

CHAPTER 1

The topmost of the Penobscot Bay lighthouse was barely visible, the morning sun reflecting off its watchful eye. I cranked out the sails and picked up a paltry breeze, doing precisely the opposite of what I'd intended, heading the boat farther out into the vast Atlantic. I snatched up the book on sailing I'd bought, *Sailing for Dummies*, and skimmed the table of contents for "How the hell to get back to shore." But evidently my copy was missing that chapter.

There was an enlightening page about fetching and after reading it twice, I determined I would have been better-off going with the *Sailing for Idiots* line. The only fetching in my future would be for a ride back to land.

I slipped into the captain's chair, a red nylon lawn chair, and found a section more up my alley entitled, "Getting Your Feet Wet." There were a series of sketches with attached labels and after careful debate, the Michelob bottle and I decided we had ourselves a schooner. According to the book: *The schooner is a traditional rig with two or more masts, the front mast (foremost) being shorter than the main mast.*

I peered up to check if the front mast, *foremost*, was indeed shorter than the main mast, but I didn't know which end of the boat was the front, thus, the boat audit was a complete failure. Why couldn't everything on the boat have labels

on it like in the book? I made a mental note to buy some sticky notes on the way home.

The sun had recently escaped the ocean's horizon and there were a few far-off fishing boats. I pulled the binoculars up from around my neck and focused them in on the nearest ship. The ship was charcoal for the most part, close to a hundred feet long, and came fully loaded with three tattered men. The rest of the boats were too far away to make out their names and I couldn't help wondering if one of them was *The Maine Catch*. I still owed the crew a round of beers for saving my ass. That, however, was a completely different yarn altogether.

Anyhow, I set the binoculars down, took a long swig of beer, leaving an inch reserve in the darkly tinted brown bottle, and picked up the second piece of reading material I'd brought along. It was a hardback novel entitled, *Eight in October*. The much anticipated book was a true-crime thriller based on a string of murders that occurred throughout Maine in October of the past year.

I turned the book over in my hands. The majority of the cover was monopolized by one of Maine's eminent firs, each of the tree's leaves visually changing from emerald green, to saffron yellow, and finally cranberry red, giving off the impression of an iridescent autumn in overdrive. From each of the leaves fell a droplet of blood, forging a puddle at the base of the tree.

I peeled opened the front cover gingerly, as if the words might fall out if I hastened. I found the dedication page and regarded the dedication: To the eight women who lost their lives.

I didn't read the names. I didn't have to. I knew them all by heart.

I clapped the book shut and had the fleeting thought to chuck *Eight in October* into the pickled abyss. The book belonged beneath the sediment at the ocean's floor. The last thing this community needed was a fifteen-ounce relic from a fifteen-day nightmare. I was pissed off at the author, some swine named Alex Tooms, who had decided to turn a buck at the mercy of these eight women. I was curious as to this Tooms' countenance, but it seems he didn't have the fiber to

put his picture on the book jacket. This decision may have been impacted by the letter I sent him detailing a collection of ways I planned to end his life should I ever recognize him in public. If my letter had swayed his decision, the point was moot; the prick had a book signing coming up on October 1st, or more notably, the anniversary of the first woman's murder.

What a classy guy. I hope someone writes a book about how he was beaten to death, with his own book, at his own book signing. I'd buy it.

I put the book down. Baby steps.

At this rate I'd get through the book in a touch under a decade. I grabbed another beer from the cooler and decided while I was there I might as well grab two. Did I mention the cooler came with the chair and is by default, attached to the chair? Well it is.

Anyways, I knocked back the two beers and chased them down with egg salad. My stomach content and the alcohol finding its way into my bloodstream, I decided to take another crack at the book. It was almost noon and I was behind on my three-word-a-minute quota. I found the first page and began reading:

Autumn in Maine is like nowhere else. The leaves fall from the trees a harvest gold and trickle to the ground a deep cherry. The lobster catch is at its peak, fisherman's cages teeming with the vermilion crustaceans. The sun wakes a nation, crawling across the Atlantic a refulgent auburn. Last October, Maine was blanketed in red. Not by the leaves, not by the lobsters, not by the sunrise, but by the blood of eight young women. Truly, last autumn in Maine was like nowhere else.

