Blaze
Her Private Treasure
Wendy Etherington

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Аннотация

Malina Blair went from rising-star FBI agent to… er…cold-case officer in the backwoods of South Carolina–not exactly a hotbed of action. But when a smuggling investigation leads her to tranquil Palmer's Island, Malina inadvertently discovers one of the region's best-kept secrets: sexy, gorgeous attorney Carr Hamilton.But even as their chemistry goes from fizzy to red-hot and explosive, Malina wonders if maybe she isn't getting in over her head. After all, she's just visiting–and the island's main attraction is also her prime suspect!

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“I’ve thought of nothing but you since yesterday,” Carr rasped in her ear

Different didn’t even begin to describe the hunger pulsing through her. She’d anticipated a spark with their kiss and gotten an inferno.

Malina pressed her lips to his throat and buried her hand in the inky locks of his hair that indeed felt like silk. “You’re part of my case. I shouldn’t—”

He silenced her with another kiss. Her protests died in the wake of the raw emotions consuming her. She craved his touch, knowing instinctively he could drive away the loneliness and satisfy both her body and her mind.

She wanted his skin pressed against hers. She wanted to let loose the fire behind his dark eyes.

His hand slid up her stomach, and her breasts tingled in anticipation. But before he could reach his goal, his thumb brushed her shoulder holster….

Dear Reader,

My hero in this story, Carr Hamilton, was inspired by, well, a car. The Triumph Spitfire was a British two-seater sports car manufactured from the late sixties to late seventies, and I drove one—painted British Racing Green—as a teenager. (If I can find a picture, I'll be sure to share it on my Web site.) It was the coolest thing on four wheels, and I just couldn't resist giving it to Carr to tool around Palmer's Island.

I also had to give my charming hero a heroine to challenge and confound him. Malina Blair is the extreme of me—tough, fearless and always ready with a comeback. (In real life, I admit avoiding confrontation whenever possible, have a ridiculous, irrational, frustrating fear of heights, and the only kind of gun I can fire with any skill uses water instead of bullets.)

Come to think of it, I'm probably not like Malina at all. But then this is the world of romance, and we can all escape for a while and be anybody we want to be.

Hope you enjoy!

Wendy Etherington

P.S. Additional apologies to the hardworking folks at the FBI Field Office in Columbia, SC. I moved their office to Charleston for the purposes of my story.

Her Private Treasure
Wendy Etherington

www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy Etherington was born and raised in the deep South—and she has the fried chicken recipes and NASCAR ticket stubs to prove it. The author of more than twenty books, she writes full-time from her home in South Carolina, where she lives with her husband, two daughters and an energetic shih tzu named Cody. She can be reached via her Web site, www.wendyetherington.com.

To my best buds, Jacquie D'Alessandro and Jenni Grizzle, whose love, support and interventions of champagne and chocolate keep me sane.

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1

CARR HAMILTON YANKED the rope around the dock post, then stepped off his thirty-seven-foot cabin cruiser, The Litigator. As rippling waves of the Intracoastal Waterway lapped against the dock, the moon hung above the marina, a glowing orb casting a cool and mysterious light. The air smelled of sea life and salt.

The gloomy night and deserted dock, plus yet another solitary cruise, had put him in a rare melancholy mood. After securing his boat, he zipped his jacket against the cool March wind and headed across the creaky wooden slats, intending to circumvent the marina bar, where he'd find friends and conversation.

"…coffee is ready for distribution, so don't get jumpy now."

Carr stopped at the familiar voice, delivered in an angry and demanding tone. Coffee distribution? Jack Rafton was an insurance agent. Auto, home, life, et cetera. Mundane stuff really. But a nice guy and good business neighbor.

"This whole thing is getting dicey," another, but unknown, voice whispered harshly.

"Relax, and keep your voices down," said yet a third man.

Carr's low mood vanished. His pulse jumped. He leaped sideways and ducked behind a large storage locker at the dock's edge, realizing he probably hadn't moved so swiftly or stealthily since his days on the Yale fencing team.

“It’s late.” Jack’s voice again. “Locals are all deep into their whiskey and beer by now.”

“Let’s just make the exchange and get out of here.” The second unknown voice.

“You’re just pissed I raised my prices,” Jack said.

“Whatever,” the first unknown man said, his voice deep and raspy. A smoker maybe. “That’s between you and the boss. Just give us the stuff.”

Carr heard footsteps on the wooden slats, then the creak of a rope tethering a boat.

He risked a glance from behind the post and saw Jack carrying a wooden crate and walking slow, balanced steps on the deck of a ski boat. By the blue and red stripes on the hull, it appeared to be Jack’s boat, but it was too dark to make out the name scripted on the side and be certain.

The crate was handed over to one of the two unidentified men, then something was shoved into Jack’s hand. All the characters stood in shadow, like the old black-and-white film noirs Carr enjoyed. He half expected to see Humphrey Bogart’s strong-jawed profile flash before him.

No hat-and-raincoat-clad detectives appeared, so Carr concentrated on what he could see. The two unknown men scurried away from Jack and the boat. He tried to estimate their height and weight, but knew both were wild guesses based on a comparison of Jack’s vital statistics.

Jack transferred the object he’d been given—an envelope

maybe?—to his other hand, then, suddenly, he turned in Carr's direction. Fairly certain the angle and the width of the post kept him hidden, Carr didn't move. He barely breathed. Whatever the meeting with the two men meant, Carr knew it wasn't something Jack wanted known by a business acquaintance. The timing as well as the conversation itself spoke to that certainty.

After a few moments, he heard Jack's footsteps receding down the dock. He counted slowly to a hundred before moving and then only to take a quick look. Noting the dock was empty, he shifted from his position.

Puzzling over the discussion he'd heard, he checked his boat to be sure he'd locked the cabin door and secured the rope properly. The exchange had to be a payoff of some kind. The two men had clearly bought something from Jack. But coffee? Why would three men need to meet in the dead of night to buy and sell coffee?

He walked down the dock, stopping as he reached the boat Jack had retrieved the crate from. American Dream was clearly scripted on the hull in bright red letters. Jack's boat, then.

Stooping, Carr glided his hand over the dock's rough wooden planks. Something gritty caressed the tips of his fingers. He brought his hand to his face, inhaling the scent. Coffee.

With the scent, he recalled one significant reason coffee grounds might be placed in a crate, then traded for cash in the dead of night. Drugs.

Two weeks later

FBI SPECIAL AGENT Malina Blair glared at the stack of case files on her desk and thought seriously about pulling her pistol from its ever-present side holster and firing at will.

Two computer hacking cases, one suspected drug smuggling and six complaints from helpful citizens who thought they spotted someone from the Most Wanted list hiding out behind the fake designer bags in the straw market.

How far the mighty had fallen.

She recalled fondly the business executive son's kidnapping case she'd closed three years ago. She supposed the son and his loved ones didn't remember the ordeal in a positive light, but the family still sent her a Christmas card every year, thanking her for her sharpshooting skills.

And barely six months ago, she'd led a team in solving a six-year-old bank robbery, taking down the ring of suspects as they attempted to break into the main branch vault of the Bank of America in downtown Washington, D.C.

Good times. Career-making moments.

Formally interviewing Senator Phillip Grammer's son on suspicion of securities and bank fraud hadn't gone quite so well. The powerful politician had stormed into the interview and claimed his son had fallen in with the wrong crowd briefly and that he and the SEC were working out a special process of restitution.

Phil junior was special all right. He'd ratted on three other people—who Malina considered minor players in the deal—and

got away scot-free.

