

The Hawthorne's Sting

Chapter One

One thing was clear to Greg Hayward. He enjoyed running in Bath far more than he did here in Ilfracombe. All the roads here seemed to be either downhill or uphill, with very few flat areas in between. Right now he was struggling to just put one foot in front of the other, but at least he was finally on a long, slightly downhill section. Unfortunately, the macadam surface had given way to uneven paving stones, and this particular stretch of road also leaned slightly toward the harbor, so every stride he took made him feel off balance.

Careful, he cautioned himself. Better to be safe than to end up bloodied on the ground.

Catching a toe on one of the paving stones could be disastrous, but he glanced to his right anyway for a glimpse of the gigantic Verity statue out on the quay, her upraised sword saluting the sky over the Bristol Channel. The pregnant, partially dissected statue wasn't without controversy, but Greg liked it in spite of that. He thought there was a graceful power in her pose. Certainly more graceful than the awkward stumble his diverted attention caused when he nearly collided with a low stone wall topped with sharp rocks.

Focus, you prat. At least try to get back to the B&B in one piece.

Head bent forward, he returned his attention to the road. A few more side streets, then a twist and a turn, and he could begin to force his way up the final bugger of a hill that led to the B&B. Just before he reached the curve onto Broad Street, though, he heard footsteps behind him, matching his pace. Then he felt a prick, like an insect sting, on his left shoulder. A woman passed him on the right, her blonde ponytail bouncing in the salty air. Her words drifted lazily back to him.

“Catch me if you can.”

A deep gray film drifted into his consciousness, and sight and sound slid away.

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A man's voice entered the darkness. "*Comment vous sentez-vous, monsieur?*"

Greg opened his eyes, slowly, painfully. The man was speaking French, and Greg didn't understand a word of it. Well, maybe a few words, "*monsieur*" and "*vous*," but that was all. He assumed he was the *monsieur*, but mostly he was just confused. And his head hurt like the devil.

He was in a hospital bed, in a darkened room, and a man and woman in white lab coats were leaning over him. He said, "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"*Vous êtes anglais?*"

Anglais. English. He knew that one too. Greg nodded, and the man, while smiling and holding up his index finger to Greg in the universal 'wait a minute' gesture, told the woman who was standing beside him, "*Aller, Nicole, chercher Margaux.*"

Margaux did arrive quickly. The man waved her in, and she said, "*Oui, docteur?*"

"*Il est un britannique. Ne parle pas français.*"

She turned to Greg and said, "Hello, *monsieur*. My name is Margaux. Do you know where you are?"

Greg couldn't answer at first. His eyes were locked on Margaux. He thought she was possibly the most beautiful human being he had ever seen. She had high cheekbones that descended into amazing dimples when she smiled, large deep-blue eyes, lightly flecked with green, and a delightful smile. Then he realized she was repeating her question.

"Sorry," he said, "I'm obviously in hospital, but..."

"Yes, you are. How do you feel?"

Another difficult question. He felt entranced by her presence, he felt lucky to be talking to such a lovely creature, he felt like he wanted to get to know her better, and he also felt he had better not express those thoughts because — obviously— she wasn't asking about any of that. He finally said, "Well, my head hurts a lot, back here."

He started to reach behind his head with his left hand, and saw that most of his forearm was thoroughly bandaged, some pinkish fluid beginning to seep through part of the gauze. When he tried to switch to his right arm, he noticed the IV needle in it.

"What the hell happened to me?" he asked.

To allay his concern, Margaux, who had been conveying his comments to the doctor, pulled up a chair, and took his left hand as she sat down. Greg was momentarily glad they didn't have him hooked up to any monitors. Her touch was so electric he was positive he would have blown the machine's fuse.

She said, "Why don't we start with me explaining what we know about you and why you are here. Would that be all right?"

"Okay," Greg said. He gazed steadily at her, trying to focus only on her words. An impossible task.

"Let's begin with what your name is."

"It's Greg Hayward. And you're Margaux, right?" he said, looking at the name badge just a few inches above what he was imagining was an outstanding breast.

"Yes, *exactement*. I am going to be translating for Doctor Devereaux since he speaks very little English."

"Sure, that's great," Greg said, "but ... why is everyone speaking French?"

"Well, because you are in France, *monsieur*."

At first Greg thought he hadn't understood her, but she looked at him with such seriousness of purpose that he knew he had heard her correctly. That was impossible, though.

The last thing he remembered was taking his evening run in Ilfracombe.

And a woman.

And a bee sting.

Greg panicked and tried to pull out his IV. Several pairs of hands pushed him back down onto the bed. They were all trying to calm him down, but he was putting up quite a struggle. Out of the corner of his eye he could see someone injecting some clear liquid into the IV line, and moments later he relaxed like a deflating air mattress, his bones and flesh melting casually into the bed. As he gazed up into Margaux's worried eyes, her hand now on his forehead, the room faded from view and he slipped into darkness once more.

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It was the next morning. Margaux had finished her rounds, and should have been on her way home by now, but she was worried about the man who had identified himself as Greg Hayward. They had kept him on a mild sedative all night, gradually reducing the dose. He should be waking up soon, and she wanted to be there when he did. She didn't know why she was so interested in him. Yes, he was handsome enough, but that wasn't especially important to her. She had the feeling he was a gentle soul, and didn't deserve what had happened to him, so maybe there was an element of pity in her desire to be here to ease him safely back into consciousness. She also felt a connection to him that she couldn't explain, though.