I peeled the label off the beer bottle, smoothing it out like a crisp dollar bill, and thought about the last sentence, *Truly, last autumn in Maine was like nowhere else.*

I had to credit Mr. Tooms, he may lack all levels of morality, but his writing did capture the solemnity of the period. It was around this time last year when the first woman was found. I'd been living in Philly at the time and the murder had earned a small write-up on page eighteen of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. I remember this distinctly because it was the first time anything from Maine made the paper.

Maine's papers were a different story. In a state with the lowest crime rate in the country, finding a woman in thirty pieces is front page news. One of the lesser papers, the *Waterville Tribune*, ran an article written by, none other than, investigative journalist Alex Tooms. The paper was on the verge of bankruptcy and had nothing to lose by running Tooms' vivid and grotesquely accurate accounts of the murders. The newspaper sold more copies in October than it had the entire nine months prior.

After the massacre ended—or as I like to say, *Went on medical leave*—this Tooms character had publishers throwing themselves at him, as to say, gold bars. The book already climbed to number five on the *New York Times* best-seller's list and nearly every person I'd talked to had either read it, was in the process of reading it, or was reading it for the second time. My sister even said it wasn't half bad. I'd been calling her Judas all week.

I was interested in how Tooms described the body of the first victim and after skimming five pages I found what I was looking for:

Called "The County" by most New Englanders, Aroostook covers 6,453 square miles and grows more potatoes than any other county in the United States. Sitting amidst two of these square miles was a small, functionally spartan, farmhouse. By noon on October 2nd, the once tame farmhouse had been transformed into the largest crime scene in Maine's 350 years of existence.

Bangor Chief Medical Examiner, Dr. Caitlin Dodds, described the scene simply as, "Sickening. Just sickening. It was truly Johnny Appleseed meets Jack the Ripper."

The victim's body was scattered throughout a half acre radius, severed into more than thirty definitive pieces. The most disheartening revelation came when the victim's abdomen was unearthed. The blonde haired, blue-eyed, medical examiner said, "It was immediately evident the victim was pregnant, except the baby, or fetus, was absent."

Less than thirty feet away, in a pile of ruin, rendered into ten unrecognizable pieces, was the victim's unborn child.

I tossed the book against the railing of the boat and it came to rest in teepee-like fashion. This was the explicit reason I didn't want to read the book in the first place. Now I had the image of a baby who'd been thrown in a blender, which coincidentally, is precisely how Alex Tooms initially described the remains on the front page of the *Waterville Tribune*.

I grabbed another sandwich, bologna and cheese, and concentrated on a more provocative image, specifically, Dr. Caitlin Dodds. I think there was an unwritten rule if you were a woman in law enforcement, you had to be unattractive, stiff, and named Mel. Dr. Caitlin Dodds was the exception to this rule—she was a stunner.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep with the good doctor on my mind.

CHAPTER 2

When I opened my eyes, I was blinded by the sun directly overhead. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the daystar seemed to take up half the seamless cerulean. We were in the midst of one of Maine's renowned Indian summers and the temperature tottered within fifteen degrees of a proximal seventy-ish.

I took a deep breath of the crisp ocean air, which is reminiscent of eating a saltine between gasps on an oxygen tank, and gazed across Mother Atlantic. There wasn't much for waves on her this morning and it was hard to believe I was bobbing along in the second largest body of water on the planet. An osprey flew nearby and did his dive-bomb-fish-retrieval thing, and I couldn't help feeling sympathy pains for the little silver guy in the osprey's beak. One second he's swimming downstream to visit his brother, the next second he's superman, only to be superdead. Poor little fella.

