

DEAD RINGER

V. B. Tenery

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Dedication

To my Savior who blessed me with Mattie Tompkins
Tenery as my mother. She taught me if you can dream
it, you can do it.

1

Hamilton, Bermuda
Friday, May 5

Mercy Lawrence wouldn't have noticed the large man standing by the silver Mercedes except for the way he was dressed. Unlike the tourists on the sidewalk, he wore a light gray business suit and tie. Sunglasses hid the upper portion of his face, and the grim set of his mouth detracted from his otherwise handsome appearance. He stood beside the car's open back door, arms crossed as if waiting for someone.

Not wanting to stare, she tore her gaze away. In jeans, T-shirt, and sandals, she blended easily into the vacationers along the boulevard. She'd spent the last five months in this wonderful country, recuperating from a head injury. Most of her memory remained intact after the accident, but dark recesses still refused to reveal their mystery.

But tomorrow, like a good soldier, she would return to Houston and report to her new job at Sabine Oil, the fulfillment of a goal she'd worked towards for the past six years.

The city's main drag ran four lanes wide with a palm-tree-lined median, the sea on one side, shops and hotels on the other. A soft wind filled the air with the scent of sea kelp and brine, mixed with a light floral fragrance from the purple bougainvilleas hanging on

the walls along the walkway. Seagulls swept low over the water, looking out past the rolling surf for lunch.

She shook her hair loose from the confines of its ponytail clip and turned her face to the balmy sunshine—mainlining vitamin D. Her path took her within four feet of the parked car.

The man moved onto the sidewalk and grabbed her arm.

“Having fun, are we?” He spoke with a slight Scottish burr, the strange question more an accusation than a greeting.

She tried to jerk her arm away. “Let go of my arm.”

His grip tightened. “I’ll just bet you’ve been living it up.” His voice was harsh, his jaw tight.

No one intervened. Casual observers would think she knew him.

One hand locked on her arm, he shoved her into the backseat, slid in beside her, and slammed the door. His movements were so quick, so smooth, she had no time to struggle, no time to scream or put up a fight.

She swallowed the lump in her throat choking off oxygen. Women disappeared all too often on foreign soil, never seen or heard from again. “Who are you? What do you think you’re doing? Let me out. Now!”

He ignored her protests and leaned forward in the seat. “Airport, Fergus.”

Blood pounded a persistent rhythm in her ears. He couldn’t be police. They had to tell one the charges before making an arrest. Besides, she’d done nothing wrong.

Her heart skipped a beat. She wanted to run, but it was too late for that. Pivoting towards him, she drew back her arm and aimed the heel of her hand for an

upward thrust under his nose. The move from a seated position lacked the needed momentum.

He blocked the blow, slamming her back against the seat with a forearm of steel across her chest. "You dropped off the map six months ago. To do what, find yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." She squeezed her eyes shut. This couldn't be happening. "This is kidnapping. My name is Mercy Lawrence and people are expecting me back at my bungalow." She struggled against the vise-like grip, slapping at his hand.

"Stop it, and cut the crap, Traci, or I'll slap you back. Taking a wife, a *mother*, home to the son she abandoned is not kidnapping. Besides, you're not a kid."

2

Hamilton, Bermuda

Friday, May 5

His words startled Mercy into momentary shock. She stopped struggling, and sputtered. "My name isn't Traci. Y-you're crazy. Or delusional. I've never seen you before in my life. My passport and ID are in the bungalow." She pointed to the rear window. "Back there."

"I would agree that one of us is delusional." He removed the sunglasses and slipped one temple arm into the top pocket of his jacket. A cold, dark gaze bored into hers. "Ironic choice of name. We just left your cabin. The forgeries were excellent, but then your low-life friend can afford the best."

"You're speaking in riddles. What friend?"

He ignored her question, and his voice softened. "Traci, Daniel is sick. Three months ago, his doctor discovered he had a damaged heart valve. I started looking for you as soon as I heard. The surgeon repaired his heart, but it may be months before he's fully recovered. He's asking for you. I couldn't deny him—have him get upset. It could delay his recovery."

