

Lauren Mendelsohn, a law professor in California, investigates the death of her Aunt Olivia's friend, Desmond Franzini, a fading historical novelist found dead in a hotel room, leaving behind the memoir of a World War II bombardier.

The Impatient Traveler

By Jorie Rose

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JORIE ROSE



THE
IMPATIENT
TRAVELER

a Lauren Mendelsohn mystery

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This is a work of fiction. The memoir in the novel, or “work within a work,” is historical fiction based loosely on actual persons and events. The memoir is a fictionalized account of the experiences of a World War II bombardier and the author has taken creative liberty with many details, including the creation of scenes, people and situations.

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CHAPTER ONE

He was a big man, and he was sweating heavily. It had been a long, hot drive in a rental car with a broken air conditioner. A three-hour drive with no relief from the thick, muggy air that enveloped him like a heavy down quilt.

As he navigated the dense rush hour traffic, rivulets of sweat trickled down his forehead and onto his cheeks before he wiped each one away with the side of a hand. He could feel the water pooling in the creases of his neck, and his back was wet and clammy against the stained leather seat. He fiddled with the air conditioner from time to time, cursing under his breath at the rental agency in Miami as he adjusted a vent; nothing but tepid air.

The dashboard thermometer registered the outside temperature at 89 degrees. April, he thought, only April and already this hot. The radio station he had been listening to was fading, and as he reached over to find another, he saw a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. He braked hard just in time to avoid a collision with a white SUV that cut in front of him. Son of a bitch, he yelled out the partially open window. Son of a bitch! But the SUV was already disappearing into the distance with its windows closed, so the occupant wouldn't have heard him even if the vehicles were side by side. Outside the window, the terrain was flat, an endless panorama of strip shopping, car lots, budget hotels, and the occasional listless palm that told him he was in South Florida.

When he finally reached his destination and was in his room, he wasn't sure what to do. He wanted to explore the grounds, but it was close to dinner time, and he could feel the first rumblings of hunger in his gut. He rubbed the dark stubble on his chin and looked around the room. Nothing exceptional. He had expected more after the old-fashioned opulence of the lobby. He threw his green checked weekend bag on the second queen bed and stashed his travel kit on a shelf in the bathroom. That done, he moved to the middle of the room and stretched, dwarfing the surroundings with his bulk. He was a tall, beefy man, and years of rich food and drink had turned his features corpulent. His black curly hair and thick lips gave him a vaguely piratical look. His back protested as he leaned from side to side, the muscles stiff after his long drive.

He pulled off his sodden sport shirt, dropped it on the floor, and took a few steps into the bathroom toward the shower. Pausing, he checked his watch and decided on a quick sponge down instead. That done, and only minimally refreshed, he wandered to the window and looked out, the view partially obscured by the twisted, sinewy trunk of the giant banyan tree he knew had been there for decades. Good. It was the right room.

The man had arrived an hour before, turning his car down the long entry road with its rows of royal palms. Past the guard's booth he drove, past the tiered fountain—poised on its pedestal a tastefully nude female figure, hands on hips, chin tilted toward the sky—pulling up in front of the salmon pink entryway of a salmon pink edifice. After handing his car over

to the valet, he checked in (under a name not his own) at the concierge desk. He paused only briefly to glance at the lobby: chandeliers, gleaming bronze tile floors, leather chairs in discreet conversational arrangements, and lines of arched mullioned windows, each flanked by a graceful fishtail palm, before finding his room on the second floor.

The grumbling in his stomach was reaching a higher register, and his thoughts turned to the menu for the hotel restaurant on his bedside table. The prices listed were high enough to correspond to that for the room itself. Admittedly, though, just the thought of the prime ribs—at any price—made his mouth water. He checked his watch; his dinner companion was due to arrive in fifteen minutes. In spite of his spiking hunger, he was not looking forward to the encounter. Indeed, it was bound to be unpleasant under the circumstances.

There was a knock. Was his visitor early? He opened the door, and first, the flicker of an uncertain smile flitted across his face, replaced by a look of fear. Yes, it was the person he expected, but what the figure in the doorway carried was something he could not have anticipated: a picnic basket—and a gun.

Three days earlier, on the other side of the continent, Lauren Mendelsohn and Darwin Kincaid were attending a tea dance at the Blue Rose Inn in San Julian, a small town in Northern California's wine country.

Lauren and her companion had recently taken up ballroom dancing and found they were as well-matched on the dance floor as they were otherwise: both earnest and enthusiastic, if

not exactly graceful, dancers. It had been Darwin's idea, inspired by the movie *Ballroom*. Lauren, who had protested at first, finally agreed.

