

Chapter One:

Except for the mermaid on a weedy patch of sea grass ghosting in her wake, Katrina Hunter's solo sail into Mexican waters had been monotonous and uneventful. And now her thirty-two-foot Westsail was on a leisurely stroll with only the current and the thrum of the auxiliary engine for companionship... except, that is, for the mermaid.

She rubbed at gritty eyes, the result of too little sleep and too many hours at *Pilgrim's* helm. "Sure it is. Last night it was Mickey Mouse reciting Robert Frost on top of a following wave, so why not mermaids?"

Shivery, bleary-eyed and slow, she blew at cold, stiff hands, then reached over and tapped at the GPS on the cockpit helm. GPS and radar both said the same thing: arrival to her destination at the port of Ensenada in forty-five minutes.

She peered through the early morning light at the sun-fuzzed tan cliffs of Baja, the bare corduroy hills folding onto themselves, then breaking apart, humped up again into another cluster of barren hills. Bored with the dull scenery, she cupped a hand over her brow and glanced back at the patch of weed again.

"Definitely not Mickey Mouse. It's a busted white fender stuck on some seaweed, that's all it is," she said, rubbing at her eyes again and watching the seaweed pad wallowing on the oily swell as if moving to some genetic Latin rhythm.

The white plastic boat fender was now a pale arm swimming in slow, lazy strokes. There was also a head with long dark hair and a body to go along with the arm.

"Yeah, and gold watches are this year's accessory for every boat fender. Shit!"

Katy swatted at the clanging alarm going off in her head—that litany of cautionary instruction drilled into her by her superiors when they heard about her solo sail to Mexico. Never mind that she'd been sailing since she could stand, or that she was frequent crew for any racing regatta on the San Francisco Bay. She was one of their own, or would be if her paid leave of absence played itself out as intended.

She stoppered her ears against getting involved with even the slightest whiff of trouble while she was in Mexico and stabbed at the Man Overboard button on her GPS to mark the exact location of the body. There would be no calling the American Coast Guard now; she was already too far away from San Diego and the American border.

Yanking at the furling line of her jib until it curled obediently onto itself and crabwalking forward, she uncleated the main and let it drop into the lazyjacks, worked her way back to secure the boom into its cradle, dropped down into the cockpit and shoved her wheel hard until the bow was aimed at the patch of weed, then tied off the wheel, idled the throttle, and with boat hook in hand, waited for the patch of weedy sea grass to slide across her waterline.

Katy leaned over and deftly nudged the weedy raft around so that its reluctant passenger was facing her, and then ever so gently pushed back the wet strands of black hair. Dark wings of brow stood out in stark relief on pale olive skin. It was a girl, maybe all of sixteen, she guessed.

"Where'd you come from?"

As if to answer at least part of her question, the ocean swelled, lifting up the maiden's bier until Katy was looking into slightly open eyes. There were no petechiae, the telltale red dots freckling the cornea and typical of strangulation.

"Not strangled, but still...."

A frothy red bubble clinging to a nostril and a few more at her mouth said drowned, but not in the water very long as the limbs were still pliant and the skin wasn't bloated or damaged by fish or sea birds.

Katy noted the time as seven a.m. for the investigation that was clearly going to happen, and gave her guess at a couple of hours earlier, which would put the death about three or four a.m.

"Did you fall off a party boat, my little mermaid?" She lifted her head to scan the horizon for any sign of a disappearing yacht or cruise ship.

The empty horizon made her sad and then angry, but not at the dead girl. Detective Katrina Taylor Hunter, recently of the San Francisco Police Department, would never be angry at a victim and certainly not one so young. "All right, let's get this over with," and she went below to twist the dial on her marine radio to 2.182 MHz and did as she was trained to do when finding dead bodies in Mexican waters—called the Mexican Navy.

