

A woman with long brown hair, seen from behind, stands on a rocky shore wearing a red strapless dress. She is looking out at a harbor where a large white ship is docked. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds. The text 'Ship Shape' is overlaid in a large, stylized, pink-to-white gradient font with a white outline.

Ship Shape

Julie
Harrington

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CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth Parker needed a husband, and she needed one now. Swirling the paper umbrella in her strawberry daiquiri, she peered out the restaurant window at the churning harbor

water. Set against purple storm clouds was her only hope of leaving the Grand Cayman Island, a luxury marriage therapy cruise ship called *Kismet*.

Set to depart in two hours and twenty-three minutes, the floating metropolis would sail for six days, taking its passengers from the Grand Cayman to Florida. It was the only cruise ship with any available cabins. Well, available to anyone that was married and miserable.

Chin propped in her hand, Elizabeth watched lightning flash in the distance. The rumble of thunder that followed rattled the bottles of alcohol behind the bar. Miserable she could manage. But married? She sighed. Far from it. The closest she ever came to marriage was the storefront of

Tiffany's. So unless she found a husband before the cruise ship set sail, she was sunk.

The useless airline ticket next to her purse mocked her. There couldn't be a more inconvenient time for a tropical depression to settle over the islands. The sudden shift of the storm's direction caught meteorologists by surprise, and made the officials at Owen Roberts Airport close its two runways. No flights, including private charter planes, were allowed to take off in the high winds and dangerous lightning.

Elizabeth had been caught off guard by the storm too. By then it was too late to alter her plans. The deed was done and she was now a criminal on the run with a stolen, flawless, six-carat diamond ring in her bra.

The door to the restaurant opened, admitting a man on a wave of humidity scented with beach and rain. She stiffened as she slid him a sideways glance and edged her hand toward her purse.

Unshaven and unkempt, four days growth of beard hid his wind-battered features. His wet, dark blonde hair was slicked back and gathered in a short ponytail at his nape. Only a bright tropical shirt, T-shirt and ragged cutoffs elevated him to the restaurant's already lax dress code. He was definitely not, Elizabeth decided, a police officer.

Things went from black to just gray again.

What on earth possessed her to board a plane for this island? How could she think she could slip in, slip out, and be back on United States soil before her stepbrother knew she'd stolen his ring? She thought that if she kept a low profile, Steven wouldn't suspect anything until it was too late. By then she'd be back home in Illinois and out of his reach.

Making a face, Elizabeth crossed her slender legs and tugged the cuff of her khaki walking shorts down to her knee. Now, stuck on this God forsaken rock, a low profile would be impossible to maintain. The instant Steven realized what happened, he'd know she did it. A simple check with the airport on the main island would show her name on the passenger register. Once that happened, his security officers would be sent out to hunt her down.

The urge to lean her forehead against the bar and weep overwhelmed her. Why her? She was a good person. A sensible person. She got eight hours of sleep a night, held down a steady job, and paid all of her bills on time. She even took those disgusting vitamin supplements her doctor prescribed.

What convinced her to fly thousands of miles from home to break into Steven's house and steal what was rightfully hers in the first place? This time Elizabeth did groan. Elbows braced on the bar, she buried her face in

her hands. She could see it now: twenty-six-year-old archivist arrested for grand theft, breaking and entering, and trespassing.

Coins jingled as they dropped into the payphone behind her and Elizabeth sat up straight as she adjusted the hem of her white silk blouse. Parker women, she reminded herself, never slouched. Lip caught between her teeth, she shredded her paper napkin. Parker women also didn't register in hotels under assumed names and smash patio doors with rocks. In the last six hours, she'd done both.

"What do you mean she's not coming?"

The question rang through the bar and Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder at the payphone. The man there was the same one that came in a few minutes earlier and, unlike the distinctive Welsh and Scottish brogue most of the Caymanians spoke with, his voice was low and gruff. Definitely an American.

Nose wrinkled, she took in the frayed denim cutoffs, sandy flip-flops, and stained T-shirt that read '*CAYMANIAN MEN DO IT BEST*'. The man glanced up. His blue eyes held hers for a moment before he turned away to brace a thick forearm against the wall. He leaned to the phone and tried to shove his shoulder against the wooden frame for privacy. It wasn't an easy feat for a man of his impressive build, rather like watching a cat cram itself

into a can of tuna fish.

"For God's sake," he growled into the receiver, "we're supposed to leave in two hours. Is she actually *in* labor?" He tapped his foot and the sandal slapped against the floor, sending a spray of sand across the wood. "You're her boss. Tell her to suck it up and get her ass down to the shuttle."

Elizabeth shook her head as she faced forward. Talk about a prime candidate for the *Kismet's* marriage therapy cruise.

"No, I can't go without her," he continued, the timbre of his voice dropping to blend with the next roll of thunder. "Don't you think it would look funny?" When he swore, dark and vicious, Elizabeth glared at his back. "Yeah, yeah," he grouched, apparently oblivious to her disapproval, "I'll think of something."

He slammed the phone down in the cradle, then did it again for good measure before he headed to the bar. Elizabeth tensed when he hesitated next to her, but he walked to the other end and sat. "Gimme a beer," he told the bartender.

"Draught, Mr. Jason?"

Shrugging, he scratched the dark brush of hair on his jaw. "As long as it's cold, I don't care. Domestic's fine."

A dark bottle was placed in front of him and without bothering with a

glass, he took a long drink. He poked through the basket filled with mostly empty peanut shells before he finally found one and cracked it open. His attention shifted to the television set mounted above the bar and he watched as a storm warning rolled across the bottom of the screen.

He popped a peanut into his mouth with a snort. "Can you believe it? They called for the best surfing weather we've had in weeks. Now look at it. Storms like this ruin the diving and the fishing too. What kind of vacation is this?"

The bartender grinned as he went back to drying glasses. "Don't worry, Mr. Jason, this will get better in a few days."

Shaking his head, he took another pull from the bottle. He belched without apology. "Playtime's over for me. Back to work."

He rolled the beer bottle between his large hands and glanced at Elizabeth.

Suddenly she was aware of how empty the restaurant was. The hour for the normal tourist dinnertime had past and it was still too early for the locals to come out and party. Add the approaching storm to the mix and everyone would stay home tonight. Other than the bartender and a man sitting on the other side of the room, Elizabeth was alone.

She didn't dare risk going back to her hotel. Despite knowing

Steven's routine, the change in the storm's path would change his plans too. That meant he'd probably already discovered the broken door at home.

Elizabeth rubbed the back of her neck. The muscles there were tight with anxiety. What was jail like on the Cayman Islands? She smothered a bubble of hysterical laughter. She could be at the museum cataloging new books instead of traipsing off on some quest for justice. Why couldn't she be content to fill out request forms on the evolutionary history of the *Homo habilis*?

"How did I ever get into this mess?" she sighed as she shifted on the barstool. Eyes closed, she tilted her head back. "Please, God," she prayed softly, "please get me off this island and I swear I'll never do anything like this again."

"Eli Parker?"

The sound of a man's voice next to her made her twist on the barstool so sharply she nearly fell off. Heart in her throat, Elizabeth stared at the man at her elbow. She didn't know when he came in, but from his well-groomed appearance and the gold Pembroke emblem on his blue tie, she knew exactly who sent him and why.

Her gaze lifted to his face. Intense green eyes peered back at her from beneath light blonde hair. Judging by the rather ominous bulk under his

windbreaker, he was armed. Time to go.

