

Diana R. Chambers - Excerpt

The Company She Keeps, Chapter 21

By Diana R. Chambers

The grayness of Paris never entered E's spirit. The winter passed in a golden haze. She continued to work, thinking she might switch to part-time after the marriage. At least, after she got pregnant. She smiled at the thought. *Maybe Monique can be godmother.*

She was busy at the travel agency—although never too busy for a good meal with Monique. But on that dark March day, Monique had a prior engagement and E decided to walk to the corner café for a quick bite. It was colder than she'd expected, but not worth going back for her fur. The “mysterious lynx”—as Monique called it, wondering who was the man attached. *What makes you think there's a man? Ma chère, there is always a man.* What was attached in E's mind was the pain, but that was private. Along with her old life—and Nick. And the blood....

E shrugged deeper inside her sweater, turning her thoughts to lunch. Either a sandwich or some *soupe à l'oignon*. *With all that gloppy cheese. Nice and hot...*

Suddenly, a beige Citroen with darkened windows pulled up along the curb. Its rear door swung open. A fair-haired man in gold-rimmed sunglasses got out, grabbed her arm and pushed her in. He slipped in beside her and slammed the door. The car sped off. It all happened so quickly; E was sinking into the cushiony seat before she even had time to think—to protest, to fight back.

The vehicle whipped around corners and down narrow streets. Outraged, she glared at the man, unruffled in his crisp, beige raincoat. “What is this? Who are you?!” A polished exterior was all she saw. His pale face was closed and silent. She stared. There was something familiar about him. “Who are you?” She felt the onset of hysteria and steeled herself, needing to remain calm.

More silence.

Then, after a desperate search of her memory, E remembered. And was now truly frightened. He was the man at the top of the Gstaad chairlift. The man in white who almost collided into them—and dropped these very sunglasses. *He's kidnapping me! Why?*

“Merde!” The grizzled driver cursed as he turned onto avenue George V. The *circulation* had slowed to a near halt. He honked, but there was nowhere to go.

E had been waiting for this moment. She grabbed the door handle. *Locked!* She glanced wildly about... seeking an answer, an angle. *Anything.* All she could see of the driver was the back of his neck—no hope of contact. Her captor continued to stare straight ahead in blank silence. The car itself was a sort of void, which threatened to swallow her into its buttery soft leather and deep cushions. She crossed her arms and sat at the edge of the seat, trying to hold back the queasy feeling in her stomach. Trying to remain alert for a way out.

The Citroen inched forward, finally reaching the end of avenue George V, the place de l'Alma. There, at the foot of the bridge, it stopped.

E reached for the door again—and this time it opened. She rushed out—defiant, ready to flee. She looked around for an escape route—but what she saw made her bones turn cold and froze her to the spot....

A tall man in a windbreaker, leaning against a wrought iron lamppost. *Nick!*

She stared, stunned. Her heart stopped.

But then a wave of anger struck—hard—so hard it knocked the breath out of her. She could barely whisper. “*You promised!*”

He eased toward her. “I happened to be in town... and was wondering about lunch?”

“You have some nerve—scaring me like this. You think this cloak and dagger shit is *funny?*”

“I knew you wouldn’t talk to me any other way.”

“Well, you were right about that!” Her eyes blazed.

“What I’d really like is a hot dog—but I’ll settle for a *sandwich gruyère*. How about you?”

“I have lost my appetite. And, don’t think I owe you anything because of that money—that *blood* money you stashed in my bag.”

“No thanks expected.”

“None offered.”

Nick reached for her arm. Livid, E shook off his hand. “The entrance to the sewers is just across the bridge. Funny. I can smell them from *here*.”

He looked at her quietly, holding her gaze. “We have to talk.” Her expression was hard, not giving him anything. Nick moved down the path toward the river, then turned. He looked at her again and nodded.

Mouth set, keeping her distance, she followed. Down cold, stone steps to the Seine.

They reached the departure quay for the Bateaux Mouches sightseeing barges. One was waiting, nearly full. Nick knew he had to get her onboard—and keep her there. There would be no other way to hold this conversation.

“After you.”

Brushing icily past, she moved up the gangplank. He followed, elbowing his way through the crush of passengers to the second deck, then to an empty spot in the bow. “Well...?”

Nick studied her. Hands on her hips, fiery eyes, alive and beautiful. “Paris becomes you, E. How are you doing?”