Chapter Two:

After six hours in a small hot room in the Ensenada police station, she had every reason to agree with veteran travelers who made it their policy never to stick around after an accident in Mexico. She had been held in solitary confinement since she was met at the marina dock by a fat, nervous Mexican police officer. He had her write it all down on a pad with a stub of an old pencil and then read it back to him as he slowly pecked out the letters on a manual typewriter. Then he had her sign it and, leaving her a copy, bowed out the door of the interview room.

Every hour or so he would pop in with a cold soda or offer to escort her to the ladies' room, which was depressingly dingy, and without any windows to tempt her with escape, she naturally followed him back into the room where he once again begged for her patience.

"The chief inspector specifically asked for your patience, please," he said, smiling and backing out again.

A dead girl had been found floating in the ocean. What was so hard to understand about that? Katy's passport said she was an American citizen, her driver's license said she was a resident of San Francisco and her police ID said she was a detective with the San Francisco police department. The ID photo sucked but so did her attitude about now.

Just when she was beginning to think she might be here permanently, her jailer whisked open the door for a broad-chested suit, a thick file under his arm. The uniform stood guard while his superior squeezed his big shoulders around his sergeant, loosened his tie, thumped the file down on the table, and with a heavy sigh, lowered himself into the chair across from Katy.

"I am Chief Inspector Raul Vignaroli and this is Sergeant Moreno," he said, as if she hadn't already become best friends with the sergeant. The Chief's basso profundo was clearly upper-class Mexican, but it was also intertwined with something akin to a Louisiana patois. Odd, and maybe she would find it interesting in some other situation, but this wasn't a social call and there was no offer of a handshake as one does when encountering another police officer, especially since that police officer has gone out of her way to willingly report a suspicious death.

The slight momentarily bothered her, but what she really wanted right now was to unstick her butt from the worn plastic chair she'd been occupying for most of her first day in port and leave for the marina and her boat *Pilgrim*. She had plans to get some deck work done while she was here then haul the boat back to the States, and with a little luck, she'd have a job to go back to. Today, however, was not going well at all. Kept in solitary for six hours and now she was getting the snub by the chief inspector.

She knew better than to initiate small talk; it only compounds the problem for suspects. Suspect? She sat up in her chair, about to open her mouth and ask if she needed an attorney, then reminded herself that she was in a foreign country. Maybe things were done differently here and, resisting the temptation to fold her arms in a defensive posture across her chest, instead calmly folded them onto her lap and did a quick assessment of the chief inspector.

The man in question pointedly ignored her and continued to study the folder in front of him.

Maybe forty, she figured, lifting first one cheek and then the other off the sweaty seat of her chair. Black wavy hair dipped over a high forehead patterned with a load of worry that wasn't any of her business. His skin was olive and the cleft in his square jaw said some Italian had

splashed across his gene pool not long ago. *Not so bad looking if you like the dark Latin type.* Her eyes wandered up to the clock again. *Jeez. Over six hours. Now, if it was just the sergeant, I could give him a quick hip shove, make it out the door and down the hall, through those swinging double doors faster than a jackrabbit...*

Then she noticed the inspector idly appraising her from under long dark lashes. *Is that amusement on his face? The bastard!*

He snapped the folder shut and stared at her as if suspecting her of having bunny feet.

"You alerted the Mexican Navy at seven a.m. this morning, is that correct?"

"Correct," she answered, and straightening her spine on the chair, looked him in the eyes, hoping she sounded like the conservative, upstanding citizen her mother always wanted her to be. "If I'd been in the States, I'd have alerted the Coast Guard. But I understand that mariners here are to call your Navy. So, do I need a lawyer, Chief Inspector?"

"That won't be necessary, Miss Hunter." Then, as if he couldn't help himself, he gave her a quick dazzling smile, causing long dimples to bracket the wide mouth. Wrap it all together and the man was not just incredibly masculine, he was downright attractive. "We're not such a third-world country that we arrest tourists who report finding a dead body. At least," he added dryly, "not without cause."

