

Part I

Arma virumque cano
Of war and a man I sing

We were a strange little group, thinking back on it, some of us saints, some of us sinners, and at least one of us with murder on our minds.

The story of how we all came together, collided might be the better word, is, on the surface at least, an account of my short and something less than successful career as a tour guide. On closer examination, however, it is a cautionary tale about the depths to which greed and obsession can plunge the human soul. If I have learned anything from the experience, it is that courage is found in the most unlikely of people, while evil lies hidden behind the blandest of faces.

My tale, the facts of which are true, but, as is always the case, subject to some sifting through the mind and memory of the teller, begins with two words I was coming to dread whenever they emanated from a certain source.

'I'm thinking, Clive Swain, my ex-husband, and through a series of events much too long -- and painful -- to get into, my current business partner, said.

Don't hurt yourself, Clive, the little voice in my head retorted. I keep these uncharitable thoughts to myself because, in addition to his aforementioned status in my life, he is also my best friend Moira's lover.

'I'm thinking, he said again. Clive is a veritable fountain, no, a geyser, of ideas on how to promote our antiques business, McClintoch & Swain by name. These notions of his, I've not failed to notice, require the oozing of copious amounts of charm on his part, and a great deal of hard work on mine.

I could see Alex Stewart, a dear friend and retired gentleman who comes in four days a week to help out in the shop, give a wry smile. For some reason that eludes me, Alex and Clive, as completely different as they are, get along just fine. Even more astonishing is the fact that Diesel, an orange tabby who holds the title of Official Guard Cat at the shop, and who, like most cats, treats the rest of the world with pure disdain, positively fawns on Clive. As this fateful conversation was unfolding, Diesel was looking up at Clive as if he was brilliance personified, purring his approval. Come to think of it, the only one of my friends who doesn't get along with Clive, is Rob Luczka, a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted

Police. Rob and I are good friends, and occasionally toy with the idea of getting closer. Maybe his considerably less than favorable opinion of Clive is part of the attraction.

'We have to be top of mind in the antiques business, right? The first store people think of when they are in the market for furniture and design, Clive said, stepping over the cat. It was a statement, not a question. Clive had recently taken a week-long marketing course, attendance at which apparently entitled him to liberally pepper his every utterance with terms like top of mind, extending our reach and market niche. Any moment now, he'd be calling our business a strategic alliance.

'So I have a great idea. He paused for effect. 'Wait for it, Lara, he said, a devilish grin on his face. I waited.

'Antiques tour! he exclaimed triumphantly. 'Brilliant idea, isn't it? One of my best. We do a couple of promotional evenings -- in the store, of course: a little cheese, a little wine to loosen things up, a little time to look around and perhaps to buy. We get some free publicity for the tour, and therefore the shop, in the travel rags. In no time flat, we get a group together. Price of the tour includes a couple of lectures before they go about what they'll see, in the shop again -- another chance for them to make obscenely large purchases -- then a week or ten days somewhere interesting with an expert along -- that's you -- to help them make their selections, and to ship the big stuff home. Nothing too ostentatious, of course, but unusual and quietly elegant. Loads of charm, just like us. Trip of a lifetime. What do you think?

'I guess it's not the worst idea you ever had, Clive, I conceded.

'I knew you'd love it, he said. 'You see the beauty of it, don't you? The price of the tour includes all your expenses. You do some buying while you're there, and the trip costs us nothing. If people buy a lot of stuff, we might even get a container paid for out of it. Great isn't it?

'Where? I asked. It was useless to protest. 'How about London? Portobello, Camden Passage, the Silver Vaults? A visit to the furniture galleries at the Victoria and Albert so they start to develop an eye for what's really good. Maybe take in some theater while we're there? Tea with scones and cream and strawberry jam served from a trolley in some elegant courtyard. I was beginning to warm to this idea.

'Too dull, he replied, with a dismissive wave.

'Okay then, France. Paris first. A charming Left Bank hotel, a sweep of les marchés aux puces, the flea markets at Clignancourt and Montreuil. Great wine, good food, magnificent art. An afternoon sipping pastis in Place des Vosges. Then we could take a few days and go to Provence. Stay in town, Avignon perhaps, or maybe even a farmhouse.....

'Too French, he interrupted, unburdened as he is with even the remotest concept of political correctness.

I sighed. 'How about Rome? That would work, wouldn't it? A cappuccino in the Piazza Navonna, then a leisurely stroll through the antiques shops right around there, with a little diversion to the market in the Campo dei Fiori, then a side trip to Florence, the Uffizi....

'Too common, he sniffed.

Rome? Common? He took me by the arm and led me into the office where we keep a map of the world dotted with little brightly colored pins that mark where our shipments are. We don't need the pins, of course: we have a computer to do our tracking now, but we like the look of it a lot. At least I do.

'We need something more exotic, he said. 'Somewhere everybody else isn't going. The way to be successful in this business of ours is not to spot the latest trends: it's to start them. That's a good line, isn't it? I'll have to use it again. His hand waved over the surface of the map, his index finger pausing for a second or two over Afghanistan, then sweeping on to Libya.

'Too dangerous, I said firmly.

'There! he exclaimed, tapping his finger on the north coast of Africa. 'Of course. The medina and souks of Tunis, the mosaics at the Bardo, a little time wandering the ruins of Carthage, a visit to the mosque at Kairouan, the ancient Roman cities in the desert -- what are they called? Thuburbo Majus, Dougga, I think. You remember what that was like. I tried to look vague. 'You do remember, he said leering at me. 'Moonlight on the water, the garden of the hotel, you in my arms.