The man's obvious pain touched her, but it wasn't her fault. "Look, I don't want him upset, but I'm..."

He held up his hand. "I have a proposition. Come home and stay until he's well. Perhaps, no more than a

month, or two. When that day comes, you can leave. You can go with my blessings and enough money to keep you in Gucci splendor the rest of your life."

Mercy shook her head. "Look, Mister Whoever-You-Are, I am *not* Traci. In two months, the job I've worked for all my life will be gone. This is some horrible case of mistaken identity. You can verify what I'm saying with fingerprints and DNA."

His jaw muscles twitched. "Spare me the denials. You think I don't know the woman I've been married to for seven years? The hair is longer and darker blonde, but if that's supposed to be a disguise, it fails miserably. Airport facial identification software picked you up. There's no mistake."

That sounded familiar, but she had no idea how it worked. "Then the software is wrong. It obviously has a serious malfunction."

"When you disappeared, I thought Daniel and I were free of you." His tone turned harsh. "But Daniel hasn't forgotten. He still cries himself to sleep, calling for you, and now he's seriously ill. You owe him, Traci. You can't be so devoid of maternal instincts that you ignore him when he's sick."

If what he'd told her was true, his wife must have been a piece of work. That, or her husband made life so intolerable she had to escape. His overbearing demeanor made the latter a distinct possibility. "I'm sorry about your son—"

He growled. "Our son. Don't play games with me where Daniel is concerned."

She shook her head and covered her face with her hands. "For the last time, my name is Mercy. I'm not who you think I am."

He turned a hate-filled gaze on her. "You either

come willingly, or I'll tie and gag you. All I'm asking, all your son is asking for, is two months out of a lifetime to do the right thing—do something unselfish for once in your life."

How could she get through to him? He wouldn't listen and wasn't open to verifying her identity. Perhaps he was psycho. And she had no experience dealing with insanity.

She squirmed in the seat, chewing on her inner lip. "I don't have two months to spare. If I'm not in Houston on Monday, I'll lose the job, and I'm not Traci."

He put the sunglasses back on, visually shutting her out.

Sliding to the far corner of the seat, she crossed her arms and tried to calm down enough to think straight. She didn't want him to bind and gag her. That would lessen any chance to escape. Inhaling a deep breath, she asked, "Where's home?"

He glanced at her but said nothing. Oppressive silence filled the automobile until they reached a small private airfield near Wade International Airport. The Mercedes rolled to a stop next to a corporate jet poised on the runway. Wallace, Ltd., was emblazoned on the side. The name seemed familiar. She'd seen or heard the name before, but couldn't remember where.

The sight of the private plane kicked up her panic level another notch. The scent of pure fear enveloped her. Frantic prayers seared her thoughts so fervent the words ran together. Letting this stranger put her on a plane headed for a destination unknown was out of the question. He could be involved in human trafficking.

Everything he'd told her could be a lie. Once the doors closed, she would be at his mercy. He could toss

her into the sea for all she knew. No one would ever know. Another missing woman among thousands.

He got out and slammed the car door, came around, and jerked hers open, a disapproving sentry.

She slipped into the warm air, scanning the landscape for passengers, airport personnel, anyone to come to her aid.

He had chosen the spot well. The tarmac stood empty. Only private aircraft neatly tucked into hangers dotted the panoramic view.

If she was to make a move for freedom, time had run out. No one would come rushing to her rescue. She'd lied about someone waiting for her. Since he'd been at the bungalow, he already knew that. There were no close friends here, or for that matter, back in Houston. She'd never had time to make friends. Fending for herself came as natural as breathing, and she did not intend to go peacefully into the dark night.

A terrible thought struck her. In all the commotion, she'd forgotten about Paddy. Her cat. He was waiting for her at the cabin and with her gone, there'd be no one to take care of him. She couldn't leave him alone on the island.