While a lovely city, Charleston, South Carolina, wasn't exactly the FBI's hotbed of excitement. Getting back to headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, was imperative, especially since screwing up again was likely to land her reassigned in the desert-to-nowhere field office. Interrogating cacti.

With a sigh, she pulled out the folder about the smuggling case. Her boss had actually dropped this one on her desk that morning. At first, she'd hoped she'd been forgiven for her career-crushing mistake and assigned to the elite team that worked the harbor. With the Port of Charleston being the country's fourth busiest, illicit goods and terrorist threats were a serious possibility.

Unfortunately, the case she'd been assigned was a vague suspicion of drug smuggling based on a two-minute overheard conversation that took place on nearby—and boringly tiny—Palmer's Island. The single witness was an attorney and friend of her boss.

It seemed she had another day of tedium ahead of her.

Scooping up the documents, she headed out of her cubicle and toward the elevator.

"Hey, Malina," Donald, one of her colleagues, called out as she passed his cube. "Gonna work another dog-napping case today?"

She never slowed her brisk stride as she called back, "I'll see if I can fit it in after kicking your ass in combat training this

afternoon."

"Again," several others called out helpfully from behind their own cubicle walls.

She lifted her lips in what some people might consider a sneer, but those who knew her recognized it as her version of a smile. She'd only been in the Charleston field office three weeks, and while everyone knew of her setback, most had at least come to respect her skills and determination. Hers was a cautionary tale none of them wanted coming true in their own lives.

Alone in the elevator, she allowed herself the weakness of closing her eyes as frustration overcame her. She should be in a corner office with a view. She should be solving important cases. She should be compiling letters of commendation.

She was good at her job—a few she'd worked with had even called her the best. If only she had tact as steady as her hands and as sure as her roundhouse kick, she'd rise to the top.

Donald hadn't exaggerated. Her first case since arriving at the office had been a literal dog-napping.

The mayor's prize Maltese had gone missing, and a ransom demand had been made. It had taken her all of two minutes in an interview with the dog walker to crack him and the master plot.

The mayor's kids had hugged her; her coworkers had laughed their asses off.

Minutes later, while she drove her government-issue sedan over the bridge to Palmer's Island, she cast a glance at the sun's rays bouncing off the rippling Atlantic waves in the

distance. Ahead was Patriot's Point, where the decommissioned aircraft carrier the USS Yorktown had been permanently docked, awaiting the daily flood of tourists eager to explore her proud and massive decks.

The island that was her destination was even smaller than the one where she'd been raised. In fact, Kauai, Hawaii was as different from Palmer's Island as two floating rock and sand masses could be. And yet, they had the same effect—they calmed and soothed as no other person, place or thing had ever managed in her life.

She'd continue to resist her mother's assertion that someday she'd want to return home, but Palmer's Island did force her to remember that her life hadn't always been about ambition, power and politics.

She found the address she was looking for with little effort and pulled into the small sand-and-shell-dotted parking lot beside a large house that had been converted into a quad-plex of offices. A discreet sign announced Tessa Malone, Family Counselor; Jack Rafton, Island Insurance; Charlie McGary, Suncoast Real Estate; and Carr Hamilton, Attorney-at-Law.

Mr. Hamilton's office was on the lower left, across the main hall from the insurance agent, who was the primary focus in the supposed smuggling operation.

The whole case would most certainly turn out to be nothing. Rafton and Hamilton were probably involved in some minor quarrel, and this was the attorney's idea of revenge. Maybe

Rafton had cut Hamilton off in traffic or carelessly blocked the driveway with cans on trash day or any number of other ridiculous things that people got worked up over.

For her, this trip was merely another hoop to jump through in order to get her career back on track.

She turned the brass knob on the door to Hamilton's office and entered to find herself in a small but elegant reception area. Malina's footsteps echoed across dark oak hardwood floors as a quick glance took in the emerald curtains, pale gold walls and expensive-looking antique furniture.

A woman with dark brown hair, streaked with silver, sat behind an antique cherry desk. She looked up with a polite smile. "May I help you?"

Malina pulled her badge from her jacket pocket. "Special Agent Malina Blair. I have an appointment with Mr. Hamilton."

The polite smile never wavered, leading Malina to wonder if the cops came calling frequently or if she was simply unruffled by any visitor. "Of course." She lifted the phone on her desk. "I'll let him know you're here." After a brief conversation, she rose and hung up the phone. "This way, please."

The receptionist/secretary turned away toward the door in the back of the room. Her tailored brown suit showed off her trim figure, just as her matching heels highlighted her confident stride.

Malina had discovered she could glean valuable information about the person in charge by watching subordinates. If that

observation held true in this case, she could expect Carr Hamilton to be self-assured, efficient and sophisticated. Not exactly what she'd expected from simple little Palmer's Island.

She followed the receptionist into the office and barely resisted gasping at the man who rose from behind the massive mahogany desk at the back of the room.

He was beautiful.

At a trim six foot two with wide shoulders and narrow hips, his body alone could cause a woman to wax poetic, something Malina never felt moved by but finally understood why others did. He wore an exquisite charcoal suit, and his thick, silky-looking, inky-black hair set off a face sculpted like the statue of an ancient god, even though nothing about him was cold.

In fact, he radiated heat—especially from his dark brown eyes, sharp and intelligent, standing out from that spectacular face, absorbing her from head to toe.

Moving gracefully, he rounded the desk and extended his hand, which was tanned and long fingered, elegant as everything around him. "Thank you for coming, Agent Blair."

Jolted into remembering she was there on a professional mission, she managed a nod as she took his hand. A shock of desire raced up her arm. "Sure thing."

His gaze lingered on her face, and she resisted the urge to pull her hand from his. There was something powerful, even meaningful, about that stare, and she didn't like the sensation that she'd lost control and perspective so quickly. In that moment, she

was a woman, not an agent, and that was entirely the wrong tone for this meeting.

"Coffee, Mr. Hamilton?" the receptionist asked from behind Malina.

"Yes, Paige. Thank you. I imagine Agent Blair would prefer the Kona blend."

Paige turned and left the room, presumably to get coffee, and Malina forced herself to both step back from Hamilton's enticing touch and simultaneously hang on to his compelling gaze. "Kona?" she asked.

"You are Hawaiian, aren't you?"

"Yes."

She clenched her back teeth to avoid asking him how he knew her heritage, but he simply nodded in response to the unspoken question.

"I'm good with faces." He extended his hand to one of the club chairs in front of his desk, then returned to his position on the other side, lowering himself into his blood-red leather chair only after she'd done the same. "Also, Sam mentioned you'd grown up on Kauai."

Gorgeous, intelligent and honest. Three very good reasons to get to know a man. Unfortunately, he was part of her professional and not her personal life.

And never the twain shall meet.

She'd seen too many careers wither and die from office bed-hopping. And falling into the wrong bed in the world of politics

landed the offenders a one-way ticket to early retirement. No way was she going down that road.

"I understand the SAC is a personal friend," she said, leaning back in the club chair and tucking her neglected libido neatly away.

He nodded. "Special Agent in Charge Samuel Clairmont." He lifted his lips in a smile that made Malina's heart jump. "He's come a long way from third string on the Yale fencing team."

"I guess you were first-string."

"Of course."

From any other man, that admission would be bragging at best, pretentious at worst. In the capable, elegant hands of Carr Hamilton, it was charming.

Paige returned at that moment with a silver tray, holding a pitcher, mugs and tiny silver spoons.