Of course I remembered. Tunisia was where Clive and I spent our honeymoon, nigh on twenty years ago. And I suppose the souks and mosques and ruins and

moonlight were lovely. What I remember most about that trip, however, was the realization that I had made a mistake, although it took me something like twelve years to do anything about it. The question was, did I want to go back there, with Clive or without him?

'Think blue and white everywhere, Clive was saying, as I returned to the present. 'tiles with that North African look, those charming wire bird cages, useless maybe, but they look wonderful and people love them, copper, maybe one or two of those splendid box beds with all the carving. We could do up the back showroom in a come-with-me-to-the-kasbah look. People would lap it up. And carpets. We need lots more carpets, and as you say, Pakistan and Afghanistan are a bit dicey these days. Beautiful, he said. 'Don't you agree?

I nodded. 'Beautiful, I said, shrugging in Alex's general direction. I figured it would never happen. Clive's enthusiasm would wane as quickly as it usually did, and he'd be on to something else. Even if it did come about, there were things to be said for it. We were always on the lookout for new merchandise for the store, that was true, and, speaking personally, a week or two away from Clive and his brilliant ideas would be just fine with me. I had to admit that it really wasn't the worst idea in the world.

'I don't usually take tours, the thin, elegant woman was saying to her companion, in a tone that implied this kind of travel was far beneath her. 'When my husband was alive, he always took me on his business trips abroad, first class, of course. I've never traveled economy. But since he passed away.....

'Don't you worry, honey, the other woman said, patting her hand, and completing misinterpreting the other woman's words. 'I'll keep my eye on you. I take at least two trips every year now, since Arthur passed on. He hated to travel, so now I'm making up for lost time -- with his money, she chuckled gleefully. 'Now what did your husband do, Catherine. It is Catherine, isn't it? Can I call you Cathy? Catherine looked horrified.

Susie Windermere, group busybody, I thought, checking her off my list, and Catherine Anderson, group snob. The two women couldn't have been more unlike, the one with outlandishly dyed red hair, dressed in a long t-shirt that did its best to hide her pendulous breasts and little pot belly, her legs, clad in green and pink tights, surprising thin, making her look like a plump little bird on spindly legs; the

other rather well turned out in a quietly expensive pant suit, and just loaded with jewelry. She wore a gold watch laced with diamonds, an impressively heavy gold chain around her neck, and pear-shaped diamond earrings that were probably worth a fortune.

'Mrs. Anderson, I said joining them. We were not yet on a first name basis, most of us, and with Catherine Anderson, quite possibly never would be. And for certain it would never be Cathy. 'Perhaps you missed my advice not to bring expensive jewelry on the trip. It can be a magnet, I'm afraid, for thieves.

The woman looked faintly surprised. 'But I did take your advice, she said. 'I left all of my best pieces at home.

'You just put that lovely necklace and earrings in your purse, honey, Susie said. 'When we get to the hotel, that Bear place, what's it called? she asked, turning to me.

'Taberda, I replied.

'Whatever, she said. 'You can put it in a safety deposit box, honey, so you won't have to worry. Now did I tell you about the cruise I took down the Nile? Have you been down the Nile?

Inwardly I groaned. The two women, while traveling solo, had indicated that if possible they'd like to share a room, Susie to save money, and Catherine, presumably, for the company. We'd put the two of them together, but already, I was wondering how bad an idea this was going to be.

'I thought Muslims didn't approve of homosexuals, another of our fellow travelers, Jimmy Johnstone from Buffalo said, elbowing his wife, Betty, and pointing toward two men across the row from them.

'Don't worry, one of the men said cheerfully. 'We won't hold hands in public. The 'Ôwe' in this case were Benjamin Miller, a large teddy bear of a man, with a reddish beard and thinning hair to match, brown eyes that crinkled at the corners, and a handshake to be reckoned with, and the speaker, his traveling companion, Edmund Langdon, tall, thin, dark, and devastatingly good-looking, with long, curving eyelashes to die for, a man about ten or fifteen years Ben's junior.

'Stone them in public squares, I've heard, Jimmy went on without noticing.

'Group bigot, I thought. It had taken me only minutes to realize that Jimmy would spend his entire vacation dissing everything and everybody even a little bit different from his comfortable world at home. With about twenty years in retail, I consider myself a pretty good judge of character, able to size up almost anyone at a glance. I shouldn't do this, of course, but, experience being a painful teacher, you do learn to spot the customer who can be cajoled into a purchase and the one that needs to be left alone to decide, or, more negatively, the visitor who is likely to shoplift, or the one whose check will bounce sky high. As unfortunate as this tendency to categorize may be, I've found I'm right about 95 per cent of the time. The other five per cent, that is when I'm totally and utterly wrong, I attribute to a fluke of some sort. Having said that, while Jimmy might have leapt to some conclusions about the two men's relationship, the sleeping arrangements, to which I was privy as the group leader, were inconclusive. The men had requested single rooms, and Ben had told me, when he'd signed up for the tour, that Ed was his nephew.

'I'm tired, Mummy, Chastity Sherwood pouted. Why do parents do that to their children, I wonder, giving them names like Chastity? In this case, wishful thinking perhaps? Chastity was about fifteen, I'd say, and, in addition to being whiny, was one of those people who haven't yet acquired a sense of their personal space. She had a very bad habit of swatting anyone in the vicinity with her backpack every time she turned around, and although people had known her for only eight or nine hours, they were already diving for cover when they saw her approach. 'How much longer do we have to wait in this stupid place?' she said, in a petulant tone.

This stupid place was the transit lounge at Frankfurt's airport, an admittedly dreary spot. The tour, which we were billing as an antiques and archaeology excursion, started in Toronto, where Chastity and her mother, who went by the sensible name of Marlene, Jimmy and Betty, Canadians who had moved across the lake to Buffalo twenty years earlier and never come back, Susie, Catherine, and the two men, Ben and Ed, who hailed from Boston, but who had opted to join the group in Toronto, had gathered.