“Great—till you showed up!”

The boat embarked with a lurch. Loudspeakers began blaring a multilingual commentary. Nick grinned at her. “In case you’ve been too busy for sightseeing.”

E knew he was trying to soften her up. She didn’t respond, armoring herself against a trap.

“Not gonna go easy on me, are you?”

Pointedly, she turned, staring straight ahead—oblivious to the granite vista of sky and river, oblivious to the mist rushing over her, the damp air. He placed his jacket on her shoulders, but she didn’t acknowledge the gesture. It was obvious he’d gone

to a lot of trouble to arrange this “meeting” and equally obvious that he’d “forgotten” his promise to leave her alone.

Nick sighed. *Best just begin. No way to sugarcoat it.* “You’re right—I kidnapped you. I broke my promise to stay out of your life. And, yes, I am bad news.” He looked down at his hands on the railing. The water below was black. “Really bad news.”

“You had me followed. That *awful* man?” She inclined her head toward shore.

“Henri? Once you get to know him—”

“*Why?* Why are you doing this to me, Nick?”

“Ironic, isn’t it? We finally slew the dragon—and now we find ourselves in a jungle full of snakes—poisonous and well-camouflaged.” Taking a deep breath, he looked up and felt the chill wind in his face. In his heart. “Karim’s import/export company is a front. He runs Iran’s Paris Logistics Center. His mission is to get around the international trade sanctions against his country—to acquire restricted technology, military materiel. Worse.”

“I thought you were the guys doing that!” Her tone was sharp. “Iran-Contra—right? Arms for hostages?”

“Something like that.”

“So, we can sell to Iran? Is that it?”

“It’s a messy part of the world—what can I say?”

She nodded grimly. “Pretty two-faced, don’t you think?” *My own government.*

She doesn’t know the half of it. But Nick only shrugged. “After Irangate—and Saddam—there was a lot of soul-searching back home. Then came the inevitable crackdown. Mansour fell into a Treasury sting.”

Sting? her face asked.

“Maybe he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe one of his friends wasn’t really a friend.” Nick narrowed his eyes. “These are not nice people, E.”

“You should talk!”

Nick tossed his head, not conceding her point. “Whatever. The fact is, the United States has an embargo against military and high-tech exports to Iran. Karim Mansour has been indicted in a conspiracy to violate that embargo.”

Dead silence. *Indicted?!* E was too stunned to react... yet.

“You met one of his associates—Eli Becker—in Gstaad?”

“Who?”

“Your dinner companion? The one who ‘bumped’ into him on the slopes.”

“How do you...? Oh, right. Your pasty-faced *friend*.” E didn’t try to disguise her scorn.

“That’s just the Israeli connection—but there are others. We need to find out about the rest of the network. We’d like you to help us get him someplace quiet—say a vacation in the Mediterranean?—so we can... talk to him.”

E erupted. “Why, you *bastard!*”

An impeccably dressed, middle-aged Japanese couple looked up in surprise. They didn’t understand English—but they needed no translation for her tone or the expression on her face.

“E? This is not just spare parts, not ordinary contraband. We’re talking *nasty* stuff—warheads packed with biotoxins or deadly chemical cocktails. Nerve gas. Poisons Saddam used against us—our troops—in the Gulf War. Now *they* want them. Even things up a little, I guess.”

She shook her head in denial.

“It’s for his own good. If he cooperates—gives us some useful intelligence regarding events in Iran—we may be able to cut a deal, protect him from less *kindly* elements of our government. Those Treasury guys are working on a scheme to get him out of France—to some country that *will* extradite him. For sure.” The enforcers worked out of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control—and they did not mess around.

Her face twisted in disgust. “Yeah. I give him to you and you give him to them.”

“Wrong. A deal is a deal.”

She stared. *A deal? Nick?*

Saddened by the cynicism in her eyes, Nick looked down into the murky, rushing Seine. But the murkiness E was probing was far more opaque than the river. The silence was broken only by the recorded travelogue.

“But... how did you know about me and Kari...?” Then, a big piece of the puzzle fell into place. She turned to him—absolutely repelled, her eyes dark slits—and slapped him hard across the face.

He took it, not trying to deflect the blow. It was the least he deserved.

The dignified Japanese couple, now convinced this was a lovers’ quarrel, averted their eyes, embarrassed at the public display.

