

MILLS & BOON



Vintage INTRIGUE

Relentless

JAN HAMBRIGHT

Jan Hambright

Relentless

Аннотация

HE'D DO WHATEVER IT TOOK TO FIND THE KILLER Finding the carjacker who'd killed his wife and child was ex-homicide cop Mick Jacoby's number one priority. Rumor had it a member of the Robear family was involved, but for five years all leads had gone nowhere. Until a routine auto-theft investigation led Mick to gorgeous Kate Robear. A repo agent fleeing her family's dark legacy, Kate's only crime was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the heart-stealing cop in the leather jacket refused to let her out of his sight...especially when the attempts on Kate's life began. Now, teamed up with Mick to stop a relentless killer, Kate was facing a risk she hadn't reckoned on: falling passionately, hopelessly in love.

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“You’re hurt. I’m going to have a look, but if you so much as touch me...”

He blinked and Kate’s hand trembled as she started to push his jacket aside and pull his T-shirt out of his waistband. Under his clothing, he was muscular, taut and seething. She sucked in a breath.

A trail of blood crisscrossed his chest. “You must have taken some buckshot when you were in the trunk.” She looked into his face for confirmation.

Again he blinked.

“It looks bad.” She still hadn’t found the source of the blood trail. Pushing his shirt higher, she brushed his bare skin with her fingertips and he groaned.

A wave of warmth burst inside of her and rushed to her cheeks. She let out a labored breath and stared at the spot just above his heart, marring his perfect chest.

“I’m dialing 911.” She stood up, rifling through the stuff on the table for her phone. She reached for it at the same time his hand wrapped around her ankle, pleading for her to stop.

Hot...relentless...inescapable.

Dear Harlequin Intrigue Reader,

Summer’s winding down, but Harlequin Intrigue is as hot as ever with six spine-tingling reads for you this month!

* Our new **BIG SKY BOUNTY HUNTERS** promotion debuts with Amanda Stevens's *Going to Extremes*. In the coming months, look for more titles from Jessica Andersen, Cassie Miles and Julie Miller.

* We have some great miniseries for you. Rita Herron is back with *Mysterious Circumstances*, the latest in her **NIGHTHAWK ISLAND** series. Mallory Kane's *Seeking Asylum* is the third book in her **ULTIMATE AGENTS** series. And Sylvie Kurtz has another tale in the **THE SEEKERS** series—*Eye of a Hunter*.

* No month would be complete without a chilling gothic romance. This month's **ECLIPSE** title is Debra Webb's *Urban Sensation*.

* Jan Hambright, a fabulous new author, makes her debut with *Relentless*. Sparks fly when a feisty repo agent repossesses a BMW with an ex-homicide detective in the trunk!

Don't miss a single book this month and every month!

Sincerely,

Denise O'Sullivan

Senior Editor

Harlequin Intrigue

Relentless

Jan Hambright



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan Hambright penned her first novel at seventeen, but claims it was pure rubbish. However, it did open the door on her love for storytelling. Born in Idaho, she resides there with her husband, three of their five children, a three-legged watchdog and a spoiled horse named Texas, who always has time to listen to her next story idea while they gallop along.

Jan can be reached at P.O. Box 2537, McCall, Idaho 83638.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mick Jacoby—A relentless ex-homicide cop, who now works the auto theft division hunting for a hit-and-run killer, rumored to be a car thief in the Robear family.

Kate Robear—An ex-car thief trying to get her life together and live down her family's reputation by working as a legitimate repo agent, or so she thinks.

Cody Talbot—Kate's four-year-old son.

Otis Whittley—An unfortunate murder victim who knew too much and used the information as blackmail.

David Copeland—Kate's mysterious boss, who's implicated in the Whittley murder.

Dylan Talbot—A man from Kate's past, who holds her responsible for his brother's accident.

Jake Talbot—Dylan's little brother and Cody's father. A man Kate once loved and feels responsible for putting in a wheelchair.

Bret Byer—Mick's ex-partner from Homicide. Unfortunately they were in love with the same woman at one time and he still carries a grudge.

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Chapter One

The fat cigar pinched between his gloved fingers glowed orange as he puffed it and stared into the night. The backdrop of the bayou made him feel invisible.