Elizabeth reached for her purse as she rose to her feet. It was a mistake. At least sitting they were almost equal in height. Now, standing, he dwarfed her. She slung her purse strap over her shoulder and, plane ticket in hand, started to step around him. "Sorry," she said, "you've got the wrong person."

She made it two steps before he caught her arm. "Ms. Parker, my name is Albert Young. You'll have to come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Elizabeth tugged against his hold, but he didn't release her. Her eyes glittered with defiance. "Let go of me."

"Mr. Pembroke wants a word with you."

"I told you, I don't know what you're talking about." Her voice was loud enough to draw the attention of the man at the bar. He paused, the beer bottle halfway to his mouth to watch them.

Young reached for her purse but, before he could grab it, Elizabeth brought her thin-soled sandal down hard on his instep. Swearing, he tightened his grip on her arm and went for her purse again. Neither noticed when the airline ticket fluttered from her fingers.

The man the bartender called Mr. Jason appeared at their side and

put his hand on the other man's chest, creasing Young's tie. The muscles and tendons in his tanned forearm tightened. Elizabeth saw his blue eyes shift downward to the holster beneath the other man's jacket before they lifted again. A muscle on the side of his face ticked. "Is there a problem here?" he asked.

Flustered, Elizabeth could only stammer.

Young looked at the hand on his chest before he turned the full strength of his glare on the owner. "Buzz off, beach boy, this is a private matter between the lady and me, so why don't you go back to your beer."

Those incredible blue eyes met Elizabeth's. He quirked a sand colored eyebrow at her. "He your husband?"

"No!" Even to Elizabeth's ears it sounded like the thought horrified her.

"Boyfriend?" When she shook her head, he leaned toward her. "You know him at all?" She told him no and he appeared satisfied. His attention shifted to Young again. His jaw squared. "Then let go of the lady's arm before I break your hand."

"This is outrageous—"

In one fluid movement, Mr. Jason wrapped Young's tie around his fist and used it to jerk him downward while simultaneously latching his fingers

around the man's thumb. A simple twist of the digit made Young release Elizabeth's arm. There was an audible pop and Albert Young went down on his knees with a cry of pain.

Blue eyes calm and still, the man released the tie and faced her. Elizabeth didn't see a flicker of hesitation in his gaze. "It might be a good idea if you're gone before this guy gets back up," he told her.

She didn't argue. Purse clutched in her hand, Elizabeth darted out the door and onto the sidewalk. Wind buffeted her, sending her hair into her eyes and molding her blouse against her small frame. She tossed her hair back and shifted her weight from foot to foot as she cast a quick glance at the sky.

The clouds rolled as lightning spiked across the sky. She glanced at the restaurant doors before hurrying down the sidewalk. It was over. Steven knew she was here. Maybe she could still find a quiet spot to ride it all out.

Elizabeth laughed at the notion. It didn't matter where she went. He'd find her anywhere. Unlike Chicago, George Town only covered a few blocks. Most of the stores closed at five so the tourists returned to the cruise ships that brought them. The port city was a ghost town.

Footsteps echoed behind her and Elizabeth quickened her pace.

Maybe her best bet was to go back to Steven and admit defeat. Her shoulders slumped. Oh, he'd love that. What frosted her the most was that she wasn't in the wrong. Steven was. But as long as he owned half the island, no one would believe he was a liar and a cheat. The police certainly wouldn't listen. That's what got her in this mess in the first place.

A strong hand clamped around her arm and jerked her to a stop. Bringing her purse up as she turned, Elizabeth struck Mr. Jason square on the nose. The bag wasn't big enough to do any damage. It barely even raised a welt.

Glaring at her, he rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. Those blue eyes didn't look so calm now. "Damn it, lady, what the hell's wrong with you?" he demanded. "Didn't you hear me calling you?"

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed. "Obviously not! Indignation snapped her upright and forced her tongue and brain to connect. "What did you expect sneaking up on me like that? Are you insane?"

His lips twitched. "I suppose I am." As if realizing he still held her arm, he released her and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his cutoffs. From one of the pockets, he produced her airline ticket. "You dropped this."

Elizabeth took it from him and rubbed the ticket against her thigh to

work the creases from the paper. "Thank you. Mister?"

"Mallone. Jason Mallone." When she shifted away from him, his lips almost formed a smile. He lifted his shoulders and gestured at the ticket.

"That's not going to do you much good. Looks like you're stuck on paradise for a few more days."

Chewing her lip, Elizabeth stared down at the slip of paper. Her vision blurred on a sudden rush of tears. If Steven went to the police to report the theft, she'd be stuck here for a few more *years*. Prison gray was so not her color. She was an autumn, damn it, not a winter.

Hand hooked around the back of his neck, Jason Mallone shifted as wind pulled his ponytail over his shoulder. "Yeah, that's kinda what I figured. Look, Ms. Parker—"

Her head jerked up. "How do you know my name is Parker?"

"It's on the ticket." His eyes narrowed. "I think we can help each other."

Elizabeth raked her gaze over him from the top of his head to the tips of his sand covered feet. Good grief, the man wore flip-flops. Purple flip-flops. She lingered on the soft sprinkle of golden hair on his legs. There was a thick white scar on one shin that stood out stark against his tan. "I doubt that, Mr. Mallone."

Sarcasm etched his smile. Feet braced apart on the sidewalk, Jason crossed his arms over his chest and impressive muscles swelled. "Are you interested in what I have to say or not?" When she didn't answer, he said, "Then here's the deal. I have less than two hours to find a replacement and I think we can help each other."

"A replacement for what?"

He produced a business card from his back pocket. Elizabeth hesitated before taking it from him. The card, with its heavy stock and embossed lettering, obviously cost money, yet his careless treatment had wrinkled it. "Jason Mallone, Security Consultant." She frowned and looked up. "I don't understand."

"Our firm is running a security check on one of the cruise ships. The only problem is I need a partner for my cover."

Elizabeth shook her head as she held the card out to him. "I'm not a security expert."

"All I need is someone to work the cover with me. It's a couples cruise." A shadow darkened his face. "The woman meant to play my better half just went into labor."

"You say it like she did it on purpose."

"Knowing her, she probably did." He flashed a bright smile at her.

All pearly teeth and charm that softened his weathered exterior.

"Why do you need me?" she asked.

He held his hands up. "Just to say you're my wife and do the things that couples do. Shuffleboard, Ping-Pong, a little tennis, maybe work on a tan. You could use one."

Elizabeth straightened. "Excuse me?"

He ignored her. "Plus you get a free ride home. The ship is scheduled to dock in Florida in six days." When she hesitated, Jason tugged on his ear and squinted. "Look, I don't care what your problem with Steven Pembroke is..."

That made her blink. "W-who said I had a problem?"

"Come on, honey, that ape back there? He's one of Pembroke's boys. So save the wide-eyed looks for somebody who'd appreciate them." He scratched his jaw through the thicket of his beard. "Pembroke owns most of the island and a lot of people think he's a god. So if he's got a beef with you, the sooner you get outta here, the better. He can make your life very difficult."

Elizabeth knew he was right. Steven thought nothing of flaunting his money or his power. Or of abusing both. She wrapped the strap of her purse around her fingers until they turned red. She didn't have much at the

hotel, only an overnight bag with a change of clothes. Certainly not enough to see her through a weeklong cruise, but she could worry about that later. Necessity was, after all, the mother of invention.