E regarded him in utter horror. “It’s Monique—isn’t it?” Her words were like knives. Stiletos. *Isn’t it?*”

Nick met her gaze—the truth hung silently in the air between them.

She shook her head in sickened disbelief. “You set me up to work for her. And *she* works for you!” E was appalled. “My God! Where were you when they passed out consciences?”

Nick looked back down at his fingernails. “I’m sorry, E, but this is a case involving national security.”

Bitterly. “Aren’t they *all*?” E was stunned. It was like a body blow. She could not comprehend how Nick could have done this to her. And *Monique?*

He could feel the revulsion in E’s stare burning into his skull. Nick gazed blankly at the passing riverbank, stone gray buildings under leaden skies. There was a solitary fisherman hunched over a pole. *Good luck, pal.* Finally, there was no escape; he was compelled to look back at her—and felt the full force of her rage.

“Have you ever *not* lied to me?”

Then the expression on her face changed, but the smile was devoid of humor. “I know you don’t think much of my intelligence.” He winced. “But I’m no bimbo. I do read the papers—and I even read *between* the lines. You screwed up in the Gulf and need a new scapegoat. Or, at least, the good-old *old* one. Right?”

E wiped the mist off her face. She didn’t know why she was talking to him. *Besides being trapped on this damn boat.* For some crazy reason, his opinion still mat-

tered—in spite of everything—and she wanted to make him realize the truth. “Well, you’re wrong! Kari is the sweetest, gentlest man I’ve ever known. It’s just a typical American prejudice—that all Iranians are terrorists or criminals. Not Kari! We love each other, and he treats me like a queen. Doesn’t use me—like *some* other men.” Her fury had again risen. “And *hell* will freeze over before I have anything to do with you or your... *national security—ever again!*”

As she paused for a breath, Nick looked at her matter-of-factly, his tone flat. “E—everyone’s after him. Including the French, for customs violations. We’d like to debrief him first.” He smiled bleakly. “They may want to cut their own deal—and the French are not known for sharing their intelligence.”

Then Nick touched her arm gingerly, trying to avoid another slug. His earnestness was below the surface, but it was there. He cared about her and what she thought of him. “I want you to know—I didn’t set you up with him. When Karim’s name popped up in the investigation, my boss contacted Monique privately—and put the tail on you. He only told me *after* the indictment. That’s when he came up with the idea of using the charges to turn Karim, so we could find out about his organization.”

“But *you* set me up with her.”

“You didn’t have to call.”

She narrowed her eyes. *How low can you get?* “After you conveniently dropped me in Paris? Alone, on the verge of a nervous breakdown?”

He met her look. No answer. No defense. *And, yeah, I am pretty low.* “Sure, Monique’s one of our French assets—and I did ask her to help you out—but that was it.”

“But I *told* you I didn’t want you taking care of me any more.”

Nick sighed, only too aware of his obligation to take care of her. His personal obligation. His *moral* obligation. *No matter what she says.* Still, he wanted—if not forgiveness—at least, understanding. “The chief knew he was looking at a major intelligence scoop—and a serious career move—if he could recruit one of the ‘big guns’ in this technology theft ring. Maybe work out a long term relationship?”

“Sure... use Kari like you used me.”

Nick pressed on. “My boss leaned on me—hard—saying he needed *my* help to get *your* help.” His face twisted in an ironic grimace. “Thought I was the only one you’d listen to.” His voice trailed off.

E shook her head defiantly as she tossed him his jacket. “Well, he was wrong about *that*, wasn’t he?”

The hurt from this betrayal was devastating. Her anger served to dull the ache, but not dissipate it. *Nothing could.* Nick had done her in, playing with her head and her heart, polluting her ability to trust. She had thought he was a human being, but he wasn’t. Bitter in her contempt E lashed out, her words possessing the savagery of an arctic winter. “Now who do I have to *fuck* to get off this boat?”

Nick saw the ice floating on her eyes. It was transparent, brittle, painfully sharp. He could feel the throbbing below the surface. Her anguish was a palpable, physical thing. She got to him in a way he had never been reached before. And he was ashamed beyond words.

If E had looked at him, she would have seen the rawness of his emotions reflected on his face. He was naked for the world to see. For *her* to see. But she did *not* care to look. She was out of there.

Empty, Nick watched her turn and stride angrily down the deck. Wondering if any salary—any pension—was worth it.

For *that* matter—any “ideal.”