In Frankfurt, my task was to find the rest of our fellow travelers, someone by the name of Richard Reynolds, a businessman from Montreal, whom I'd only spoken to briefly on the telephone; Emile St. Laurent, a colleague from Paris, who'd been a late addition to the trip, having signed up only three days previously, and a couple who seemed certain to up the glamor quotient of the trip: Curtis Clark, a professional golfer from California, and his wife, whose name on her passport read

Roslyn Clark, but who was infinitely better known as Aziza, one of those models of one name only, who are regularly featured in the fashion pages of numerous magazines, and on the runways of the haute couture houses of Europe.

And indeed the couple was easy to spot, he with the even tan, beautiful teeth, and the shock of blond hair so familiar from the sports pages and TSN, and she, taller than he was at about six feet, with gorgeous toffee-colored skin, elegant long neck and cheekbones, a beautifully-shaped head, shown off by very, very short dark hair, and graced with a regal bearing that left the men she met drooling, and the women suicidal. There was no question about it, she was lovely. But then again, so was he.

Curtis, as far as I knew, had never won a major tournament of any kind, and might well have gone unnoticed forever, were it not for the fact he'd snared Aziza, thereby making himself the envy of half the world's population, but also because of his ability to be disarmingly charming on television, a skill he was given the opportunity to demonstrate once he'd married Aziza. As a result, he snagged some very lucrative product endorsements, and his dazzling smile was much to be seen. He also functioned as her manager, if the stories in the tabloids were true, there having been some dustup with her former manager which had been the subject of juicy speculation for a period of time. Why they were on this tour, when they could afford to travel first class, just the two of them, I could not imagine, but the fact they were had the potential to bring us some wonderful publicity. Clive had told me about a hundred times to make sure they enjoyed themselves.

Emile St. Laurent I had met on several occasions, and so I found him easily. He was seated near the gate, reading an antiques magazine. He was about sixty, with a nice head of gray hair, dressed in gray flannels and a polo shirt, with a houndstooth sports jacket over his arm, stylish in a lovely Parisian sort of way. He looked decidedly fresh and unruffled, after what surely had been a decent meal and a good night's sleep, something the rest of us, having endured airline food and cramped seating on the transatlantic flight, were sorely missing. The truth of the matter was that, despite my annoyance with Chastity's complaining, I too was just plain tired, having come off a stint at a design show that had kept me up to all hours, and had required an immense amount of packing and unpacking of merchandise. Then there were all the last minute arrangements for the tour, and hours of swotting up on various subjects so I could be the expert Clive had envisioned. Even though I knew a fair amount about the part of the world we were going to see, I still felt I needed to do a lot of study before we left. Just looking at the neat and squeaky clean St. Laurent made me feel even more tired and grubby

than I already did.

'Lara McClintoch! he exclaimed, rising from his seat and extending his hand. 'How nice to see you again.

'Nice to see you, too, Emile, I said, as he kissed my hand rather suavely. 'Glad you'll be joining us.

'I'm delighted, too, he replied. 'I found there was a space in my calendar after a business trip fell through, and I thought I'd just call up and see if you had room for one more at the last minute. This antiques and archaeology tour of yours is an inspired idea! Nice idea for a trip, and the publicity won't hurt business at all, will it? Gets the McClintoch & Swain name around internationally. Wish I'd thought of it first.

While Curtis and Aziza were the celebrities of our group, in some circles, St. Laurent might arguably be considered even more famous. Emile St. Laurent was a numismatist, a coin collector, and while this occupation might be a hobby for most, for Emile it was a serious, and in his case, very lucrative, business. We'd first met about twenty years earlier, when I was just getting into antiques, and was beginning to go to antiquarian shows. Emile, too, was just starting up then; now, he was considered one of the most successful coin dealers on the planet, and his company, ESL Numismatics, had an international reputation. I doubted that in his circles at least, he needed the publicity he was referring to.

'Is this just a vacation for you, Emile, or is there something special you're looking for?

'Just a holiday, he said. 'Although, if I came across a silver tetradrachm or two from ancient Carthage, I wouldn't mind, now, would I, seeing as how they're selling at auction anywhere in the range of \$1500 to \$20,000 these days. Rather more than enough to cover my expenses on this tour. But this is, as I say, a holiday, and something of a homecoming. I was born there, actually. Haven't been back in forty years, so it will be interesting to see how it's changed, or at least how wrong my youthful memories of the place are. He winked at me through the little round wire-rimmed spectacles that gave him a rather scholarly appearance. 'I hear you and Clive are back together, he said, changing the subject. 'Professionally speaking, of course.

'Professionally only, I can assure you, Emile, I said, rather tartly. 'Why don't you

come along and meet the rest of the group? I'm sure they'll be interested in hearing stories of your youth in Tunisia. While I do know that it is a complete waste of time to contemplate such things, I could not help but idly wonder, as I led him over to the group, where I'd be if I'd chosen coins twenty years ago, instead of furniture. The kind of prices he was mentioning left me breathless. You wouldn't think there'd be that kind of money in coins, but Emile was the living proof there was. He'd had his ups and downs, though. At one time I'd heard he owned homes all over the world, including a spectacular apartment overlooking Central Park in New York, and an equally wonderful villa near Nice, and he'd gotten out of coins for awhile. Then he'd lost it all in some business scheme. His return to the coin business about three or four years earlier had created quite a stir at the time. I took his presence here as a good sign, that he was well on his way to a full economic recovery.