Sucking in a resolute breath, she shoved past her captor, dodging as he lunged for her. She dashed down the runway and soon realized her sandals were never designed for sprinting. Feet pounded the cement behind her, the sound growing closer by the second. A strong arm grabbed her T-shirt, lifting her off the ground.

When he turned her to face him, she slapped him with every ounce of strength she possessed. The blow landed with a sharp *smack*. She raised her hand for another strike, but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her

in close, arms pinned to her side.

She tried to knee his groin, but he twisted her sideways. Thwarted, she drew her right leg back and kicked his shin.

He swore, and the next thing she knew she was upside down in a fireman's carry over his shoulder.

She dug her fingernails into the corded muscles on the back of his neck. A warm, wetness covered her fingertips. He swore again and two sharp slaps struck her backside, numbing both cheeks.

With her still struggling and kicking, he stomped back to the plane, up the stairs, and into the aircraft's entrance. Somewhere behind them, lights flashed. She scanned the field and watched as a man with a camera over his shoulder disappeared into the trees outside the runway.

Great. Perhaps he had recorded her abduction.

She pounded the man's back with her fists as he marched down the aisle to the back, opened a door and tossed her onto the bed.

Breathing heavy, his face flushed a smoldering red. "You'd best calm down before you force me to do something we'll both regret." He rubbed his neck, stalked out the door, and a lock snapped into place.

She scrambled off the bed. A weapon was her first priority. She checked the lamps. No good—bolted to the desk. A computer desk in the corner held possibilities. In one of the drawers, she found a letter opener and a metal stapler. She placed the opener in the back waistband of her jeans, the stapler under a pillow.

The aircraft rumbled down the runway and lifted off, tossing her back onto the bed. She brushed the hair from her face and moved to the leather chair in the

corner. All she could do now was wait for his next move.

Hours later, the door opened, and his frame filled the entrance. He had changed into jeans and a long-sleeved polo. "If you're over the hysterics, there's food and drink in the galley. You'll have to help yourself. There's no steward aboard."

She shook her head. "No thanks."

"It's up to you." He leaned against the doorjamb. "Where's Rossellini? I didn't find him or his clothes at your bungalow."

"I'm not surprised. I don't know anyone named Rossellini any more than I know you."

He shot her an icy glare and shook his head. "Daniel worships you. Why, I have no idea. You've never had time for him. But by all that's holy, you will see him through this or suffer the consequences." He turned to leave.

"Wait. My cat. Paddy. No one will feed him."

He came farther into the room. "I didn't see a cat at the bungalow."

"You wouldn't see him. He'd hide. He doesn't like strangers."

He gave her a your-giving-me-a-headache look. "I'll call the rental agency and have them to take care of it."

"How do I know you will? I have no way to check."

"You know because I said I would." He bit out each word. Straightening, he took a step towards the door. "It figures you would have more compassion for a cat than you do for your son." Then he was gone, leaving the door open.

She leaned back against the soft leather. What

now? Could she stab him with the letter opener? Yes, if he tried to harm her. So far, he hadn't, except in retaliation from her attack. She'd have bruises on her backside for weeks.

The room began to close in on her. She rose from the chair and walked out into the main cabin.

As she passed him, he held out his arm to stop her and jerked the letter opener from her waistband. "I thought you might find that."



Thomas Wallace sat across the aisle from his wife. Buckled into her seat, she stared through the porthole into the darkness. She had the frustrating ability to turn any situation to her advantage. He almost believed her denial, and he had experienced all her tricks.

She knew well who Ricco Rossellini was. Her half-Pakistani, half-Italian lover. Rich, handsome, and dangerous, he attracted women like kittens to cream.

Pushing a weary breath from his lungs, he relaxed against the headrest. Whatever new game she played would do her no good. The airport security systems had picked her up. Bermuda authorities had notified him when their system raised a red flag. There was no mistake.

He'd called in favors from his past to get her programmed into airports with the SDK technology. Payback would be right around the corner. He didn't know when the call would come, but it would come. None of that mattered, now.