I kicked off my khaki shorts, boxer briefs, and docksiders, then checked to see if there were any other boats in the vicinity before walking the plank *él* Natural. The Atlantic was freezing, but a good freezing, the kind you get in water above fifty degrees, but below fifty one. If you want to get technical, I wasn't in the Atlantic per se; I was in the Penobscot Bay, which forty miles east invariably becomes the Atlantic Ocean.

Anyhow, the bay retained its summer heat a wee bit longer than say the English Channel, and I was frigid not freezing. I trod water and watched the predominantly white hull of *The Backstem* bob up and down with the current.

If you're wondering about the name, my sister, Lacy, aptly named the boat after her pug Baxter. Alas, *The Backstem* was moving, but it was coming towards me, so no worries, right? Wrong. My entire body had turned into one comprehensive cramp. Now this could have been rooted in my not waiting a half hour after eating. Perhaps the five beers I'd guzzled in the last hour had something to do with it. There's also a slim chance it was related to the two chunks of lead that had gone zipping through my flesh nearly a year ago. Most likely it was a combination of all three.

I turned over on my back and went into the dead man's float, praying I wouldn't substantiate the term's connotation. Some form of sea life brushed my side and immediately I was more frightened of my pecker becoming some fish's lunch than drowning at sea.

Once safely back on the boat, I couldn't help but notice if something had eaten Paddington, it would still be hungry.

Anyhow, the dusty white sands of the shoreline were visible for the first time, but I still had three hours or so until I washed up. I plucked *Eight in October* off the boat deck and sank into the Captain's chair.

The third woman's murder especially interested me and I found what I was looking for on Page 59:

When the body of Amber Osgood was found on the afternoon of October 5th, the buck was passed from the Bangor Police Department to the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI sent a task force to Maine to head up the investigation. The task force comprised of agents Todd Gregory and Wade Gleason, from the FBI Violent Crime Unit, and FBI consultant, Thomas Prescott.

Todd Gregory, 27, was a third-year man at the FBI and regarded as the top young agent in his field. Gregory was short, strikingly handsome, with hazel eyes, dark brown hair, and olive skin.

Wade Gleason, 47, had been a staple in the FBI community for

more than twenty years. Gleason had worked more than two hundred serial homicide cases and was considered worldwide to be the best in the business. The soft-spoken African-American was tall, athletically built, and known simply as, "Gleason," by peers.

Rounding out the team was FBI consultant, Thomas Prescott. Prescott, 33, a "retired" homicide detective, was ruggedly handsome with unruly brown hair, slate blue-gray eyes, and renowned for his irascible wit, erratic behavior, and confrontational style.

I threw the book over the side of the boat. Erratic behavior, my ass. Who the fuck did this jerk think he was? First things first, I was *handsome*, not ruggedly handsome. And second, my confrontational style stemmed from the fact I was working with three retards. All right, two retards. Wade Gleason was one smart cookie and he'd kick the shit out of his own mother if she overcooked his steak. But Todd Gregory and Caitlin Dodds were about as useful as a twelve dollar bill.

As for that little pipsqueak Gregory, he was so pretty most of the male cops I knew had a thing for him, and not just the gay ones. I'd been flipping through *People* magazine at the supermarket in June or July when I came across his pretty little face in their *50 Most Beautiful People* issue. Evidently, it violates Maine state law to light a magazine on fire in a public place because I was arrested and forced to pay a small fine.

I peered over the edge of the boat, but *Eight in October* was nowhere to be found. Rats. Now I would have to spend another twenty-seven dollars on a tasteless book I'd find no solace in reading.

I grabbed a beer from the cooler and sucked down all twelve ounces, then lying back I let my mind wander to the day I first met the task force.

CHAPTER 3

I opened the door to the large Philadelphia apartment to the distinct ring of my cell phone. I extracted my cell from under the middle, olive drab, sofa cushion and flipped it open, “Prescott.”

“Is this Detective Prescott?” Came a harsh deluge.

“That’s *ex*-detective Prescott.” At least according to the three documents I had to sign, initial, and lick.

The voice softened a bit. “Right. This is Charles Mangrove. I got your number from Dwight Stully.”

