

# *Currents Deep and Deadly*

## *Chapter 24*

For a while Suzanne and I had a pretty good time meandering down the narrow streets, then ducking out of the blistering sun to browse boutiques and souvenir shops. We even stopped for a beer and shared a chicken and hearts of palm empanada at a cute outdoor café, where I slouched with my fancy beaded flip-flops dangling from the ends of my toes and just tried to feel like a wealthy tourist.

Our wandering also took us past an extraordinary number of beautiful churches and religious statuary dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Suzanne seemed positively enthralled by them. As we stood in front of a four-hundred-year-old convent contemplating a marble statute of Christ that I couldn't help noticing had been rendered with a remarkably European face, Suzanne looked up and said, "Praise the Lord." I looked over at her and was taken aback by the somewhat crazed expression of awe on her face. Almost immediately she rearranged her features and smiled shyly at me. "I really am a very religious person," she said. Then she abruptly walked on to the next church.

A little while later I had become lost in thought again, this time about the integral relationship between Christianity and settlement of the New World and how the religious influence dramatically altered the course of history for indigenous people as well as those of us who subsequently inherited these lands. This naturally led me to more musings about the origins of religion and how virtually everything about human existence was and still is influenced by those beliefs. At that point we had been staring up at the huge statue of a cross at the end of Cruzeiro de Francisco square, which is surrounded by old churches and the convent. I was going to say something to Suzanne about the religious influence but wondered if I should stay away from the subject all together.

I know I have a tendency to get lost in thought for a minute or two, but it could not have been longer than that before I looked around and realized I was alone. I assumed Suzanne had stepped into one of the shops on the square, so I stayed in the immediate area for about fifteen minutes hanging out on a wood and wrought iron bench waiting for her to return. When she didn't, I became very concerned. What happened to her? I had one of my intuitive feelings that something was going on that I should know about but didn't. I waited another five minutes before I started walking slowly back to the long two-story white stone Rio Blanco palace just down the street from the elevator building. I stood next to the central fountain looking around for any sign of Suzanne. I just could not come up with a good reason for her disappearance other than the unlikely possibility that she had lost sight of me and had gone through the same waiting and looking process before going on ahead.

Finally I gave up and entered the building. As I stepped into the elevator for the ride down, two Brazilian men entered and stood to either side of me. Their closeness was not altogether unexpected because the car was full of people, but something about the way they positioned themselves was unnerving. My anxious impressions during the quick ride down were that they were about my height, slim, with very dark skin and eyes. They wore tight-fitting jeans, and the one on my right was wearing a sleeveless white tee shirt and had a bushy mustache, while the other one wore a short-sleeved black shirt and had a small goatee. Both sported complex tattoos covering their lower arms, which I couldn't make out in any detail in the dim lighting. They didn't actually look at me, but my pallid unembellished arms were suddenly covered with goose flesh in the stifling car as the two guys seemed to lean toward me in a way that seemed unnecessary if not downright menacing.

At the bottom I tried to get out of the building as quickly as possible but had to fight my way through a small crowd of people all heading for the exit at the same time. I quickly looked over my shoulder and was relieved to see that the two men were nowhere around. I decided, with relief, that they had gone out another door and that my imagination was just running on overtime. Out on the plaza I had another uncomfortable moment as I gazed across the lanes of traffic to the square outside the Mercado, now filled with vendors' booths and carts and teeming with local families as well as tourists. *Do I remember how to get back to the ship? Shit, here I go again with my lousy sense of direction.*

I crossed the plaza to the street, thinking that I should walk with folks who appeared to be citizens since there was no traffic light and cars seemed to come from every direction at once. At a partial break in traffic, I scooted across beside a couple pushing a stroller over to the square. We arrived safely at a coconut water stand on the corner, and I stood for a minute watching the vendor deftly operate the intriguing device that punched a hole in the large green seed, while simultaneously catching the milk in a container for her customer.

After getting my bearings, I decided it was safest to try and retrace the route Suzanne and I had taken from the ship, which had seemed fairly straightforward. I entered the market intending to walk straight through to the other end. It was only about three and the sun was high and bright. The ship wasn't scheduled to leave the port until five, so I had plenty of time even if I did manage to make a wrong turn on my way back. I reached the center point of the crowded market, looking from side to side at the astonishing array of merchandise as I proceeded down the narrow aisle. For some reason I turned to look behind me and found myself almost face-to-face with white tee shirt boy. The smirk on his face told me that this, anyway, was no coincidence. *Oh God—there is no God. Don't panic! There are lots of people around, and I can find some help if I need it.* I remembered passing an office of the "tourist police" on the route we took this morning, but I wasn't sure exactly where it was.