'I teach, Ben was saying at Susie's prompting, as Emile and I approached.
'Harvard. Classics. Greeks, Romans, that sort of thing.

'And your friend? Susie said, glancing Ed's way. The woman was going to know everything there was to know about everybody before we even hit Tunis.

'I'm a parasite, Ed replied. Susie looked taken aback.

'He means he's temporarily unemployed, Ben said, glaring at Ed.

'Oh, I see, Susie said. 'Well, I'm sure it's not your fault, honey. It's those politicians.

'You can say that again, Jimmy exclaimed. 'Should take the whole lot of them out back and shoot them.

'And what do you do, Jimmy? Susie asked.

'Chicken parts, he replied.

'Chicken parts? she replied dubiously. You mean....?

'Feet, necks, gizzards. I sell them to the Chinese.

'The Chinese, Susie repeated. 'Oh, she said, then brightening. 'Chicken feet. Dim sum, right? You sell to Chinese restaurants in Buffalo!

'China, he said. He looked at her. 'I sell to the Chinese in China.

'From Buffalo? she asked incredulously.

'Sure, why not? he replied. 'The rest of us don't want the stuff. Good business, actually. Pays to keep my bride here in style. The bride smiled and self-consciously patted her hair. She reminded me of nothing so much as a TV mom from the Ô50's.

'Oh, Susie said. 'Isn't that sweet. How long have you and Betty been married?

'Thirty years, Jimmy said.

Susie thought about this for a moment and then wisely decided to move on. 'And you are?' she said to Emile.

'Emile St. Laurent, at your service, Emile said, bowing slightly.

'And what do you do, Emile? she asked, rather coyly I thought. He was an attractive man.

'I just dabble in a few things, he replied.

'Like what? she prodded. There was no stopping this woman.

'Coins, that sort of thing, he said.

'Oh, she said. 'Then you should meet Ed here. He doesn't do anything either. Emile had the good grace to look amused. I gave him the title of group diplomat on the spot.

'How much longer do we have to wait? Chastity pouted, looking balefully in my general direction. 'I'm just miserable, she added.

I could kill Clive, I thought. Although I would never admit it to Clive, up until that moment I had been warming to this idea of his. Determined to make the tour a success in a more tangible way than Clive's rather ephemeral notions of the value of publicity, I was aided, unwittingly on his part, by a film star who had recently purchased a huge house in Rosedale, a Toronto neighborhood that many aspire to

but few attain. He called on McClintoch & Swain to furnish the place.

“I want to make a statement, the actor said, pulling at his short and spiky bleached blonde hair. ‘Something that expresses the real me.

I’d taken him sketches, swatches and photos of Thai, Indonesian, and Greek style, Tuscan farmhouse, Provencal villa, and just about everything else, but nothing appealed to him. Then, almost in desperation, I made one last phone call. ‘North Africa, I said.

‘Way cool, he’d replied. The house had ten bedrooms, six fireplaces, and a living room the size of a small stadium. Way cool, indeed. Clive and I made up a list of furnishings I was to find while I was on the tour. My plan was to get the group to Tunisia, hand them over to the local guide and the archaeologist expert we’d hired, and then undertake the one activity that might actually keep us in business: scouring the country for the rather lengthy list of antiques and carpets we’d need for the Rosedale home. There are few activities I enjoy as much as hunting down the perfect antique for a client. From my perspective, the chase is as much fun as the purchase, and finding something really unusual for a good price is positively exhilarating.

‘I’m hungry, Chastity said.

‘Have a potato chip, Ben said, thrusting a bag in front of her. The girl eyed it and him suspiciously. ‘Okay, don’t have a potato chip, Ben said, reaching into the bag to help himself to a handful. Ben, I could already tell, liked to eat. I hadn’t seen him for even a moment without some food in his hand. Keeping him from getting hungry on this trip might be challenge.

I turned my attention to finding the last member of the group to meet us in Frankfurt, one Richard Reynolds, another last minute addition to the trip. The only thing I knew about Richard was that he was a stockbroker and had flown in from Montreal. I found him right away though. He was the only person in the bar talking in English on a cellphone. I had no idea whom he might be talking to, it being two am back home, but they say the market never sleeps.

I had a minute or two to look him over while he talked away on his phone. Rick was outfitted in completely new clothes, right down to his belt and the carry-on bag at his side: new denim shirt, with the folds still showing, Reeboks so white they hurt my eyes, and new khaki jacket. I knew that because there was one of

those nasty plastic things that hold the price tags and require garden shears to remove, still protruding from the edge of one sleeve. I debated whether or not I should tell him about it, but I decided I wasn't his mother, just the tour guide, and anyway, given the self-important way he was leaning against the bar and talking loudly on his phone, I wasn't sure his ego could stand it. I hadn't seen his luggage yet, but I had no doubt it would be absolutely pristine too, minus the usual wear and tear of any transatlantic flight. If I wasn't mistaken, this was the first trip of this sort Rick had ever taken. Whatever had possessed him, I wondered, to take an antiques and archaeology tour to Tunisia instead of, say, a sun, sand and sex excursion to the Caribbean?

'Hold on a sec, he said into his cellphone as I hovered nearby. 'You Lara, by any chance? I nodded. 'Hey, how ya doin'?' he asked, giving me one of those overly hearty handshakes that set your rings digging painfully into your fingers. 'Call you back in a sec, he said to the phone.

'Glad you could join us, Mr. Reynolds, I said.

'Hey, call me Rick. I'm glad, too. Touch and go, let me tell you. Didn't know if I could make it right up until the last minute. Market's pretty hot, right now. But a guy's gotta take a break every now and then. You know what they say, all work and no play. Hope I don't get called back, though. I assume I'll be in cellphone range at all times? This thing is digital, of course. The satellite will find me just about anywhere I should think.

