, John was her knight in shining armor.

He was always there when she needed him. More importantly, he was there when she didn't even admit to herself that she needed someone. He always sensed her needs and was there to fill the gaps left by her new life.

“John, yes, I want to find romance on the seven seas. But while I'm looking for Mr. Wonderful, I want to meet some interesting people like I used to when I traveled; people whose experience goes beyond ice fishing and smelt runs. I also want to see something other than snow. Jesus, I am so sick of snow I could puke. I want to hear waves crashing on some exotic beach and see a sunrise making its way over a Greek island. I want to experience life again. Life with a pulse. John, can you understand that? Please say you can.”

“Yeah, yeah, I understand. I just don't want to accept it. I'm afraid for you, friend. The Gambrelinis never expected you to testify after what they did to you. They didn't anticipate you would testify from your hospital bed, and our sources feel the mob didn't buy the story that you died in the hospital from a blood infection. Jewelle, the Gambrelinis don't forget. What you're talking about doing is jeopardizing everything we've done to make you disappear and keep you safe. You're risking it all, Jewelle. Is this really what you want?”

The desperation in his voice echoed through the office as he stared at her without blinking, completely still. It was as though his lack of movement could hold off the ticking of the clock on the wall and Jewelle's decision.

“John, let’s make a deal. Let me take this four-week cruise. Maybe I just have cabin fever, and some time away from Duluth will give me a new appreciation for it. Maybe I’ll miss the iron ore ships anchored out on Lake Superior, the drive on Sunday afternoons on the North Shore, and the smell of the fresh bread from the European bakery on First Street. It is a beautiful city, quaint, and charming. The people couldn’t be nicer. But I have to leave before I can know if I want to return. Please give me your blessing. I need to do this. John, please.”

Jewelle’s face tilted slightly to the right as she looked John in the face. Tears stole their way down her cheeks, some trailing over the six-centimeter scar that ran down the left side of her face. Although seven years had faded the redness of the injury and cortisone injections had diminished the size of the hypertrophic tissue, the scar left a noticeable imprint on her otherwise beautiful face...and on her spirit.

At forty-eight, Jewelle looked much more like forty. Her hazel eyes were accented by perfectly arched dark brown eyebrows that extended to the temples. As a child, she had acne and still got pimples when she got overly stressed. Other than that, she had a smooth, medium complexion. She often wondered if acne didn’t have some life expectancy which should have run its course. Surely one couldn’t have acne and hot flashes at the same time? Her biggest hope was that the pimples would stop before the hot flashes began. So far, the pimples were still hot on her trail.

She was five-foot-five and weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds. Even though she was slightly overweight, she knew how to wear clothes that made her look like she had a perfect figure, or at least look very attractive. Sometimes she even felt sexy; but not recently. Recently she didn’t feel anything. Her days melded into one another as did the many long months of winter in Duluth. She needed a spring, a renaissance of her soul, a renewal of her spirit. It was now or never.