Dwight Stully had been my chief at the Seattle Police Department and was still my main contact with the world of law enforcement. The name Mangrove sounded familiar and I hoped I was talking to the long-lost, twice-removed, third-cousin, of the Mangrove I suspected. “Any relation to the Charles Mangrove who happens to be Deputy Director of the FBI?”

“One in the same. One in the same.”

Oh, boy.

Charles continued, “Listen, I’m calling in regards to these killings up in Maine. Are you familiar with them?”

I only knew of two killings, but from my experience, *them*, was an overtone for three or more. If I were smart, I would have hung up the phone. But I wasn't smart. Cunning, yes. Deft, sure. Competent, probably. But smart, well, the jury was still out on that one. I said, "Sure, the two gals who got hacked to shit. What's this have to do with the FBI?"

"You mean three gals. This morning they found a third. She was killed on an island off the coast of Maine called Campobello. Campobello is Canadian territory."

"So why isn't the Royal Caribbean Mariachi Band taking over?"

"You mean the Royal Canadian Mounted Police?"

I guess Charles took my silence as some sort of nod and persevered, "Actually, it's Interpol's jurisdiction."

I was confused, but I was used to being confused when working with the FBI. "You skipped the part about how it landed in the hands of the Far Below-average Intelligence Agency."

He laughed. "Dwight told me you were a smartass."

Cunningass, get it straight. "Yeah, well it keeps people on their toes, and it keeps me from killing myself. Send old Dwight my regards next time you see him."

"Will do. I'll tell you how the case landed in our lap. Interpol has their hands tied with about fifteen hundred terrorist threats and doesn't give a rat's ass about a brother who hacked up his sister and a couple other girls. They think they're pawning this off on us, but we need the publicity."

The big picture was starting to come into focus and it wasn't a Picasso. "And you're calling me to get my tailor's number?"

"Right. Listen, we want to hire you to augment the investigation. Glease told me a little about you and it seems to fit with what I've heard; you're a prick, but you're a smart fucking prick."

Cunning fucking prick. Say it with me.

I asked Chuck, "Is that who I'll be working with?"

"Yep. You'll be working directly under him."

I didn't like working under anyone, but if I had to, there were worse people to work under than Wade Gleason. "Who else is on the team?"

“Guy named Todd Gregory. Young guy. Graduated number one from Georgetown a couple years ago.”

“Sounds like my bio ten years ago, and look how I turned out.”

He laughed again and said, “You’ll have FBI status and the government will pay you a healthy stipend.”

“First off, I don’t want FBI status. I have a reputation to uphold. And secondly, what exactly is the government’s idea of a healthy stipend?”

“Five hundred dollars a day, plus expenses.”

Five hundred magombas a day. Their balls must be deeper in the meat grinder than I thought. I said, “You can call me an FBI consultant.”

“Deal. You have a fax?”

I rattled off my fax number and Charles said, “I’m sending you the information packet and autopsy reports the Bangor Police Department forwarded me from the first two murders.”

Sure he was. I would get about a fifth of what the Bangor Police Department sent the FBI. The Feds are an odd bunch. They recruit you to help them out, then go to great lengths to ensure you don’t know jack squat. I’d always hated when the suits came in and stripped a case from me and I inquired, “Who had the baton before it was passed to you idiots?”

He laughed again. Wow, three for three. If only my dates went as well. Charles said, “I talked with the Bangor medical examiner, some lady named Dodds. She was understandably upset when she found out we were stripping the case. We could use a feminine eye and her forensic background will be incomparable, so we decided to keep her on as part of the task force. Part of our new image.”

New image, my ass. I cut to the chase, literally. “When does my flight leave?”

It was raining and my doorman, an old black gent named Hale, and I huddled under the apartment building’s long balustrade. Ten minutes later, Hale had successfully hailed me a cab. I can just picture Hale’s reaction to the results of his job aptitude test when they told him his occupational dreams were limited to door-

man or weatherman. Nevertheless, Hale threw my bag in the trunk and wished me a safe trip.