"I'll need to get my stuff," she said reluctantly, not agreeing to anything yet.

"Then we can meet at the launch. As long as you check out."

"Check out?"

"Yeah, you know." He shrugged again. "Typical background check. You're not wanted anywhere are you?"

"No." This was absurd. Reckless. Stupid. Parker women did *not* do things like this. Accepting propositions from strange men who looked like they'd never heard of soap would be on the top of the list of don'ts.

She didn't know this man. Certainly not well enough to go away on a cruise with him. Of course, she never went away with any of the men she dated, not that there many in her rather boring past, but the idea of walking onto a ship with a man she'd known for less than five minutes sounded so... desperate.

Then again, she *was* desperate.

As if he could read her mind, he held out his wallet. "I've got identification."

When she took it from him, their fingers brushed. His hands were rough and Elizabeth knew he didn't sit behind a desk all day. Hours in the sun and hard work had weathered his skin. His nails were neat though. Cut short—obviously manicured. She found it odd considering the rest of his grooming habits were so relaxed.

Silent, she studied the identification card. *International Security Services*. It certainly looked authentic. Without a photograph on the card, it gave her nothing more than his thumbprint, employee number, hair and eye color, and weight.

Elizabeth stared out at the cruise ship. It looked more like an overgrown bathtub toy than salvation. A raindrop hit her cheek, then another, reminding her this could be her last chance to escape. With a sigh, she tucked the business card back into his wallet, flipped it closed, and held it out to him.

He shoved it back into his pocket and raised a brow. "So? What do you say?"

Drawing herself up straight, Elizabeth held out her hand and he took it. His grip strong and she told herself that nerves caused the tingle of electricity that shot up her arm. "Mr. Mallone," she said, "I'd say you just found yourself a wife."

CHAPTER TWO

Jason Mallone almost felt human again. Grimacing at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, he rubbed his fingers over his beard. A quick stop at a barbershop had gotten rid of the ponytail and though they'd offered a shave, there was something about a two-hundred-pound man wielding an unprotected razor that made him decline.

His dark blonde hair clipped short, a quick flick of a comb swept the longer locks off his forehead. Combined with the neatly pressed mocha khakis, he was well on his way to returning to Jason Mallone: Mild-mannered security professional.

The scars peppered across his chest told quite a different story. Some were the results of childhood accidents. The rest came with the job at ISS. He ran his fingers over a particularly nasty scar on his side. The jagged

white line and a T-shirt from *Harry's House of Humus* were the only mementos from his one trip to Egypt. There were still occasional rumbles that authorities there were looking for a way to drag him back to their jurisdiction.

Grinning, Jason leaned closer to the mirror and stroked his jaw. If it wasn't for the ISS dress code, he'd let the beard grow out completely. That would really piss off the suits at the agency. Would serve them right after this fiasco of an assignment.

As he opened the medicine cabinet and rummaged inside for a can of shaving cream and a razor that didn't look like it had been around since the Nixon era, there was a knock on the bathroom door. It opened before he could answer and the humid air, spiked with soap and deodorant, rolled into the hallway.

Shelby Knight leaned his shoulder against the threshold as he studied the top sheet of the dossier. He didn't look up. "Fax came in. You want the good news or the bad?"

Shaking the can of shaving cream, Jason used the mirror to study the other man. The two were almost complete opposites. Both were tall and in good physical shape, but Shelby was Puerto Rico dark with the classic black hair, olive skin, and cocoa eyes. He also wore a thousand-dollar silk suit

that five seconds in the ocean waters would destroy.

That was the main difference between the two. Shelby had the foresight to get into high tech security as a freelance consultant. He chose his hours, clients, and fees. Shelby Knight was a lot of things—an expert marksman among them—but he was no fool.

During high school, a common interest in computers and security, not to mention a love of ocean sports, made them good friends. Later, after Jason left the FBI, similar styles and ethics made them terrific partners at ISS. They stayed close even after Shelby left the firm.

Since then, Jason made the trip from the States to the Cayman Islands to stay as his guest. They spent their days fishing and diving. When the evenings came, and the flock of tourists returned to their cruise ships, the two trolled all the right hot spots to meet all the wrong women... and enjoyed every minute of it.

White foam erupted from the nozzle of the can and Jason worked the lather into his beard to make the whiskers pliable. "Just tell me she's not wanted for prostitution in California or some shell game in Nevada."

"She's not."

He snorted. Elizabeth Parker, with her wide, dark eyes, was a perfect con artist's dream. An odd mix of innocence and sin, with a touch of

helplessness, she reared a lot of instincts in a man. Some of them even protective.

While Shelby was a leg man, tall and blonde never hurt either, Jason couldn't resist a woman with eyes that made him want to lean in and drown. The wider, the darker, the better. He'd fallen a few times but always managed to escape before the altar.

For a man in his line of work, marriage was out of the question. His father's death proved that. Killed in the line of duty, his father left behind a wife, three young daughters, and one sixteen-year-old son to take care of them all.

No, single suited Jason just fine.

Looking like a man with a bad case of rabies, he plucked the razor from the counter and rolled it between his fingers. "Give me the good news first."

Shelby smirked as he scanned the information faxed to him.

"Elizabeth Parker, age twenty-six. Never married. Archivist librarian at the Chicago Museum of History for eight years. Rents an apartment in the suburbs. Owns a seven year old car, but commutes by train."

He studied the financial information on the next page before continuing. "Her credit card, which she pays off every month, has a little

over three hundred bucks on it. There's about twelve thousand in her checking account. Perfect credit rating."

"Stop." Jason drew the razor over his face, plowing a trench in the foam. Smooth, tan skin appeared beneath. "I get the picture. She's clean."

"She's not just clean. She's perfect except for a parking ticket she got three years ago." Shelby closed the file before he folded his arms over his chest. "Not exactly your type, Mallone. So that leaves me with only one question." He raised his brows. "Where the hell did you find her?"

"I picked her up in a bar."

He choked. "Now that *is* your style."

Frowning, Jason swished the razor clean before he went back to shaving. "You're sure there's nothing in her file that's a bit... off?"

"Please, she's a librarian. No wants, no warrants. Pays all her bills on time. Has glowing references on her applications. Even her college transcripts came back clean." He tapped Jason's shoulder with the manila folder. "Better watch yourself, Mallone. This one's smart. Graduated *summa cum laude* and is working toward her Master's Degree in," he paused to check the file. His brow furrowed. "Evolutionary biology."

Jason slid him a sideways glance. "What's the bad news?"

"You'll be stuck on a cruise with a woman who wrote a thesis on the

implications of the fully opposable thumb and you have to ask?"

"If she's so clean," he paused to draw the razor up his throat, "what the hell does Steven Pembroke want with her?"

That made the other man's eyes narrow. "What makes you think he does?"

"Young hassled her in the bar. She said she didn't know him but..." Jason trailed off and lifted his shoulders. "Call me paranoid."

"I'll keep checking but are you sure it's not mistaken identity?"

"Something tells me there's more to it."

"Okay, you're paranoid."

"Isn't that my job?"

"No." Shelby poked him in the shoulder again. "Your job is to take my bike to the docks, get on that ship, and find out who's been stealing watches and rings from the passengers on the cruise. This woman's window-dressing." He looked down at the grainy black and white photograph accompanying the file. "She's exactly what you need. Quiet. Unassuming. She certainly won't draw any attention. She'll help you blend into the background. She's perfect."

