



Max Zamora was getting too old to play Superman. Adrenaline rushed through his veins and raised the hair on the backs of his arms, but did little to dull the fiery ache shooting up his side, stealing air from his lungs. At the age of thirty-six, he felt the pain of saving the world much more than he used to.

He took steady breaths to control the pain and the nausea threatening just below the surface. Above the pounding in his head, he listened to the sounds of tourists and taxicabs, of island music and waves hitting the docks. He heard nothing out of the ordinary filling the humid night air, but Max knew they were out there. Somewhere. Looking for him. If they caught him, they wouldn't hesitate before they killed him, and this time they would succeed.

Light from the Atlantis Casino illuminated blurry patches of the marina, and for a split second his vision cleared, then doubled again, playing havoc with his balance as he moved from the shadows. The soles of his tactical boots made not a sound as he boarded the yacht tied to the end of the dock. Blood trickled from the cut in his bottom lip and dripped

down his chin to his black T-shirt. When his adrenaline ran dry, he knew he'd be in a heap of hurt, but he planned to be halfway to Florida before that happened. Halfway from the hell he'd visited on Paradise Island.

Max made his way to the dark galley and rifled through the drawers. His hand fell on a fishing knife, and he pulled it from its scabbard and tested the wicked five-inch blade against his thumb. Moonlight poured in through the yacht's Plexiglas windows overhead and lit up patches of the inky black interior.

He didn't bother to search the yacht further. He couldn't see much anyway, and he'd be damned if he'd turn on the lights and illuminate his position.

Flatware rattled in the drawer as Max slammed it shut. He figured if the owners were still on board, he'd made enough noise to roust them by now.

And if someone did suddenly appear from out of the darkness he'd have to switch to contingency plan B. Problem was, he had no plan B. An hour ago, he'd run through the last of his backup strategies, and now he was running on pure instinct and survival. If this last ditch effort failed, he was a dead man. Max didn't fear death; he just didn't want to give anyone the pleasure of killing him.

When no one appeared, he made his way back outside and quickly cut the docklines. He moved up the stairs to the flying bridge. Max's vision cleared for a few brief seconds, allowing him to see the bridge had a canvas top and plastic wraparound windows. He knelt beside the captain's chair within the variegated shadows, and his vision blurred and doubled again.

A wave of nausea rushed at him, and he breathed through it as best he could. Mostly by touch, he used the knife to pop

a section off the top of the helm. Perspiration stung a cut on his forehead and ran into his brow as he pulled out a tangle of wires. His vision wasn't getting any better and it took him longer than he would have liked to locate the back of the ignition switch. When he did, he sliced through the wires, then touched them together. The twin inboard engines kicked over, sputtering and churning the water as Max placed one hand on his side, one on the helm, and rose.

He put the yacht in gear, slid the throttle forward, and eased the craft away from the end of the dock. If he tilted his head just right, his double vision wasn't as bad, and he could keep the yacht in the center of the waterway and away from hazards.

He motored the vessel out of the marina and into Nassau Harbor, beneath the bridge that connected Paradise Island to the capital and past the cruise ships docked at Prince George Wharf. Nothing that night had come this easy, and at any moment, he expected a spray of automatic fire, shredding the canvas top and chewing up the deck. The minute he'd landed on the island that afternoon, his luck had gone from bad to worse, and he didn't trust that his bad luck was through with him yet.

'Excuse me, but what are you doing?'

At the sound of a female voice, Max spun around and gripped the arm of the captain's chair to keep from falling. He stared at the double image of a woman outlined by the fading lights of the harbor. A lighthouse at the end of the island sent a bright beam sliding across the floor and lighting up two identical pairs of feet with twenty red toenails. It made a leisurely journey up two red-and-blue skirts and bare flat

bellies. Two white shirts were tied between two pairs of big breasts. Then it slipped across the corners of two full mouths and drifted through a tangle of blond curls. Her face remained hidden as the fuzzy image of two small dogs yapped from her arms, the shrill barking enough to make Max's ears bleed.

'Shit, I didn't need this,' he said, wondering where the hell she'd come from. The poor excuse for a dog jumped from her arms and bolted across the floor, stopping by Max's feet and barking so hard his rear legs rose from the deck. The woman moved forward, and her double image trailed slightly behind as she rushed to scoop up the mutt.