Growing up in Manhattan, Lauren's main form of exercise had been long walks through the streets of the city. Otherwise, she was a self-described bookworm and admitted klutz, notoriously uncoordinated at sports. As an adult, in the name of fitness (next to godliness in California), she had diligently huffed, puffed, and gasped her way through a series of recommended exercise regimens: aerobics, jogging, step classes, kickboxing. Each one equally unpleasant, but they gave her a sense of accomplishment, as well as sore muscles, as she grunted and groaned her way to fitness nirvana. At the very least, she enjoyed the feeling of strength that accompanied her exertions, as well as greater stamina for things she actually enjoyed: long city jaunts and hikes in the countryside.

But ballroom dancing actually looked like fun. After completing a series of lessons, she and Darwin had been attending Friday night dances at the Blue Rose Inn and Dance Hall, the hall a converted barn next to the main structure. The hall boasted scuffed oak floors and mirrored paneling on two walls that appeared to double the usual turnout of thirty-odd dancers to a crowd of sixty.

Sam and Ellie Woodward owned the place. A semi-retired married couple, both professional dancers who had competed as a pair on the ballroom circuit, the Woodwards wanted to keep their toes in their dance shoes but in a less demanding format.

One, two, three, Lauren counted silently, or so she thought, while Darwin eyed her with amusement. Around them, the room was a kaleidoscope of couples of all ages, dressed in everything from jeans to gowns and tuxedos, executing the waltz with varying degrees of proficiency.

The six-piece swing band, consisting of elderly local volunteers, switched to a Latin tune with a Cuban beat. After almost colliding with a gray-haired couple, the woman dressed in a pink gown with matching feather trim, her dapper partner in an aged tuxedo topped with a sequined bow tie, Lauren and her friend launched into a rumba, Lauren still dutifully counting out the steps.

A few minutes later, they were seated at a small table to the side of the room, Lauren slightly breathless. “Masterful, absolutely masterful,” Darwin beamed, taking off his glasses and pushing back his hair, now tousled and damp from their recent efforts.

“Hmm.” Lauren looked at Darwin’s smooth, attentive face across from her. A reporter for the Santa Rosa Clarion, he was intelligent and as open as the skies of his home state, Montana. Not bad to look at either: clean-shaven, even-featured, dark-haired. Darwin was one of those rare handsome men who seem to be completely unaware of their physical appeal. Always in slightly rumpled shirts that could use a stiff ironing, smudgy glasses, and disheveled hair, Lauren found him absolutely adorable. Best of all, he had a kind heart.

She had met him at a fundraiser for a local charity not long after moving to wine country. Lauren didn’t know many people and wasn’t sure what to do with herself at the event. Most

partygoers were already clustered in knots of acquaintances. She sidled up to a buffet and chose a square of vegetable-laden flatbread. Before she could take a bite, an arm jostled her from behind, and the flatbread plunged to the floor, not without leaving a smear of oil down the front of her shirt before coming to rest. Lauren inspected the damage and decided the spot created resembled the shape of Missouri. She looked up to see a tall man tucking in a shirttail with one hand and offering her a napkin with the other. She gratefully accepted the latter. One thing led to another... and another.

They had been together for two years, and Lauren still couldn't believe her good fortune. In fact, everything had been going well for Lauren lately. The classes she taught at Sequoia State, a small law school at the edge of Santa Rosa, were proceeding without hitch. Lauren had left San Francisco with some trepidation. After living in the city for years, she had a solid circle of friends and good memories, as well as the terrible ones that accompanied the divorce. But the job at Sequoia State had seemed to be just what she needed, and she took the leap, buying a house in San Julian only half an hour from work.

Now, wine country was starting to feel like home. As soon as she bought the old clapboard house near downtown with a combination of her own savings and proceeds from the divorce settlement, she had thrown herself into renovations, many a product of her own elbow grease, and then decorated the interior with a combination of her favorite belongings from San Francisco and finds in local antique stores and garage sales.

Teaching was a good fit for Lauren, too. And she had met Darwin. It was all too good to be true. She had the vague, uneasy feeling of people who are not accustomed to happiness that when things finally go right, the good luck can't last. Something must happen; the other shoe must fall.

Lauren finished her Calistoga, contemplating her trip the next day to Florida to visit her aunt Olivia, an artist, and see her show, a retrospective of her work over the decades. Lauren's aunt had been both a gallery owner and painter in New York. A few years before, she had sold her share of the business and moved to Coconut Grove for the sunshine and, as she put it, "the scene."

As a child, Olivia's bohemian lifestyle had been titillating to Lauren. Growing up in Manhattan and feeling lost in a big, boisterous family, Lauren had been adopted by Olivia who had shown her, à la Auntie Mame, some of the more interesting, if at times more questionable, sides of the city. It had been exciting to walk on the wild side with a protective aunt by her side and then return to the safety of home.