The cabby delivered me to Philadelphia International in less than ten minutes and I rewarded him with a crisp fifty. He seemed quite appreciative and I was wished a safe trip, yet again. The woman at the American Airline's desk asked to see my driver's license, handed me a ticket, and I was wished a safe trip for a third time. I checked my bag for a sign that read, *Going on Unsafe Trip*, but it must have fallen off.

I walked to the terminal and handed my ticket to a computer with light brown hair and a large mainframe. The computer directed me through black curtains to a nicely cushioned window seat. Holy fucking handbaskets, the Federal boys shelled out for first-class. If it wasn't an off day in my rotation, I would have shit my pants.

I'd flown first-class on one other occasion and I remember noticing they kept the best looking flight attendants up here and the gargoyles and gays back in coach. A twenty-something knockout, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes, appeared from thin air and asked if I would enjoy a preflight cocktail.

A preflight cocktail? I never knew such a thing existed. I ordered a whiskey sour and my flight attendant theory placated, I extracted the fax documents from my attaché case.

My drink came and I flirted shamelessly with the stewardess (her name was August but she was born in November, talk about irony), until she broke away to do the preflight announcements. A few minutes later we were in the air and Manhattan was just a postage stamp on a postcard. August jumped on the intercom and informed us we were cruising at an altitude of 31,000 feet. I was going to apprise her I was cruising at 31,000 feet, 8 ½ inches, but I didn't feel like getting sent to coach.

Anyhow, the flight was only about an hour and fifteen minutes and I needed to get cracking if I were going to know my one-fifth backwards and forwards. I read all twenty fax pages and noticed the autopsy photos were mysteriously MIA. I'd been on the case for all of one hour and twelve minutes and the Feds were already flaking out on me. They probably figured sending me first-class would cancel out their lack of geniality. Dickheads.

The gist of the reports was as follows: two women had been raped, beaten, turned into jigsaw puzzles, and their eyes taken as door prizes. The most intriguing nugget was the first victim, Ingrid Grayer, had been pregnant, and the DNA showed the father was the brother, Tristen Grayer. Tristen was the prime suspect, whom of which the *New York Times* had dubbed, “THE MAINEIAC.” There was a small write-up on him, which would have been more poignant had it read, “We have no information at this time.”

The plane landed and I walked out into the Bangor International Jetport corridor, realizing I’d left the fax documents in the seat pocket in front of me. Whoops, looks like someone had their leisure reading for the next flight.

Anyhow, there wasn’t much I could do at this juncture, so I bought a book by Michael Crichton called *Timeline* I’d heard had been made into a bad movie. I found the airport bar, ArrivALE’s & DeBARTures, and retreated to a far corner. Fortunately, the bar’s service was better than the bar’s name, and within ninety seconds I had an Irish coffee in front of me and a club sandwich on the way. I read about fifteen pages of the Crichton novel, which I didn’t understand because I was one of the few people on the planet without a Ph.D. in quantum physics, and polished off the club.

I’d just started over on page one when two guys appeared over my left shoulder. They were both clad in dark suits with black ties and I had the eerie feeling I was on the set of *Men in Black III*.

If I had two words to describe each of the people before me they would be: short & pretty and tall & black. I’d actually worked with tall & black on a couple cases prior to this one, and we hadn’t hated each other, which is a rarity with me. I can be a touch annoying.

I stood up and extended my hand, “How’s it going Glease? Been what, a year and a half?”

Wade Gleason smiled, revealing teeth almost too white, and said, “How can I forget. You lost a hundred dollars to me in a game of one-on-one. My wife wanted to thank you personally for a lovely night on the town. Speaking of which, you and that Jennifer girl ever get hitched?”

“Nope. She left me for a Dalmatian two weeks before the big day.” A lie, but not far off.

It appeared as though Wade had no intention of introducing me to short & pretty and I asked, “Who’s your caddie?”

Wade did a poor job of suppressing a smile and introduced the two of us. Todd Gregory was no taller than five-three and would probably get carded when he tried to vote come this November. I shook Todd’s petite and presumably freshly manicured hand and said, “What’d you do, slip the bouncer a fifty?”

