

HOT STUFF
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"Your pineapple soda, miss. Would you be wanting ice? Americans visiting Bombay seem to like ice."

I barely heard him. My focus was on the far corner of Hot Harry's Saloon and the man whose presence filled that spot. "Thanks. Um, say, do you know who's the Strider wannabe in the back? In the hood. Sitting under the poster for Pirate Princess. He's staring at us."

The waiter squinted. He seemed puzzled. "Strid-er? I do not know this word. Like stride, yes? A person who walks very fast?"

I smiled. "I'm sorry. I've seen Lord of the Rings a few too many times. I forget that not everyone is a film buff. Strider's one of the main characters."

"Oh. Yes. Of course." He smiled. "But I do not think this striding man is staring at me wanting a refill. I think it is you. Most understandable." His smile grew wider. "Striders in movies. I love Americans. Cinema junkies. But we also have much this interest in Bombay. We are home to Bollywood. Pirate Princess was a Bollywood film. I have seen it one hundred times. You will visit?"

I nodded. I'd already jotted that particular site down on my to-do list.

The waiter had pegged it. "Cinema junkie."

I spent my childhood attending Broadway shows and cinematic extravaganzas when I wasn't taking acting, dance, gymnastic, or voice lessons. Mom dreamed that she'd see my name, Tempe Walsh, above a marquee one day. Theater or film - she didn't really care which.

By age three I was reciting Bogart's "hill of beans" speech from Casablanca and organizing my pre-school classmates into Sharks and Jets for the opening dance in West Side Story.

It seems logical then, given my upbringing, to assume I was currently soaking up the ambience of this bar in Bombay waiting to shoot a film. Doubtless one in which I played a starring role. Logical? Yes. But wrong.

Ironically, I was in India this week because many years ago, on the day I turned four, if one wants to be precise, my father found me reciting Bogart's "beans" speech in Russian to the doorman. My father declared that he had sired a linguistic genius, then decreed I would earn a real living in a career far removed from theatre.

I became an interpreter. An occupation that consisted primarily of translating "whatever" to English, and English to "whatever" for "whomevers" like my current boss, Ray Decore, the man sitting opposite me.

"Tempe? What's with cozying up to the waiter? Trying to make me jealous?"

I frowned, then shoved the bourbon and Coke that Ray Decore had ordered for me back across the table for the third time in less than two minutes.

"Cozy? Discussing movies? Mister Decore. Let's get something straight here. You hired me to translate Hindi to English so that you don't get swindled in the middle of buying some crazy statue. Might I remind you that this job does not include extra-curricular activities with the interpreter."

"Damn! Lighten up, Tempe. We're in Bombay for an entire week. This

transaction shouldn't take more than thirty minutes, after which we can leave this stinking cesspool of a bar and head over to a nightclub that caters to tourists who believe in clean. Now, tomorrow night, and subsequent nights, I'd prefer spending with you alone."

"Forget it. Not interested. I'm here to complete this deal for you, although I still don't understand why you need a linguist. Most folks in India speak English quite well."

"But Himali Khan does not, and since he's selling and I'm buying, I'd like to be in a position where I'm not swindled."

"Fine. So you've stated. I'm not sure I believe it, but I'm getting a free trip to Bombay, so I'm not going to argue the point. But once the negotiations are complete? Well, I have places to see. Alone."

I took a sip of my pineapple soda.

"Wanna hear my plans?"

I did not wait for a response. "Good. First, no matter what, I'm going to the Ganesh festival. Do you know, on the last day of the festival, they throw the elephants into the bay? Well, not the real elephants. I mean, that would be cruel."

Ray opened his mouth to interrupt.

I chattered on. "Then again, maybe the elephants wouldn't mind. After all, it would cool them off. Where was I? Oh. I'm talking about the statues of the elephants. Big ones, little ones, plaster-of-paris, bronze, recyclable, not. You name it, they're dunked in the drink."