'Maybe not always, I said, feeling sorry for the busy satellite whose job it was to keep an ear out for Rick. 'But you know, I expect there'll be regular phones just about everywhere.

'Have to do, he said. 'I promised I'd check in regularly. In fact, we'll have to talk some more later. Still got a couple of calls to make before we leave. Got to find out how the Nikkei did, get a few deals ready for tomorrow. Nice meeting you, Lara. he said, turning back to his phone.

If I was supposed to be impressed by this notion of Richard Reynold's indispensability, I confess I wasn't. Indeed, when it came right down to it, if I had money to invest, which I don't -- I have only one investment, and it's called a store -- I already knew Rick was the last person I'd have look after it for me.

But at least, all were accounted for, except for one couple meeting us at Taberda.

'I think they're calling our flight, Rick, I said, gesturing toward the gate. I'd leave it to Susie to find out all there was to know about Rick Reynolds.

'I find a hat pin is very effective in warding off unwanted advances, Susie was saying to Catherine as I caught up to them in the boarding line. 'I always have one with me when I travel, she added, pointing to a rather lethal looking pin in her felt chapeau. The pin was about four inches long, a large fake ruby gemstone at one end, and an unprotected point at the other. I wondered if they'd let her on the plane with it.

'I'd have said a Swiss army knife would be better, Marlene said. 'I have one.

'A gun works best of all, Jimmy said, turning to look back at the two women. 'But Betty here made me leave mine at home. He gave his wife a baleful glance.

'Have a chocolate, Ben said from behind me. This is going to be quite the trip, I thought, helping myself to a large chunk of candy.

Taberda is a glorious little town built on the top and down the sides of a cliff high above Tunisia's Gulf of Hammamet. It is a sun-drenched cluster of brilliant white houses, domes and minarets, accented with a distinctive blue, with terraces cascading down the sides of the hill to a tiny harbor and fishing port, and further along, a small but very pretty beach. Originally a Berber village, it was now the haunt of wealthy Tunisians and travelers who eschewed the more crowded and popular tourist zones that lay to the south and north of it.

I had first crossed the threshold of the Auberge du Palmier twenty years earlier as a new bride. I fell in love in an instant: the gentle rattle of the palm tree in the courtyard, the intense blue of the windows and doors against the stark white of the walls, the smooth feel of the marble beneath the feet, tumbling vines set against glowing tilework, and from somewhere, the scent of oranges and jasmine. I'd loved it then, and, despite everything that had transpired in the intervening years, I loved it now. Better still, I could see the magic working on my weary little band of travelers who were as enchanted as I was.

'My, isn't this nice! Susie sighed.

'Perfect, Aziza agreed.

'It's very good to see you again, Mme Swain, Mohammed, the concierge said, taking my carry on bag. I winced. Mohammed had insisted on calling me Mme Swain when I came here with Clive, despite my protestations that my name was still McClintoch, and I didn't think anything would change him now. He looked older, his face a little more weathered, and he stooped a little too, but his friendly smile was the same. He was probably past it, as concierges go, but it said something about the nature of the place that the management had kept him on. I found, despite all my misgivings about revisiting the place, I was pleased to see him, the Swain name notwithstanding, and more than that, delighted to be there.

The auberge was built as a family home in the 1930's by the father of the current innkeepers, a Frenchman who'd come to North Africa to make his fortune, and stayed because he loved it. The house had been his passion, a folly of sorts, a magnificent home, a villa or a palace really, on which he'd lavished his attention, and much of his cash. He'd lost the place in the troubles in the late 1950's and early 1960's, when the country was agitating for independence from French rule. Like most of his compatriots, he'd fled with his wife and daughters, Sylvie and Chantal, to France. But Tunisia had been in their blood, and Sylvie and Chantal had returned to Taberda a few years later, now to run the hotel for the current owner, a charming man by the name of Khelifa Dridi.

Like most houses in Taberda, the inn showed a virtually blank wall to the street, dazzling white walls broken only by large solid wood gates in the traditional keyhole shape, decorated with metal studs, and painted a glorious blue that mirrored the sky and sea, and the cascading branches of bougainvillea in purple and pink. Once inside the gates, it was a different story. The house was on the outskirts of Taberda, about two thirds of the way up the hill, and had a wonderful view back to the town's terraces to one side, and the Mediterranean on the other. The gardens were truly lovely, with palms and orange trees, and a profusion of flowers, hibiscus in yellow and scarlet, pink, lilac and white oleander, and a small, but pretty swimming pool.

The large double entrance doors opened into a two-story gallery of white marble columns supporting the second floor, which surrounded the entranceway like a gallery. The upper portions of the columns and arches between them were so delicately and intricately carved that it is almost impossible to believe it was marble. The walls in this area were sheathed in an incredible rose marble, and the floors were marble too, covered at regular intervals with beautiful carpets. The most wonderful feature of all was the carved wood ceiling, painted dark red and gold.

To the right of the entranceway, was a sitting room, which doubled as a tea room and bar, with several couches, all covered with kilims, or woven carpet, throws. There were niches in all the windows, filled with benches and pillows, and to one side a chess board was set up. At the back, in a large alcove under the overhang of the floor above, was an eating area. Further along was the so-called music room, with lovely light streaming through the windows, and a little library and reading area.

To the left, past the stairs to the second floor and through large doors was a courtyard open to the sky. In it was the palm tree after which the auberge was named.