He exhaled his last drag and sucked in a breath of mossy air. The eerie hum of the swamp's carnivorous inhabitants droned in his eardrums. Here in the bayou the cycle of life played out in deadly turnabout. It was his kind of game.

Tearing the soggy end off of the butt, he shoved it into his shirt pocket and flicked the half-finished smoke into the nearby water. It hissed as it extinguished in the brackish muck near the boat he'd pulled ashore. He flexed his hands into fists and felt the leather tighten across his knuckles.

She would be here soon. He'd seen the glow of car lights flicker through the trees on the road to the north. His nerves pulled taut with excitement, anticipation. Like a drug it chased through his body bringing him to arousal.

Beautiful, predictable Kate. He'd chosen well. Caution coiled around his thoughts and constricted his ego. She was a down payment on a bigger prize.

The crush of gravel warned of her approach. He melted into the cocoon of foliage around him, picking up the trail of her movements in the shadows.

KATE ROBEAR COVERED the last ten feet of the road and

ducked behind a tree. She leaned against the moss-tangled trunk and peered at the house across the narrow strip of real estate.

A whisper of breeze, heavy with humidity, licked her hair and chased a shiver through her body. Nothing like a late night in a Louisiana bayou to make her skin crawl.

Digging in her backpack, she pulled out her notepad and penlight to study the information her boss had given her on tonight's repo job. Silver BMW 540i, owner of record Otis Whittley. She checked the address scribbled on her pad. It matched the string of black house numbers tacked on the wall next to the front door, where a naked bulb dangled from a couple of bare wires.

The house, if she could call it that, was little more than a shack. Its once-white coat of paint had long ago melted in the Saint Charles Parish humidity, leaving only flakes as a testament. There wasn't anything wonderful about its location, either. Bayou Gauche. The end of the universe.

She released the button on the light, drew in a breath and tried to avoid thinking about what slithered behind her in the stagnant water. She'd never been afraid of the dark, but bayou dark had teeth.

Half-light radiated from the lightbulb and pierced the shadows around the house. Massive oaks dressed in long tresses of Spanish moss swayed in the breeze, mimicking the rhythm of a dancer.

Scanning the dappled landscape, she suppressed her

apprehension. She was being paranoid, letting her over-active imagination scare her, but the sooner she got out of here the better she'd feel. Besides, the driveway was empty. She couldn't take what wasn't there.

Frustrated, she shoved her notepad and light into her pocket. Her ride out of this hole was a cell phone call away. Maybe she should abandon her hopes of snagging the car tonight and come back tomorrow.

Kate dismissed the thought and tried to focus. The idea of standing in the swamp all night scrutinizing every shadow wasn't her idea of fun, but hard-to-recover assets were her specialty. There was a five-thousand-dollar bonus for the recovery of the car and she needed it, yesterday.

From somewhere in the bayou the low tone of a car engine hummed to her. Could it be the Beamer? Hope churned her insides. She closed her eyes, listening for the change in the motor's rpms as it slowed for the corners and powered up in the straightaway. It was a BMW. She'd know the sound of its performance 290 horsepower V-8 anywhere and it was coming straight to her.

Adrenaline surged in her veins. She edged around the broad tree trunk as the car's headlights swept her position. She was here for one thing and it was about to stop less than fifty feet away. It was her lucky night.

Her pulse quickened, sweat formed on her palms, it was a rush she'd come to need.

The engine rumbled, then raced as the driver gunned the motor a couple of times and shut off the engine.

She listened for the horn toot of the alarm. Nothing. The lack of a locked door would give her plenty of time to get into the car, start it and drive away.

Otis's footfalls in the gravel were somewhere between a shuffle and a stumble. He garbled the lyrics to "Show Me the Way to Go Home."

The catchy notes of his boozing song amused her. He was drunk. That explained the time. She'd almost feel guilty leaving the poor guy out here in this creepy place with no transportation. Almost.

The creak of ancient wooden stairs and the slap of the screen door were her signal.

She peered out from behind the tree. A single light came on inside the house. Shining through a sheer curtain in what appeared to be a living room. Five minutes and the BMW 540i was as good as gone.