She set the service on Hamilton's desk, then turned and left the room. As he poured the coffee, Malina took a moment to let her gaze roam the office, noting the dark wood floor-to-ceiling bookcases filled with volumes, a few pictures and knickknacks. A wide-screen laptop sat on the left side of his desk. A sideboard served as a bar, displaying cut-crystal glasses and decanters filled with amber liquid.

Class, style and old money permeated the room.

"Cream and sugar?" the man across from her asked.

She almost said yes simply to watch those graceful hands move. "No, thank you."

“Strong coffee for a strong woman.”

Since she had no idea what to say to that statement without heading the conversation down a personal path, she sipped from her mug. The Kona was bold and flavorful, just as it should be.

He looked amused as he settled back into his chair, no doubt realizing she was attracted to him. A man with his looks and style wouldn’t miss such an obvious detail.

Despite the near certain futility and mundane nature of her task, she had to be careful not to take the wrong step with this man. He stirred something in her better left unturned. She had a singular goal and couldn’t afford any distraction.

But she so hated being careful.

“So, what do you think of my observations?” he asked.

“I’m not sure what to think at this point. I’d like you to tell me what you saw in detail.” From her pocket, she pulled out a microrecorder, which she set on the desk in front of him. “For the record.” She recited the standard warning about testimony and giving false information to law enforcement, then settled back to listen.

He gave a report as organized and detailed as any cop. He was careful not to speculate and left out personal feelings, as she would expect from a lawyer. From the file the SAC had given her, she’d read about his success litigating civil cases in a variety of antitrust suits, products liability and environmental issues. She could well imagine him living like a king on the proceeds of his powerful voice and structured mind.

Still, the likelihood of an everyday citizen cracking a drug-smuggling operation was about as likely as her suddenly deciding to lay down her Glock and become a pole dancer.

"Drugs are smuggled in coffee grounds," he said in conclusion.

"Twenty years ago," she said drily as she turned off the recorder and returned it to her pocket. "Things have gotten a bit more sophisticated these days."

"I don't envision Jack as a major drug kingpin. This is a small operation. Unsophisticated methods would suit them better."

Despite herself, she was impressed he'd thought through the conclusions of what he'd witnessed. "So why did you come to us? If Rafton is dealing drugs, this is a matter for the DEA."

"I have reason to believe he's smuggling more than drugs."

"How?" she asked, though she suddenly knew.

"I've been watching him."

She sighed heavily. Random citizens playing at being cops was a surefire way of getting somebody killed. "I'd prefer you leave this to the professionals."

"You mean the professionals who don't believe anything illicit is going on?"

"I haven't come to any conclusions yet."

Clearly annoyed, he tapped his fingers against the arm of his chair. His gaze locked with hers. "The FBI do investigate major thefts, don't they?"

"Last time I checked."

"And art theft would still fall in that category?"

"It would."

"Then I've come to the right agency."

It would still mean she'd have to give the DEA a heads-up, and interjurisdictional cooperation with those cowboys was one of her least favorite job requirements.

Hamilton leaned forward. "I didn't ask you here on a whim, Agent Blair. I'm not a panicked or bored islander looking for attention. There's something to this case."

"It's not a case yet."

Those elegant hands, linked and resting on the desk in front of him, clenched. "Why are you so skeptical of my information?"

"Why do you think Jack Rafton's stealing art?"

"Because two nights ago, he unloaded a box shaped like a large painting."

She'd asked the obvious; she'd gotten the obvious answer. "Maybe he's just buying art with his drug-smuggling proceeds."

"Maybe he is. Why are you so skeptical of my information?"

Because the SAC would never, on purpose, give me anything with teeth.

She bit back that response, though, and stated facts, which she was sure the sharp lawyer would appreciate. "Drug smuggling is an extremely risky and dangerous pastime. Only the very desperate or very foolish would choose that route. The drug kingpins are protective to the death of their product's distribution and often disembowel those who cross them.

"From the quick background check I did on Jack Rafton,

summa cum laude graduate of the College of Charleston and longtime insurance broker of Palmer's Island, I don't see him blending well in that violent world."

Hamilton nodded. "True enough."

"Rafton also doesn't drive an exotic car, which, if you'll pardon the cliché, is a drug dealer's biggest weakness."

"And how do you know that?"

She shrugged. "The parking lot outside. There's a well-used SUV that belongs to the family counselor. A fairly new but understated luxury sedan for the real estate agent, a pickup truck for the insurance guy and a perfectly restored Triumph Spitfire convertible painted British Racing Green." She lifted her eyebrows. "Which I'm sure belongs to you."

"You ran the tags."

"Didn't need to."

He said nothing for a long moment as he studied her. "Well, I suppose somebody at the Bureau is taking my suspicions seriously if they sent you."

She started to argue with him, to explain that the only reason she'd been sent was because he was friends with a powerful man. But admitting that would be admitting she had no influence and simply did as she was told. Plus, despite the urge not to be, she was flattered he recognized her investigative skills.

"We appreciate the cooperation of concerned citizens and follow up on any tip that will lead to the arrest and conviction of anyone participating in criminal activity."

“Ah, the pat, politically correct answer. Not what I would have expected from a woman who risked her career by questioning Senator Grammer’s son.”

Malina felt the blood drain from her head as humiliation washed over her. “Agent Clairmont told you.”

Hamilton nodded. “As I’m sure he mentioned, we’re old friends. For what it’s worth, he considers you an asset to the Bureau. He also respects your willingness to do whatever it takes to see justice served, even if your methods are sometimes rash.”

“That kid was guilty as sin,” she said, fighting to talk past her tight jaw, even as she felt a quick spurt of pleasure in hearing her boss respected her.

“Sam thinks so, too. Power buys silence way too easily.”

“Not with me.”

“So noted. But I’m guessing a drug-and/or art-smuggling case could put a nice letter of commendation in your file. Not to mention I’m suddenly moved to make a generous campaign donation to whoever runs against that idiot Grammer in the next election.”

Her gaze shot to his. “Surely you didn’t just attempt to bribe a government agent.”

A wide, breath-stealing smile bloomed on his face. “Surely not.”

She rose slowly to her feet. Who the hell was this guy?

Smart, successful and wealthy. A law-abiding citizen who took untold hours of his time to investigate a professional

neighbor, then used a powerful association to see that his observations were taken seriously. Was he bored, curious or did he have a hidden agenda?

Bracing her hands on his desk, she noted he'd stood when she had and now she was forced to look up at him. At five-seven, she wasn't a tiny woman, but the height and breadth of him made her feel small and feminine in comparison. "I'm here to follow up on your information as ordered by my supervisor, Special Agent in Charge Samuel Clairmont. Do you have anything further to add to your previous statements?"

"I imagine you'd be interested in the storage garage Jack keeps under an assumed name in Charleston, which currently houses a brand-new Lotus Elise."

"How do you—" She stopped, shaking her head, irritated that he'd, yet again, managed to surprise her. "You followed him."

"I'd also like to point out that he chose Ardent Red instead of British Racing Green for the exterior paint." He cocked his head. "Do you think that's an indicator of law-abiding citizen versus master smuggler?"

Temper brought heat to her cheeks. "Mr. Hamilton, I'm—"

"Call me Carr."

"Mr. Hamilton, I'm advising—no," she amended, "I'm ordering you to bring your amateur investigation to a halt. Do not question Mr. Rafton or his associates. Do not ask others about him and definitely do not follow him. The Bureau will look into your information and take things from here."

“But you don’t really believe me.”