The hotel was to be our base during the stay in Tunisia, a pleasant refuge from which we'd head out every day to see the sights -- Tunis and Carthage to the north, Sousse, further south, and later, the Roman ruins on the edge of the desert, and then into the desert itself. Despite its size as a family home, as hotels go, it was small, intimate. Our group had, in fact, pretty much taken over the whole inn, and in recognition of that fact, Sylvie, Chantal and Sylvie's daughter Elyse were waiting for us when we arrived.

'Mesdames, messieurs, bienvenue ^ l'Auberge du Palmier, Sylvie said.

'What language is she talking? Jimmy said in a somewhat irritated tone. 'Can't she speak English?

'French, Aziza replied. 'It's the country's second language after Arabic. Tunisia was once part of France's empire. She is welcoming us to the hotel. Merci, Madame, she added in Sylvie's direction. 'Votre auberge est tr s gentille. Aziza speaks French, I thought. That was good to know. She wouldn't need as much assistance getting around as some of the others.

'You are all most welcome, Sylvie said, switching to English. 'We want you all to have a wonderful stay here in Taberda. And now, may I attend to some formalities?

In short order, everyone had their room keys and had been assisted to their rooms. The guest rooms were located off the upstairs hallway which overlooked the main space below. As tired as I was, there was no time for rest for me. I had only a moment or two to see my room, a small but almost perfect single which had once

housed an artist's studio, where according to Sylvie, she and her sister had once had weekly art lessons. The room had a tiled entranceway, marble floors, and one of those boxed beds Clive was so keen to acquire for the store, and I thought would be perfect for the film star, a bed essentially built into an alcove, and surrounded by a glorious carved wood frame. I sat on the bed for a moment or two. It was perfect, and I was looking forward to falling into it. It had been a very long day: the overseas flight, the stopover in Frankfurt, another flight, and then the usual customs formalities, and an almost two-hour bus ride to our destination. Sleep was something I needed very badly.

In the meantime, however, I had work to do. First I checked that the remaining two members of our group had arrived, which indeed they had: Clifford Fielding, an American, and a woman by the name of Nora Winslow, who described herself as Fielding's companion, whatever that meant. They had requested adjoining rooms. 'Monsieur Fielding, he is resting, Sylvie said. 'Tr s charmant, our M. Fielding. And the other one, she has gone jogging, she added, her distaste for such an activity, and the person undertaking it, plainly evident. She had a point. Why would anyone travel all the way to North Africa to go jogging? 'Ah, there she is. Madame Winslow, this is Madame McClintoch, she called out to a very fit looking woman in jogging attire who was heading up the stairs.

Nora Winslow had a nice firm handshake, and the body to go with it. Rather androgynous in appearance, with long legs and a slim, wiry body with nice muscle definition, she was about my age, early to mid-forties, and had short-cropped hair, bleached by the sun, and an even tan. Group athlete, I thought to myself. 'I'm very glad you'll be joining us, I said aloud. 'You'll meet the others at dinner, 7:30 to 8 here in the lounge. Will you tell Mr. Fielding for me?

'Of course, Nora said rather abruptly. 'See you, she added, before bounding up the stairs two at a time. Not a great conversationalist, our Ms. Winslow.

Next, with everyone accounted for, I met briefly with the guide who had greeted us at the airport and who would be with us on all our tours, a pleasant young woman by the name of Jamila Melka, to make sure the arrangements for the next day's tours were in good shape. Then I called our resident expert guide, an archaeologist and historian by the name of Briars Hatley -- an unusual name to be sure, but one I'd take over Chastity any day. I'd found Briars through some contacts I had in the field. He was a professor of archaeology from UCLA, a specialist on the Phoenician period in Tunisia, and was on sabbatical, working at a site on the Gulf of Hammamet, he told me. He confirmed he'd be at the hotel

shortly to meet me, and was ready to start the next day.

'Can they spare you at the site? I asked him. I had been told he was the project director, and was pleased we'd been able to hire him.

'They can, he chuckled. 'I have a very competent assistant. And I'm delighted to have a real paying job for a few days.

'Why don't you join us for dinner at the auberge this evening, then? I said. 'We'll throw in a good meal, too. We're having a Tunisian style feast tonight to get things off to a roaring start. You could get acquainted with everyone.

'I never turn down a good meal, particularly given the grub I've been eating the last while. Regrettably, our housekeeper quit and we've had to do our own cooking, he said. 'I'll be there, with bells on.

'About 7:30 or 8, I said, concluding the call.

Next I typed up a list of all our guests and their room numbers, had it copied, and arranged to have the list slid under everyone's doors. I figured it would help people remember names that evening.

Then it was off to the kitchen to consult with Chantal, who was head chef for the evening. We went over all the details of the menu, then, with Sylvie and Jamila, I went to see to the room setup. Clive had insisted we start with a big dinner, even though I protested that people would be too tired. 'You start big, and end big, he insisted. 'Then everyone will be happy. You'll see.

We had two large tables of eight, plus one extra setting at one of the tables for Briars. I decided to split up the couples, except for the group whiner and her mother. 'Who do you figure will get lost first? I said to Jamila, as she helped me put out placecards.

'Catherine, she replied. 'She is the kind of woman who has been looked after all her life, and can't find her way anywhere by herself.

'You could just as easily say Betty by that criterion, I laughed. 'I vote for Rick. He'll be too busy making deals over his cellphone to notice the rest of us have all moved on. Why do you figure he came on a trip like this?

'I see that type all the time, Jamila said. 'Men who work day and night for years and years. Never marry, or the wife leaves them because she's alone all the time. Then one day, right around 40 or 45 -- I think that's his age, don't you? -- they wake up and realize life is passing them by. They find they have few close friends, just casual acquaintances from the office, and no real stories to tell. But they do have money, so they try to buy some experiences: this trip, for example. Rick's got the look all over him. I agree he is a candidate for first person lost, but my money is still on Catherine. Want to bet a dinar or two? she asked, referring to the local coinage.