As if on cue, his eyelids began to flutter. He moved slightly, sighed, and said, "It's you."

She smiled. "Yes, *monsieur*. You remember me?"

"Yes. You're the nurse. The interpreter."

“*Oui*. My name is Margaux Brillon, and I will continue to translate for you while you are here. Do you speak any French at all?”

“Very little. Just schoolboy French, and that was years and years ago.”

“Then I will be here in the afternoons and evenings. In the daytime someone, probably Nicole or Frederic, will help you.”

“Oh,” he said, a hint of disappointment in his voice, “You’re about to go?”

“My shift is over, but I can stay for a little while if you like.”

“Good,” he said, as if relieved.

She smiled. And blushed. “Perhaps I should, what’s the phrase, catch you up?”

“Catch me up to speed? Yes, please.” Asking the obvious question first, he said, “Why am I here?”

He didn’t seem to be panicked this time, just curious about his situation, so Margaux thought he was showing improvement.

“First of all, you shouldn’t worry,” she said, “but this is what we know. You were found in the road yesterday afternoon, in *le centre-ville*, the downtown area, and were taken to one of our emergency clinics. You had apparently been in an accident when you were jogging. The attendants said you were struggling and anxious, and, frankly, they said you were babbling nonsense, so once you were stabilized they brought you here.”

“Where is here?”

“Ah, I haven’t told you. You are in the *Hospitalière de la Toussaint*, in Caen. Can you tell me why you were so upset yesterday?”

“Well, I’m still worried, because the last I remember I was jogging, and I did pass out, but I was in England, in Ilfracombe, which is on the west coast ... what, maybe two hundred miles from here? And a hundred of that is over water.”

“That *is* most strange.”

He asked her what day it was, and she said, “It’s the 12th of June.”

“Of June?”

“*Oui.*”

“It was the 21st of May when I...” He hesitated, not wanting to admit to himself what that meant. After a few moments of silence he voiced it aloud. “I’ve lost over three weeks?”

“Apparently so, *monsieur*, but I don’t want you to be concerned about this. We will help you figure it out. At least we know your name now, and we can release that information to see if someone recognizes you. Someone must be worried about you.”

He grinned. “I’m worried about me too. Either I’m crazy, or something crazy has happened to me. Did I have anything with me when I was hurt? A mobile phone?”

“*Un portable?* No.” Looking at his chart, she said, “You were wearing running shorts and shoes. You had two keys in your shorts, possibly for a house and a car, and you were wearing a watch and a silver chain.”

“A chain? I’ve never worn anything like that. And I didn’t have my iPod? I almost always take my mobile and my iPod when I go for a run.”

“The chain was around your neck. It had a small pendant of a runner on it. You own nothing like that?” He shook his head, no, so she suggested, “Perhaps that was why you were injured. If your mobile and your iPod are missing it might have been a robbery.”

“Maybe so.”

“But you are safe now. That is what counts.”

“I suppose.”

Just then a nurse’s head appeared in the doorway saying, “*Margaux, il a un visiteur.*”

A young woman entered, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Margaux guessed she was in her late twenties, maybe a couple of years older than her. A huge smile spread across the woman’s face. “Oh, Greg. Thank god. I was so worried. Are you okay?”

He hesitated. “Uh, fine. I think.”

She turned to Margaux and held out her hand. “Hello. I’m Claire Borrowman, Greg’s fiancée. I’ve been checking all the hospitals since he didn’t come back to our hotel last night.”

The word fiancée took Margaux by surprise. She accepted Claire’s proffered hand and shook it lightly. She knew she should never develop romantic feelings for a patient, but her reaction was apparent proof that she had. Her disappointment lifted slightly, though, when Greg said to Claire, with the sincere politeness often expected of the British, if not always attained, “I’m sorry if this seems rude, but I don’t think I know you.”

If Margaux had been looking at Greg instead of Claire, his befuddled look alone would have told her that he hadn’t expected the word fiancée either. Unfortunately, his diagnosis also seemed certain now. Some sort of amnesia.

“I won’t swear to it,” she said, “but I think I know what has happened. Greg — Mr. Hayward — has had some trauma to his head, and that could account for his memory loss. He said just before you arrived that he was baffled about the loss of time, and now we might know why. Just a moment, I’m going to fetch Dr. Deveraux.”

When she returned with the doctor, Claire had taken Margaux’s position in the chair, but it seemed apparent that Claire and Greg had spent the few minutes in awkward silence. After

introductions and a brief recap of everything they knew so far, relayed through Margaux, the doctor said that he would like to keep Greg a while longer, especially because of his head injury, but he should be able to go home in a couple of days.

Margaux turned to Claire, “I have to go now. My shift is over, but I will be back tonight. Why don’t you come in tomorrow morning and we will both talk to Monsieur Hayward. Perhaps we can help him recover some of his memory.”

Claire looked at Margaux with the firmness of a gold miner staking a claim. “I’ll stay here with him for a little while now, if that’s all right.”

“Of course,” Margaux said, “but don’t stay too long. His rest is important.”

“Of course,” Claire replied, with an icy smile that did little to hide how she felt about Margaux.