Lauren was already packed: a cocktail dress for the reception, shorts and t-shirts, a few dressier outfits, and a new bathing suit, something of a splurge. Darwin had offered to take care of Tobias Smollett, her black Standard Poodle. She got custody of him in the divorce; it hadn't been much of a struggle.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning, Lauren arrived at San Francisco Airport in time to buy *The New York Times* and *Cosmo* (a very guilty pleasure) at a newsstand and a cappuccino at Starbucks. She took her stash to a seat facing the window and sipped, glancing at the morning headlines. Outside the window, the airport was shrouded in fog (not unusual for SFO), and when Lauren glanced at the runways, she could barely discern the outlines of planes appearing ghostlike out of the scrum as they nosed their way toward terminals or glided out, disappearing into the soupy mist as they queued for take-off.

Lauren was an ambivalent flyer: queasy on take-offs and landings and unnerved during turbulent passages, but during smooth spells, she enjoyed reading and watching the clouds drift by. Today, the wall of gray outside the window provoked a vague sense of unease. She glanced at her watch, hoping the fog would burn off before departure.

The boarding call for her zone broke into her reverie. Glancing out the window as she approached the gangway, she was happy to see the morning sun pushing its way tentatively through the gloom. She slid into her window seat and pulled *Cosmo* from her travel bag, glancing at the table of contents. Around her was the sound of people pushing bags into overhead compartments. Suddenly, a loud and seriously disgruntled male voice boomed, “But I booked the emergency row!” Lauren looked up... and up and up. Towering over her was a gigantic bull of a man, at least six-foot-four, heavysset,

thick-necked, with small, close-set eyes barely discernible in a meaty face crowned by a cap of dark curls. Next to him, a slight red-haired flight attendant shrugged helplessly.

“So sorry. There must have been a mix-up.”

“Well, then move someone, dammit. Are you blind? I need legroom.”

The flight attendant pursed her lips. “I’m sorry. I can’t do that. We’re about to take off.” She indicated the lighted “fasten your seat belt” sign with a forefinger.

“Well, what about a bulkhead seat?”

“I’m sorry, sir. They’re all taken, too.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m sorry, sir,” the man grumbled nastily. For an uncomfortable moment, Lauren thought he was going to take the empty seat next to her. She couldn’t help cringing as he approached, but he lurched backward a few feet and heaved his bulk into an aisle seat several rows behind her.

Lauren craned her head around. The man looked vaguely familiar. He was clutching a leather briefcase to his chest and shook his head “no” when the attendant indicated the overhead compartment nearest him, then pushed the case carefully under the seat in front of him. He looked up and, catching Lauren’s eye, glared at her. She turned around quickly, embarrassed at having been caught observing the drama in the aisle and its denouement.

Popping a mint in her mouth, she returned her attention to her magazine, scanning its contents: “Six Exercises for Thinner Thighs,” “Twelve Ways to Please ‘Your Man’ in Bed,” “Twenty Questions to Test Your Emotional IQ.” All of life’s dilemmas reduced to simple numerical formulae. Magazines

like *Cosmo* published the same articles over and over, with only slight variations, yet there seemed to be an insatiable market for them. Lauren never read such stuff on the ground (well, except in supermarket lines), but they had become part of her take-off ritual; concentrating on easy-to-digest prose helped ease her nerves.

The engines kicked in with a thrum, and Lauren felt a corresponding jolt in her stomach. She pulled down the window shade and forced herself to read carefully, word for word, the article in front of her, “Cuticle Magic,” as the plane taxied down the runway and thrust itself into the air. As it ascended, she studied the advantages of nail brushing with the intensity she usually reserved for legal texts until they leveled off at cruising altitude.

Then she sighed and opened the window shade to see blue sky and cotton ball puffs of cumulous clouds; they were well above the remaining fog. She slid the magazine into the pouch in front of her and settled back into her seat.

Her thoughts turned to her aunt. It had been five (or was it six?) years since she had last seen her. Olivia Mendelsohn: tough, imperious... and some said overbearing. Olivia had made it as an artist and businesswoman in an era when women, though more common than they had been in the art world, still weren't finding a level playing field.

And then the move to Miami. Olivia, after a lifetime in Manhattan, was a woman who knew as much as anyone could about the city and enjoyed the panorama of food, culture, and human comedy it offered. So why Florida? Lauren wondered.

She turned from the window and pulled a copy of *The Kite Runner* from her travel case, ready to settle in for a few hours of reading before the change of planes in Dallas. Absorbed in her thoughts, she was only peripherally aware of the big man behind her who couldn't seem to settle down in his seat. The passengers were all silent, reading or dozing, all, that is, except the man Lauren had come to think of as "The Impatient Traveler." From his vicinity, she heard the snap of a briefcase opening and closing, the whispery shuffling of papers, and a continuous but fortunately unintelligible muttering. She was tempted to look around but was reluctant to meet the gaze of the Impatient Traveler again.

Soon, a trolley passed, accompanied by two attendants offering drinks. Two hours later, the sound of the trolley wheels again announced the arrival of lunch. Lauren accepted her meal gratefully; she was hungry, having rushed out that morning without breakfast. She surveyed the array of apparently plastic food on a plastic tray: a sandwich on rye bread, carrot sticks, and a glutinous green substance she surmised was Jell-O. It would have to do. She peeked under the bread and was happily surprised to find what looked like white cheddar slices. Not bad for airplane food.