“I do, in fact. I trust that you saw what you say you have. What those observations mean is an entirely different subject.” She reached into her pocket for a business card, which she laid on his desk to avoid touching him again. It seemed imperative that she get away from this man as fast as possible. “Let me know if I can be of further assistance.” She turned, then paused and glanced back. “Or if you find Jimmy Hoffa.”

With that parting shot, she headed toward the door, longing to run when she sensed him following her. She caught a whiff of his cologne, a blend of sandalwood and amber, as warm and enticing as the man himself.

Her hand was on the doorknob when he spoke. “Professional considerations aside, I’d like to take you to dinner sometime.”

Swallowing hard, she forced herself to meet his gaze. “Sorry. You’re a witness. I’m not allowed.”

“But you’re not even certain a crime has been committed.”

Despite what she’d told him and the sheer unlikelihood of anything significant happening on Palmer’s Island, she knew there was. Her instincts were buzzing, and they hadn’t steered her wrong yet.

Well, except for that senatorial questioning thing.

“I’m investigating,” she said shortly, hoping to further discourage him.

Either he didn’t get the signal or he didn’t care, since he reached out, sliding his fingertip along her jaw, sending waves

of heat racing down her body. “And I imagine you don’t give a damn about what’s allowed.”

Her breath caught. She didn’t. At least she never had.

And look where that attitude had led you.

Opening the door, she stepped out of his reach. “I also don’t have time to get involved. I’m going to close as many cases as I can and get back to D.C., where I belong, as soon as possible.”

Disappointment moved across his handsome face. He slid his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. “Of course,” he said quietly. “Thanks for coming.”

She regretted her abrupt tone but didn’t see how she could change what was. “One last thing about Rafton.” Though she already knew the answer, caution demanded she ask. “This isn’t personal, right? Rafton didn’t hit your car or steal your girlfriend?”

“No. And I don’t have a girlfriend.” His dark eyes gleamed with power and possession. “If I did, neither Jack Rafton nor any other man would take her.”

2

AS CARR SIPPED his whiskey at The Night Heron bar, he watched out the back windows as boats docked and launched for sunset cruises down the Intracoastal Waterway, then rounded the tip of the island and out into the Atlantic.

Had he finally spent too much time slowing down and reflecting?

Observation had become a staple. Watching other people do interesting things.

For so many years, he'd been on the fast track. He'd spent every waking moment establishing a lucrative practice in Manhattan, fighting for clients with prospects for big payoffs, dismissing others he might have helped but whose cases weren't as profitable.

He'd dispassionately profited from suffering and built a fortune and fierce reputation by doing so.

He hadn't paused to notice small, everyday things. To stroll the beaches he'd grown up on. To appreciate love and friendship. To watch the birds glide across the night sky.

It had taken the death of his uncle and mentor to jolt him.

Uncle Clinton had departed his life respected, rich and bitterly alone. He'd coldly extracted every penny from every case he'd taken on. He'd corrupted idealistic law school graduates with promises of wealth and power. Few, other than the descendants

who inherited his money, had mourned him.

As Carr had watched heaps of fertile earth drop onto his uncle's casket, he knew he was destined for the same end. And he knew he had to find another path.

That had been two years ago, and while he didn't regret finding his roots again and settling on quiet Palmer's Island, the sparks of need for excitement came more frequently these days.

Dear heaven, did he have to fade into tedium? Was that his penance? "Hel-lo, gorgeous."

Certain he wasn't being addressed, Carr nevertheless glanced at Jimmy, The Heron's weekday bartender, and noted his gaze locked on the door behind Carr. "What hot blonde are you fixated on tonight?"

"Brunette," he returned, his eyes following the subject in question.

Carr didn't bother to turn. Being barely twenty-one, Jimmy's taste inevitably skewed young. At thirty-five, Carr wasn't even remotely swimming in the same pool.

Instead, he stared at his whiskey.

"What are you doing here?" a familiar voice asked seconds later.

Raising his head, Carr blinked, but Special Agent Malina Blair was still sliding onto the bar stool next to him, changing his evening from watchful boredom to stimulating possibility in a matter of seconds.

"Drinking." He raised his glass as he absorbed her lovely

features. “Join me?”

Her exotic turquoise gaze slid from his face to his glass and back again. “Why the hell not?”

He only had to lift his finger to get Jimmy assembling her drink. “I like you a lot better when you’re speaking your mind instead of spouting Bureau platitudes.” Not that he hadn’t liked her then as well. His fingers tingled with the urge to pull her silky-looking dark hair from the restraining ponytail secured at the base of her neck. “How’s the investigation progressing?”

“I would like you a lot better if you’d stay out of my case,” she said as Jimmy set the drink before her.

“So now it’s a case?”

She rolled her shoulders. “It is.”

He’d had faith in her sense of justice, but he was relieved to have the instinct confirmed. Sam had been right in that she was the agent for the job.

Did his good deed erase one of the black marks next to his name?

He wasn’t sure—especially since his greatest desire was to seduce her into compromising her professional code of ethics and sleeping with him.

She sipped her drink, never wincing.

Though he considered his brand of imported whiskey smooth, he knew plenty of people who found it too bracing. Women mostly. But then Malina Blair was tougher than the exotic island beauty she appeared to be.

“You like whiskey?” he asked her, fascinated by the way her pillowy lips cupped the crystal.

“Not especially.” She rattled the ice in her glass. “This is nice, though. Stop me if I lose my senses and have the urge to shoot somebody.”

“I’m here to serve. Lousy day?”

“Lousy month.”

“I imagine so. But do you define yourself completely by your job?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

That path led nowhere, as Carr well knew. She’d be so much happier if she fell into bed with him. He wondered how long it would take him to manage it.

Certainly the key to this lady’s heart wouldn’t be found in candy, flowers and suggestive compliments. “So I assume you’ve spent the last thirty-six hours pursuing the case. What have you learned?”

“That boat captains on small islands like to gossip, and your friend Jack Rafton is well liked, even if he has been coming and going at odd hours lately.”

“Which you already knew by talking to me.”

She shrugged. “Corroboration was necessary.”

He was dying to watch that cool nonchalance fall away with the right touch. Because beneath the frustrated heat under her staid, navy-blue suit, the fire of a passionate woman lurked.

With effort, he managed to focus on their conversation. “If

you need more details, you might talk to the harbormaster, Albert Duffy. He knows everything about everyone. Though you'd do better to charm him than flash your badge."

She looked at him, then glanced at her watch with a sigh. "I have a meeting with Albert Duffy in twenty minutes."

Carr tracked his gaze slowly down her body. "Not that I don't think you look amazing—and I believe Jimmy is impressed as well—you'd do better showing Al a little leg."

She bared her teeth. "I could always show him the wrong side of a federal interrogation room."

He leaned toward her, lowering his voice several pitches. "Subtlety often works better than force."

Her gaze moved to his and held. Desire lingered in the depth of her eyes, clear as the tropical water they mimicked. Her beautiful lips parted, and for a moment, her gaze dropped to his mouth, and he thought she was going to give in to the need so obviously pulsing between them.

Tedium had vanished the moment she'd appeared, and the sensation was heady.

"Who's Jimmy?" she asked, leaning back and breaking the spell.

"The bartender." Carr inclined his head toward the young man pouring vodka in a glass for another customer. "Wave. I think he has a crush on you."

She never looked in Jimmy's direction but said, "He's too young. What are you doing here anyway?"

"Drinking, as I said earlier. But also volunteering to be your assistant, guarding your virtue, so to speak, as well as helping break the ice with Al. I'm one of the few people he actually likes."

"I thought I told you to stay out of this case."

"It's my bar."