"Of course. And, as an American police officer," she said, pointing out once again what he already knew, "I'm glad I was able to help. So, are we done here?"

A twitch, or was it a smirk, tugged at the corner of his wide mouth. But instead of answering, he went back to studying the pages in the thick folder while the clock on the wall slugged out another five minutes.

She clenched her hands together and stared at the clock, then rubbed her tongue over her teeth, trying for some moisture.

"Have you been offered anything cold to drink?"

She jumped at the sound of his voice. Was he *trying* to make her look guilty?

Ignoring the crumpled paper cups littering the table, he snapped fingers at his sergeant and said, "A couple of cold sodas, *por favor?*"

Turning back to Katy, he added, "Regular Coke okay with you? We don't have diet."

Katy sighed. Standard police tactics. "What do you want from me, Inspector? I've told your sergeant everything I know. But now that I've been here for six—oops, make that six hours and fifteen minutes, I'm sure by now you know more than I do. So, did she fall off some party boat or what?"

He gave her a noncommittal stare. His eyes, she noticed, were the color of burnt sugar and there was some kind of golden ring around the edge. Wolfish eyes combined with that low, threatening voice and she would've considered him a very sexy package—except for the wedding band on his left hand. She did like her bad boys, just not *married* bad boys.

"Sure, a cold Coke would be nice, thank you."

Peering at her over imaginary reading glasses he said, "You have a husband, a friend, anyone who can account for your whereabouts?"

She knuckled her tired eyes. "Inspector, if that fat file says anything about me, you already know that I'm on sabbatical from the San Francisco PD, I'm single, I live in a studio apartment in Columbus Street. There are ten, maybe twelve people who know where I was this morning at seven a.m. because I checked in with them after I called your Navy." Then she added with a tilt of a smile, "But, whatever you do, please don't call my mother."

He answered her smile with one of his own, and this time it appeared genuine. "As a dutiful son with a constantly worried mother, I can assure you we will not call your mother."

Sergeant Moreno backed into the room with two cold cans in his hand. He set the cans down on the table, and giving her a timid glance, bent to whisper in his boss's ear.

The chief inspector blinked. Then suddenly purposeful, he scraped back his chair and stood. "Señorita Hunter, we will detain you no longer. In the course of your brief stay here in Ensenada, I hope you will not hold this unfortunate incidence against us. Please enjoy the rest of your vacation and thank you for your cooperation." He nodded once to his sergeant and turned to leave. When he saw that Katy wasn't standing, the black brows went up a notch.

"So, nothing to share, Inspector? Like, was she murdered?" Katy asked in a voice that quavered from the pent-up emotion of the last six and a half hours.

He looked down his long Roman nose at her as if he'd just encountered something smelly. And she probably was, too. Her last shower being now almost twenty hours ago.

"I can only give you the standard reply; I am not at liberty to divulge anything at this time. And, as they say in Mexico, *Que le vaya bien*. It means—"

"I know what it means, Chief Inspector. As for having a good trip, I think that boat already sailed."

She waved a floppy hand to indicate she had no intention of explaining American slang to him and stood up. And, with as much dignity as she could muster, marched past him out the door and down the hall, trailing the sergeant behind her. At the lobby, she turned to the sergeant. "Will you call me a cab, please?"

"Oh, that is not necessary, señorita. I will personally drive you to the marina."

Baja Naval was expecting her. It was a good working marina and she was looking forward to the respite. Scrub the boat, get the teak work done and leave Mexico and its troublesome problems behind. She nodded thankfully to the sergeant. She could almost taste the late afternoon sun, the fragrance of tacos frying in local stalls. Oh, and there was the fish market. Maybe she could persuade the sergeant to stop long enough for her to pick up some fresh fish, or better yet, some fish tacos. Her stomach rumbled at the thought.

She was still thinking about those wonderful fried fish tacos as the double doors of the police station slammed open with such force that the ceiling fan stuttered in its lazy rotation. Two policemen marched in, dragging a listless prisoner between them.