His smile muscles were clearly atrophied, as he made no reaction to my jest and said dryly, “You’re funny, I heard you were funny.”

I looked at Glease and threw him my best You’ve got to be shitting me, is this guy for real look, and said, “You’ve got to be shitting me, is this guy for real?”

The three of us settled into a black Caprice, which are only driven by mobsters and FBI agents, and I was disappointed when the driver said his name was Tim and not Fagioli.

I was trying to get a feel for how much involvement I would have in this case and said, “So let me get this chain of command straight. It goes Director Mangrove, then you.” I pointed at Gleason in the front seat. “Then me.” I pointed to myself. “Then Fagioli.” I pointed at the driver. “Then that guy.” I pointed to a bum sleeping on an airport bench. “Then his babysitter.” I pointed at Gregory to my right.

Gregory didn’t laugh and I was beginning to wonder if he was hearing impaired. Gleason said, “Actually it goes him, then me, then you.”

Gregory stared out the window, letting the implications of the news sink in. It was difficult to talk with my black Armani dress shoes touching my tonsils, but I somehow managed, “You mean to tell me this little shit is Special Agent-in-Charge?”

“It’s part of our new image.”

“I can’t believe this sack is SAC. Glease, you’ve been the Denzel of the suits for twenty years and now they got you working for Michael J. Fox’s little brother. How in the hell are you okay with that?”

Gregory turned his gaze from the window and said, “If Wade is Denzel Wash-

ington and I'm Michael J. Fox. Then who exactly does that make you?"

I wanted to say, "I'm Brad Pitt you fucking idiot," but I wasn't that big of a badass, so I said, "I'm Stephen Baldwin."

Gleason couldn't contain himself and erupted in laughter. I added to my buddy Todd, "And I said you were Michael J. Fox's little brother, not Michael J. Fox."

I spent the next hour and twenty minutes ogling the continuous landscape called Maine. Red firs, yellow maples, green spruces, orange—you name it. It made every snapshot my eyes had taken in the past seem black and white. When God painted the world, Maine would be the area where he dabbed his brush to rid the excess paint. Layers of greens, swimming with yellows, sleeping on reds, hiding from oranges.

Another thing I noticed was as you move north along the coast, it was as if you were traveling into the past, America circa 1960. (It appears the state of Maine was a couple decades behind its 49 counterparts, well 47, I imagine the Dakotas are much the same.) Electrical cables ran for miles along the country highway and I had the quiet feeling the car was racing the current, and possibly time.

We stopped at what appeared to be a station of sorts and after reflecting back on my conversation with Director Mangrove, "Campobello is Canadian territory," I deduced it was a border crossing.

See that, one part cocky bastard, two parts astute detective.

I opened the car door and realized how darkly tinted the windows had been. The sky was not overcast, but a perfect cobalt blue. Gleason grabbed his attaché case from the trunk and the two of us made our way to the small group congregating near a sign reading, "Roosevelt Bridge."

There were three people in the group. A short, fat, balding man who'd obviously gotten the short end of the stick. Todd Gregory, who had a stick up his ass. And a blonde bombshell, who looked in desperate need of a stick.

Gleason and I nudged our way into the circle and it turned out the bald man was not George Costanza, but a Canadian mountie named Francis. Francis was wearing a neatly pressed red suit a couple sizes too small and the three hairs left

on his scalp had somehow formed themselves into a cowlick. We shook hands and he didn't say, "Eh," or "Hoser," and I was skeptical if he was really Canadian.

The blond bombshell was more like a blond nuclear bombshell. She was gorgeous, her eyes the same cobalt blue as the sky, set in a soft, angelic face. She had on a white v-neck blouse, a tan blazer, a matching knee length skirt, and black stilettos. She looked like she'd just stepped off Wall Street and I was shocked to learn she was the Fed's contact at the Bangor Police Department. The delectable Dr. Caitlin Dodds.