As soon as I turned forward and picked up my pace, I saw his companion leaning with an elbow on the counter of a snack bar about twenty-five feet ahead. His eyes held mine for several seconds. Fear in the form of a melting icicle slid down the back of my tank top, but I stubbornly refused to look away. When he finally blinked and shifted his gaze to the left, I darted to my right and tried to race down a perpendicular aisle. Actually, I was mainly running into people and not making a lot of headway. "Please, please, let me through," I cried. I was a whole lot taller, younger, and in better shape than most of the customers; and I felt like a steamroller as I knocked people aside. I had never really had a fear of men in general or of being threatened or raped, but I was making up for it now.

All around me people were yelling and gesturing angrily, but their voices seemed to have slipped into the distance as I pushed frantically forward. Finally I reached the end of the aisle and turned left in the direction of the front entrance. As I rounded the corner I forced myself to

glance back hoping that I had lost my stalkers. But there they were still moving forward through the crowd, bumping into stalls and sending textiles, carved wood statues, and pottery flying. The worst part was their eyes. They were black and intense and locked onto me with no interest at all in the havoc they were causing as they plowed through the people and stalls in their frenzy to catch me.

I ran as fast as I could, wishing I had opted for sensible tennis shoes, as I weaved around people and stalls, yelling that I needed help the whole time. Of course, no one could understand me. But they didn't need English to get the idea that I was in trouble. It didn't seem to matter, probably because they were as much afraid of my pursuers as I was. I could see the open end of the building up ahead, and if I made it that far, I could get out onto the street and surely would be safer there.

Just as I leaped out into the sunlight next to the outdoor café full of families with small children, white tee shirt boy grabbed my arm roughly just above the elbow and yanked me back into the shadow of the building. My stomach did a slow sickening roll at the feel of his dry scaly hand on my skin. People sitting and standing in the immediate area could see what was happening, but no one made a move to help me. I was panting hard, but I pulled and struggled with all my strength, even kicking at his shins. My might and determination were apparently a little more than he had expected. His partner ran up behind us to help, and just as I felt his grungy fingers grabbing at my other arm, I swiveled away and began running up the street toward the dock—I hoped.

To this day, I don't know how I avoided being run over, as I darted in a blind panic across a busy street. I just kept running and somehow found my way to the sidewalk of Avenue Oscar Pontes, which ran along the back of the port building. Gasping through my mouth and unable to cry for help, I sprinted past pedestrians, some of them tourists who were stopping to see what was happening, and that is when my senses of taste and smell were suddenly assaulted by the urine. It was dripping down the side of the cement building that ran along the length of the sidewalk. Dark disgusting stains marred the wall at intervals of about ten feet, and in some places the sidewalk was still wet. Obviously, this was a popular nightspot for drunks to relieve themselves. Even in my state of terror, it was utterly revolting, and I tried to run at the outer edge of the sidewalk near the street to avoid the wetness and the stench. Coughing and gagging, I stumbled along the curb, and prayed; *please don't let me fall down*, to no one in particular.

I almost made it. Goatee boy caught up with me about a half block from the gate leading to the dock, and I was too tired to do much about it. He grabbed me with one arm around my waist and the other around my neck, and began pulling me into the street. He babbled something in Portuguese into my ear, and I knew instinctively that he was going to put me into a car, and that I simply could not let that happen. I glanced up and saw two other men wearing light-colored shorts, most likely ship's passengers, running up the sidewalk a couple of blocks away waving their arms and shouting. They were too far away to save me as we moved farther away from the curb. I saw an open car door just a couple of feet away and screamed at the top of my lungs. With all my strength I pulled back, twisting and kicking for what seemed like an eternity, but I was worn out and just couldn't fight any longer. It felt as if everything was slowing to a full stop as he released his grip on my neck and grabbed at my breast to push me down onto the backseat of the car.

Suddenly I felt a sharp tug and another pair of hands on my shoulders pulling at me. *Oh no, it's white tee shirt boy too. Christ, I'm dead!* "Help, somebody help me!" I screamed over and over, as I weakly tried to twist away from them.

“Darcy, Darcy, stop! Stop fighting. You are all right now. Calm down.”  
Miraculously—I don’t mean literally—Don had pulled me away from my pursuer and was holding me against his muscular chest while I continued to sob and gasp for air.

“Is she OK?” I could barely hear Charlie’s voice with my face pushed into Don’s shirt, but his anxiety was obvious. I felt the vibration of Don’s muffled voice in my cheekbone as I tried to burrow deeper into the safety of his awesome body.

“She will be. Both guys drove off,” he said. “I guess they decided not to fight since we’re so close to the port entrance.”