'Who are you? Do you work for the Thatches?' she demanded. He didn't have time for dogs or questions or bullshit in general. She had to go. The last thing he needed tonight was a barking mutt and a yapping woman. She and her dog were going to have to jump. The tip of Paradise Island was less than a hundred feet behind them now. They'd probably make it. If they didn't, it wasn't his problem.

'Shut that dog up or I'll drop-kick it overboard,' he said instead of forcing her and her mutt into the sea. Damn, he was getting soft in his old age.

'Where are you taking this yacht?'

He ignored her and glanced one last time at the fading lights of Nassau, at the fuzzy green buoy markers and flashing lighthouse, then he turned his attention to the controls. He had a few questions of his own, but he would have to wait to get the answers. At the moment, he had more important concerns. Like survival.

His hands shook from pain and adrenaline. Through the sheer force of his will and years of experience, he steadied

them. He hadn't detected another vessel following him, but that didn't mean much.

'You can't just take this boat. You have to return to the marina.'

If his head hadn't ached like a bitch and his body hadn't been used for a punching bag, he might have found her damn funny. Turn back, after the hell he'd lived through? Take the yacht back, after he'd gone through the trouble of stealing it? Not freaking likely. It took a rare talent to hot-wire when a person couldn't even see straight. He'd been aboard just about every Navy vessel imaginable. Everything from an inflatable to an attack sub. He knew how to read a Global Positioning System, and in a pinch he could read chart maps and use a compass. Problem was, with his vision, the best he was capable of at the moment was to head west and haul balls to the walls.

'Who are you?'

He squinted at the golden blur of the controls in front of him and reached for the radio. He missed and tried again until he felt the knobs beneath his fingertips. Static filled the air around him, drowning out the woman's questions. He adjusted the squelch knob, cutting out the background noise, then he turned it slightly. The radio picked up the marine operator's transmission with a passenger ship, then he switched to a noncommercial channel. He heard nothing out of the ordinary and continued to switch. Each channel sounded normal. Again, nothing out of the ordinary, but he wasn't listening for normal or ordinary traffic.

'You have to take me back. I promise I won't tell anyone about you.'

Sure you won't, honey, he thought as he glanced over his shoulder, but he could see nothing out of his left eye and turned his attention back to the controls. If she'd shut the hell up, he could almost forget she was there.

He'd been out of communications with the Pentagon for twelve hours. In his last transmission, he'd informed them that there would be no need for a rescue, no need for further negotiations. The two DEA agents he'd been seeking were dead, and had been for a while. Obviously unused to torture, they'd succumbed at the hands of their captors.

'People will notice I'm gone, you know. If fact, I bet someone has missed me by now.'

Bullshit.

'I'm sure someone has already contacted the police.'

The Bahamian police were the least of his problems. He'd been forced to kill André Cosella's oldest son, José, and he'd barely managed to escape with his own life. When André found out, he was going to be one extremely pissed-off drug lord.

'Sit down and be quiet.' Through his double vision, he made out the lights of a sailboat heading toward them on his port side. He didn't think the Cosellas had found the body yet and doubted the sailboat was filled with drug smugglers, but he knew better than to rule anything out, and the last thing he needed was for the woman beside him to start screaming her head off.

He felt rather than saw her move, and before she could take a step, he reached out and grabbed her arm. 'Don't even think about doing anything stupid.'

She screamed and tried to pull out of his grasp. The dog

yapped, jumped to the deck, and locked his jaws on the leg of Max's pants.

'Get your hands off me,' she yelled, and swung at him, almost connecting with his already aching skull.

'Damn it!' Max swore as he spun her around and slammed her back into his chest. He set his jaws against the pain shooting along his ribs and grappled for her wrists. She fought to escape, but she was soft and very feminine and no match for Max. He easily forced her forearms to cross her breasts, pinning her to him and controlling her jabbing elbows. Her hair piled on the top of her head tickled his cheek as he clued her in on their untenable situation. 'Be a good girl, and who knows, you just might live to see the sunrise.'

She stilled instantly. 'Don't hurt me.'

She'd misunderstood him, but he didn't bother correcting her. It wasn't *him* she had to worry about. He wasn't going to hurt her, unless she took another swing at him. Then all bets were off.