We were all introduced and I was hoping Dr. Caitlin was thinking, Dr. Caitlin Prescott, not bad, not bad at all, but she looked more like the type to make me adopt her last name.

There wasn't much for small talk and after each of us signed a form, we broke huddle and headed back to the cars. I hesitated for a couple seconds, gazing across the Atlantic trying to make out where the thin bridge ended and this so-called island began. There was an ulterior motive for my hesitation, which paid off when I fell into stride behind the good doctor. To say the view was spectacular would be an understatement; her professional skirt unable to shroud the well-maintained, grade-A caboose, housed beneath the fabric.

Thomas Dodds, I could deal with that.

No one was allowed at the crime scene until the Feds arrived, which is a terribly stupid policy and everyone was pissed off. Well except the Feds. And me. And Francis, the quasi-Canadian mountie, didn't seem all that upset. So, I guess that left Caitlin. Dr. Caitlin Dodds was pissed off.

I made a point to get in the same car as Dr. Dodds who greeted me with a grunt when I had her slide over in the backseat. No one else filed in, and within ten seconds it was clear why; Dr. Caitlin Dodds was a monstrous bitch.

The car started onto the bridge and after staring at me for a couple awkward seconds, the doctress barked, "What? Your suit get lost at the cleaners?"

I've always had the uncanny ability to give off the impression I'm lying whenever I'm telling the truth, and vice versa, so I said, "I'm not FBI."

“Yeah right, you’re not FBI like I’m not on my fricking period.” She rummaged through her purse and extracted what I can only assume was a tampon.

I attempted to roll out of the car and plunge myself into the Atlantic, but my door wouldn’t open. Blasted federal perks. I turned around and saw what I’d thought was a tampon was in actuality a pack of Mentos. Now, there would be good commercial—The Freshmaker.

Anyhow, after popping a Mentos—she neglected to offer me one—Dr. Dodds unbuttoned her blazer and revealed she’d been concealing three deadly weapons. While all were respective thirty-eight’s and all were equally special, only one was a Smith & Wesson.

I made my way up the eighteen inches to her eyes and she said, “Sorry, I’ll try to de-bitch. I’m just a little wound up right now. I thought these killings were over, then this morning I get word they found another woman. Then to top it off, they tell me I’m not allowed to do anything because she was found in Canada and the case was being turned over to you imbeciles.”

I liked this girl, she hated the Feds almost as much as I did. I cocked my head at the car speeding alongside ours and said, “You mean those imbeciles.”

Caitlin sat quietly, no doubt trying to get a read on the asshole, with the lavender shirt and tan tweed jacket sitting beside her. Finally she asked, “What are you?”

I repositioned myself on the black leather, “I’m the government’s idea of a safety net.”

“Safety net? Please explain.”

“If I break this case my name is never mentioned and the FBI gets another slot on the bedpost. However, if the case breaks them, my name shows up all over the place and I get slaughtered on the bedpost.”

She began buttoning her blazer and said, “It’s notch on the bedpost, not slot on the bedpost. Maybe you would have gotten it right if you hadn’t been using my tits as a teleprompter.”

I knew I’d stared at them one second too long. “Sorry, won’t happen again. But, you have to admit, it’s one hell of a teleprompter.”

She tried to look offended but it’s hard when the sides of your mouth are turned up in a grin. I guess she thought it was in her best interest to change the

subject and said, “Why’d you agree to come up here if you knew this in the first place?”

Making a concerned effort not to let my eyes drift to her boobies, I said, “I could care less if my they pin all the blame on me. Hell, I’d take the blame for the JFK assassination if it’d keep these FBI types from bringing it up after one Sex on the Beach. I’m here for one reason, and one reason only—I kill killers.”

I think the last three words hit deep because she turned her gaze to the window. A suffering thirty seconds passed, each rivet in the bridge rumbling louder than the last, when Caitlin turned and said, “Let me get this straight. You had drinks with an FBI guy and he ordered a Sex on the Beach. What a bunch of fricking pansies.”

Be still my heart.