The illuminated hands on her watch pointed to 2:00 a.m. Picking up her backpack from the base of the tree, she dusted the bottom for crawly hitchhikers and slipped it onto her shoulder. The weight of the air had gone two-ton, loaded with rain. There was a storm coming.

As if tapped into her time schedule, the light went out in the front room and came on at the side of the house. The bathroom she guessed. With his pants down, she doubted Otis could beat

it out the front door in time to catch her.

She slipped from behind the tree, edging toward the car. Like a soldier on a mission, she focused on the automobile. Focus, move, attack, drive. Her method had never failed.

Pausing next to the car, she pulled the dealer's key out of her pants pocket. Repoing a car with the key seemed too easy. She hesitated and looked around, her senses on full alert. The acrid smell of cigar smoke hung in the air. Maybe Otis liked them along with whatever it was he'd had to drink tonight.

She opened the car door.

The shrill scream of the horn blasted.

"Dang!" An auxiliary alarm? She jumped in, shoved the key in the ignition and turned it over. The hot engine roared to life. She pulled the gearshift into reverse and tromped on the gas pedal. The headlights came on, the auto locks clicked. The car shot out onto the road in a cloud of dust.

Kate jammed the brake and put the car in drive.

Pop. The screen door splintered against the outside wall of the house.

Her heart jumped in her chest. Otis was loose. Fighting panic, she stomped on the gas. The tires spun, trying to grab the road. "Come on!"

The spinout sent a spray of dirt and gravel out behind her. The tires bit. The car launched forward. She glanced in the rearview mirror as Otis stumbled through the dust.

He raised a long dark object.

Shotgun! Her heart slammed against her ribs. She leaned forward, tucked her head and pushed the accelerator to the floor.

The blast bit through her concentration. Simultaneously, the rear window shattered.

She jerked. Lead tore through metal and raked over her nerves. She straightened and slammed on the brakes. The car fishtailed, she countersteered, stayed on the pedal, feathered the brakes and kept the car on the road.

Cranking the steering wheel hard to the right, she maneuvered the sharp turn at the end of the road and jetted toward the main highway.

A sob formed in her throat, but she reasoned it away. The rear window of the Beamer was gone, but there wasn't a scratch on her.

Should she call the police? Otis Whittley didn't have any right to shoot at her. She was just doing her job.

Kate geared the car down and braked at the stop sign. Highway 306 was in front of her, Otis Whittley was behind her. She took a right and headed for the storage unit she'd rented in Paradise, seven miles away.

The sleek car devoured the distance and she was relieved when she pulled up next to the storage unit code pad. She punched in the numbers and waited for the wrought iron gate to open.

If Otis had transportation, she was sure he'd have been right behind her. A couple of people had chased her, but shooting was a first. Other drivers could be outrun, bullets were another story.

Maybe she should reconsider her current profession.

A shudder built in her insides, its ripple effect forcing gooseflesh up her arms. It had to be because of the nip of April air that breezed through the missing window. She checked her rearview mirror. The red reflection of her brake lights shone behind her in the darkness, but the trunk lid was higher than it should be. A pellet must have damaged the lock.

The gate swung open and she drove the car to the back of the complex where she'd left a double garage-size unit open. She pulled the car in and killed the engine. The auto locks snapped. She climbed out of the car and flipped on the switch to a single fluorescent overhead.

A shower sounded good. Scrubbing the swamp off her skin was going to be priority one, she decided, checking her watch. Two-thirty a.m. Not bad for a night's work. The paperwork could wait for tomorrow, but she wanted to have a look at the damage caused by the shotgun blast.

Kate rounded the left rear quarter panel.

The notes of a scream raced up her throat, but they came out as a whimper. Caught between reality and disbelief, she watched the buckshot-peppered trunk open without a sound.

"Move and you're dead." A man climbed out of the compartment and rose to six feet of lethal flesh and bone.

Time stopped. She stared at the gun in his hand, then back at his face.

"Who are you?" he asked above the buzz of the fluorescent.

She struggled for words and took a step back, gauging the distance between herself, the man and the open door. Her limbs went numb, the air thickened around her. She worked to breathe, to think. Stay cool.