"Literally?"

"Yes, plus I live across the street."

Admiration sparked in her eyes. "The house on the point."

"How did you know?"

She drained the rest of her drink. "It's you."

"You're hedging. You've certainly run a deep search on me by now. You know my address, my background, my professional history and financial status. I bet you even know what grade I received on my contract law midterm my junior year of college and whether I prefer boxers or briefs. Before you walked through the door, you knew I owned this place. Why the subterfuge? Why pretend surprise at finding me here?"

"I live for subterfuge," she scoffed.

"Stop," he said quietly but firmly. The sarcasm was a defense mechanism that she obviously used to keep people from probing too deeply. A way of maintaining distance. "It wouldn't kill you to accept my help."

"No, but it might compromise my case. Plus…"

When she stopped, he prompted, "Plus?"

"I don't understand your motives. Why are you going to all this trouble? Why do you want to get involved in this investigation?

What's in it for you?"

She didn't trust him. Not surprising, since he didn't trust himself. The bribery attempt, a remnant of his old ways, had been a huge misstep. But he'd wanted to know what kind of agent he was dealing with, despite Sam's assurances that Malina was fiercely ethical.

"It's my duty," he said finally.

"As what?"

"A citizen of the United States."

She shook her head. "Nobody's that committed and idealistic."

"But they should be." And he was fighting every day to be sure he could count himself among those who were. "This is my island." When she raised her eyebrows, he added, "Not all of it, though I do own a fair collection of properties. I mean, this is my birthplace, my home. It's lovely and peaceful, the place where I intend to raise my children and live until I'm ancient and dotty. I care what happens here, and I won't let smuggling or drugs or anything else ruin my community."

Saying nothing, she held his gaze. "You're—"

"Agent Blair?" a gruff voice interrupted.

Malina rose and held out her hand to harbormaster Albert Duffy. "Mr. Duffy, thanks for agreeing to meet me."

Though he shook her hand briefly, his thick gray brows drew together, and the wrinkles on his darkly tanned and lined face seemed to deepen. "I don't like working with women."

“I don’t like working with anybody. Why don’t we take that table in the back corner?” she suggested.

Al scowled briefly, but must have been somewhat satisfied with Malina’s direct answer, because he shrugged and wandered toward the booth.

Malina turned back to Carr and spoke in a low tone only he could hear. “That was a pretty impassioned speech earlier. I can see why you were a prize to juries. I still have to ask you to keep your distance from this case.” When he started to interrupt, she held up her hand to stall him. “I’d be interested in calling you for an occasional consultation, but that’s where your involvement ends. Understand?”

“Since you’re articulate, and I’m fairly intelligent, yes, I understand.”

She narrowed her eyes briefly, as if trying to figure out if there was a loophole. Which, of course, there was.

“Your offer to help is admirable,” she said after a moment. “In fact, it’s—” She stopped and shook her head ruefully. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard sentiment like that.” She brushed her hand across his arm. “Thanks.”

Now she thought he was being noble.

He almost wished he could call back his words. His nobility was tainted. He didn’t deserve her admiration. But he wanted her.

When she reached into her pocket and pulled out a clip of cash, he held up his hand. “I’ll pay for the drinks.”

“I appreciate the offer, but you can’t.” She took out a twenty-

dollar bill and laid it on the bar. “Generous.”

She turned toward the booth Al had settled into. “My compensation to the cute bartender whose flirting I’d never consider returning.”

“Why not?”

She flicked him a glance. “I’m attracted to men, not boys.”

“WOULD YOU LIKE a drink, Mr. Duffy?” Malina asked as she scooted into the booth and faced the cranky harbormaster.

He pointed a knobby finger toward the bar area. “It’s comin’.”

Malina looked over to see Carr Hamilton headed toward them, a glass of whiskey in each hand.

He slid onto the seat beside Duffy, then lifted his drink in a toast and his lips in smirk. “I figured you’d want to abstain. On duty and all.”

“Very considerate, Mr. Hamilton,” she said, certain the sharp attorney caught her sarcasm. “However, I don’t need your assistance.”

“I’m sure you don’t. However, I’m Mr. Duffy’s lawyer.”

“He called you?”

“No, but isn’t it fortunate I was here? I’ll stay on his behalf.”

“I don’t want to be here at all,” Duffy said, glaring at her.

“Me either,” she muttered. The man she had the reluctant hots for was currently sitting across from her, meddling in her case, distracting her from nearly everything. “But I have a job to do.”

Duffy sipped his drink. “You should be home, cookin’ for your man.”

Though her muscles tensed like a coiled snake, she managed to let the anger roll off. “I’m better with a pistol than a spatula.”

“Not natural,” Duffy insisted.

Malina drilled her gaze into his. “Frankly, Mr. Duffy, I’d rather be anywhere else, talking to anyone else than you. And yet…” She lifted her hands and leaned back. “Here I am, striving to protect the law-abiding citizens of Palmer’s Island from the criminal element. If I can make the sacrifice, so can you.”

Duffy continued to glare silently at her, as if sure he’d never seen a self-possessed woman in his life.

“Al,” Hamilton said quietly, “let her do this.”

Duffy sighed. “Yeah, okay.”

“I’d like to record the interview, if that’s okay with you.” She cast Hamilton a glance. “And your attorney, of course.” With their verbal agreements secured, she asked Duffy, “Do you know Jack Rafton?”

Duffy looked wary. “Yeah. Slip number nine.”

“Owner of a twenty-six-foot cabin cruiser called American Dream?”

“Yeah.”

“How would you characterize your relationship?”

“We ain’t got a relationship, lady. We’re men.”

And not homophobic at all. Malina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She liked her job, she really did. Or, rather, she used to. “Are you friends?” she asked.

Duffy shrugged. “We have a drink together sometimes.”

“Have you ever been to his house?”

“No.”

“Do you have his cell phone number?”

“No.”

“What do you talk about when you’re together?”

“Fishing. What does that have to do with anything?”

“She’s trying to determine if you’re close friends with Jack,” Hamilton put in.

“Are you?” Malina pressed the harbormaster.

“I guess not.”

The man could give clams pointers. “But you see Mr. Rafton frequently.”

“He has a boat. I run the harbor.”

“Does Mr. Rafton seem under an unusual amount of stress lately?”

“How the hell do I know?”

“Have you seen him at the docks at unusual times over the last few weeks?”

Duffy’s gaze darted to Hamilton. “What does she mean unusual?”

Hamilton’s lips twitched. “Out of the ordinary.”

“I know that. I don’t know what that has to do with—”

“You run the harbor,” Malina interrupted. “You know when people come and go. When does Rafton usually come and go?”

“Early morning, sometimes after dinner.”

“When has he been taking his boat out lately?”

Duffy sipped his whiskey before answering. “Later.”

“How much later?”

“Eleven, maybe twelve at night.”

“So would you characterize that as unusual?”

Annoyance lined Duffy’s face. “I guess so.”

His statement fell in line with what others had said with less reluctance and certainly more grace. Was Albert Duffy simply ornery, or did he have some connection with Rafton that he didn’t want known? With this man, directness seemed to be the only course. “Are you engaging in or helping to cover up illegal activity perpetrated by Jack Rafton?”

Duffy sputtered so heavily he couldn’t speak.

“Agent Blair,” Hamilton said, his gaze locking on hers, “that’s inappropriate.”

But it confirmed her instincts—Duffy was an insulting curmudgeon and likely not a would-be felon.

