

# VIVIAN CONNOLLY



A PLEASURE CRUISE  
BECOMES A TRIP INTO TERROR WHEN  
A RUTHLESS KILLER STALKS THE DECKS.

# FIVE PORTS TO DANGER

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**VIVIAN CONNOLLY**

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# *SHIP OF DEATH*

I made a rapid circuit of the main deck. Aunt Kathleen was ensconced in a deck chair, her green cape billowing in the wind which was vigorously chasing white clouds across a deep blue sky. She waved to me and I quickly settled myself beside her.

“‘Tis a grand day, Brian, wouldn’t you say? We’ve been needing a bit of wind to clear the cobwebs from our brains. I hope you slept well?”

“Not too well, Aunt Kathleen. Attempted murder doesn’t exactly encourage sweet dreams.”

“Attempted murder is it? Do you mean you’re writing a thriller? A waste of your satirical talents, if you ask me.”

I was in no mood for another sympathetic discussion of my alleged talents. “I’m not writing anything,” I told her. “This was a real life attempt. Or maybe I should say a ‘real death attempt.’ *On me!*”



# **FIVE PORTS TO DANGER**



## CHAPTER 1

The funny little brass band was playing a *paso doble*, the same one I'd heard last Sunday in Cordova when the matadors entered the bullring. This wasn't an entrance, though. It was an exit. An exit in the grand style. That was one of the things I liked about Spaniards. They did everything with class. The *Virgen de Toluca* was not the *Queen Elizabeth*. She was smaller and had a potbellied look about her. Her paint was dingy, and some of her life preservers carried the name of her sister ship, the *Montserrat*. Still, dowdy and haphazard as she might be, she rated a *muy grande* send-off. The band, flags all over the place, flowers by the ton, happy passengers lining the railings, weeping relatives on the dock, everybody waving white handkerchiefs, earsplitting blasts on the whistle, the whole bit. A classic scene. I felt like a character in a movie made around 1938.

The last man hurrying up the gangplank looked like a fellow actor in my movie. He wore a belted black trench coat and had a wide-brimmed felt hat pulled low over his face as if he was ashamed of his looks. He wasn't waving to anybody, and he didn't linger by the railing. He practically snatched his ticket back out of the hands of the dude with the gold braid, pushed his way through the crowd around the top of the gangplank, and

disappeared. Bogart would have done the whole thing more casually. This guy would never make it with Twentieth Century Fox.

I thought about how nice it would be if I were back in the Thirties. Then I could be Dashiell Hammett and save myself all the wear and tear that went with being Brian Singdahlsen. My American publisher might even stop remaindering my books. I wouldn't be maundering around trying to decide if I ought to junk my so-called style and dream up a new one.

That was what this trip was supposed to do for me, give me a whole new slant on life. And writing, naturally. I hadn't reached the point yet where life without writing seemed possible. If things kept progressing downward at the present rate, that day might come. It was great to know my first novel was currently a best seller in Finland, but eventually I might run out of literate Finns. *Eating*, which had made quite a splash at first, had already disappeared from any conceivable American bookshop. I couldn't even find a copy for the rare admirer who wanted to pay cash for one instead of borrowing it from me or a library.

The two books that followed *Eating* hadn't even made it through a third printing. Of course, if Peter could get that Finnish translator to sober up, I might still get lunch money from one of them. But the omens were ominous. At least, my British publishers didn't remainder my books. They kept everything they'd ever printed stacked neatly away in some old warehouse down by the Thames. I'd never been there, but the betting was good they'd still have some of Marie Corelli's weaker efforts tucked away in one of the corners, the covers tastefully decorated with the toothmarks of an intellectual river rat. My books bided their time there patiently. One of these days the underground wave of adulation for Singdahlsen's early works would

surface, and then both Peter Leyton and I would make a pretty penny selling first editions at astronomical prices.

This whole sea voyage caper had been Peter's idea. I remembered that talk over a pub lunch in London five weeks before. I'd been sounding off to good old Peter, my British editor, about all my assorted woes.