Daniel needed his mother. When the boy recovered, they'd be well rid of her.

Misplaced affection had cost him years of denial, loss of self-esteem, and possibly damaged his son beyond repair. Yet here he was, dragging her back home.

How had he become entangled with a woman like Traci? The answer tasted bitter in his mouth. She had been an addiction, a habit he thought he'd kicked until today. But the drug still had the power to draw him back in. Love and hate—two faces of the same coin.

She sat across the aisle, face wearing a sullen sadness, like that of a child denied a treat. The nightlife of New York and Rome had more appeal than caring for her son. How she would hate returning to the island's dull pace.

Perhaps she'd married too young. Maybe she had needed to spread her wings more before settling down to marriage and a family. She was twenty-eight, now. Time for her to grow up and accept responsibility.

Thomas ran his hands through his hair, letting his fingertips massage small circles at his temples to ease the on-rushing tension headache. He reached into the console, extracted two aspirin, tossed them into his mouth, and swallowed them dry.

He stole another glance. In seven years of marriage, she'd never worn anything but her favorite designer-of-the-moment. The longer hair and informal clothing gave her a younger, softer look. He had to keep reminding himself he needed her for Daniel.

"When did your son...when did Daniel have the surgery?" Her voice sounded soft in the quiet cabin.

"Two months ago. I started to look for you before that. I thought you would want to know."

Thomas had cleaned the wounds on his neck with alcohol wipes and applied antibiotic cream, but it

began to sting again. He unfastened the seat belt and went back to the restroom to reapply the ointment.

When he returned to the cabin, she rested her head against the seat, her gaze focused on him. He couldn't read her expression. Perhaps fright. She, of all people, should know there was no reason to fear him.

How could someone with such an angelic countenance behave as she had? Embarrassing the family in public without regard for propriety. Abandoning her only child.

He pushed the button on the seat to the recline position. Introspection could take him just so far. It wouldn't solve his problems.

3

Wallace Island, the Aegean Sea
Saturday, May 6

The airplane dropped altitude, and a small dot on the ocean changed into an island with ten or twelve miles of sandy beaches and green foliage. Along with the scene below came the reality of her plight, and she was unsure of what to expect when the plane landed. From the birds-eye view, the only escape route would be by aircraft or boat. And she had no clue where this insane man had taken her.

Wheels touched down with a hard thud. Home. Wherever that might be.

Bright sunlight flashed through the window. She squinted and rubbed her eyes.

A shadow fell across her face. Her captor held out a cup of coffee.

The aroma of fresh-roasted beans wafted to her nose, and she accepted the hot brew. After a tentative too-sweet sip, she shuddered and handed it back. "I drink it black."

He went to the galley and returned with a steaming cup, black as his soul. "Still believe a woman can't be too rich or too thin?"

Why try to explain she always drank it straight? That she appreciated the unenhanced flavor. He

probably didn't care.

He took the seat across from her, his expression tight. "Daniel is mobile now, slowly regaining his strength. He won't be up when we arrive. Get your shower and change. Try to be a concerned mother. Anything else will be unacceptable." His jaw muscles flexed. "I'll be watching you, and so help me, if you show Daniel any sign of rejection, I'll give you the thrashing you never got as a child. That's a promise."

What his idea of a thrashing was, she didn't have a clue, and had no interest in finding out. "I'm not afraid of you, and I would never be cruel to a child." She looked down at her wrinkled shirt and jeans. "I have nothing to change into unless you packed my clothes while you were rummaging through my things at the bungalow."

"Your wardrobe is still here. I figured you'd come back sooner or later, so I didn't toss your clothes out, although I should have."

Mercy turned her gaze away. On the long flight, the little boy's needs crept into her thoughts. She didn't know what the next few days held for her, but she wouldn't be the only victim here. The child could get terribly hurt. This mistaken identity fiasco might delay his recovery. Children were smart. He might realize she wasn't his mother at once, even if his father refused to accept the truth.