"And a vegetarian meal for you, sir," Lauren heard the flight attendant say.

"I didn't order veg-e-tar-i-an," the Impatient Traveler growled, enunciating each syllable distinctly. The volcano had erupted again.

"Most people like our aged Vermont cheddar. It's a special."

“I do not eat cheese, and I will not eat this.” He pushed away the proffered tray petulantly. “It’s not surprising that what this airline considers food I would not give to a dog, but I do at least expect to get what I requested: the roast beef sandwich, though God knows I’ve had it before and it tastes like leather. But in any event, I did not order a cheese sandwich. Take it back immediately. And get me something else. Meat, preferably.”

The red-haired flight attendant looked worried. “I’ll see what I can do. We only have a certain number of meals aboard. After we serve everyone, I’ll see if we have a leftover sandwich for you.”

As she passed by, Lauren looked up. Her eyes met those of the attendant. Lauren smiled, and the woman shrugged. Ten minutes later, she returned. She was not bearing a sandwich. “I’m sorry,” she said sheepishly. “There are no extra sandwiches.”

“No extra sandwiches!” the Impatient Traveler boomed. Heads swiveled toward the center of the plane. “What’s wrong with this airline? Management shall hear of this. And of you, too, Miss...” His small, closely set eyes sought the name on the attendant’s tag. “Miss Carol Kramer.”

The woman seemed almost ready to cry. “May I offer you a complimentary drink?”

“Another Coke will do.” The Impatient Traveler tore open his bag of peanuts. “Rancid, of course,” he snarled, a note of triumph in his voice.

This crisis over, Lauren returned to her book, nibbling the edges of her sandwich as she read. This time, she was able to

concentrate. The rest of the trip passed uneventfully, the Impatient Traveler napping, as she surmised from the sound of hoarse, ragged snoring several rows behind her. She turned briefly and craned to see his head thrown back, thick lips parted, eyes closed. Even at a distance of several yards, she could see beads of perspiration on his forehead. It must be so unpleasant to get worked up all the time, she thought before turning her attention elsewhere.

Lauren spent the brief layover in Dallas browsing through the book rack in a gift shop before boarding the Dallas to Miami leg of the flight. She had no sooner settled herself than she saw the Impatient Traveler huffing up the aisle in her direction. She groaned silently, then breathed a sigh of relief as he passed by and, examining his boarding pass, lowered himself into an emergency row seat that he had probably wrangled during the stopover.

Three hours later, Lauren was at the back of a deep crowd that ringed a baggage carousel at Miami International Airport. Around her, she heard excited greetings in Spanish and English as families, lovers, and friends united, those lucky enough to have baggage appear out of the chute in the first batch already hurrying away. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Impatient Traveler almost knock over a baby stroller as he elbowed his way to a prime spot directly next to the carousel. The briefcase he had put under the seat in front of him was placed carefully between his legs. Lauren sniffed as she observed him pull a suitcase and a small overnight bag off the conveyor belt. He elbowed his way out and Lauren got what

she hoped was her last look at the Impatient Traveler as he pushed his way through the crowd.

Olivia Mendelsohn rubbed an itchy spot on the side of her nose with a corner of the oversized T-shirt she used as a smock and scrutinized the seascape propped against an entire wall of her studio. She was pleased with what she saw. Her move to Coconut Grove three years previously had revitalized her work. Most of her friends had been aghast when she announced her intention to leave. For many of them, the map of the known world began and ended with Manhattan. How could she, a lifetime New Yorker, adapt to the relative cultural desert that was South Florida?

But Olivia had smiled at their objections. She was in her early seventies and restless. The New York art scene that she knew so well was getting claustrophobic, and life, in general, felt stale. There was nothing like a drastic move to shake things up. And it had worked. Starting over at her stage in life had been an adventure; she felt exhilarated and rejuvenated, and it showed in her work. The timing had been right, too, she reflected. She had been close to her nieces and nephews, her brother Aaron's children, and by the time she moved south, all were grown and most had left New York themselves.

Of her brother's offspring, she had been closest to Lauren, who would be arriving that afternoon. Lauren, the third of five children. Olivia dabbed her brush in the aquamarine paint on her palette. Lauren had been a quiet, bookish child, altogether too serious, really. Olivia had taken her under her wing, carting her off to galleries, museums, plays and parties. Lauren had

taken it all in calmly, her glasses perched on her freckled nose, her wide hazel eyes set in an inscrutable elfin face.

Now, it seemed her niece had come into her own, teaching law in California. In previous years, Olivia had a hard time picturing Lauren as a prosecutor and wasn't surprised when Aaron told her she'd left the fray. But Olivia supposed the experience was a good foundation for teaching criminal law. And teaching, she surmised, was a good fit for her niece, always so analytical, so logical.