"It would seem you've gone stale for the moment, Brian. Don't worry. It happens to every writer. It happened to Hemingway."

"Hemingway's dead," I said. "He doesn't have to eat any more. I do."

"You really do have this oral fixation, don't you?"

"Stop talking like a C.C.N.Y. sophomore," I said. "Sympathize! Here I am, a black humor writer with a white skin who's lost his comic touch. What chance have I got? Maybe I should forget the whole satire thing. When *Eating* came out, it seemed pretty funny to have a guy living in a converted sewer with a hidden entrance to a supermarket. Now it sounds like a practical way to fight inflation. My material keeps bouncing out of my head and into real life. Facts are a lot funnier than fiction these days."

"Just because you had the bad luck to get yourself so involved in that novel about a computerized robot who is elected President of the United States . . ."

"Yeah, how about that? My brilliant idea has become a cartoonist's cliché. Peter, I've got to find some new approach. Satire just doesn't make it any more."

"I don't believe that. I still think you're simply at low tide right now. You'll come out of this funk, and your work will be better than ever. I don't think I have to tell you again how highly I regard you as a writer."

"You don't have to, but it might help," I said.

Peter's eyes brightened. "I'll give you more than kind words. I'll give you some advice on how to get over this bad spell. Get out of London. You're getting too

tangled up in the literary rat race here. I've watched it happening. Do you know, you're even developing a British accent."

"Gorblimey!"

"Seriously, you are. It's a bad sign. Too many outside influences."

"Seriously, you might be right." I thought about the outside influences, one in particular. Her name was Margo. She was a girl with whom I intermittently exchanged insults and physical raptures. Ostensibly, her job was secretary to a public relations firm. Her real vocation was the strenuous work involved in remaining "with it" in swinging London, where the definition of "in" and "out" changed daily, or sometimes, hourly.

In some ways, Margo was the ideal female for the semi-detached arrangement that seemed to suit me at the moment. With her I didn't have to worry about sudden lapses into "I'm really old-fashioned enough to believe in marriage." She was good in bed. She could cook pretty well, which is a fantastically rare quality among English girls.

But there was always this feeling that wherever we were, and whatever we were doing, she was checking us out against the catalog in her head to see if this was really the sort of thing a swinging London chick should be doing. Discotheques, sure. Quiet evenings at home, maybe, so long as there was a constant accompaniment from the latest pop record. American writer with name frequently mentioned in public press, fine. American writer struggling to produce next masterpiece—semi-acceptable. American writer fading into obscurity—better start looking for replacement. That was about the point we'd reached, where I was neither "in" nor "out," and the feeling was not one of utmost comfort. Yes, leaving London for awhile might be a good idea.

"The trouble is," I told Peter, "I don't know where

to go. There's a rat race everywhere, and I'm just the kind of guy who always gets hung up in it."

"How about a Greek island?"

"I've tried that. By the second week, everybody on the island was my lifelong friend and I spent all my time drinking *retsina* in waterfront cafes."

"Have yourself dropped by helicopter in the Amazon."

"A neat scheme," I said admiringly. "But I'm too damn civilized. I like a hot shower and a cold beer every day. Besides, real solitude would drive me up the wall. I like to have people around me, chattering to each other, walking around, picking their noses. I like to look up from my scribbling and watch them. I just don't want them to talk to me. That's where all the trouble starts."

Peter looked thoughtfully at the remnants of his slice of prime rib. Then his eyes narrowed. That was a sure sign his brain had shifted into high.

"Do you speak any Spanish?" he asked.

"*Chinga su madre*," I said.

Peter flushed. "There's no need to get personal, Brian."

"I'm quoting, not cussing," I said. "That's the only Spanish I know."

Peter's smile came back. "Excellent," he said. "I know just the medicine you need. I'll take care of the whole thing. Can you meet me here for lunch on Thursday? I'll have all the arrangements laid on."