"Yeah." The word came out laced with skepticism.

Shelby turned the picture around so his friend could see it and tapped

his finger against it. "Come on, Jason, she's a librarian. How much trouble could she possibly be?"

* * *

Elizabeth tried very hard to stop thinking, but she wasn't doing a very good job of it. Thinking was, after all, what got her into this mess in the first place. The more she thought about the injustice of her situation, the angrier she got. True to her Parker nature, an injustice never went unsettled. Especially not when the victim was another Parker. It was unnatural.

After she returned to the hotel, it didn't take long to pack. Since she never really unpacked, it was a simple matter of grabbing her tote bag and notifying the desk she was checking out. As hotels on the Cayman Islands went, she picked the best, most expensive. One thing she learned from Steven, money bought a lot of things and anonymity was one of them.

As she headed through the lobby for the glass doors, caution demanded she think about what she was doing. She knew little about Jason Mallone except he drank beer from the bottle and had the fashion sense of a goat. None of that mattered though. The important thing was he offered

her escape.

Besides, what could happen on a cruise ship full of people? And Mallone did check out. A phone call to the main International Security Services office in Florida confirmed Jason Mallone was out of the office on an assignment and wouldn't be available for at least a week.

As far as she could tell, his story was true. Even if it was a mistake, she would be in a better position surrounded by hundreds of other tourists than stranded in George Town with Steven at her heels.

A man stepped away from a group of tourists and in front of her. Shifting the strap of her tote on her shoulder, Elizabeth tried not to collide with him, but their shoulders bumped. She started to murmur at automatic apology, but he grabbed her arm before she spoke.

Grim faced, Albert Young glared at her. His thumb was bandaged and the other fingers looked swollen. "Ms. Parker."

Steven Pembroke, a shorter, stouter man, moved around the bodyguard and nodded to her. Her stepbrother touched Young's arm and the guard released her before moving obediently aside.

Elizabeth massaged her arm as she scowled at her stepbrother. "I should have known you'd be around here someplace, Steven," she complained. "Guys like you always travel in pairs." She glanced at Young.

"Dumb *and* Ugly."

Steven didn't respond, but then she didn't expect him to. After all, he didn't have a sense of humor. He also didn't have a chin. Elizabeth squinted at him. She never noticed that before. No chin and slouchy shoulders. It made her back ache and she found herself standing straighter.

Because they didn't share any blood connection, Elizabeth and Steven didn't look like brother and sister. The only things they shared were dark eyes and hair. Steven was stocky, his eyes a bit too close together. Styling gel slicked his hair back and the deep brown tan came from a tanning bed. Steven Pembroke never went to the beach.

It wasn't his slight paunch from too many fried conch dinners or his thinning hair that kept him from the beachfront. For Steven, it was all about appearances. Why get something for free when he could pay for it and brag about how much he spent? Despite his attempts to look powerful and successful, including a suit Elizabeth figured cost half her annual salary; he still looked like a wet weasel.

The lobby door opened as a group of college-aged men entered, grumbling about the weather and the rain. One of them looked at her, offered her a smile and a broad wink before continuing to the crowded bar. It wasn't a surprise to see the tourists inside. On an island where the sun

and surf were everything, the only thing to do when it rained was drink.

Steven glanced around the lobby as he straightened the cuffs of his white dress shirt. "Why don't we go back up to your room so we can talk privately."

"I've already checked out," Elizabeth told him.

"Then we'll talk in the bar."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but I was on my way to the gift shop. They've got postcards from the turtle farm over in the town called Hell with slogans like *Wish you were here. Saw this and thought of you.* I thought I'd buy one for Uncle Reece." She started to walk away but Young blocked her path. She tightened her grip on her tote and retreated. "You know how Uncle Reece gets a kick out of those things. Like the matchbook I gave him for Christmas. The one you open and a match pops out that looks just like a man's—"

Steven's face darkened. "This isn't a joke, Eli. You have something of mine. It wasn't in your hotel room and you didn't put it in the safe. So you have it on you or you've hidden it somewhere. I want it. Now."

Determination glittered in her brown eyes. "It isn't yours and you know it. It belonged to my mother. It's mine."

"Don't be ridiculous," Steven snorted as he flicked a piece of

imaginary lint from his suit. Solid gold cufflinks winked at her. "That ring was lost a long time ago. You know how absentminded your mother was in the end. Let's discuss this in the bar over a drink. You still like those obnoxious daiquiris?"

Elizabeth folded her arms over her chest. "I'm not going anywhere."

Steven nodded at Young before he turned and headed for the restaurant. The guard planted one hand in the small of Elizabeth's back, the other around her nape, and used the hold to propel her forward. When they reached the alcove, Steven was already at a table in the far corner, dusting the seat off with his handkerchief.

The room was crowded with people gathered to watch the weather report and take bets on whether or not the depression would turn into a full-fledge hurricane. As Elizabeth was rushed past the bar, the same man from the lobby caught her eye again. He and his friends were doing their best to polish off a bottle of tequila aided by a bowl of sliced limes and some salt.

Steven folded his handkerchief into a neat triangle before he tucked it back into the breast pocket of his jacket. Elbows rested on the arms of the chair, he steepled his fingers together and watched her approach with obvious displeasure.

Once Young released her, Steven tipped his head toward the chair opposite him. "Sit."

When Elizabeth didn't move, the bodyguard jerked a chair back and shoved her down into it. Landing with an *oomph!* she glared up at the man. He never looked at her.

"Calm down, Eli," her stepbrother clucked. "This doesn't have to be an unpleasant exchange, so don't make it that way."

Elizabeth leaned forward to fold her arms on the table, causing the loose top to wobble on its base. "This isn't an exchange at all, Steven. The stone, if I did have it, is mine. *You* stole it from *me*."

The gold and ruby pinky ring he wore flashed fire when he waved his hand in the air. "The law might not agree with you."

"Only on an island where you're the law," she shot back. "You changed the setting of the diamond but we both know it's my ring."

His brows lifted. "So you do have it."

"What if I do? What are you going to do? Call the cops?" Amused, she crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair. "Go ahead. Call. Let's see what they have to say. It should be interesting considering they had no comment when I told them about all of this in the first place."

Hands spread apart, he smiled a perfect white smile of caps and

crowns. "All I know is that I came home to find my house broken into and my property gone. You have that property. Return it and I'll forgive this unpleasantness."

Elizabeth clenched her hands around her bag. "No."

Steven's eyes narrowed as he curled his fingers into a fist. Neither stepsibling blinked. Finally, he sighed. "Albert, check her bag."

Before she could protest, Young ripped the tote from her arms. He set it on the table with a thud that made the salt and peppershakers jump. Elizabeth shifted in the chair as he unzipped the main section and rummaged through it. "Didn't your mother ever tell you it's impolite to go through a lady's bag without asking?" she demanded.

"He doesn't have to ask," Steven said as he studied his nails. "He works for me and does what I tell him."

Someone made a selection at the jukebox on the other side of the room and the music that flowed out was a strange mix of Calypso and Mariachi. Elizabeth drummed her fingers on the table. "Just because you changed your name, Steven, doesn't mean you've changed. You're still the same little boy taking things that don't belong to you just like when you raided my piggybank."

He laughed. "We're not children anymore, Eli."

"No, we're not."

Sobering, he watched as Young piled the items from the bag on the table. There was a pair of black shorts, another white blouse, and a pair of gym shoes with the socks wadded up inside them.