There were rumors of a new man, too. It was about time. Olivia had never liked the ex-husband. What was his name? Sydney? Sandy? Such a prig, and an egotist to boot. Olivia herself had been married four times but never had children. Being an aunt, though, was certainly enough.

She stood back and surveyed the swatch of sky she was working on with a critical eye. Perhaps she needed a deeper vermilion along the horizon?

Lauren's suitcase was one of the last pieces of luggage to appear. She grabbed it and exited the terminal into a blast of hot, muggy tropical air. She was briefly startled when the lenses of her glasses were immediately coated with a film of steam from the humidity. She wiped them, wondering if eyewear in Florida should come equipped with tiny windshield wipers, then hailed a cab and gave the driver her aunt's address.

She held her breath as the taxi sped around the gray, rutted curves of I-95, the sky directly above an intense blue, while to the west, a line of gunmetal gray storm clouds gathered, and a faint rumble of thunder punctuated the comments of the

Haitian cab driver. The highway emptied onto a local thoroughfare, and they soon made a left into Coconut Grove, where everything changed. Lush vegetation reigned; live oaks and coconut palms filled the yards and shaded the streets, with houses barely peeking through the greenery. They pulled up in front of a stucco cottage with an old Fiat sports car in front. Lauren paid the driver and walked up a flagstone path. She rang the bell and waited. No answer. She hit it again and tried the knob. It wasn't locked. Just like Olivia, she thought.

But where was her aunt? Her car was out in front, but no sign of life. She pushed the door open tentatively and called, "Aunt Livvy!" No response, and no one approached. She stepped in and looked around. From where she stood, she could see the living room and a screened-in back porch, both decorated in fifties and sixties memorabilia: a jukebox in one corner, a swinging chair in another, an old Coca-Cola clock on the wall. Above the sofa hung a long black-and-white triptych of a reclining nude whose face, though partially obscured in shadow, looked suspiciously like Aunt Olivia's in earlier days.

Lauren took a few tentative steps into the room. Through a doorway, she caught a glimpse of the kitchen: a black and white tile floor, white cabinets and appliances, and smaller kitchen gadgets in shiny reds. It was all very kitsch. Very Olivia.

Then, coming through a back screen door with a whoosh was Livvy herself, a tall, muscular woman looking, Lauren thought, not much older than when she had last seen her: the same ramrod posture and high cheekbones. The only changes

Lauren discerned were more salt in her thick salt-and-pepper hair and a deepening of the lines at the corners of her mouth.

“Lauren, darling, I’m so sorry. I was out in the studio and lost track of time.” Olivia spread her arms to hug her niece but, looking ruefully down at her paint-spattered shirt, stopped short, then turned and gestured for Lauren to follow her into the kitchen. “You must be exhausted, dear. Let me get you some iced tea.” She shook her head as she pulled open the fridge. “Black infused with papaya. Everything seems to be infused these days.” She rustled around in the refrigerator and set out a platter with cheese, crackers and cornichons.

Lauren slid onto one of several red plastic and chrome drug store stools bordering a flecked white and gray Formica counter and took a sip of tea before filling a small plate.

“Charming house, Aunt Liv.”

Olivia, standing behind the counter, put a hand on her hip. “Thank you, dear. I was lucky to find this old cottage from the 1930s. Not many left. I’m afraid you’ll find the downtown terribly changed, too. There’s not much safe from the wrecker’s ball here.”

“The wild, wild East,” Lauren murmured.

“That’s about it.”

“So why are you here? You must miss New York,” she ventured.

Olivia looked at her niece, a half-smile on her lips. “Of course. There’s no city like Manhattan in the world. And, as an artist, I was lucky to come of age in it when I did.” She reached for the pitcher of tea and poured herself a glass, then added a teaspoon of sugar, stirred, and watched the swirls in the cup

ruminatively. “When I was learning to paint in the fifties, New York was the center of the universe for visual arts. Jackson Pollack, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning. They took the world by storm.

“My god,” she continued, “I studied with Rothko at Brooklyn College! Can you imagine! I was a lesser light—I rode their coattails—but what coattails they were. Being on the fringe was heady enough. After that... it was never quite the same.”

Lauren nodded, swiveling back and forth on her stool.

“But I stayed. New York was still the center of the art world... and I had the gallery, of course. But finally, the city became stuffier, claustrophobic,” she continued. “And these old bones started to yearn for warmth.”

“Old bones?” Lauren felt a stab of worry. “Are you okay?”

“Of course. Tosh, dear.” She had picked up a few Britishisms from a two-year stint in London, Lauren remembered, “tosh” being one of her favorites. “I’m quite healthy, but age demands its comforts. And, besides, it’s good to shake things up a bit every now and then.”

“Really?”

“Yes, dear, really.”

“You know I worry about you, don’t you?”

“Well, you shouldn’t. I’m a tough old broad.”

Even tough old broads aren’t immortal, thought Lauren.