“I thought we might get to our goal more quickly with more specific questions,” she said to the men across from her. “And I’m sure Mr. Duffy doesn’t think the FBI engages in random questioning. I wanted to let him know that he’s being watched and any attempt by him to warn Mr. Rafton of the questions I’ve asked would be perceived by me as the act of an accomplice.” She smiled. “Everybody clear now?”

“What a man does on his own time isn’t any of my bother,” Duffy mumbled.

Her smile broadened. “Exactly. That’s my job. Thank you for

your assistance, Mr. Duffy," she added, rising and turning off the microrecorder. "I'll forward copies of the interview transcript to your office, Mr. Hamilton. Good night to you both."

"You'd do better to learn to cook, honey," Duffy said as she turned away.

Facing him, her fingers twitched as she skimmed her hand across the butt of her gun. "Would I?"

"Yeah." His gaze defiant, Duffy leaned back in the booth. "Carr here needs a girlfriend. He's rich, so he could probably even get you lessons."

"If only I'd known those options were open to me, I'd have skipped training in Quantico and raced right over to the Julia Child Institute." Her temper finally breaking, she braced her palm on the table and leaned toward Duffy, meeting his startled gaze with her own furious, narrowed one. "As it happens, I'm a pretty good ass-kicker, so I think I'll stick with what I know." She paused briefly, renewing her smile, even though it was significantly cooler. "As long as that's okay with you."

Stalking away, she didn't dare look at Hamilton, who'd no doubt find a way to warm her icy demeanor.

Chauvinistic, patronizing men who were threatened by women in general, not just the ones carrying firearms, didn't warrant any room in her thoughts. And yet, here she was, striding to her car and dwelling on the interview as if she cared whether or not she could boil water.

If Duffy owned a gun, it was doubtful he'd be able to hit the

broad side of a barn with it, even with a sniper's scope and a GPS. And yet nobody was questioning his ability to be harbormaster. Though what his job had to do with weapons, she couldn't say. She just—

She ground to a halt next to her dark blue sedan. Those two didn't seriously think the investigation of this case would be reduced to gender, did they? Suspected smuggling was serious business that had nothing to do with chromosomes.

Frankly, she'd expected better from Carr Hamilton.

He caught up to her in the parking lot, bracing his arm on the hood of her car and standing way too close. "Why did you come here tonight?"

Again, she was conscious of feeling small. As an agent, the sensation bothered her. As a woman, she couldn't help inhaling his cologne's spicy scent and spending a few seconds reveling in the head-spinning that followed.

She told herself it was important that she stand her ground and resist his advances. If she let him inside, she wasn't sure how she could stay objective. Stepping back, she rolled her shoulders. "I'm here because this is where Duffy wanted to meet. He's a complete ass, by the way."

"I did advise you to show some leg."

Briefly, she closed her eyes to get a better handle on her temper. Was he really just like everybody else? "You don't honestly believe I'd resort to low-cut dresses or high heels to solve my case," she said, her gaze boring into his.

“Sure I do.” He closed the distance she’d created between them. “If it solved your case, you’d do just about anything.”

His assured tone angered her—or so she tried to convince herself. The fact that his statement was true was irrelevant.

Hamilton cocked his head. “As far as your personal life, though, I think you’d make a man’s journey just about as difficult as you could.”

Also true. Though not out of any deliberate issue with men in general—except the chauvinistic, homophobic or idiotic ones. She simply hadn’t met many men worth giving her time to lately. And if she was lonely, she had her job to focus on. The SAC respected her. For now, that would have to be enough to keep the home fires burning.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Did they teach you how to be an egomaniac at Yale?”

Ignoring her defensive stance, he leaned into her. “No, I think that particular quality is inborn.”

The challenge in his dark eyes hadn’t wavered once since the moment she met him.

She liked that.

Truth told, she liked him. But he was intimately involved in her case, and she knew an attraction to him wasn’t wise.

“Are you sure you didn’t come here to see me?” he asked.

“I came to interrogate a person of interest in my case.” If she figured the owner of the bar, who she’d learned spent many of his nights in that bar, showed up, well, that was simply a side

benefit to a job that had sold her short on positive points so far.

His gaze roved her face. “And I’m irrelevant?”

“You’re…distracting,” she admitted, her heart racing with the crazy need that she sensed would always mark any encounter with Carr Hamilton.

“Then I’m doing my job.”

She angled her head. “Is that why you followed me out here—to do your job?”

His tongue moistened his lower lip, and she barely repressed a groan. “No.” He wrapped one arm around her waist. “I have other things on my mind right now.”

As he lowered his head, she knew she could stop him. Should stop him.

But there were times when her instincts took over, and while those interludes didn’t always end the way she’d anticipated or desired, she couldn’t deny they always made things interesting.

She doubted touching Carr Hamilton would be any different.

His hand cupped her jaw as he laid his mouth over hers. As his fingers gripped the back of her head, his tongue slid between her lips, sending sparks of desire and need shooting through her body. The lustful feelings smoldering inside exploded.

Their chests met; her nipples tightened.

Her body wanted him, even if her brain warned of the danger. With a moan of longing, she ignored her conscience. She clutched the front of his shirt as he continued to devour her mouth, seeming determined to absorb every part of her into him,

and she was willing to let him.

Willing? Hell, she wanted more.

Much more.

He pressed her back against her car. “I’ve thought of nothing but you since yesterday,” he rasped in her ear.

Her pulse hammered. Her body throbbed.

Different didn’t even begin to describe the hunger pulsing through her. She’d anticipated a spark and gotten an inferno.

She pressed her lips to his throat and buried her hand in the inky locks of his hair that indeed felt like silk. “You’re part of my case. I shouldn’t—”

He silenced her with another kiss. Her protests died in the wake of the raw emotions consuming her. Her belly tightened, craving more of his touch, knowing instinctively he could drive away the loneliness and satisfy both her body and her mind.

She wanted his skin pressed against hers. She wanted to let loose the fire behind his dark eyes.

His hand slid up her stomach, and her breasts tingled in anticipation. But before he could reach his goal, his thumb brushed her shoulder holster.

She shoved him back instantly.

In the dimly lit parking lot, white sand beneath her shoes, ocean breeze brushing against her skin, she gasped for air and watched him. He looked as dazed as she felt.

“You touched—” She broke off and slid her hands into her pants pockets. Her fingers quivered with the need to brush

an errant lock of his silky hair off his forehead. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Sorry. My weapon holster. It’s an instinctive thing for a cop to protect.”

Still breathing heavily, his mouth lifted on one side. “Remind me to disarm you next time.”

She shook her head. There shouldn’t be a next time.

And yet could she really imagine resisting the beautiful man standing before her for long? If he wanted her—and by the evidence presented in the past few minutes she could only assume he did—was there any way she wouldn’t be his?

She shivered at the thought.

“Cold?” he asked, stepping forward and bracing his palms beneath her elbows.

“No.” She shook her head. “That’s the last thing I am.”

His hands gripped her waist, and she noted he was careful to keep them away from her holster. “Come home with me.”

She turned away. “I can’t. I need to think.” She’d never been a coward in her life, but she wasn’t sure whether she should run toward or away from this man.

“Think about me?” he asked, his lips against her ear.

“Among other things. I need to go to the gun club.”

“The…what?”

She glanced over her shoulder into his confused eyes. “Gun club. They have an indoor shooting range that’s open twenty-four hours.” Then she remembered the whiskey she’d indulged in earlier. The club would have to wait for morning. “I like to

shoot to relax."

"I like to walk on the beach."

Just another way they were opposites and completely wrong for each other.

When she opened her car door, he let go of her and stepped back. "You want a ride home?" she asked him.