The guard pulled the socks out and grinned as a blue velvet box fell into his palm. He cracked it open and the smile disappeared. "It's empty," he announced, showing his boss the container.

Elizabeth smirked when Steven glowered at her.

"Keep looking," her stepbrother said. "It's there somewhere."

The bodyguard pulled out a no-frills white cotton bra and matching panties and let them dangle from his fingertips. Snatching them from him, Elizabeth tried not to blush, but did anyway. A hairbrush, some cosmetics, and a jar of cold cream came next, then a paperback book.

Young patted the pockets again to make sure he didn't miss anything. "There's nothing here, Mr. Pembroke."

"Try her purse."

Outraged, Elizabeth reached for it as she started to stand. "How dare you—"

Young yanked the handbag from her and pushed her back into the chair. The man at the bar frowned, nudged his friend with an elbow as he

pointed at the table.

The guard unzipped the purse and, without ceremony, dumped it. The contents rained out and onto the table. Her wallet, passport, and checkbook hit the table with a slap, followed by the clatter of loose change, a pen, and one tube of strawberry flavored lip balm. There was nothing exotic or unusual, certainly nothing as exquisite as a diamond.

"Satisfied?" Elizabeth asked with an arched brow. Extending her hand to the man standing next to her, she waited. Young slapped the purse into it with a huff. As she stuffed the contents back inside, she shook her head. "You always were a bad loser, Steven, but I never thought you'd stoop this low."

"I'm not the one sneaking around smashing in patio doors and ransacking houses, so let's not talk about stooping, Eli." His gaze wandered over her baggy shirt and walking shorts. "She must have it on her. Search her."

Elizabeth's head whipped up and her eyes flared. "What!"

"Discreetly."

When the other man reached for her arm, she rolled out of the chair and shoved it into the man's legs. Her palms were sweaty. "No one," she said sharply, "is searching me."

Steven studied edges of his thin, brittle nails. "We can avoid all of this if you'd stop being so obstinate. Give me the ring."

"Kiss my—"

He slammed his hand down on the table causing several people to turn and look. The men at the bar watched more closely. "Enough games!"

Her attention on Young, Elizabeth stuffed her purse into her tote. "I used to let you get away with a lot of things, Steven. I let you *miscount* when we played board games, swipe extra money from the bank when you were making change. I even put up with the rules I supposedly forgot." She hugged the larger bag to her chest. "Maybe that's why we are where we are now. Because I let you get away with it. But not anymore. You want me searched? You're going to have to drag me kicking and screaming from this room. Explain *that* to the police."

When she finished, Steven's face was red and he was breathing hard. "Albert."

Young tried to pull the bag from her arms but Elizabeth refused to release it. When he yanked again, he nearly lifted her off her feet. Two of the men broke away from the bar. Just as they stepped up behind him, Young jerked harder on the bag and Elizabeth released it.

Unprepared for the sudden surrender, the bodyguard careened

backward. His elbow connected with one of the men's nose in a crunch of cartilage and a spurt of blood. The assaulted tourist clamped his hand over his face as he bent double with a startled cry of pain.

"Why you son of a..." Grabbing the guard's arm, the other man whirled Young around and punched him right in the face.

Elizabeth let out a squeak as the bodyguard toppled into her. Even though she tried, she wasn't quick enough to escape. His weight sent her sideways, causing her foot to twist beneath her. As she fell, the strap of her sandal snapped. A second later, she hit the ground. Her hands and knees grated over the rough stone tile.

Young floundered for his footing. He would have been fine if he didn't smash his forehead into the lead lampshade hanging over the table in front of him. The bong reverberated, nearly drowning out his startled cry of pain. Stunned, he reeled back, arms flailing.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth, who managed to push herself up onto her knees, reached for the strap of her tote to pull the bag closer as Young's foot came down on it. She gave the strap a sharp tug and the bodyguard went down, landing flat on his back on the tabletop.

The whole thing flipped like a teeter-totter. One end went down, sliding the guard to the floor, as the other end shot straight up to catch

Steven's jaw and snap it up with a crack. The force of the blow hurled her stepbrother back in his chair and the sudden shift of weight caused it to rock on two legs before it collapsed backward. Brown penny loafers and white socks shot up into the air and stayed there like twin flags of surrender.

Scrambling to her feet, Elizabeth slung the strap of the bag over her head as hotel management, flanked by two security guards, rushed in. Ignoring their shouts, she bolted through the side door and stumbled onto the pathway. Shoving people out of her way, she hurtled a suitcase on wheels. "Excuse me! Look out!" she shouted in warning. "Coming through!"

The broken sandal, combined with the weight of the bag against her hip and her short legs, made it difficult to cover the ground with speed. Barreling down the pathway and around the pool, Elizabeth wove her way through the maze of lounge chairs in her dash for the beach. When she reached the stairs leading down to the beach, she tugged off her shoes and bolted barefoot down the steps.

Her foot hit the sand, sank deep, nearly sending her flat on her face, but she managed to recover and she took off down the sandy stretch. The afternoon rain made the sand cold and unpredictable. It gave underfoot at

the most inopportune times, sending her weaving sideways like a drunk and her arms up from her sides like windmills.

Driftwood and bits of bark stung her soles, but she didn't stop. Catching sight of the docks in the distance increased her speed and, in a full-blown sprint, she streaked through the crowd that had gathered to watch the growing swells.

By the time she reached the landings used to shuttle tourists in and out of the cove, her lungs, feet, and sides burned. Not bothering with her shoes, she limped across the sun-warmed blacktop of the parking lot. Sun bleached piers stretched out into the rolling waters. The operator of the only shuttle boat there lounged against a wood piling as he flipped through a magazine and smoked a cigarette. The white and green striped canopy of the boat billowed in the wind, swelling up and down like a heaving lung. Jason Mallone was nowhere in sight.

Scowling, Elizabeth shifted the bag on her hip. Still limping, she passed a man leaning against a black and chrome motorcycle. When she reached the dock, her steps faltered. She checked her watch, the boat, then the beach. Letting out a shaky breath, she ran her fingers through her damp hair.

Steven wasn't giving up. But then he never did. Even when they were

teens he was a sore loser. His temper and his impatience were his weakness. They were the things she relied on to beat him every time. Push him far enough and he would storm away, red faced and swearing. If anyone ever knew how easily he rattled, he wouldn't be the success he was today. Of course, he'd planted himself on an island where he could play supreme ruler.

She winced as pain stabbed into her sore knees. When Steven did lose, he did it very, very badly. After that, nothing was off limits. He knew how to hold a grudge and Elizabeth certainly didn't help the situation by provoking him.

Despite the warm gust of wind that came in off the ocean, a shiver went through her and she rubbed her arms. As welcoming as the Cayman Islands and her people were, she knew she'd outworn hers. Any doubts she had about taking Jason Mallone up on his offer vanished.

"You're late."

The sandals slipped from her hand and clattered to the pavement as she spun around. The man lounging next to the motorcycle didn't move. He stood with his arms folded over his broad chest, his legs stretched out and his ankles crossed. Wind rustled his short blond hair like a playful lover. Clean-shaven, Jason Mallone looked presentable in the brown pants

and short sleeved white shirt. Elizabeth blinked several times before she recognized him.

She raked her gaze over him once more. Good grief, the man was actually handsome. Previously hidden beneath the tangled beard was a strong jaw and a mouth she bet looked friendly if he bothered to try. "M-Mr. Mallone. I didn't recognize you."