“Now, plans for tomorrow: I have two canvases that need a few finishing touches, and then I’ll be off to the gallery for a final inspection. You can come with me. But you must be

exhausted. Let me show you to your room. And I didn't ask about your flight."

"It was fine, except for this absolutely dreadful man who sat a few rows behind me and kept complaining about everything."

"How beastly," Olivia murmured.

The sound of the doorbell interrupted the conversation. Olivia opened the door, and a man stepped into the vestibule. It was the Impatient Traveler.

CHAPTER THREE

“Olivia,” he cried.

“Desmond, you old devil.” Olivia turned to Lauren. “This is my friend, Desmond Franzini.”

It was the man from the plane, and now Lauren recognized him. Desmond Franzini wrote historical fiction, long, ponderous novels in the style of James Michener or Leon Uris. She had seen his face on book jackets. He looked a good deal older—and heavier—than the photos, even those on his most recent books.

“Desmond,” Olivia continued, “This is my niece, Lauren. She teaches law in California. Why, you’re practically neighbors.” She turned to Lauren, explaining. “Des lives in Mill Valley.”

Mill Valley, in Marin County, was half an hour’s drive south of San Julian. Not far enough, Lauren thought.

Franzini was setting down his luggage, a disgruntled look on his face.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy getting to know each other.”

He grunted and turned away. “Olivia,” he groaned. “My flight was awful. Absolutely awful. The food was inedible.”

“The seats,” he continued, “are obviously made for Lilliputians. And the flight attendant... calling her rude would be a kindness. Why I—”

“Come now,” Olivia interrupted briskly, using what Lauren recalled as her talent for handling the most insufferable boors. “I’ll show you to your room. You can rest up and recover from

your... ordeal.” Lauren caught the briefest of winks in her direction. “This one’s for you, Des.” She pointed to a room with a queen-sized bed and dresser. “And for you.”

Lauren’s room was about the size of a walk-in closet, big enough for only a narrow cot and a small wicker chest. Olivia caught her eye and shrugged. “What could I do?” she whispered. “He’d never have fit in here.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Livvy.” Lauren smiled wanly. “Really.”

After Franzini had retreated to his room, she asked, “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s on a tour, touting the reissue of his first book, *Beyond the Mountains*. And his publisher isn’t footing the bill for a hotel.”

Desmond was already in his room and out of earshot, but Olivia still kept her voice down. “His career has been in a bit of a slump. Maybe this will give it a boost. Anyway, I couldn’t say no, not even with you here.” She shrugged.

The next morning brought Lauren into closer proximity with Franzini than she would have liked. She waited while her fellow guest used the bathroom for what felt like forever. Standing in the hallway in her bathrobe, she heard the sounds of running water, grunting, humming, and gargling as he performed (energetically, from the sound of it) his morning ablutions, emerging to glare at her as if she had been the one who kept him waiting.

After Lauren had her turn at the bathroom, she and her aunt strolled out into the garden with their coffee. The early heat

was already shimmering on the horizon but hadn't yet descended in full force. Franzini was nowhere to be seen.

Luxuriously ensconced on a lounge chair, Lauren stretched her feet out in front of her and flexed them, toes pointed forward, then back. "Mmmm. If only it would stay like this."

"If only. By afternoon, you'll be more than ready for air-conditioning."

"Where's your show?" Lauren began.

"The Spitzer Gallery," Olivia provided, adding, "it's a retrospective, spanning the decades."

"I know. Ambitious."

"Yes. It's been quite an effort, but most of the pieces are installed. Only the two I mentioned are left. And they'll be picked up before we leave for the gallery."

"Where's your friend?"

"Off to meet with booksellers."

Lauren hadn't seen him leave.

She spent the morning reading and reviewing notes for her classes, while Olivia was on the phone making last minute arrangements. Finally, it was time to go, but Olivia's old Fiat seemed to have other ideas. She revved it three times, waited, then tried again. This time, the engine caught. "Marcello can be quite temperamental," Olivia explained.

"Marcello?"

"For someone I knew." She smiled slyly. "A man in Rome: fast and unreliable."

They drove into what looked like an industrial area with abandoned warehouses, overgrown lots, and a scattering of boarded-up stores. Litter in the streets and more in the gutters.

At the same time, Lauren started to notice intricate and colorful graffiti. Then she began to spot art galleries, coffee shops, even a few restaurants... and more graffiti painted on peeling fences, storefronts, and the sides of buildings.

“Where are we?” Lauren said. “I assumed you were showing in Miami Beach.”

“No, this is Wynwood,” Olivia explained. “Some call it the anti-South Beach. It’s been a depressed area for years. But recently, artists have started to ‘discover’ it.”

They pulled up in front of a storefront with a sign that read “The Frederick Spitzer Gallery” hanging from the eaves. Inside, they were met by a small, round man with a mustache, the gallery’s namesake. “Well, Liv, old gal, what do you think?” They were obviously on close terms.