“I could ask you the same thing.” She watched his expression for any sign of what was going on in his head. Her backpack was in the passenger seat, but it was too far away for her to reach it before he blew a hole in her.

“Close the door.”

She obeyed, taking in his size and weight. How strong was he? Pulling the rope, she brought the metal door down slowly. If she waited until it was almost closed, she could roll underneath it. There was a spare key outside in her Bronco.

“Don’t get any ideas.” In two steps he was on her. He clamped his hand on her shoulder, but his fingers didn’t bite into her flesh. The physical contact jolted her; she froze under his touch. Guys like this got off on the fear they could generate. She wasn’t going to give him that satisfaction, or the advantage.

The door touched down on the concrete floor. She had to get to her backpack, somehow.

She turned toward him, determination in her veins.

“Again. Who are you and why did you boost this car?” His voice was low, demanding and cut with an edge of irritation.

“I didn’t steal it. I repossessed it.” If her answer erased doubt, it didn’t register in his sharp green eyes, eyes that seemed to probe into her soul.

“Wouldn’t it be better to do it in daylight with a police escort?”

His solution intrigued her, even while the gun he aimed at her made her wonder about his status. Law-abiding citizen or desperate criminal?

“I obtain hard-to-recover assets. Not everyone willingly lets you take their ride.”

His expression hardened, his eyes narrowed. “Have you got a lock for the door?”

Fear raked across her nerves. “Maybe.”

“Maybe isn’t good enough.”

This was her chance. Kate took a step back. The padlock was in her backpack. “It’s in the front seat. I’ll get it.” Move. She crossed in front of him.

He turned as she passed by and she was aware of him next to her as she opened the door and pulled her backpack out by one strap. She grasped the zipper. If she only opened it partway, she could put her hand in and rummage around. He’d never see his demise coming.

“I’ll take that.”

Before she could protest, he pulled her lifeline away. She swallowed her disappointment. Was this guy a mind reader?

“Head for the table.” He motioned to the card table she used for her paperwork. It was pushed into the corner at the front of the garage. She took hesitant steps toward it. He followed close behind. So close she could feel his heat, feel the arc of his strength connect to her body and drive fear into her soul.

Dressed in black from head to toe. Leather jacket. Early thirties. Clean shaven. Blond. Six-one. Green eyes, yes his eyes were green. She stored the details in her mind for the day the cops caught him. That was, if she lived.

A knot tied her stomach as she thought of her son. She had to make it...for his sake. She stopped at the table, wincing as he slid the zipper on her backpack and dumped it out with a couple of shakes. Her gaze locked on the Taser gun as it fell out with the rest of her worldly goods. An innocent object disguised as a tissue holder.

Attack. She dove for the weapon. Desperation choked her mind and made her movements erratic. She missed her mark and he threw an arm around her waist.

Kate fought to get away, but he was too strong. She ended her struggle, aware of the feel of his hard chest against her back and the sensation of being superheated against him.

“Who are you lady, MacGyver?” He laid his gun on the table, snagged the padlock and carried her to the door.

“I’ll warn you once.” His breath was warm against her ear, his voice soft, but deadly. He set her down, turned her and pointed his finger in her face an inch from her nose. “If you move, I’ll tie you up.”

He opened the lock and put it into the clasp on the door.

Kate kept still, watched him snap the lock shut and deposit the key in his left front pants pocket. She had to have the key.

Mick felt better with the lock in place. The woman beside

him was trouble and too unpredictable to take his eyes off. He could see her thinking every second. Planning her escape. The challenge sent a surge of excitement through his veins. It didn't bother him that she was the sweetest piece of eye candy he'd seen in an eon, but so far he hadn't been able to get any information out of her that made sense.

The intensity of the burn in his side flared again. He didn't know how long he had until his shrapnel wound sent him to lala land. If he lost it now, she'd be gone along with the Beamer, his only link to Otis Whittley.

“Where did you get this car?”

Her eyes were a rich shade of coffee-brown and sparkled with defiance. She glared at him and raised her chin.

Mick knew the make-me gesture. He hadn't busted a single punk who hadn't flashed him the same challenge. But she didn't look the part.