His lips twisted to the side as he looked away and his eyes squinted against a sudden gust of wind. "Even us beach boys clean up real nice." When she darted another look over her shoulder, he followed. "Something wrong?"

"What? No!" Elizabeth winced as a stone cut into the bottom of her foot. "No. But we don't want to miss the boat, do we."

"Then first things first, Ms. Parker." Stepping away from the bike, Jason reached into his pocket and produced a simple gold band. No diamond, no precious stone; just a no-flourishes gold ring. He held out his hand to her. When she hesitated, he said, "If we're going to play husband and wife we need props."

Flustered, Elizabeth gave him her left hand. The ring slid into place and stayed there as if made for her. Mallone's fingers lingered. Breath caught in her throat, she looked down at his hand and could feel the flutter

of her pulse under the fingers around her wrist. He still didn't release her.

Puzzled, she looked up to find him watching at her. His brows were drawn together, a faint line between them. "Mr. Mallone—"

"Jason," he corrected.

"Jason." Lord the name felt strange coming from her lips. It was a simple name. An old name. Nothing strange about it at all. "Jason, I really think we should go."

His thumb moved over her knuckles and those intense blue eyes locked on hers. "In a rush to get there, Mrs. Mallone? Or a rush to get out of here? Looks like you ran into some trouble."

Did the man miss anything? Drawing in a breath, she started to lie. It was becoming a very bad habit. Before she could say anything, his fingers skated over her palm, sending a stab of pain through her. Apparently he noticed because he turned it over, raised it to examine the torn skin. His face darkened.

Still holding her hand, he stepped back and raked his gaze over her. Acutely aware of her skinned knees and sore feet, Elizabeth pulled away from him. Her fingers curled into fists as she edged a step toward the boat. "We should go."

Moving painfully slow, Jason took his black leather jacket from the

bike where it was draped over the seat, lifted his bag, and led the way down the pier. "We should get a few things straight," he said as he flung the jacket over his shoulder. "First off, you call me Jason. None of this Mr. Mallone crap or you'll blow it for sure. Got it?"

"Yes, yes," she agreed. He could have asked her to strip naked and do a belly dance on the top of the shuttle and she would have done it as long as it got her off the island.

"When we get into the cabin, we have to get our stories straight. Where we met, how long we've been married. It's the details that'll trip us up with the other passengers and crew."

"The devil's in the details," Elizabeth said trying to be amicable.

"You follow my lead. Any question you can't answer, keep your mouth shut, look at me, and let me do the talking. ISS has taken a lot of negative press lately, and I'm not going to blow this assignment because you can't do what you're told. Got it?"

Do what she was told? Elizabeth glared at his back. Who the hell did he think he was? He wasn't her father or her husband, thank God. She pitied the poor woman that ended up with him. Arrogant. Pushy. Even without the ponytail, beard, and purple thongs, he had all the subtlety and charm of a rhinoceros.

Stopping in mid-stride, Jason turned so unexpectedly and Elizabeth followed so close she slammed into his chest. Sighing, he gripped her shoulders and set her back a step. He didn't take his hands away. "Got it?" he asked again.

Brown eyes glittering a kaleidoscope of irritation, Elizabeth lifted her chin. "Tell me something, *Mister Mallone*," she said purposefully, "what am I allowed to do? Because from where I stand, that list is bound to be shorter."

"Lady, from where you stand, everything's bound to be shorter."

She bristled, sputtered. "Now that was uncalled for you... you..."

Dismissing her with a vague wave, Jason stomped away from her. The pier swayed with each rapid footfall and Elizabeth pressed a hand to her stomach as the dock rolled beneath her. The water wasn't deep this close to shore, probably no more than ten feet, but it might as well have been a mile. Since she couldn't swim, she could barely muster enough courage to sit in the shallow end of a pool let alone travel by water. Just flying over it made her hyperventilate. She spent the entire flight to the island with her face in an airline sickness bag.

When Jason reached the side of the small boat, he handed his large suitcase to the pilot who, surprised by the weight of it, nearly dropped it.

Jason shook his head at the other man. "Women," he grumbled.

Elizabeth's spine stiffened. "Neanderthal!"

Jason stopped. His shoulders squared. Slowly, he faced her and his brows set in a straight line. "Excuse me?"

Not put off by the glower, she stalked to his side and poked him in the chest. "Neanderthal," she repeated as she poked him again. His chest was like a rock. Aware of the man inside the shuttle, she chose her words with care. "We may be married, Jason Mallone, but that doesn't give you the right to insult me. If we're going to get through the next week," she paused before seizing the words he'd used earlier. "Y-you'd better suck it up or you'll be sleeping on the couch."

The captain of the boat tried to hide his laugh by coughing. Both passengers glared at him.

Jason thrust his face toward hers. His jaw worked and his eyes narrowed into slits. Though they were the same color as the tropic water, they were as warm as ice. "Six days, sweetheart, and the couch will probably be a lot warmer."

He would have gone on, but the pilot cleared his throat. "Excuse me, folks, but you said you had a ship to catch. If you don't want to miss it, we should go."

Jason stepped into the boat before holding out his hand to Elizabeth. His smile was forced. "Time to go, dear," he drawled. "Don't want to keep the nice taxi driver waiting."

With a huff, Elizabeth took his hand to steady herself, and stepped into the craft. She started to sit down when the boat engine roared to life. The boat surged away from the dock, sending her sprawling back on the seat with a startled cry.

Ocean spray hit her in the face, drawing her attention back to the water again. Deep water churned and slapped at the side of the boat, threatening to flood over the hull. Fingers clamped around the canopy pole, Elizabeth dragged her gaze from the surf and locked them on Jason's back.

The mantra, the one that first started running through her head when she got on the plane for the island, repeated once again. *Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.*

Not at all disturbed by the choppy water, Jason stood next to the pilot, his feet braced apart on the deck. Each time the boat pitched or swayed, he leaned with it as if born on the sea.

"So where are you folks headed?" the pilot asked.

Jason pointed to the gleaming white ship in the distance. "The

Kismet."

The man hesitated, darted a quick look at Elizabeth. "The therapy cruise?" When Jason nodded, the pilot shook his head and patted him on the back. The gesture was filled with sympathy. "Good luck, pal. I think you're gonna need it."

CHAPTER THREE

Heralded one of the finest cruise ships in the world, the *Kismet* was a state of the art vessel with four decks of lounges, shops, spas, and restaurants connected by glass elevators. As Elizabeth followed Jason and one of the ship's stewards to the elevators, down to the deck where their cabin was, she could see why the ship had its excellent reputation.

Their guide, a pleasant, dark haired man named Marco, oozed style and charm as he moved with Fred Astaire grace and delivered a memorized speech of welcome. Trailing behind, Elizabeth took in the earth-toned fabrics in the shades of New Mexico, the wood paneling, and classic light fixtures that softened intricately veined marble floors. It felt more like a gentleman's club than a cruise ship. The *Kismet* wasn't just luxurious. It was ostentatious.

Her scuffed gym shoes squeaked on the polished floors as she turned in slow circles and walked. The ship, with its elegant and flowing lines popularized in the 1930s, ran efficiently on modern pumps and engines.

Jason Mallone said nothing as they entered the plush carpeted hallways, didn't comment when Elizabeth let out soft exclamations of awe. Maybe, given his occupation, he was used to traveling like this.