The sailboat sliced through the calm waters, a blur to Max, and all too clearly reminding him of his weakened position. He couldn't see straight. At the moment, his vision was better in the dark than the light, which had just about as many advantages as disadvantages. He didn't need a doctor to tell him his ribs were cracked, and he was sure he'd be pissing blood for at least a week. Worse, Cosella's men had taken all of his toys – his weapons and his communications. They'd even taken his watch. He had nothing to fight back with, and if they found him, he was a sitting duck. Worse than a sitting duck. His bad luck had cursed him with a soft civilian woman and

her irritating mutt. He shook his leg and the little yapper slid across the wooden floor.

‘Let me go and I’ll sit down like you said.’

He didn’t believe her. He didn’t believe she wouldn’t try something, and in his present state, he wouldn’t even see it coming. He’d lived through too much already tonight to let her finish the job. He narrowed his gaze and his double vision slid into one image. The stern light of the sailboat slid past without incident, and to his vast relief his double vision did not return.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘I’m one of the good guys.’

‘Right,’ she said, but she didn’t sound convinced. More like she was trying to pacify him.

‘I’m telling you the truth.’

‘Good guys don’t steal boats and kidnap women.’

She had a point, but she was just plain wrong. Sometimes the line between the good guys and the bad guys was as hazy as his sight. ‘I didn’t steal this vessel, I’m commandeering it. And I’m not kidnapping you.’

‘Then take me back.’

‘No.’ Max had been trained by the best the military had to offer. Excluding tonight’s fiasco, he could shoot and loot better than most. Scale just about any installation, get what he needed, and be out by dinner, but he knew from experience that one hysterical woman could make a solid situation as unstable as hell. ‘I am not going to hurt you. I just need to put some distance between me and Nassau.’

‘Who are you?’

He thought about giving her a fictitious name, but since she

would probably find it out when she tried to have him arrested for kidnapping, he told her the truth. 'I'm Lieutenant Commander Max Zamora,' he answered, but he didn't give her the whole truth. He left out that he was retired from the military and that he currently worked for a part of the government that didn't exist on paper.

'Let go of me,' she demanded, and for the first time Max looked downward into the blurred image of his hands wrapped around her wrists. The backs of his fingers and knuckles pressed into the soft pillows of her breasts, and suddenly he felt every inch of her slim back crushed into his chest. Her rounded behind was shoved into his groin, and hunger mixed with the ache riding his ribs and thumping his skull. He was equally disgusted and surprised that he could feel anything beyond pain. Awareness of her spread across his skin, and he pushed it back, tamped it down, and forced it into the dark recesses where he buried all weakness.

'Are you going to take another swing at me?' he asked.

'No.'

He released her and she flew out of his grasp as if her clothes were on fire. Through the dark shadows of the cabin, he watched her disappear into the corner, then he turned to the controls once again.

'Come here, Baby.'

He looked over his shoulder at her, sure he hadn't heard her right. 'What?'

She scooped up her dog. 'Did he hurt you, Baby Doll?'

'Jeesuz,' he groaned as if he'd stepped in something foul. She'd named her dog Baby Doll. No wonder it was such a nasty little pain in the ass. He returned his attention to the

GPS and pressed the switch. The screen illuminated, a gray blur of lines and fuzzy numbers. He squinted and brought the screen a bit more into focus. On the port side of the screen, he could just make out the approaching lines of Andros Island and the chain of Berry Islands off his starboard side. He couldn't see well enough to read the increments of longitude and latitude, but he figured as long as he headed northwest for another hour before turning due west, he would land along the coast of Florida by morning.

'If you're really a lieutenant, then show me your identification.'

Even if every piece of identification hadn't been taken from him when he'd been captured, it wouldn't have told her anything anyway. He'd entered Nassau under the name of Eduardo Rodriguez, and everything from his passport and driver's license to his pocket litter had been falsified.

'Take a seat, lady. This will all be over before you know it,' he said, because there was nothing more he could tell her. Nothing she would believe anyway. The American public was better off not knowing about men like Max. Men who operated in the shadows. Men who performed untraceable missions for the U.S. government and were paid with untraceable money. Men who answered nonexistent calls from nonexistent phones in a nonexistent office in the Pentagon. Men who gathered intelligence, disrupted terrorist activity, and took out bad guys while allowing the government its deniability.