Clean Levi's hugged her slim hips and brushed the tops of black running shoes. A black sweatshirt was tied around her narrow waist and a tank top with TULANE printed on it stretched across well-rounded breasts. Shiny hair the color of mahogany was parted on the side and splayed well below her shoulders. He put her height at five-six or so. She looked delicate standing in front of him, but he'd felt the repressed strength in her curvaceous body for himself.

He swallowed and tried to focus his wayward thoughts. “I haven't got all night.”

“It’s the property of Dallas S & L. I’m supposed to deliver it to them on Friday.”

“You don’t understand.” He stepped toward her, his patience brittle. “This car stays put until you tell me who you are and what you really want with a fifty-thousand-dollar ride.”

“I told you. I repossessed it.”

“Yeah, and I’m the tooth fairy.” He was getting nowhere with her and he didn’t have time to mess around.

“Look, lady, I’m not going to shoot you.” He raised his hands, feigning peace. “I need information. If you hadn’t taken the car, I’d have it.” Otis was probably miles away by now.

“Come on.” He grabbed her elbow, steered her around the car and back to the table. If she wouldn’t tell him who she was, then he’d find out for himself.

He shuffled through the contents of her backpack, a virtual smorgasbord of paraphernalia fit to rescue a spy from any situation. Rope, a Swiss Army knife, first aid kit, cell phone, even a cache of tissues to blow her perfectly shaped nose. He’d never seen anyone so prepared. But she wasn’t going to be prepared for him, if she didn’t take him where he needed to go.

His gaze settled on her wallet. He grabbed it, popped the clasp and flipped it open to her driver’s licence.

Kate Robear, 415 Murray, New Orleans. Hatred exploded in his chest, burning him like a red-hot poker. He sized up the woman in front of him while the knowledge ricocheted deep into his brain.

He had a Robear? The family resemblance was indisputable. Dark hair, fair skin, expressive eyes socketed innocently in a beautiful face. For an instant he wanted to make her suffer as he'd suffered, but he sucked it up and tossed her wallet onto the table.

Kate studied the slight tic along his jawline, the faraway flicker in his eyes, and waited for the moment she could reach for the Taser.

“Robear. I might have known, no junk for a Robear.”

His words knifed into her mind. There was contempt in his voice. His body stiffened and revulsion flared in his eyes.

What did he know about her family?

As if lost in some distant memory he looked away for a second.

Attack. She grabbed the Taser and jerked to the right, avoiding his bear-paw swipe.

The device came to life like a live-voltage wire. She slammed the weapon to his thigh and pushed the button. A muscle-incapacitating zap hissed into his body. He stumbled back and collapsed.

She fell forward onto her knees and stared at the man laid out in front of her.

His eyes were wide with surprise, but he lay motionless.

She crawled toward him, determined to get the key before the Taser gun's effect wore off. He was fit. It wouldn't take long for him to regain his motor skills. She shoved her hand into his pocket and felt through its contents. Change. Pocketknife. She

brushed the elongated metal shaft of the padlock key with her fingertips, pinched it and pulled her hand out.

Sticky red liquid coated her fingers.

Blood.

Her heart raced in her chest as one horrible thought chased another. She stared at the man sprawled on the concrete floor. He was bleeding. Could she leave him here? What if his injury was serious? He could die in front of her.

She slipped the key into her pocket and edged close to him. “You’re hurt. I’m going to have a look, but if you so much as touch me, you’ll get this again.” She jabbed the weapon at him.

He blinked.

Kate’s hand trembled as she pushed his jacket aside and pulled his T-shirt out of his waistband. Carefully she moved the blood-soaked fabric up, trying to avoid touching his bare skin. Under all that black, he was muscular, taut and seething. She sucked in a breath. If masculinity was a crime, he’d be doing life, and if he weren’t incapacitated, she was certain he’d have her on the ground with his hands around her throat.

The thought of her son slammed into her mind like a tidal wave. She stopped. What would happen to Cody if she wasn’t there to take care of him? This man could do that. Take her life.

She swallowed the knowledge and returned to her task. She couldn’t let him bleed to death. She had to take a chance.

A trail of blood crisscrossed his chest. “You must have taken some buckshot when you were in the trunk.” She looked into his

face for confirmation.