A thick, sun-bleached blond head of hair flopped over half-closed eyes, the buttonholes missing their mark on a faded Hawaiian shirt.

Katy judged him another drunk American giving Mexicans cause to believe everything they've heard about privileged Yanks with their big wallets and bad manners.

He was a good foot taller than the two Mexican officers, but with his hands manacled behind his back, it was obvious that he wasn't going to give them any trouble. But before Katy could dodge around him for the exit, he raised his head and a startling pair of aquamarine eyes met hers.

He straightened his back, wincing at the angle of his cuffed wrists. "What the... Whisper?"

Suddenly, the sound of the ceiling fan was terribly loud. Blood pounded in her ears, her mouth went dry, her palms were damp and her feet were nailed to the floor. In a knee-jerk reaction, she hissed, "Don't call me that!"

Then realizing her mistake she backed up and bumped into Inspector Vignaroli.

His brief nod to his sergeant indicated there would be a detour in the prisoner's march for the holding cells and Katy's freedom.

Chapter Three:

Chief Inspector Raul Vignaroli herded them into the same tiny interrogation room where she again flopped down into the nearest plastic chair, leaving the blond American man to stand awkwardly next to her.

The inspector looked from Katy, who preferred to stare at the clock rather than meet his eye, then to the prisoner, noting the alcohol-blurred expression, the fresh cut above his left eye and the fading bruise along his neck. Raul Vignaroli knew that in other circumstances the blond man would be pushing back his floppy surfer's hair, re-buttoning his shirt, shoring up his image, if not for the chief inspector, then certainly for the attractive young woman. He looked from one to the other. About the same age and there was an air about the two of them, something the inspector could almost smell. Ah yes, that was it—money. The man may have had it at one time, but obviously had lost it. A refugee from some kind of trouble in the States? He would have to look into it. Ensenada was rife with Americans in one kind of trouble or another. The woman—vacation, she said. A police detective from San Francisco, yet he had the feeling there would be more to her than what was written in his sergeant's report. Under other circumstances... well, it was better not to go there.

Raul was glad he'd listened to his instincts and told his men to wait and bring in the drunk American as the young policewoman was about to leave. This should be interesting and perhaps useful.

The chief inspector, with satisfied amusement in his voice, asked, "Ah, then you know each other?"

The man, squirming at the cuffs on his wrists, answered for her. "Of course she does. She can vouch for me."

Her cheeks went a deeper shade of pink and she looked to be trying to swallow something disgusting. Then, as if leaping at an unbidden thought, she blurted, "Is he being arrested for the girl's murder?"

"Murder! Chris' sake, Whisper, I traded a twelve pack of beer for those oysters. How was I to know those kids filched 'em from the college agri-pond?"

The inspector's expression of amusement deepened to that of a shark about to bite. "Excuse me for a minute?"

When he left, Katy looked over at the aging blond surfer and sighed. "There's no two-way mirror in here, but they could have a microphone somewhere. Oh, what the hell, this day is already screwed. So, Gabe, what happened to Canada?"

"Too cold. What happened to San Francisco?"

"I think it's safe to say we both picked the wrong border. And to think, only moments ago I was thinking about bunny feet and here I am again with the biggest bunny of them all."

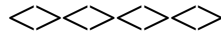
"It was no picnic, I can tell you that much. I hitched so many hay and animal trucks just to get this far I can still smell goat."

"Oh my God! Don't tell me you're thinking of sneaking back across the border?" Katy reached over and punched him on the shoulder. "All you had to do was keep two promises and

now you're reneging on both? You dumb shit—you're going to ruin my life, yet!" She began to pummel him in earnest.

They were interrupted by the shark-like grin of the chief inspector as he and his sergeant stepped back into the room. The sergeant left, but the inspector stood where he was. With a flickering light now dancing in his eyes he said, "Now, who wants to go first?"

End of excerpt



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