'Where are we going?'

'West,' he answered, figuring that was all the information she needed.

‘Exactly where west?’

He didn’t need to see her to know by the tone of her voice that she was the kind of woman who expected to be in charge. A real ball-buster. Under the best of circumstances, Max didn’t let anyone bust his balls, and this wasn’t the best of circumstances. And he’d be damned if he’d allow some woman to screw up his night even more than it had already been screwed.

‘Exactly where I decide.’

‘I deserve to know where I’m being taken.’

Normally, he didn’t enjoy intimidating women, but just because he didn’t enjoy it didn’t mean it bothered him, either. He backed the engine off to a nice cruising speed of about twenty knots, punched up the cruise control, and stalked to where she stood with her dog, a shadowy figure in a dark corner of the bridge.

Light from the full moon slipped through the windshield and lit up the top of her shoulder and throat. She must have gotten a glimpse of his face, because she sucked in her breath and sank back even farther into the corner. Good. Let her be afraid of him.

‘Listen real close,’ he began, towering over her and placing his hands on his hips. ‘I can make things easy for you, or I can make them real hard. You can sit back and enjoy the ride, or you can fight me. If you choose to fight me, I guaran-goddamn-tee you won’t win. Now, what’s it gonna be?’

She didn’t say a word, but her dog propelled itself from her arms and sank its teeth into his shoulder like a rabid bat.

‘Shit!’ Max swore, and grabbed the mutt.

‘Don’t hurt him! Don’t hurt Baby!’

Hurt him? Max was going stomp it into a grease spot. He pulled and the fabric of his shirt ripped. The snarling beast came off in his hands and he dropped him to the floor. The dog yelped and scampered away.

‘You bastard!’ she yelled. ‘You hurt my dog.’ Only after her fist connected with the side of his head did he realize she’d blindsided him. His ears rang, his vision blurred a little more, and he called her some very choice names.

She took another swing, but he was ready for her and grabbed her wrist in midaim. He swept her feet out from beneath her and she went down, hitting the deck hard. Max was through playing nice. He flipped her onto her stomach and planted his knee in her back. She flailed and fought and called him a few pathetic names of her own.

‘Get off me!’

Get off her? Not likely. He was going to gag her, tie her up, and dump her overboard. *Sayonara*, sweetheart. Dim light from the GPS spread across the floor and reached her bare feet and calves. She kicked, and he grasped two fistfuls of her skirt and ripped a long piece from the bottom.

‘Stop! What in the heck do you think you’re doing?’

Instead of answering, he straddled her and squeezed her hips between his knees to keep her still. She tried to twist and turn, but he managed to grab one flailing ankle and tie a half hitch knot around it. Then he grabbed the other and wound the material in a locking cleat around them both. She yelled her lungs out while Max secured her feet. Then he grabbed the bottom of her skirt once more and ripped. This time the whole thing came off in his hands. The backs of her long legs were pale against the darker wooden deck. Her panties might

be pink or maybe white. Max wasn't sure and he wasn't going to dwell on it.

She begged him to stop, but her pleas fell on his still ringing ears. He tore another long strip from the skirt, then placed his hand flat on her behind. Silk. Her panties were silk, he discovered as he held her down. He quickly reversed his position so that he faced the back of her head instead of her feet. He knelt over her, her waist squeezed between his thighs like a vise while he tied a half hitch knot, and she still fought him. She tucked her hands beneath her body, but he grabbed her arm and easily brought it to the small of her back. He tied her wrists together, then stood over her. Now that the rush of adrenaline was slowing to a trickle and it seemed as if he just might live after all, his neurotransmitters were running less interference, and the pain in his head and side made him more nauseous than before.

Breathing hard, he stepped over the woman on the floor and moved to the helm. He'd wasted precious time dealing with an unwanted passenger and her unwanted dog. He flipped off the cruise control and pushed the throttle to fifty-five knots.

The scratch of the little dog's nails reached his battered ears as it scurried from its hiding place to dart past him. Then silence filled the cabin, and he reached for a box of emergency signal flares stuck to the side of the helm. Over the next half an hour, his vision cleared enough for him to sort through the ten handheld flares. As far as making them into any sort of defense weapon went, he determined there wasn't enough magnesium to make a decent incendiary bomb.