Why did this man insist she was Traci? Could her resemblance to his wife be strong enough to fool the airport security system? How was that possible?

The aircraft door opened, and he waited for her to unfasten her seatbelt and stand.

She stepped to the entrance, unable to stop her hand from shaking. At the top of the steps, a man she

recognized as the chauffer reached out his hand. "Watch yer step, lass."

Legs unsteady, she accepted the offer. "Thank you."

The old Scot's eyebrows rose almost to the plaid cap he wore, but he said nothing. This was her first good look at him. He must have flown up front with the pilot. His clothes were rumpled but clean. A big man, with a weathered face that held the same disapproving glare his boss wore.

A brusque voice came from behind her. "Fergus, will you see to the luggage?"

"Aye."

A long stone path led to steps and then to a plateau. Her host guided her up the stairs and moved up beside her.

At the top, she paused, taking in the Italian villa spread out over what seemed an acre, all white arches sparkling in the morning sun. An enormous white diamond set among a field of sapphires. Unique perfume that smelled of honeysuckle and roses filled the air around the terraces dotting the grounds. The sea, a blue backdrop, could be seen from every point of view.

Eyes narrowed, he glowered at her. "You act like you've never seen it before."

She met his unflinching stare. "I haven't."

Behind them, Fergus uttered an almost inaudible, "harrumph."

As they reached the villa's entrance, the lord-of-the-manor motioned her inside. A wide staircase rose in the center of the marble foyer, tall, potted ferns placed artfully on each side.

He guided her to the second floor and turned

right. "I called ahead and had your things moved next to Daniel." He swung the suite's double doors wide and turned to leave. "You know your way around. If you need anything, just let one of the staff know."

Of course, there would be servants. Would they help?

He left without closing the door. No reason to lock her in. She had no way off the island.

With urgent steps, she crossed the room, locked the door, and searched the area for a telephone. Her breath caught when she spotted one on the nightstand. She lifted the receiver and listened. No dial tone—an intercom house phone.

What did it matter? What could she say if she found a way to reach the outside?

"Hello, my name is Mercy Lawrence, and I've been abducted."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know. An island somewhere."

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

They would write her off as a nutcase.

She stood in the middle of the room and surveyed her cell. Certainly unlike any jail she'd ever seen. The room was huge, with white walls and a white marble floor. A king-sized bed on a raised platform dominated the center of the room. Sheer white and sapphire panels flowed from a silver cornice board centered over the bed. The bedding was white with blue, red, and silver throw pillows.

A thick scrapbook rested in the middle of an antique writing table in the corner, and on the opposite side, a plush, oversize chair sat next to a reading lamp. Elegant French doors led out to a balcony with lounge

chairs and tables.

A platinum prison.

Mercy shuddered, kicked off her shoes, and found the bathroom, bigger than the living room in her Houston apartment. Rummaging through one of the vanity drawers, she found a supply of new toothbrushes. That solved one problem. In the shower, she mulled over her meeting with the little boy. Best let him set the tone.

She wrapped a large towel around her body and stepped into the closet. One thing was certain. The lady of the house had great taste and an unlimited budget. Racks of clothes with matching accessories, arranged by casual, dress, and eveningwear, seemed to go on forever.

She selected white slacks and a blue silk top that fit as if made for her. Even the Italian footwear in rows under the matching garments was her size. How was that possible? How could he have known her size? Even the style suited her taste, although designer labels had never fit into her budget.

She shook the doubts away. Despite the head injury, she couldn't have forgotten all this. She was not Traci. Her name was Mercy.

Dressed, she stepped into the hallway and turned around to get her bearings. Not a soul in sight to show her the way. Following instinct, she located the second-story landing.

Descending to the main floor, she found it as empty as the upstairs hallway.

Her gaze drifted into the great room, drawn to the enormous fireplace and the portrait centered above the mantel. She moved in closer. The portrait was a mirrored image of her.