"Wait a minute! Arrangements for what?"

"Brian, I assure you that in your present state of mind you must let me make the decisions. While you're this depressed, you'll have some bright objection to anything I suggest. You must simply put yourself in my hands and follow my instructions with complete and total faith in my judgment. I haven't failed you yet, have I?"

"I've got to admit you haven't."

"Then trust me now. Lunch here on Thursday, right?"

"So long as you're paying for it," I said. What the hell. Might as well humor him. At least, if his bright idea, whatever it was, turned out to be a bummer, I could blame Peter for a change. I was worn out from kicking myself in the ass all the time.

When Thursday lunchtime came round, Peter was as close to bubbling with excitement as I'd ever seen him. As soon as we'd ordered, he pulled a manila envelope out of his attache case and handed it to me. I yanked some printed papers out of it. A small object fell and hit the pub floor with a metallic clink. I picked it up. It was a key.

"The key to the flat a rich friend of mine keeps in Marbella," said Peter, beaming. "You can hole up there for a couple weeks before the *Virgen de Toluca* sails."

"Who or what is the *Virgen de Toluca*?"

"An ancient little passenger ship that sails from Cadiz, on the south coast of Spain, to Veracruz, Mexico," said Peter. "Emily and I made the trip a few years ago. Very relaxing. About two hundred passengers, all from Spain or Latin America. Nobody speaks English. Trip takes three weeks. Swimming pool, bars, dancing on the deck if you want it—not exactly posh, rather homely sort of atmosphere. Stops at the Canaries, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico and Caracas en route—a little sightseeing to enliven the pleasant torpor."

"I'm going to be trapped on this overpopulated tub for three weeks?"

"I told you everyone will be speaking Spanish. You don't speak it."

"I didn't speak any Greek when I landed on that island," I said.

"The Spanish are different," said Peter. "More reserved. If you want to talk to them, that's fine, they'll be friendly. But if you want to preserve your solitude, they'll let you. I recommend the forward section of the main deck, right over the bow. No one ever comes there except an occasional crew member. Sea spray, gulls, salt breeze. Very invigorating."

It began to sound attractive. Three weeks before the mast. Chris Columbus' route, with me at the helm of the *Santa Maria*. Words like *intrepid*, *uncharted*, *vagabond*, swam through my mind.

"Behind him lay the grey Azores  
Behind, the Gates of Hercules  
Before him not the ghost of shores  
Before him only shoreless seas,"

I quoted.

"I say, Brian, that's a rather nice bit of doggerel for spur-of-the-moment stuff," said Peter.

"Not my work," I admitted. "Tenth grade English at Pasadena High School. Some great American poet or other."

"Oh," said Peter damply. Then he perked up again. "You've stopped bloody objecting. Don't tell me you actually *like* my idea?"

"Sounds kind of different," I said. "What's all this paper?"

"There's a plane ticket to Marbella, your ticket for the boat, the address of my friend's flat and some tourist literature about Spain. The *Virgen* leaves Cadiz on March fifteenth. You'd better leave London immediately, before that quicksilver mind of yours goes sour on the idea. A few weeks of sun and seashore while you're waiting to sail won't hurt."

I looked at the standard drizzle outside. "Sun?" I asked incredulously.

"I told you you'd been in London too long. Yes, Brian, there still is a sun shining somewhere. In February, the *Costa del Sol* is a likely place to find it."

Peter's idea was sounding better and better. Then my beleaguered pessimism came to life and started to fight back.

"All very nice until I get to Veracruz," I said. "What then? Tell the conductor I left my galoshes in Spain and have to go back to get them?"

"A lot can happen in three weeks. Your mood may be very different by the time you land. In any case, Veracruz is a delightful old town. Festive, easygoing, marimba bands, beer for fivepence in sidewalk cafes under stone arcades, palm trees. . ."

"Let's skip your English romanticism about palm trees, Peter. Remember, I grew up in Los Angeles."

"Ah, but this is different. Palm trees without smog!"