He set the box of flares on the helm and glanced at the

Global Positioning System. He could now see the outline of Andros and the Berry Islands to his stern. He changed the heading a few degrees west and headed toward the coast of Florida. Then, once he was fairly sure they wouldn't run aground on one of the seven hundred islands and cays that made up the Bahamian Commonwealth, he once again lowered the speed of the boat and flipped on the cruise control.

Max set his teeth against the pain in his side, and as he walked from the bridge, he looked into the dark corner. The woman had managed to pull herself into a sitting position. Within the shadows, he could make out the white of her blouse and a sliver of light from the window shone on her red toenails. Her little dog lay curled up by her feet.

Without a backward glance, Max walked from the bridge, slowly making his way down the stairs, holding his side against the jolt of each step. His breathing became more labored, and by the time he entered the lit galley, he saw spots in front of his eyes. He found a first-aid kit beside the stove and a tray of ice in the freezer.

In the refrigerator, he discovered bottles of wine, several fifths of rum and tequila, and about a case of Dos Equis beer. Under normal circumstances, Max only allowed himself a beer or two. Tonight he needed more, something with a bigger kick, and he reached for the rum. He unscrewed the top of the clear bottle and brought it to his mouth. He winced at the pressure against his split lip but took several big swallows anyway. He wrapped the ice in a hand towel, then stuck it beneath one arm.

Grabbing the first-aid kit, he headed through the salon and

flipped on the switch in the bathroom, coming face-to-face with his reflection in the mirror above the sink. He didn't know which was worse: the way he looked or the way he felt. The left side of his face was swollen and turning purple. Dried blood from his nose smeared his cheek, and the cut in the middle of his bottom lip had bled down his chin. He took a long drink of the rum as he studied the rip in his shirt and the small dog bite on the ball of his shoulder. It wasn't deep. Just a scratch, really, and, compared to the rest of his injuries, didn't even warrant inspection. He just hoped like hell the mutt had had all his shots.

With one hand, Max pulled his shirt from the waistband of his black jeans and lifted it up. Nasty red welts crisscrossed his torso, while a bruise in the shape of a bootheel marked his left side. At least he was alive. For the moment anyway.

He rummaged around in the first-aid kit until he found a bottle of Motrin. He emptied five tablets into his palm and chased them down with rum, then he wrapped an Ace bandage around his ribs. The elastic bandage didn't help all that much, but he pinned it in place anyway. He found some antiseptic soap, and as he washed the blood from his face and neck, he thought of what had happened to him tonight, and wondered how the mission could have gotten so messed up from the beginning.

The intelligence he'd been given had been wrong, his contingency plans had all failed, and he wanted to know why. The report had placed Cosella's men in one part of the church on the vast compound, when they'd clearly been in another. The DEA agents had been held in the front of the building instead of the back, but none of that really mattered. Terrorists

weren't the most predictable people and intelligence was subject to change on a minute-by-minute basis. Max knew that, dealt with it often.

But he'd never had all his escape routes so unexpectedly and totally blocked before, and it occurred to him that perhaps someone on the inside hadn't meant for him to survive this one.

He washed away the traces of blood and closed the gash on his forehead with a few Steri-Strips. With the icy towel held to the side of his face and the fifth of rum in his other hand, he returned to the galley. There was only one person he completely trusted at the special ops command. Joint Chief of Staff General Richard Winter, a chain-smoking, foulmouthed straight shooter who'd served in Vietnam and Desert Storm and knew a thing or two about living in the trenches and fighting with your back against the wall.

The general was a real hard-ass, but fair. He understood about going clandestine, what it took, and what it involved. But Max couldn't risk contacting the general yet. Not on an unsecured line. Not when the transmission could be picked up by anyone within a thirty-mile radius. Not when he was such an easy target.

Once again, he rummaged through the yacht, looking for a weapon. He searched the closets in the stateroom and cupboards in the salon and galley, but found nothing more threatening than plastic cocktail swords and a set of dull steak knives.

He emptied the bottle of Motrin in his pocket and reached for a big purse sitting on the dinette table. He dumped out the contents, looking for prescription analgesics, like codeine or

Darvocet, but came up empty except for a travel-sized Tylenol. The purse contained cosmetics and dog treats. A toothbrush and hairbrush and casino chips. He flipped open the wallet and stared at a North Carolina driver's license. With one hand, he held the ice to his face, while with the other he brought the license closer to his good eye. For an instant he thought the face looked familiar, but it wasn't until he read the name that he recognized the woman.