He blinked.

“It looks bad.” She still hadn’t found the source of the blood trail.

Pushing the shirt higher, she brushed his bare skin with her fingertips.

He groaned.

A wave of warmth burst inside of her and rushed to her cheeks. She let out a labored breath and stared at the spot just above his heart and slightly to the left where a pellet had burned a trail, marring his perfect chest.

“I’m dialing 911.” She stood up, riffling through the stuff on the table for her phone. She reached for it at the same time his hand wrapped around her ankle.

Hot...relentless...inescapable.

Chapter Two

He jerked hard, pulling her off balance. Her right hand slammed against the tabletop, the Taser dislodged from her grip and clattered onto the floor.

She hit the ground.

In slow motion, he pulled her toward him.

Elbows against the concrete floor, her heart pounded and she kicked, swimming against a wave of fear that threatened to drown her, but he was too strong.

Catching sight of the Taser, she reached for it, straining to touch it in a final desperate move.

One more second and she would be his, but he suddenly let go. Hope for survival surged in her veins. She sat up and fixed her gaze on him.

He pulled himself upright and leaned against the front tire of the Beamer. “Kate Robear. Detective Mick Jacoby. New Orleans Police Department, auto theft division.” He held the badge in his hand like a trophy. “Battery on an officer is a crime.”

She tried to shut out his words, but an image of Cody staring at her through prison glass was the only thing that came into focus.

“Can’t we work this out? You never identified yourself as a cop. I thought you were going to kill me.”

He sat very still. His chiseled features as hard as stone. She didn’t know if her reasoning could find a catch hold, but she had

to try.

“You locked us in here together. I deserve an explanation for that.” He continued to watch her with eyes the color of shallow seawater.

“I’m not a car thief.” Desperation diced her composure to bits. “This car has been repossessed, legally. I have the paperwork. I didn’t steal it.”

“Prove it. Take me back to Otis’s.”

“You can’t be serious. You’re in no condition to go anywhere but Mercy Hospital.”

“I hope you like jail.”

Her pulse jackhammered at her temples. He wanted to go back into the swamp?

“You’ve got a first aid kit.”

“You’re nuts. He shot at us. At me. Who’s to say he won’t kill us next time?” The thought rattled her bones.

“Get the kit.”

She scrambled to her feet and grabbed the medical supplies she always carried. He had to be crazy if he thought he could do this. Cops thrived on danger, but blood loss didn’t take the testosterone level into consideration. He’d be at Mercy before dawn and she’d be in jail or dead. The victim of a drunk wielding a shotgun.

“Put a dressing on it. It’ll hold until I get to Otis.”

“You need more than a dressing.”

He pulled his T-shirt farther up, his jaw locked against the

pain. Muscle tensed just under his skin and she watched him stiffen. Desire drummed deep in her body.

“What are you going to do? Arrest him?” She felt his stare as if it was solid, looked into his eyes and pressed the thick pad against his wound.

For an instant he closed heavy-lashed lids over pain-clouded green eyes, but opened them almost immediately.

“Why do I need Otis?”

“How about him shooting at us for starters. And he did this.” She nodded to the bandage she pressed to his side. “He assaulted you first.”

A half smile arched his mouth, but vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “I have a Robear in custody. I’m doing my job.”

She’d taken the family career track? Was that what he thought? “Let’s get you to my car before you pass out. You don’t have to be conscious when I drive you to the hospital.”

He forced his palm down on her hand. Heat burned into her fingers and sent a jolt of current through her body. She tried to pull away, but couldn’t escape his touch or the awareness it evoked.

“You will take me to Otis.” He was so close, she could see beads of sweat form on his upper lip. “If you don’t, you’ll serve time when I’m done with you.”

“Okay. Okay!”

He released his hand from hers and she felt him shudder.

“I’ll open the lock.” Kate moved away from him and fished

the bloody key out of her pocket. If she didn't get him out of here soon, he'd pass out.

Hand shaking, she fit the key into the padlock and raised the metal door. He was on his feet by the time she returned to his side. He slid his gun into the waistband of his pants. At least someone could shoot back this time.

"Get your stuff, MacGyver." He glared at her. "Nice and slow."