Marco stopped in front of a black walnut door and fished for the keycard in the pocket of his tight-fitting navy pants. The *Kismet* uniform – long pants, a starched white shirt, and a dark blue and gold checked vest – was far too severe for the tropical climate. All he needed was a pillbox hat and a small tin cup to pass for an organ grinder's overgrown monkey.

He slid the electronic card through the lock and the small light flashed from red to green before the deadbolt opened. Pushing the door inward, he motioned them forward and followed them inside.

Elizabeth stood in the center of the cabin and stared as Marco pointed out the bathroom with its shower and separate bath, walk-in closet, and other features, before demonstrating to Jason how to use the phone. She didn't hear a word of it.

The two-room suite was enormous. Her one-bedroom apartment could easily fit inside the cabin. Like the rest of the ship, the décor was

warm. Rich desert colored damasks and silks covered the overstuffed armchairs and couch in the sitting room.

The bedroom lay beyond the narrow doorway. True to its purpose, the room's largest and most decorative feature was the European king-sized bed where sinfully luxuriant silk mocha sheets and a heavy brocade comforter covered the mattress.

The whole thing was obscene. Elizabeth worried too much about paying her rent and fixing her car if the fuel pump went out again, than to worry if the drapes were silk. And they were. With the curtains drawn back, she could see the dark sky and sea. Once they were out on open water, the view would be breathtaking—as long as she didn't think about the eight thousand miles of water underneath her.

As she watched the slow rise and fall of the waves, her stomach began to mimic the motion. Elizabeth wiped her damp palms on her shorts. Commanding herself to breathe, she spun away from the window. Both Marco and Jason watched as she headed straight for the thermostat.

"Is there a pharmacy on board?" she asked.

Marco nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Mallone. Deck eleven, next to the beauty shop."

"Are you all right?" Jason scowled. "You look a little... green."

Anxious to get air moving in the cabin, Elizabeth ignored the question and adjusted the temperature. A few seconds later, a cool breeze filtered through the vent high in the wall. Standing under it, she tilted her head back, letting air stream over her face and neck. The air conditioning raised goose bumps on her flesh.

Eyes closed, she plucked at the buttons of her shirt and opened the top three. The air flowed into the blouse, fluttered the light fabric against her skin. Unaware that Marco watched her, his dark eyes slipping down to enjoy the creamy skin she exposed, Elizabeth commanded herself not to throw up.

When her stomach stopped doing back-flips, she straightened and opened her eyes as Jason stepped in front of the other man to block his view. Her 'husband' squared his shoulders. "I think we can manage on our own now."

Marco took a quick step back, bumped into the table behind him. "I- If you need anything, just ring the main desk and ask for me. Marco." His attention shifted back to Elizabeth and his smile was pearly. "I'll be happy to service your needs."

Jason's hands clenched at his sides. "I'll bet."

The man's smile faded and he sidled sideways. "We set sail in ten

minutes. The Captain's Gala starts at seven. Jacket and tie, of course. Black tie optional."

The steward finally had Elizabeth's full attention. "What?"

Jason pulled a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet and slapped it into the other man's hand before he propelled him to the door. "Yeah, yeah, thanks, Marlo."

"Marco," the steward corrected, rolling his R's. He had enough time to slip two keycards on the table before Jason shoved him into the hall and slammed the door in his face.

Twisting her slender fingers together, Elizabeth followed Jason from the sitting area into the bedroom. His suitcase and her tote bag sat near the dresser. "Captain's Gala?" she repeated.

He grabbed his bag and swung it on the bed, making the mattress bounce. "Yeah. Most cruises start with one."

"But—"

"We should get started. We'll keep things simple and easy to remember. That way you're less likely to get confused." Jason opened the suitcase and pulled out his shirts. Each was neatly folded and wrinkle-free. "We've been married for a year. We met in Chicago since that's where you're from. Think you can remember that?"

When Elizabeth sat on the edge of the bed, she immediately began to slide as the comforter slipped from the smooth sheets. Muttering, she climbed into the middle of the bed, folded her legs in front of her, and propped her chin in her hand. "A year. Chicago. I can remember."

"We did the normal tourist stuff on our first date," he continued. Pants joined the shirts, then his shaving kit. "Dinner. Movie."

"What movie?"

He cocked his head. "What?"

"What movie?"

"What difference does it make?"

She shrugged. "People tend to remember stuff like that, Mallone."

"No. *Women* remember junk like that." Shaking his head, he headed into the closet and returned with wooden hangers. "We live in Chicago. Since we know you couldn't find a job at another museum anywhere else, we decided I would relocate."

Elizabeth gave him a critical squint. "How did you know—"

"I checked you out." His grin was lopsided as he slipped each shirt on a hanger. "You think I'd blow this assignment by being sloppy? Hell, I couldn't ask for a better cover story. Traveling business consultant gets trapped in a nice, dull life with a librarian..."

"Archivist," she corrected in a stilted voice.

Jason ignored her. "It's believable. People like things familiar.

What's more familiar than a librarian?"

"Excuse me?"

"No offense." He gathered his shirts and headed for the closet. "I sleep on my right, so I'll take that side of the bed."

Elizabeth's gaze strayed toward the window. The other side of the bed faced it and, since she slept on her left side, she would spend the next few days watching the ceiling do the Mexican wave. The onboard pharmacy would be her first stop.

Since Jason didn't leave room for debate, she said nothing and watched him unpack. It amazed her what the man could fit in one suitcase. Half of his wardrobe was casual clothes in light fabric and colors perfect for hot days. The rest were dressier outfits in dark, rich fabrics for cool nights on the water.

"The bathroom has a lot of space," Jason told her, "but I figure I'll take one side of the cabinet, you can take the other and the one drawer. It'll be easier if we keep our stuff separate. Don't want you dulling my razor."

Her left brow rose a fraction. "Does this mean you actually intend to use one instead of roaming the ship like Uncle Wasco who ran a still in his

backyard and spent his days picking fleas off his basset hounds?"

Jason stopped and stared at her. "Aw man, what kind of family have I married into?"

"About this Captain's Gala," Elizabeth started as she traced the piping on the bedspread.

"Don't sweat it. We'll be at a table with our cruise buddies, two other couples that will always be at our table for dinner. Tonight's an icebreaker."

"Yes, but—"

"Speaking of dinner, you have enough time to unpack, grab a shower, and get dressed before we have to be down there, so listen up." He poked a finger into his chest. "Jason Mallone. Thirty-two. Never married before. I work as a computer network consultant and the job requires a lot of travel. That's why we're here. You're having difficulties adjusting."

"Why do *I* have to be the one having problems adjusting? If we live in Chicago, I'd think *you* would have the problem adjusting. After all, it sounds like my life wouldn't change that much."

"What?" Brows low, Jason's lips twisted to the side. He put his pants in the bottom dresser drawer. "Jeez, Parker, it's a cover story. Deal with it."

"Someone's bound to ask."

"Then steer them my way. I'll handle them." He checked his watch again, then glanced at her. "You better move it if you want time to get dressed and fix your hair."

Automatically, Elizabeth touched her head. What was wrong with her hair? She followed him when he headed into the small sitting. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about," she said. "I didn't exactly plan this trip."

Grabbing the remote control from the coffee table, Jason flipped the television on before opening the mini-bar. The news anchor flickered to life on the screen and droned on about the cost of crude oil in the Gulf. Bent over the small refrigerator, he pushed bottles of French water and fruit juice aside. "Jeez," he grumbled, "no beer? What the hell kind of boat is this?"