"Tell me, when were you in Veracruz?"

"Oh. . .ten years or so ago."

"Want to place a small wager with some reliable bookmaker about that smog estimate?"

Peter suddenly became very businesslike. "Now look here, Brian, you're beginning to carp again. Stop it. You agreed to place yourself completely in my hands."

That was true. But the Singdahlsen pessimism does not give up easily. "You're forgetting one thing, Peter. How am I going to pay for this magnificent jaunt?"

"It's all laid on. We'll consider it an advance against future royalties. I assume your passport is in order?"

"Yeah, no problem there," I admitted. The magic word *advance* had delivered its usual body blow to the old pessimism. "O.K., Peter, I might as well relax and enjoy it. I'll send you a postcard from Veracruz. Or maybe even a manuscript." *Oh, oh, watch it,*

*Singdahlsen*, I told myself. *Euphoria is beginning to take over*. I struggled to hold on to my nice safe depression. The drizzle helped. So did the thought of packing.

As it turned out, the packing was no problem. Margo took care of most of it, along with things like getting the electricity and phone turned off. She seemed almost as relieved to be getting rid of me as I was at getting some distance between us. So after a relatively painless interval of three days, I found myself on an Air Iberia plane, winging southward, as they say in the ads.

Marbella had been nice. Most of the English-speaking jet-setters littering the beach around me were so rich I got stage fright at the thought of talking to them. I did pick up, in my usual magpie fashion, too many words of Spanish for my own good, but now I was on shipboard, I resolved to bury my new vocabulary and stick to "*No comprendo*" and pointing my finger at the menu.

While I'd been reliving all this stuff in my mind, the ship had cleared the harbor, and we were well out to sea. As if on cue, the word "menu" in my reverie was followed by the actual sound of a gong being struck, loudly and slowly. The sound seemed to move around the deck in a steady progress. Wondering how we had suddenly slipped out of Twentieth Century Fox into J. Arthur Rank, I looked to see where the sound was coming from. It turned out to be the work of a waiter in one of those little short white coats and shiny black pants. Evidently a lot of my fellow passengers already knew the drill, because they started streaming toward the back end of the ship. (I wasn't yet enough of a salty dog to use words like "stern" or "aft," even to myself.)

I followed them. They flowed down both sides of a branching staircase lined with gleaming oak bannisters to the deck below. As I'd guessed, it was the dining room. I saw at once what Peter had meant by "homely," in the English sense. Though there were a

few small tables for four, the others were very long affairs seating ten or twelve people. My eagle eye picked up some patches in the heavy white tablecloths. It also picked up the welcome sight of large decanters of red wine deployed at pleasantly close intervals on the table. Peter had told me the bar prices would be low, but he'd neglected to mention the free wine. There didn't seem to be any bureaucratic hang-ups about where to sit, so I followed the example of the other people and plopped myself down in the first empty chair I came to.

Dinner was good. It meandered on for about seven courses, and some of the courses had two choices. I quickly worked out a system of sign language with the waiter. For fish, he'd make swimming motions with his hands; for fowl, he'd flap his elbows; for meat, he'd put his fingers to his head like horns. The system was simple, logical and consistent, and it gave the rest of the people at the table so much entertainment that they soon quit trying to teach me Spanish.

There were eight other people at the table, including two very well-behaved kids, a boy about eight and a girl about eleven. These were attached to a set of parents who looked bored enough with each other to make it a safe bet they'd been married about twenty years. There was another married couple, a little older and pudgier. The rest were all unattached males. At the foot of the table sat a dark-haired man of about twenty-eight or so, his hair sleeked back in that Valentino style that people like bank clerks and police chiefs still wear in Spain. He seemed nervous. His dark eyes kept glancing around the dining room, as if he was looking for someone he didn't especially want to see. He didn't look at anybody at our table, just applied himself to the food as if he was afraid the cook might run out of supplies half way across the ocean. He skipped dessert (that nice custard thing I had already become addicted to in Spain) and left the table