Ray's eyes glazed over.

"Tempe? Watching a bunch of fake elephants getting tipped into water is not my idea of entertainment. Yeah, right, we're here to clinch a very big deal, but why not have some real fun while we're at it? We're thousands of miles from New York. Who's to know? Who's to care?"

He leered at me. I rebuttoned the top button of my suit before responding.

"I care. And believe me, I'm planning lots of fun stuff. Like hitting Kemps Corner and spending next month's rent in a mad shopping spree buying trendy, outrageous clothes."

Ray started to say something. I ignored him, lost in my dream itinerary.

"I'm gonna take snapshots of the Flora Fountain which is a starting point for protest marches and great speechifying. Then I'm trotting by the National Park and communing with tigers and llamas and cobras and whatever other cute little pets wander around unattended."

"Spare me. Fountains? Cute little pets?"

I held up my hand. "Wait, wait! My big dream is to visit Film City, Bollywood, and watch a Masala movie being shot. And I'm serious about seeing the Ganesh parade. I want to get my picture taken standing next to a real live elephant. I love elephants. The first movie I ever saw was Dumbo. Anyway, I'm going to be the ultimate tourist and do ultimate touristy things."

Ray lifted his bottle of Rajit beer, took a swig, swallowed, then scowled. "I don't give a damn about tourist spots. I was thinking more of the one-on-one kinds of attractions. Perhaps back at the Taj Hotel where my suite has the most marvelous jet bath. And the mini-bar is well stocked. If you get my drift."

"Guess what? My room has a Jacuzzi, too. I have plans for a good soak. Alone. And it seems obvious to me, sir, that you do indeed require a translator, because you damn sure have problems in communicating."

I sat back and watched as three men approached the tiny table where I continued my attempts to keep Ray's knees from pressing mine and ignore his less-than-subtle attempts at flirtation.

I'd met one of these men about twenty minutes ago. Mr. Himali Khan was a buyer and seller of precious objects. He was also the reason Ray Decore needed an interpreter. Khan now took a seat opposite me and stared at the top button of my suit for a moment. Then he gestured to a man wearing a crisp, starched white shirt and tailored black slacks who bowed, kissed my hand, then murmured something in a language I identified as Gujarati.

Mr. Starched Shirt offered me a cigarette.

I said, "No, thank you" in Gujarati.

The man's eyebrows lifted a hair as he responded, "You have a decent accent, Miss. Where did you learn both Hindi and Gujarati?"

"Louie's Lingo. It's linguistics software. Um. A computer program. You load in the language of choice and a day later you're fluent." I smiled. "Assuming you have an aptitude for the subject, which I do. I'd heard Gujarati was still used for business dealings here in Mumbai--or do you prefer Bombay?"

He shrugged. "Either is fine."

"Well, anyway, I learned as much Gujarati as I could, along with Hindi. So, do you work with Mr. Khan?"

His eyebrow lifted. The short, scarred, bald man behind him snorted, pulled out a cigar, tossed it onto the table, muttered something in a dialect unknown to me and not covered in Louie's Lingo, then whirled around and headed back to his own table. I shivered.

"Did I just witness a new Indian rite of welcoming Americans?" I asked, this time in English.

A slight flush added a hint of red to the light brown skin. He answered in precise, clean, unaccented English.

"I apologize. Mr. Patel is a rude man. He is showing his displeasure at having a woman here in the saloon and at your assumption that we work with Mr. Khan. We do not. Mr. Patel commented on your red hair. It was not a nice remark. He should not be allowed in the company of polite society."

He bowed again, then walked in silence back to a table several feet away from this Mr. Patel. I tapped Mr. Khan's shoulder, then asked, in Hindi, how he knew the men who'd just greeted Ray and me in diverse fashions.

He grinned, showing several gaps where teeth should have been placed. "Buyers. Rich buyers for my collection. You do not want to be talking to them. And you don't need to be speaking to them since you are here to be talking to me."