He started off. "I'll walk. Thanks."

"Oh, Hamilton? By—"

"Do you think you could call me by my first name?"

"No, I really don't think I can now."

He scowled. "Then when?"

She shrugged. "When it's the right time. And, by the way…" She let her gaze track down his body, long, lean and illuminated by the streetlight. "The Bureau couldn't care less whether you wear boxers, briefs or nothing at all."

"What about you?"

She had no doubt he'd look hot in anything. Or nothing. "I couldn't care less either."

3

BINOCULARS AROUND his neck, Carr leaned against the aft railing and stared at the moonlit water where his boat bobbed at the dock.

At nearly eleven o'clock on a Wednesday, the bar was the only place that was hopping. Jack's boat was still out, so it seemed the only thing to do was wait.

His thoughts returned, as they had a million times, to the night before and the kiss he'd shared with Malina Blair. Of course, describing what they'd shared as a mere kiss diminished the encounter by miles.

Touching her had been like holding lightning in his bare hands.

She—

He halted his thoughts as he sensed movement behind him on the dock. He didn't flinch or turn, but his heart rate picked up speed.

Were Jack's buddies back?

He hadn't seen them since that night he'd found the coffee grounds nearly three weeks ago.

Were more drugs being delivered? Were there even drugs involved at all? Something odd was certainly going on, but had he jumped to conclusions based on the coffee grounds? Malina had passed off the connection between drugs and coffee. Was

she right, or was she simply trying to demonstrate that he had no business messing around in her case?

If these guys were drug dealers, they were certainly ruthless. And while he could hold his own in a courtroom, he acknowledged for a stark moment that he might just be out of his element in this particular world.

He could battle, but he wasn't trained in any physical combat beyond the conniving elegance of the fencing ring. Brutality wasn't part of his life. And, candidly, he was more brains than brawn.

As he heard a click on the starboard side of the boat, he spun on the balls of his feet and crouched at the same time.

"Smooth," said a familiar voice. "But I still wouldn't have missed."

The next second, a powerful flashlight blinded him. Cursing, he rose and held his hands in front of his face. Malina Blair's shadow was barely discernible. "Is that really necessary?"

The light flicked off.

He blinked and saw spots as his eyes adjusted back to the darkness. Before he'd fully recovered, she was inches from him.

She tapped the binoculars. "A little late for bird-watching."

Dressed in black, her arm was a shadow that ended in a lethal-looking gun pointed to the sky. With her dark hair pulled back tightly from her face, the first thing he could see clearly was her startlingly turquoise eyes. He had the crazy, poetic urge to drown himself in them.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” she asked, narrowing those eyes as she holstered her pistol.

He wanted to see her hair loose and tangled around her beautiful face. He wanted to feel the strands brush across his bare skin. He wanted to bury his body in her softness and hear her breath catch as she lost herself in the pleasure of his touch.

“Contemplating a late-night cruise,” he managed to return finally.

She shook her head in disbelief.

If he admitted the truth—that he was imagining her in his bed—would she shoot him or throw him overboard?

Or would she respond as she had the night before? With need and heat and a longing for even more?

She poked her finger in his chest, backing him against the railing. “I thought I made it clear that you should keep your distance from this case.”

“Did you?” He angled his head and gave her a smile that she clearly wasn’t buying. “I recall that conversation a bit differently. I remember saying I understood what you thought my involvement in the case should be.” He paused significantly. “I never agreed to the terms.”

She paced away, then back. “Why do you think lawyers get a bad rap when it comes to honesty?”

“Because honesty and truth are two entirely different concepts. Do you have on black underwear, too?” When she glared at him, he shrugged. “I’ve always wondered about the

wardrobe for the undercover espionage thing."

She stopped pacing. Her fists were clenched by her sides, and he decided he enjoyed needling her almost as much as he enjoyed touching her. "How about you leave the espionage to James Bond and me to handle this case?"

"Sorry, my investment in the outcome is too great."

"What investment?"

He made a sweeping gesture to the area around him. "My island, remember?" Among other beautiful things I want to hold close. "I need to see this through."

"And I said I'd consult you. The stakeouts you need to leave to me."

He raised his eyebrows. "Stakeout? I'm just enjoying the night air."

With a huff that was utterly female and so unlike her, Malina leaned back against the railing next to him. "How are honesty and truth different?"

"Honesty refers to integrity, candor. Truth is answering a question without lying."

She cast him a surprised glance. "That's a despicable distinction."

He nodded, and the barb of criticism hit in ways she couldn't imagine, even though he knew she'd read his case files. "It's the law."

"According to whom?"

"Anybody who's called upon to defend themselves or someone

else in court."

"Someone guilty?"

The barb turned poisonous, spreading through him like cancer. "Everyone's entitled to a defense—even the supposed guilty."

"Is that how you sleep at night?"

With fury burning inside him, he faced her, crossing his arms over his chest. The fact that part of his anger stemmed from embarrassment only fueled his indignation. "Do you want to debate legal procedures? How about the merits of tort reform?" He nodded toward her holstered pistol. "As good as you might be with that, I'm better at the law, so don't even think about screwing with me on that subject.

"A lawyer presents his or her case. A judge or jury determines guilt or the level of judgment. That's it. That's the system where we all work." He leaned into her. "If, however, you want to screw me in other ways, I'm more than happy to oblige."

Her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. And either his honesty or his crudeness had finally shocked her into silence.

Unable to face her or himself, he stormed across the deck and down into the cabin. He slammed the door behind him, then tore the binoculars from around his neck and flung them and himself onto the couch. Through the window above him the moon cast its haunting light.

Several moments later, the cabin door opened.

"I'm sorry I took my frustration out on you," she said, flopping

against the wall opposite him and crossing her arms over her chest.

For some reason, her frustration calmed him instantly. “I’m sorry I did the same. Why are you so annoyed?”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Why not?”

“The case. Concern for my job.”

“No other reason?”

She moved toward him. His heart jumped.

When she stopped beside the sofa, so close their legs nearly touched, he felt the heat pumping off her, as well as a seductive scent, which could have been perfume or simply the innate lure of her skin. Both twined their way around his senses.

“You,” she said. “I thought about you.”

Though her tone was an accusation, he wasn’t offended. She’d thrown his world off balance. Now he knew he’d done the same for her.

He also knew he should stand, but he wasn’t sure his legs would hold him.

She skimmed her fingertips across his shoulder. “What’ve you done to me?”

Part of him wanted to tell her to run. He wasn’t worthy of her time or attention. But he wasn’t capable of that kind of nobility.

He captured her hand in his and kissed the underside of her wrist, where her pulse beat strong and thick. “In an effort to be truly honest, I should admit I was enjoying the night air and

hoping you'd show up for a stakeout."

She slid down onto the sofa beside him. "And I knew you wouldn't give up your involvement in this case."

"Are we pursuing the case because we want to solve it, or are we pursuing it to have an excuse to be together?"

"I'm not sure."

"Does it matter which is true?"

"Honestly?" She smiled, leaning toward him, her lips an inch from his. "No."

Her tongue teased his bottom lip, then her teeth nipped the same spot. He hardened in an instant.

With a tug of her wrist, he pulled her against him, crushing her against his chest, relishing the way her heart hammered against him, as if trying to escape and join his. Angling her head, she deepened the kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He breathed in the scent of clean cotton and, if he wasn't mistaken, gun oil.

She was a combination of tenderness and teeth that he found intriguing, stimulating and irresistible.

His erection throbbed. His ears buzzed.