Kate jammed her things into her backpack and zipped it shut. There was no way out except going into the bayou with him.

"His place is about seven miles from here on the edge of Bayou Gauche." She pulled his arm over her shoulders.

He walked on his own, but leaned heavily on her, pressed close to her side. His body heat radiated into her and pulled her nerves thin, doubling her discomfort, but she couldn't run away. Couldn't escape the myriad of opposing sensations that targeted her mind and body.

A fine drizzle fell outside. She settled him into the passenger seat of her Bronco and hurried around to the driver's side. Kate started the engine and rolled out of the lot, letting the flip-flop of the windshield wipers calm her nerves. What a mess she'd gotten herself in tonight. Life had just become immensely more complicated thanks to the angry, wounded cop in the passenger seat next to her.

"You do know you're in the middle of my investigation?"

She gave him a sideways glance and refocused on the road. "I

didn't know cops liked to hide out in car trunks. You're in the middle of my repo job."

"A man's got to get creative. You picked a bad night to take his ride."

"Some ride." Kate killed the lights as she made the turn just short of the house. "No sense getting him fired up." She cut the engine, rolling the last twenty feet. She'd learned to be quiet and invisible. "There it is."

The single bulb over the house numbers still burned in the darkness. The bathroom light shone at the side of the house.

"Just like I left it. He's probably in his crib, sleeping like a baby."

"How did you find this place?"

"My boss gave me the information."

Mick pulled his pistol out of his waistband and checked his rounds. "Who is this boss of yours? Has he got a name?"

"I don't give out that information."

"You will." He snapped the cylinder shut. He'd catch Otis in his bed, arrest him and take him downtown. Any leads he'd have gotten with the tracking device in place were gone now, but he had her. It wouldn't surprise him if she knew more than she was telling.

The pain in his side had turned to a dull ache. He'd been in rougher shape a couple of times, but he'd never been assaulted by a Robear. Certainly not by a female one who was short on details and long on looks. He hadn't even known the strange

breed existed, until tonight. “Stay here.”

He climbed out of her Bronco and stood still, listening to the sounds of the night. The rain had stopped, but there was a dampness in the air that penetrated through his skin. He turned the collar up on his jacket. It had been a long time since he'd been in the bayou without the sun overhead. He glanced at Whitley's house and scanned the darkness.

The night was strangely still. His caution level rose. Beyond the thick mesh of trees protecting the house, he heard movement in the water. A slow rhythmic slosh, like the dip of a paddle. Then it stopped. Probably an alligator courting a meal.

Striding across the road in a zigzag pattern, he made it to the porch. A rickety stairway approached the front door from the left. He stepped up onto the first stair. The rotten wood moaned under his weight. He skipped the next two and made the landing without a sound.

The screen door dangled from a single hinge. Otis had been in some kind of a hurry to stop Kate from taking the car.

He leaned to the left of the entry and balled his fist. Bang, bang, bang. He pounded the door and listened to the sound echo inside. “Otis Whitley. New Orleans police. Open the door.”

No response.

He didn't have a warrant. If Otis didn't come out willingly, there wasn't much he could do.

“He's not here.”

The element of surprise was usually his, but he whirled around

at the sound of her voice. Kate stood on the step below him.
“What the...get back in the car.”

“He’s not here. I looked in all the windows.”

“You did what?”

“I’ll show you.” She brushed past him, turned the knob and gave the door a push.

It swung wide-open. A shaft of light from the outside bulb penetrated the front room.

She moved to step over the threshold, but he pulled her back.
“You can’t go in.”

“And why not?”

The hairs on his neck bristled. “See the broken lamp, the ransacked kitchen?”

“Yeah.”

“Something went on here after you boosted the car.”

“I didn’t boost the car.”

“It’s a crime scene.”

“We’ve only been gone half an hour. I don’t know how anything can happen in half an hour.”

“It’s as easy as squeezing the trigger. Click. You’re dead.” He took Kate’s hand, ignoring the burst of electricity that arced up his arm and spread through his body. He’d neglected to point out the pool of blood near the end of the hall. Fresh blood.

He marched her closer to the car. Closer to safety. He put her in the passenger side and moved around to the driver’s side, eyeing the darkness. Braced for unseen threats that could come

at any time.