Khan stood, nodded to Ray, who looked upset that Khan and I were conversing in Hindi, then walked over to the bar counter.

I'm not a big drinker, but I've been in more than one pub in Manhattan since I

hit legal age eight years ago. Hot Harry's Saloon seemed no different than most of the bars that line Eighth Avenue near the Theatre District. Smaller and a bit dirtier, perhaps, with posters featuring Masala movies tacked on the walls and foreign-sounding names advertising various liquors, but when one came right down to it, it was a bar.

I blinked, then blushed, when I saw the ancient, lopsided poster of Miss April 1982 taped onto the broken mirror. I'd never seen a picture like that on Eighth Avenue or anywhere else in the city. I quickly averted my gaze from the negligently clad model.

Next up in my viewing area was the counter top that held bottles of beer, hard liquor and wine. To the right of the bar stood vending machines. Two of them catered to nicotine addicts and did not interest me, but the tiny machine between them must have been designed for carboholics. I spotted assorted American brands of chocolate bars and pretzels and potato chips. Plus those little sandwiches with the cheese crackers filled with peanut butter.

I had no idea when this transaction would be finished, and I hadn't had much lunch. I brightened and started to rise to check out the selections. The fact that the dark-hooded Strider sat at a table only about three feet from the vending machines did not enter into my decision. Or so I told myself.

Ray grabbed my arm. His tone shifted to all business. "Not the time to go wandering, Tempe. You're on in about two seconds. Now listen well, neogiate better, and earn your pay."

Khan had returned from the bar with two bottles of beer. I guess since soda, not booze, was my drink of choice, I didn't rate a refill. Khan set the bottles on the table, popped the tops, then pushed one toward Ray. It appeared he was ready to begin final negotiations.

Khan set a price in rupees.

I turned to Ray. "If the rate of exchange is what it was this morning, Mr. Khan has just asked for a million five." My eyes opened wider. "Wow! That's one damn high price."

"It's fair, Tempe. Don't worry about it. But tell Khan I do need to see the statue."

I shrugged. It was Ray's money to spend as he wished. I turned back to Khan and asked, in Hindi, if he could show Ray the piece. Khan flashed his semitoothless grin at me, then reached into the filthy backpack he'd set next to his chair. He rummaged for about four seconds, then lifted out something wrapped in a dirty T-shirt that had what appeared to be Miss April's younger sister silk-screened on the front. Miss June. Who was definitely busting out all over.

Khan brushed the half-filled bottles off the table onto the floor, dropped Miss June over them, then set a small ivory figurine on the table. I stood and leaned in to get a better look.

"Wow! Is that it? The statue? That is so cool. But why is the lute upside down? That seems odd. Hey, Ray, is this a fake?"

I heard a scream come from the middle table of Hot Harry's. Mr. Patel. The door to the bar burst open, and at least a dozen men ran inside hollering epithets

in languages I did not understand. My employer also began to spit out epithets, in a language I did know quite well, and with words I hear far too often on the subway in Manhattan.

"You bastard! You stinkin' lousy (bleep, bleep) cheat!" yelled Ray.

"Su-ar!" yelled the snorting man.

Starched Shirt yelled something in Gujarati.

"Cluipear!" yelled the dark-haired Strider sitting in a shadowed corner by the vending machines.

Wait. Back it up just a minute there. I'd heard Ray call Himali Khan a "lousy cheat" plus a few other choice words less polite. Fine. Got it. Then the bald-headed Indian with the cigars had spat out "pig" in Hindi.

But "Cluipear?" It's Gaelic. It took me a second or two, but then I remembered it meant "deceiver." Mister Tall Dark Striding Stranger was shouting in the language of ancient Ireland in Hot Harry's Saloon in Bombay, India. But I had no time to ponder this paradox because the bar now resembled one of the more violent scenes from Gunfight at the O.K. Corral.