Ahead of them, a warren of rooms, walls painted dark gray, the floor a lighter mottled gray cement. The first housed Olivia’s most recent paintings, bold splashes of color for sea and sky—representational, almost. There were gaps for the pieces that had just been delivered. “Do you want to place them?” Freddie asked.

“No, dear, I trust you.” They walked to the rear, where Olivia’s earliest works were hung, then moved slowly forward through the rooms, doing a final once-over of the display.

In the back, they saw works influenced by Olivia’s mentor, Rothko, embracing his soft-edged chunks of color. The middle rooms showed Olivia’s works from the 1960s through the 90s, Olivia’s longest period, and the style she became known for, luminous abstract canvases filled with color and movement. In the front room were her latest works, all done in Miami.

Seascapes and human forms began to emerge, done in broad swathes but definitely recognizable.

A tall, slender woman with cornrows in intricate z's against her scalp appeared at their side. "Olivia, do you want to go over the menu again? As we discussed, I thought the food should reflect the diversity of Miami. Flatbread with smoked salmon, miniature Cuban empanadas, Jamaican jerk chicken canapés." She turned to the drinks: "Red and white wine, mojitos, and a soft drink station with Perrier and iced tea."

"The tea is...?" Olivia peered, "Yes, infused with raspberry."

Franzini was to dine with them that night, Lauren learned to her disappointment. She had been looking forward to conversation with her aunt, but, as it turned out, Franzini dominated the evening. To top it off, his mood hadn't improved since the flight from San Francisco, his conversation a litany of complaints: His publisher wasn't giving him enough attention. His agent wasn't available when he needed her. It went on and on. He shoved a forkful of food into his mouth and continued his recitation of woes, barely stopping to chew and swallow. Lauren was treated to several distasteful glimpses past his teeth to pink gums and partially pulverized paella.

Desmond Franzini, she concluded, was not one of those people who grew on you. She found herself longing for his departure.

The day of the reception dawned relatively mild, and Lauren and her aunt had orange juice and coffee in the garden. By mid-day, the heat had set in. Mid-afternoon, they were in

the Fiat, which was just as ornery as the day before, coughing a few times before sputtering to life. “I think Marcello is having trouble waking up.”

“He must have had a hard night,” Lauren observed.

“Marcellos always have hard nights.” Olivia sighed. She was a fast driver and soon they were approaching the gallery.

“What’s our roommate up to this morning?” Lauren managed, hanging on around a curve, just before they arrived.

“More meetings. He’s also working on a new book.”

“About?”

“A war novel. He hasn’t said much about it—unusual for him—but he’s been hinting at great things.”

Olivia clutched and changed gears. “He’ll be at the reception for a bit. Then he’s taking off for somewhere and plans to stay away overnight. I’m sure you’re devastated.”

“Quite.” Lauren could barely suppress a smile. “Destroyed, actually.”

“It gets worse. He’s flying back to California late tomorrow night, after dinner with us, so he won’t be here for the last few days of your visit.”

“Now I’m totally bereft.”

“I would imagine,” Olivia said dryly.

She parallel parked down the block from the gallery, leaving the spaces in front for guests. The afternoon heat settled in, and Lauren wiped away the sweat that had collected in the curves on either side of her nose on the short walk from the car to the gallery. Her staunch little black dress clung damply to her body.

Frederick met them at the door, nervously wringing his hands. “Hello, dears, the food is here, but I’m afraid the servers and tables are not. There’s nowhere to set anything. This is frightful.”

“Tosh, Freddie.” Olivia waved a hand dismissively. “I’m sure they’ll be here any moment. If not, we can improvise.”

As if on cue, a truck pulled up in front, out of which poured two well-muscled men and a dolly with folded tables. Behind it followed a car with wait staff from the catering company.

Soon, all was in order, tall tables scattered in each room for people to set their food and drink on while they talked and a few chairs for those who needed them. Lauren filled a bowl on each high top with Godiva truffles, a small touch to make the guests feel pampered.

People started filtering through, Olivia greeting them at the door, looking queenly in a white caftan with gold edging. It was still relatively early in the day, and Lauren expected they were artists themselves or others who worked a flexible schedule.

Almost everyone was wearing black, she noted. It could be San Francisco or New York. Men in black, she thought, some of the older ones sporting gray ponytails. Standing in one group, dressed in the achromatic ensemble that seemed to be *de rigueur* for the artsy gentleman of a certain age—with the addition of a jaunty fedora—was a familiar figure, tall, heavysset, good-looking. She caught his eye briefly, and he gave an almost imperceptible wink. Could it be Malcolm, Olivia’s third husband... and Lauren’s favorite? He ambled over and gave her a light kiss on the forehead.

“Malcolm?”

“The one and only.”

“You live here, now? You and Olivia... both?”

Malcolm winked again and grabbed a mojito.

Lauren shook her head and wandered on, strolling toward the back of the gallery, past Olivia, who was deep in conversation with a young man in a black silk shirt, charcoal trousers, and pointy patent leather shoes. A lock of hair kept falling in his eyes, and he repeatedly swept it back with a hand.