The gentle rocking of the boat beneath them belied the electricity in the air. In the dark, shadows mingled. Hot breath and seeking hands sparked passion. Forgetting who she was and her real purpose in his life, he surrendered to the moment as he hadn't in a very long time.

But before he'd taken his next breath, she had her pistol drawn

and her back plastered against the wall next to the cabin's exterior door. "Get down," she whispered.

His hands tingled. He still had the scent of her clinging to him. "I—"

"That buzzing in your ears isn't my substantial powers of seduction. It's a boat motor."

"How do you know my ears are buzzing?"

"Because mine are, too. Get down."

He slid from the sofa onto the floor and watched her peek between the blinds on the glass door. With a great deal of effort, he could now separate the humming in his ears from the motor outside.

She was cool, calm and in charge. He was a quivering mass of need. There was a serious balance issue with this relationship already. If there even was a relationship, which he wasn't sure about. They'd only been introduced two days ago. Didn't these things take time to develop? Didn't the fact that she was in his life only to solve a case make anything meaningful impractical? And hadn't he decided he was through with anything that didn't have meaning?

Then again, her ears were buzzing, too.

Eschewing dignity, he crawled across the cabin, then rose beside Malina. "There are times when I feel like a freshman in the throes of my first crush."

"The throes of—" She stopped, turning her head to glare at him. "Don't throw. Don't crush. Be still."

She looked lean and sexy, her pistol raised beside her and pointing at the ceiling. Her expression was focused, her body braced. Desire tightened his stomach. “Is that thing loaded?”

She peeked between the blinds again. “Do you ever shut up?”

He pressed his lips to the shell of her ear. “If you keep my mouth occupied in some other way.”

She ignored the invitation and said, “I think it’s your buddy Jack.”

“So we work now and play later?”

“I’m always working.”

She used the tip of her gun to move the blinds aside, and he watched over her shoulder as Jack’s boat puttered past and turned into its slip. “That’s him, right?” she asked in a hoarse whisper.

“That’s the boat.”

She snorted. “You’re such a lawyer.”

“Unless there’s now a rash of boat thieves running over the island intent on disrupting the general well-being of the citizenry, I assume Jack’s the pilot.”

“Hell. A wordy lawyer.”

“I’m well paid for each and every syllable.”

“Do you ever feel guilty for making that money on the tide of pain and suffering your clients have to weather?”

Something ugly clenched inside him. “All the time,” he said lightly.

Part of the tension he felt must have slipped through his tone, because she glanced at him. “Cheap shot. Sorry.”

“I’m used to it.”

“So I’m all the more sorry.”

“I appreciate the—”

“Hold on. He’s moving.”

And Jack was.

He emerged from the cabin with a small box tucked beneath his arm. The box appeared to be made of ordinary, brown cardboard. It measured no more than half a foot wide and long. Jack was whistling as he stepped off his boat and onto the dock.

For some reason, the upbeat tune made Carr’s blood boil. “Let’s follow him.”

Malina planted her hand in the center of his chest. “Let’s watch.”

After a few moments, Jack disappeared up the stairs toward the marina bar—and no doubt the parking lot beyond.

“We should go after him.”

“I will. I know where he lives.” Tucking her pistol back into its holster, Malina opened the door and stepped out. “Let’s look around a little first.”

As they moved slowly along the dock, Carr studied the bobbing American Dream. Something was fishy about Jack’s boat—and it didn’t have anything to do with nets or rods. “I don’t suppose you could turn your head while I pop the cabin lock and see what old Jack had hidden beneath his mattress?”

“Not yet.”

Though Malina’s back was to him, Carr raised his eyebrows.

“So you’re not saying no? How liberal of you, Agent—”

“Hang on.”

As Malina bent to one knee, Carr moved closer to her. More coffee maybe? If so, Jack really ought to find a sealed box to carry his illicit merchandise in. Didn’t the man know about plastic containers? They even had fresh seal plastic bags now. Double-zippered to ensure the contents stayed tightly enclosed.

“Well, now,” Malina said in a low, excited tone that immediately captured his attention. “It seems your neighbor does have a side business, though I’m not sure how drugs, art or coffee enters into it.”

Carr moved his attention to her clenched fist, which she held out in front of her. “How so?”

“It appears Mr. Rafton went for the sparkle instead.”

When she opened her hand, sitting on a scrap of white cloth, a large, loose diamond glittered back at him from her steady palm.

4

RISING, Malina studied the stone in her hand. Four, maybe five carats. But the thrill of discovery was rapidly being overcome by questions with no answers.

Hamilton, standing so close she felt completely wrapped in his enticing, somewhat old-fashioned sandalwood scent, seemed to realize this as well. “You make people think you’re smuggling drugs, when you’re really smuggling diamonds? That seems…”

“Stupid.”

“And what about the artwork?” Hamilton asked. “I’ve bought enough paintings to recognize the crates in which they’re shipped.”

“Decoys? Or he’s into more than gems.”

“Coffee grounds and painting crates to disguise diamonds?”

Malina shrugged. “Gold and jewels are a big commodity now. With the stock market and economy shaky, tangible assets are hot. Banks, museums and collectors are being hit left and right. Smuggling stolen goods is in vogue once again.”

“But Jack—head of a smuggling operation?” Hamilton frowned. “He doesn’t have the nerve or the brains. He’s a nice, average guy.”

“And yet he’s already managed to stir up a lot of red tape. Paintings and diamonds are major theft—FBI jurisdiction, in other words. Drugs are DEA. Plus, there’s local law enforcement

to coordinate and possibly the Coast Guard if any of us needed to board his boat in open water. Maybe this is a more complex operation than it seems."

Hamilton shook his head. "Sorry. I can't give Jack that kind of credit." When her gaze flicked to his, he amended, "Bad guy credit, of course. He's just not that creative a thinker, not devious enough."

"Maybe you're the one who's not devious enough."

"Oh, no. I am."

How did she respond to that? His odd, self-deprecating humor had a darker source, she was sure. Were all those profitable lawsuits becoming mundane?

She knew he'd left his practice in New York City two years ago to settle on Palmer's Island, where he'd volunteered to be the unpaid staff lawyer to a variety of charities and churches. Up until they'd met, she'd been certain he was behind the scenes building a big case—tort reform be damned—that would bust out on the national scene, sending him around the talk shows and law conferences for some time to come.

But that cold-blooded plan didn't mesh with the man she'd met—and kissed.

I like to walk on the beach.

She believed those words more than she trusted the evidence she'd seen in her background check.

How far the mighty had fallen indeed.

"You observed Jack taking a payoff," she said, to get her

focus back on the case as she folded the cloth carefully around the diamond and tucked it in her pants pocket. “He could be a middleman with someone more creative pulling the strings.”

“True.”

“Who would have the nerves and the brains around here to smuggle diamonds?”

“I can find out.” A smile stretched across his gorgeous face. “In fact, we both can.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Malina crossed her arms over her chest. “I should be ordering you back to your office and out of my business.”

He slid his fingers down her sweater-covered arm, barely touching but easily reminding her of the intimacies they’d already shared. And the ones likely to come. Need shimmered between them like the glow of the moon overhead. “But you won’t.”

“No.”

“Because you know I won’t listen, or because you know you can use me to solve the case?”

“Both. I assume you already have an idea for finding out about the smuggling?”

“You know me well.”

“You constantly think several steps ahead.” She shrugged. “It’s a trait I recognize.”

He angled his head. “I imagine so. I’ve been invited to a yacht party on Friday night. All the island’s elite crowd will be there, including Jack.”

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