'A dinar, I said. 'You're on.

Cocktails were to be served at 7, and I had barely enough time to shower and change into something more party-like before it was time for the festivities to begin. I threw on a silk dress, some lipstick and eyeliner, looked longingly at the bed, and then headed down to the bar. We'd taken over the lounge, by and large, for the party. There were a couple of local businessmen there, but they soon left the place to us. It started quietly enough, but gradually our travelers began to drift in, and as the drinks flowed, the decibel level rose. On the bar were lovely pottery dishes decorated with elaborate Moorish patterns, heaped with glistening olives and sun-dried sweet peppers. Waiters passed plates heaped with tiny briks, succulent warm and savory pastries filled with eggs, or meat and perfumed with olives and capers and cilantro. Others passed platters of doigts de Fatma, Fatima's fingers, slender tubes of golden pastry filled with potato and onions. Still others brought artichokes stuffed with ricotta and tuna. And then there were slices of baguette -- the French might have left Tunisia, but they'd left a number of culinary traditions behind -- topped with goat cheese and roasted tomatoes.

Susie was the first to arrive. She'd exchanged her pink and green tights for white pants and a pink tee-shirt. Catherine was one of the early birds too, in a very elegant long skirt and starched white cotton blouse with a lace collar. She was wearing pearls this time, and while they make pretty realistic fakes these days, I was reasonably sure these were the real thing. I sincerely hoped she had taken the advice to lock up the rest of her jewelry, and debated about mentioning it again, but it wasn't necessary. Susie was on it right away. 'I'll do it after dinner, Catherine replied. 'I was just too tired when we first got here.

'Don't you forget, honey, Susie said. 'I'll remind you. That would have been enough to make me dash right back to the room to get them just to make her stop,

but Catherine was made of sterner stuff than I.

Most of the others arrived in one big bunch. Aziza was absolutely spectacular in a royal blue silk sheath, and Curtis looked rather fetching too, in a white suit that showed off his admirable tan to perfection. Marlene and Chastity arrived in similar little black dresses, with Emile, casually elegant in a dark suit and white turtleneck, in tow; Betty wore an attractive yellow pant suit, her husband slacks and blazer. Ben came in looking fairly casual, in slacks and sweater over a shirt and tie, Edmund, the fashion plate, wore a white tee-shirt and black slacks, and a heavy silver bracelet. It was all rather festive.

Nora arrived with her arm linked through that of a rather debonair older man, about sixty, I'd say, with a smashing red cravat, blue blazer and gray trousers. While he looked very distinguished, she was dressed in white shorts and a sleeveless tee-shirt with a very low scooped neck and large dangly earrings in the shape of a parrot. I made a mental note to tell her that when we were out visiting the sites, particularly the mosques, she would have to cover up.

'Hey, how ya doin'?' I heard, and realized that the last of our group had arrived: Rick, in a spanking new leisure outfit, who proceeded to bore everybody with how many calls he'd had to make to his office since we'd arrived. 'Market's open back home, now, he said. 'Gotta stay on top of it. Rick, I had already decided, was going to redefine the word shallow on this trip. Even Clive at his worst had more interesting things to say than he did, and was less self-centered. I left Rick to it, and moved on.

It was my first opportunity to meet Cliff Fielding, but I had barely introduced myself, when Susie was on the case. 'Where are you two from?' she asked.

'Dallas, Cliff said pleasantly. Up close, I decided Fielding was older than I'd originally thought, closer to seventy than sixty, but in remarkably good shape for his age.

'Dallas! Susie exclaimed. 'Didn't you say your name is Winslow, Nora? I have a cousin in Dallas by the name of Fred Winslow. Small world, eh? Do you know him? Maybe we're related.

Nora looked startled at the notion of being a relative of Susie's. 'No, she said. 'I don't. Making conversation with Nora was hard work, even for Susie.

'I should send him a postcard, Susie went on. 'Maybe the two of you could get together when you get back. Nora looked less than thrilled with the idea.

'What do you do, Cliff? Susie went on, oblivious to the fact that Cliff and Nora were trying to move away.

'I am a dentist, but I'm retired now, he replied. 'I have a little company, only five employees.

'My husband, Arthur, had a small business too. He was an engineer. What does your company do?

'It manages my investments, he said. For once, Susie was speechless.

Group tycoon, was what I was thinking. 'You'll have to meet Rick, was what I said out loud, however. 'He's in a similar business, I believe. Cliff was about to allow himself to be lead over to meet Rick, when Nora grasped his arm and steered him in another direction. It seemed that Nora was the one to decide whom Cliff was to meet, and when, and although as far as I knew, she hadn't as yet had any opportunity to be bored to tears by Rick, she had other plans for Cliff.

Shortly after eight, Sylvie clapped her hands for attention and announced that dinner was served. We went into the candle-lit courtyard, and sat at the tables around the palm tree. The courtyard looked magnificent. The tables were set with red tablecloths, with cutlery of brass. The glassware was richly decorated in gold. In the background, the music of the Malouf could be heard, exotic and soulful. At each place there was a small round or oval metal container, some engraved with flowers or swirls, others with brightly colored enamel work, against which the place cards leaned. I'd dashed out in the afternoon to buy them. They were not expensive, but they were very attractive, and I thought they would make nice, and portable, mementos of the occasion. As Clive had said a hundred times, if he'd said it once: make sure everyone has a good time. It seemed to work. Everyone admired the workmanship, and wanted to know what they were. 'Small powder cases, I told them, 'as in gunpowder. Now you can use them for whatever you wish -- tie tacks, rings, pills, whatever. Everyone seemed delighted with them.