There, in a back corner of the last room was Desmond Franzini; he had slipped by without her noticing, no mean feat for someone so tall and bulky. He was speaking to, or rather at, a smallish man in a white short-sleeved shirt. Lauren couldn't hear what they were saying, but the expression on Franzini's face was not a happy one. He looked like he was talking vehemently, poking the man in the chest with a forefinger as he spoke. The picture they presented resembled that of a large, angry bear towering over a small, frightened camper.

Lauren edged through the doorway and pressed against the wall, hoping to hear what Franzini was ranting about. Just as she managed to slip into earshot, he turned, saw her, and closed his mouth abruptly. His companion took the opportunity to scamper away. Franzini glared at her and stalked to the front of the gallery. After nodding at Olivia, he exited. Lauren looked around but couldn't find the man he had been busy haranguing.

She shook her head and started a tour around the gallery to check on the drink tables and tidy up leftover glasses and plates, grabbing an empanada for herself along the way.

After the last of the guests had been ushered out the door, Olivia and Lauren joined Freddie in his office. He offered them drinks. “Good turnout,” he observed. “And you sold three pieces on the spot.”

Olivia swirled the Scotch in her glass. “I like people to see my work. The size of canvases, the brushstrokes... that doesn’t show up in books and catalogs.” She waved a hand airily. “The cash isn’t bad either.”

“No, old friend,” Freddie said, “we did good.”

“By the way, Aunt Liv, I saw...” Lauren said hesitantly.

“Malcolm? Yes, he moved down here about the same time I did.”

“Do you see him often?”

“Oh yes, I see a great deal of him.”

Lauren arched an eyebrow.

Driving north on I-95, Desmond Franzini was feeling irritated, not unusual for someone whose mood monitor generally registered anger. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard of his rental car, his foot heavy on the pedal. Two hours until his dinner appointment—barely enough time to check in and unpack. Scoping out the buildings and grounds would have to wait until the next morning. Then, back to Coconut Grove and dinner with Olivia and that mousy niece of hers again. Desmond wasn’t sure how Olivia had talked him into it. This time he’d probably have to make some sort of dreary small talk and feign interest in the niece’s work. She taught something, didn’t she? Desmond couldn’t remember

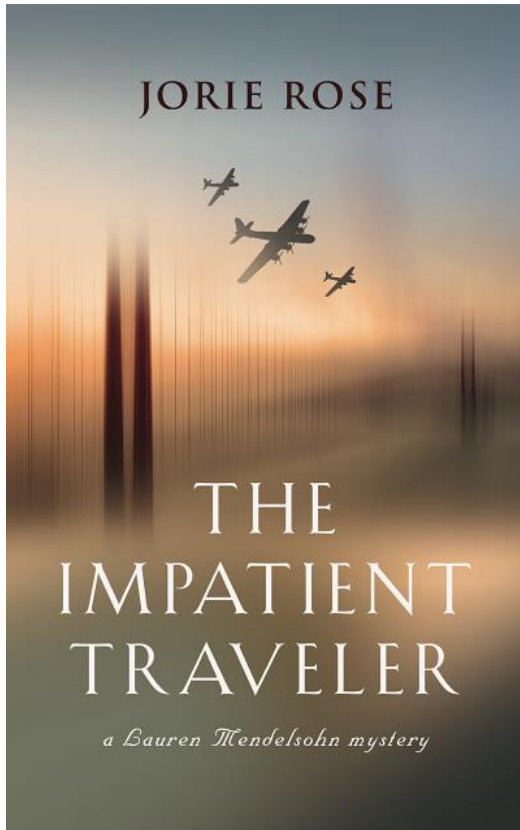
what. English? Art? The Kabbala? If it was California, it could be anything.

The first exit for Fort Lauderdale flashed by. Another half hour or so until he reached his destination.

He was getting hungry. Although he had helped himself generously to the hors d'oeuvres at the reception, it had not been enough to stave off his growing late afternoon appetite. But in spite of the pangs in his stomach, he was not looking forward to dinner. That was unusual for him, especially since he would have the opportunity to do two of his favorite things: eat and talk about his work, both activities he could normally engage in quite happily for hours. But these were not normal times. In fact, Desmond's life hadn't been what he considered normal for quite a while.

He wiped his brow and neck. The air conditioner was broken. "Damn cheap car," he grumbled. The days of fancy expense accounts were over. But not permanently, he hoped. After his next book came out, everything would change.

The SUV ahead slowed abruptly. Desmond accelerated and swerved into the lane to his left, only to have to apply the brakes again as he came up behind a row of cars at a standstill in the rush hour traffic. He honked the horn and cursed softly under his breath. Yes, he thought, soon everything would be different.



Lauren Mendelsohn, a law professor in California, investigates the death of her Aunt Olivia's friend, Desmond Franzini, a fading historical novelist found dead in a hotel room, leaving behind the memoir of a World War II bombardier.

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