"Ship."

"What?"

Head inclined to get him to look at her, Elizabeth stood beside him.

"Ship. Technically it's a ship because of its size."

Jason's gaze was level under drawn brows and his expression was one of pained tolerance. "Well, thank you, Funk and Wagnall."

Irrked, she folded her arms over her chest. "Like I said, I didn't plan any of this and I wasn't expecting any Captain's Dinner."

Jason pulled a wheel-shaped package wrapped in red wax from the fridge and sniffed it. His arm shot straight out and his head jerked back as if it was a bologna sandwich left in a school locker over the summer. His nose wrinkled. "Good God, what *is* this?"

She barely looked at it. "Gouda."

The cheese went back into the mini-bar with a careless toss. Slamming the door shut, Jason flopped onto the couch. He kicked his feet onto the coffee table and, using his toes, pushed his shoes off. Hand hooked behind his head, he turned the television volume up as a weather map appeared and globs of orange and yellow rolled across the radar.

Arms at her sides, Elizabeth stood in the middle of the living room. Her gaze shifted back and forth between him and the television set. Finally, she cleared her throat. "Jason, I'm trying to talk to you."

His attention never left the screen. "So talk."

"You're not listening."

Sighing, he shifted to sit more comfortably on the couch. "Lady, we're only playing married, so save the nagging wife routine for witnesses and go unpack or something."

With a loud huff, Elizabeth stalked into the bedroom. Of all the men on the planet, she got stuck with this ill-mannered, obnoxious slob. She

unzipped the tote bag and dumped the contents on the bed. So much for thinking that a shave, haircut, and a decent change of clothes would make any difference.

For the few seconds it took for him to step in and help her at the bar, Elizabeth thought Jason Mallone might be a gentleman. Now the thought made her laugh. Gentleman? He probably couldn't even spell it. Grabbing her one change of clothes, she stormed back into the living room.

Her reappearance apparently didn't warrant a glance. Balling the clothes up, she hurled them at him. The black shorts sailed over Jason's head, struck the lampshade, and nearly toppled it. Her white blouse, however, hit him right in the face and clung like a veil before it slipped to his lap.

Jason sat there, blinking. His jaw clamped tight. His lips thinned. Lifting the gauzy blouse with two fingers, he raised his blue eyes to her brown ones. His expression was flat and unreadable. When Elizabeth returned his contemptuous glare, he waved the blouse in the air like an oversized hankie. "What," he asked, a silken thread of warning in his tone, "is this?"

"My clothes. *All* of them."

The full meaning took a minute to sink through his Cro-Magnon skull

but when it did, she saw his eyelids flicker and the corners of his mouth tighten. "Are you telling me this is *everything* you have?" he growled

Elizabeth smiled. "Think the captain will notice if he asks me to dance?"

"That isn't funny." Still holding her blouse, Jason rubbed the soft fabric between his fingers. "How the hell can any woman travel with only one outfit?"

"I'm not in the habit of hauling all my stuff around for what was supposed to be a three-hour tour. Sue me."

He glowered. "How are we going to make anyone believe we're a married couple if you wear the same outfit everyday? People are going to ask questions. What are you going to say?"

"Gee, I don't know." Mockery made her eyes glitter. "I thought I'd steer them your way and let you handle it."

Clearly annoyed, Jason slung the blouse over his shoulder and stood. Elizabeth took a step back. Good lord, the man was massive. In the confines of the cabin, he seemed even larger. He advanced on her as she retreated another step.

"You're going shopping," he told her.

"That will be a neat trick considering we've left port. What am I

supposed to do? Swim back to George Town?"

"Don't tempt me, lady. Tossing you overboard sounds good right about now." His eyes glimmered. "Everybody already thinks we're having problems and after meeting you I'm sure they'll think tossing you was justified."

Stung, Elizabeth's chin went up another notch. "You can always claim diminished capacity. One look at you and any jury would buy it."

Jason shook his head as he pulled his wallet from the back pocket of his pants. "Quiet and unassuming," he muttered as he sorted through his credit cards. "How much trouble can she be? I should have known right then but, oh no, not me." He studied her face then shook his head again. "It's the eyes. I have *got* to see a shrink about this."

"I tried to tell you, but you keep—"

He cut her off. "Go buy whatever you need from the shops onboard to get you through until we hit an island. And make sure you get a damned receipt. I'll write it off as a business expense."

Irritated, Elizabeth snatched the credit card from him. Six days of quality time together. Was she ever going to get a full sentence out? Even if she couldn't swim, jumping overboard was starting to sound good to her too.

"I'm gonna wring his neck for this," Jason muttered as he headed for the phone. "Wait until I get back there."

As she let herself out of the cabin, Elizabeth heard him dial the front desk and paused to listen.

Hand braced on the desk, Jason leaned over the phone. "This is Mallone in *Kismet* Master Suite Two. There's no beer in the fridge. You've got water and juice and some road-kill you're trying to pass off as cheese, but no beer. Wait. Wait, don't put me on hold. Don't—"

Snickering, Elizabeth closed the door and retraced her earlier steps to the elevator and took it up a few decks to the plaza. As she passed the reception desk, she slowed.

Like Marco, the woman at the counter looked uncomfortable in the *Kismet* uniform. The light on the phone next to her flashed a silent reminder that a caller was on hold. In apparently no hurry to return, she filtered through the registration information in the computer.

Elizabeth cleared her throat as she stepped up to the desk and tapped the credit card against the wood. Her smile was a bit nervous as she gestured to the phone. "Excuse me. That wouldn't happen to be Mr. Mallone on hold, would it?" When the receptionist nodded, she let out a low, disappointed sigh. "I knew he'd try this. The man never gives up. I

really hate to put you in the middle of this. It's so unfair, really, but his doctor *did* insist..."

"Doctor?" The receptionist's eyes widened as scrolled through the information again. "I didn't see any special instructions on the guest registration."

"It's due to his problem, you see." Elizabeth waved a hand in the air and her gold wedding band glittered. "Not alcoholism or anything like that, you understand. It's just..." She darted a quick look around before she leaned forward and lowered her voice. "It doesn't help his condition, if you know what I mean. I guess too much alcohol can have *that* effect."

The receptionist sat blank-faced for a moment then her eyes flared. "Oh! Of course, Mrs. Mallone. I'll make a note of it right here." She paused, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. "Would you like me to let the kitchen know too?"

Elizabeth's smile widened. Female understanding and cooperation, what a wonderful evolutionary advancement. Now all they had to do was figure out asexual reproduction and men like Jason Mallone could sit and guzzle beer on barstools all they wanted.

Managing her best, helpless, wide-eyed stare, Elizabeth pressed a hand to her chest. "Could you? You are such an angel."

The woman flushed. "Our goal here on the *Kismet* is to rejoin couples, ma'am. It's our pleasure to do everything we can to bring you closer. In *any* way we can."

Smiling, Elizabeth watched as the clerk entered the information. Drinking was such a nasty habit and combine alcohol with heat... Well, the two just did not mix. Surely Jason would see the wisdom of it in retrospect. Content, Elizabeth headed for the shops. If Jason Mallone wanted her to act like a wife trying to repair their marriage, she could do that. She stopped to study the mannequins in the window of a store called *His & Hers*, and her smile widened.

One quiet, unassuming, rent-a-wife coming right up.