Lola Carlyle. Lola Carlyle, famous underwear and bikini model. Maybe *the* most famous. Her name conjured up images of a near-naked woman, rolling about in the sand or on satin sheets. Of long legs, big breasts, and hot sex. Her *Sports Illustrated* pictures had always been a real favorite with the boys at Little Creek.

Max tossed the wallet on the table. Damn. The situation just got a bit more complicated. A bit less easy for the government to cover up. And if he was recaptured before he made it back to the States, the soft pampered woman on the bridge didn't stand a chance. A few minutes ago, he would have sworn that his luck couldn't get any worse, but it sure as shit had just gotten a lot worse.

A grim line sealed his lips as he grabbed the rum and the ice-filled towel and headed back up to the bridge. Maybe the woman upstairs wasn't Lola Carlyle. Just because Lola Carlyle's purse was in the galley didn't mean the tall blond woman he'd tied up was her. Yeah, maybe, and maybe he could just go ahead and sprout wings and fly home.

Climbing the stairs on the way up to the galley didn't hurt any less than on the way down. He paused twice and held his side against the sharp pain before continuing. In the past, Max

had broken about every bone in his body, and ribs were by far the worst. Mostly because it hurt to even breathe.

Within the dark cabin, he picked out her white shirt. She was exactly where he'd left her, and he moved to the console and placed the bottle of rum and the towel next to the throttle.

'This will all be over soon,' he said in an effort to reassure her. Although, after she'd tried to knock his head off, he didn't know why he was bothering. Maybe because if he were in the same situation, he would have done the same thing. But, he thought as he pressed the ice against his left eye, he would have succeeded.

'Could you please untie me? I have to go to the bathroom.'

The only lethal weapon on board sat next to his rum on the console, so he considered her request. 'If I do, are you going to clock me again?'

'No.'

Max stared at her outline, looking for any detail that might identify her as the woman known throughout the world by her first name alone. He couldn't make a positive determination one way or the other. 'That's what you said last time.'

'Please. I really have to go.'

Max looked around. 'Where's your mutt?'

'Right here, asleep. He won't bite you again. I've talked to him about it, and he's really sorry.'

'Uh-huh.' He grabbed the fish knife and crossed the deck and, keeping his back as straight as possible, knelt beside her outline. Within the dark corner he felt for her feet, then easily slid the knife through the cotton strip. 'Turn around,' he said, and when she'd done as he'd told her, he sliced the material binding her hands. He grabbed his side, and with more

difficulty than it had taken him to kneel, he rose to his feet. 'This could have been avoided in the first place,' he said through the pain, 'if you'd just done what I told you to do.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

A warning bell sounded in his splitting head as he replaced the knife in its scabbard, then slid it in his waistband at the small of his back. He didn't trust her sudden passiveness, but perhaps she'd realized that she couldn't win and it was in her best interest not to fight with him any more. Yeah, maybe. Or maybe he really was getting soft in his old age.

She slipped past him with her dog in her arms and headed for the door. At the top of the stairs, the moon shone across her back and bottom, and in her hurry to get by him, she left the scent of her hair in her wake.

He moved to stand by the captain's chair and grabbed the bottle of rum. He took a drink and looked out the front windshield at the Caribbean moon. At the rolling waves before him and the vast emptiness of the ocean. Beside a folded-up newspaper, he spotted a pair of binoculars. He carefully raised them to his eyes, but saw nothing except black ocean. He relaxed a degree.

Max had always taken the worst that life could throw at him, and he'd always mastered it. He'd made it through six months of SEAL training, been in Desert Storm, taken out terrorists in Afghanistan, Yemen, and in the South China Sea, but tonight had been the worst. Because of José Cosella's desire to impress his father with his brutality, and a shoddy piece-of-shit handgun, Max was still alive. The same could not be said of José.

Still fresh in Max's mind, he recalled in precise detail the

click of the jammed gun, José taking his eyes off him to examine it, and Max making his move. The chair splintering and coming apart within the ropes that bound his hands. Him using a piece of the wooden back to save his own life. Running to the docks, hiding in the shadows, and picking his opportunity.

