

Anchored in the northernmost waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea off the Vieux Port of Bastia harbor, The Blue Amulet was a splendid yacht. A modern technological wonder, with advanced satellite communications, a digital navigation system, global positioning system, and high-speed Internet connectivity, its sleek aluminum hull was adorned with a simple design. The light blue eye, familiar to the inhabitants of the Mediterranean region, had been bestowed on the magnificent floating palace by its owner to protect it against the dreaded curse of le mauvais oeil, "the evil eye."

Chapter One

Laguna Beach, California
August 1998

Mark Zennelli shielded his eyes and stared at the silhouette of the couple embracing in front him. Behind them, the Pacific Ocean sparkled in the bright afternoon sunlight. A feeling of quiet desperation overtook him. Anna Ellis had been the love of his life. Now, it was up to her. Had he done the right thing by telling her? The guy obviously loved her. What else could he have done?

Maybe I should have swept her away, he thought. Taken her off to Catalina for the weekend, directly from the airport. Not revealed anything.

A low growl came from the backseat of Mark's BMW convertible. Paris, Anna's golden retriever, was up on all fours, his tail on high alert, staring at the man embracing Anna.

"Easy, boy," Mark said as he got out of the car and grabbed the dog's leash. "She's okay. Well, maybe she's okay. I'm not so sure about you or me."

The canine growled again as Mark pulled him toward the building.

"All right. Come on. Let's get out of here." He led the reluctant dog along the side alley and up the rear stairs to his condo. As he opened the door, he turned to look back at the beachfront. The two were standing apart now, deep in conversation, and Mark could see that Anna was sobbing. He remembered with sudden alarm that she had said the Frenchman was dead, and she had seemed terrified when they drove into the alley.

Christ, he thought. Dead? What was all that about? He raked his hair nervously. *It's all that Diamanté's fault. Him and his terrorist brother.*

Chapter Two

With my heart telling me to turn back toward Laguna Beach, I drove up the coast of California in a rented car that sparkling August afternoon in 1998.

My gut hurt every time I thought about Anna, leaving her with the impression that I never wanted to see her again. It wasn't true, of course. I loved her more than I had loved anyone in my life, which was why I had to leave her. I knew she wouldn't be happy living under an assumed name, possibly on the run, nor could I, in all consciousness, have asked that of her, a well-known author. What would have been the point of taking all that away from her?

Tired, hungry, exhausted emotionally, and with a lot of decisions to make, I decided to stop and spend the night in Carmel-by-the-Sea. That evening, I sat on the beach, watching the sun set. As a cool breeze gently whipped the cypress trees along the rugged coastline, I made a plan. I had the money to make it happen, having secreted my wealth away in a bank account in Switzerland no one but I knew about. I would have to use it discreetly, of course, and I would have to be careful that my whereabouts not be discovered. As I pondered my new name, Charlie Guilbert, and how I would have to get used to it, the

sun slipped below the horizon, and the air chilled. I took a sip of wine and noticed, farther down the beach, the dark figure of a man who appeared to be watching me.