There was a fair amount of confusion at first about the seating arrangements, with Nora insisting that she had to sit with Cliff. 'He's not as strong as he could be, she whispered to me. 'I want to sit with him in case he needs my help. He didn't look

as if he needed much help to me, but I decided not to argue, and we rearranged the seating to accommodate them. Cliff sat with Nora to his right, and Catherine Townsend to his left.

The meal started with a traditional Tunisian soup, chorba el khodra, a nice thick vegetable soup thickened with tiny pasta. Then, with a flourish, the waiters strode from the kitchen with platter after platter of food. There was couscous, at least two or three kinds, one with lamb meatballs, one with vegetables, another with chicken; mechouia, a dish made of grilled tomatoes and peppers, spiced up with harissa, the Tunisian hot sauce, and the spice blend called tabil; heaping bowls of carrots, glistening with olive oil, redolent with caraway and sprinkled with parsley, and plates of grilled meat of various kinds. The air was filled with the scent of cumin and coriander, fennel and cinnamon. A collective sigh of contentment went up as the group tucked in to their meal. 'This is just divine, Betty said, and several others murmured their agreement. It occurred to me that what Betty really liked best was sitting at a different table from her husband. She immediately engaged Ed in conversation and was soon giggling away happily.

Almost everyone, indeed, seemed to be having a good time, except for one or two of them. 'What's this? Chastity said, poking at the food on her plate.

'I don't know, dear, her mother said. 'And we do have to be very careful what we eat in these primitive countries.

'Chicken, Jimmy said. 'I should know. But they've put something strange on it. I assume he meant the cumin. Chastity looked at her plate rather dubiously.

'I'm sure there must be a McDonald's or something around here somewhere, dear, Marlene went on. 'We'll find it tomorrow.

'Actually, no there isn't, I said, with some satisfaction. 'I don't believe there are any burger joints in this country.

Marlene looked horrified. Her daughter looked as if she was about to cry. 'Tragic, Chastity said.

Ben just smiled. He was a man who enjoyed his food. He'd sampled all the appetizers and gone back for his favorites more than once, and had heaped his plate at dinner. He took a large bite of the suspect food, poured himself a generous glass of wine from the decanter on the table, and raised his glass. 'Delicious, he

proclaimed. 'Whatever it is.

Nora ate silently, sharing only a word or two with Cliff and hardly anything with Marlene who sat on her other side. Cliff, though, seemed to be enjoying himself, engaging in animated conversation with Catherine, on his left. From time to time, both of them would erupt in laughter. When that happened, Nora would insinuate herself into the conversation for a moment or two before pulling back into her shell.

Curtis did not appear to be having as good a time as the rest of us, but for a different reason. He kept looking over at the other table where his wife, the beautiful Aziza, was talking in French in an animated fashion to the handsome and flirtatious, although in a relatively harmless way, Emile St. Laurent. He's jealous, I thought, not surprisingly. She was lovely, but more than that, she was his meal ticket. Golf wasn't going to make his fortune, his relationship with Aziza was, and he wasn't about to give her up any time soon. Betty tried manfully to engage him in conversation, but soon gave up, and turned her attention back to Ed.

We were already on the main course and well into the wine when Briars arrived. 'Sorry, he said. 'Problem at the site. Shall I go around and say hello to everyone, or can I eat first?

'Sit down and eat, I said, remembering he'd been cooking for himself. 'Make your own introductions here, and I'll introduce you to the other table later.

'Thanks, he said, reaching for some couscous. 'I'm starving.

'Man after my own heart, Ben said. 'Eat first. Deal with problems later. Try some of this excellent local wine. Magon, I think the waiter says it's called. I'm Ben Miller, by the way. Harvard. I understand you're from UCLA.

And so the conversation went, and by and large, the evening seemed to go quite well. Everyone made an effort to get along with everyone else, even with Chastity. When she began to whine that there was nothing she wanted for dessert, Ben picked up a branch of dates, and offered her one.

'Try it, he commanded in a voice I expect he put to good use in the lecture hall.

Chastity took the proffered piece of fruit, and carefully placed it in her mouth. 'Oh, was all she said, a look of surprise crossing her face as she reached for another.

Ben grinned across the table at me.

'Excellent evening, he said.

And it was. People stayed at the tables long after they needed to, and lingered over coffee and fruit. Briars, a good meal in him at last, was charming and funny, and had everyone eating out of his hand within minutes. People came and went. From time to time, someone would get up to get another drink from the bar, or go to the bathroom, but no one seemed inclined to cut the evening short, even Ben when Chastity, pushing back her chair suddenly without looking behind her, and nearly flattening Susie in the process, also knocked over a glass of wine sending splatters of red all over his sweater. He just got up, disappeared for a few minutes, and returned with a clean sweater on, his good humor intact. Aziza left for a few minutes to go upstairs to pick up a wrap as the air in the courtyard cooled with the evening, and Curtis followed her. People switched places from time to time to talk to someone new: Ed got up and came over to chat to Ben for a few minutes. Susie bobbed around the room continuing her interrogation of anyone she'd missed at the airport or the cocktail party. Emile and Cliff, two businessmen who'd presumably found much in common, got into a discussion about fine cognac, then went into the bar to see what they could come up with, leaving Nora who went to exchange a few words with Rick before going to find Cliff. Even Marlene felt safe enough to leave her daughter alone for a moment and went over to talk to Betty Johnstone. I kept up my end of the conversation as best I could and tried not to fall asleep right then and there. In my sleep-deprived state, I was even beginning to credit Clive with being the genius he always said he was.

All that changed in an instant. 'It's gone, Catherine gasped, almost falling into the room in her distress. 'My gold necklace. It's been stolen!