Max set the bottle on top of the newspaper and caught a flash of white reflection in the windshield.

‘Turn this boat around,’ the woman behind him commanded in a slightly breathless, faintly southern voice. She flipped on the galley lights and the glare immediately stabbed Max’s corneas. ‘Turn it around or I’ll shoot.’

Max squinted against the pain and light that suddenly flooded the bridge. He slowly turned and no longer had to wonder if he’d accidentally commandeered a famous underwear model along with the yacht.

Lola Carlyle was just as gorgeous in person as she was staring back from the cover of fashion magazines. She stood in the doorway, half her blond hair piled on top of her head, the other half curled about her shoulders as if she’d just gotten out of bed. Her deep brown eyes stared back at him from beneath the perfect arch of her brows. She’d untied the white shirt from between her breasts and had buttoned it all the way to her bottom. Her long smooth legs were every man’s fantasy. She might have been his, too. If it weren’t for the orange flare gun pointed right at his chest. Ms Carlyle had been busy.

Well, he’d wondered if his night could get any worse, and it sure as shit just had. He should have known. He should have followed her, but he’d rather face a dozen flare guns than a trip

down those stairs again. 'What are you going to do with that thing?' he asked.

'Shoot you if you don't turn this boat around. Now.'

'Are you sure?' He really didn't believe she'd shoot him. Most people didn't have what it took to look a man right in the eyes and end his life. 'That'll leave a mighty big hole. Make a really big mess, too.'

'I don't care. Turn the yacht around.'

Maybe she had what it took. Maybe not, but there was no way in hell he was turning back to Nassau.

'Now!'

He shook his head. 'Not even for you, Miss July.' Her eyes narrowed, and he provoked her further, waiting for her to make a move so he could make his. 'What was the name of that magazine where you appeared on the cover wearing that red thong bikini? *Hustler*?'

'It was *Sports Illustrated*.'

He raised his hand to touch his split lip. 'Ah, yes.' He looked at the traces of blood on his fingers, then returned his gaze to her. 'I remember.' Her brows scrunched together even more. 'You were a real hit with the teams that year. I do believe Scooter McLafferty cuffed the carrot several times in your honor.'

'Charming.' Her frown told him she was neither flattered nor amused. 'The boat,' she reminded him, and waved the flare gun. 'Turn it around. I'm not kidding.'

'I told you I can't do that.' He folded his arms over his chest as if he were relaxed. But the fact was, he could have the knife out of its scabbard and in her right eye before she took another breath. Now, he didn't want to do that. He didn't want to kill a

famous lingerie model. The government frowned on the killing of civilians, so maybe he'd just kick the gun out of her hand. That was going to hurt like a bitch and he wasn't looking forward to it. 'If you want this yacht headed back to Nassau, you'll have to come over here and turn it around yourself.'

'If you try anything ...' She took two hesitant steps forward, her dog at her bare feet.

'You'll sic your vicious mutt on me again?'

'No, I'll shoot you.'

He even moved over for her and pointed to the wheel. 'It has a tendency to vibrate below about fifteen knots,' he provided.

She stopped and motioned with the gun for him to move completely away from the helm.

Max shook his head as he watched her. He waited until she took one more hesitant step, then his arm shot out and grabbed her wrist. She tried to yank away and the gun exploded. The twelve-gauge shotgun shell blew a ball of flaming red fire into the helm. It slammed into the GPS, smashed the bottle of rum, and sent sparks shooting in all directions. The ignited rum flowed like a flaming river across the controls and into the hole Max had created when he'd removed the panel to hot-wire the engine.

Both Max and Lola hit the deck as the fifteen-hundred-candela ball burned its way through the faux-wood panel and shot beneath the console, where it exploded with a loud pop, sending flames up through the hole. The red flares lit one by one, burning the helm like ten mini blowtorches. The wiring cracked and sizzled and the engine shut down. Like the dying throes of the *Titanic*, the lights blinked out completely. The

only illumination in the pitch-black night, the dancing flames and orange glow of the burning helm.

‘Oh, my Lord,’ Ms Carlyle cried.

Max crawled to his knees and looked up at the blazing newspaper, the flames licking the windshield and igniting the custom-made canvas top. Apparently, his rotten luck wasn’t through with him yet.