What was he thinking, bringing her out here? He should have called a black-and-white to take her in. He climbed in and threw a sideways glance at his unwilling passenger. "I need your cell phone. Mine's DOA. Shrapnel."

"Sure."

He watched her rummage in her bag of tricks and pull out the phone. She handed it to him and smiled. His insides went to mush. She was good. There wasn't any doubt about it, but he didn't trust her.

Mick pressed in Callahan's station number and waited for his friend to pick up. "I've got a crime scene." He rattled off the location of the shack Otis lived in. "There's no body. It'll probably go to Schneider. ETA? Fifteen. I'll be here." He hung up and leaned back into the seat, feeling ragged around the edges.

"Body? What are you talking about?"

"I can't involve you." His own words kicked him in the gut. She was already involved, but just how, he wasn't sure.

"Tell me everything you know about Otis Whittley and his Beamer."

"I told you all I know. I repossessed the car tonight. I don't know Otis. He's just a name on a list."

He didn't want to believe her. Believe she'd just been in the right place at the wrong time? Things didn't happen by accident. "Who do you work for?"

Pulling a penlight out of her pocket, she opened the glove

box, shined the narrow beam of light into the compartment and pulled out an envelope. “I have a court order, that’s all you need to know.”

Who was she protecting? There wasn’t an honest person in the Robear clan. Any one of them could steal a car in under thirty seconds and wave as they drove off. Was she any different?

He set his jaw and locked out a minuscule desire to believe her. A Robear was a Robear. They’d taken all they were ever going to take from him.

“I’ll have to haul you downtown. My supervisor has a nasty temper in the interrogation room. You’ll spill your guts before the bars on Bourbon Street close.”

“Where do you get off threatening me? I’m a law-abiding citizen. That car is in my possession and I intend to shuttle it to Dallas at the end of the week.”

“You’re in my custody.” The air temperature in the car went subzero.

“You’ll have to arrest me then, because as soon as your buddies arrive, I’m going home.”

If he wanted to keep her, he’d have to arrest her. The charge wouldn’t hold her for long. The thought tasted like dirt in his mouth, but he was in no condition to drag her there in cuffs, only to have her bond out in the a.m. “As soon as the crime-scene investigator arrives, you’re free to go. You’re a material witness. I’m going to need a full statement and elimination prints. One of the hazards of touching the doorknob. Don’t leave town.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She sat stiffly in the seat next to him.

“Give me the papers.” He pulled them from her hand and opened the envelope. She directed the beam of light onto the document.

Mick studied the paperwork, giving the bank in Dallas authority to reclaim its property by any means necessary. As much as he hated to admit it, she was telling the truth, but he’d check to see if she had a record.

“I’d like a copy of these.” He folded the papers and shoved them back into the envelope.

“Can do.” She flipped the switch on the flashlight, plunging the interior of the car into darkness.

Mick waited for his eyes to adjust in the weak light from the porch bulb.

“Why do you have it in for me Officer Jacoby?” Her voice was soft and low, matter-of-fact.

His nerves twisted around his hatred. “I have it in for anyone who’s broken the law.” He’d forced the words out. Did she know how much he wanted her to be guilty? Only her court order was going to protect her tonight. “Looks like you’re in luck.” The CSI team van made the corner with its lights flashing.

She was out of the car before he could finish his sentence. Mick climbed out from behind the wheel and closed the door. They met in front of the Bronco. “I’ll be on your doorstep tomorrow morning. You better be there.” He wanted to slap the cuffs on her right now and chain her to the nearest tree, but he

hesitated.

“You can plan on it, Officer.” He searched her angelic face for a glimmer of deceitfulness, but it was his heart that told him she would be there in the morning, waiting.

The CSI van slowed and stopped, followed by a string of other vehicles.

He waved her off, stepped aside and watched her climb in behind the wheel.

“Jacoby, you responsible for this mess?”

Mick turned around as Callahan climbed out of the van and walked toward him. “You know me. If there’s a crime, I’m there.”

Callahan slapped his shoulder and smiled. “I like your attitude. Sure you won’t come back to homicide? We could use you.”

“No. I had all of that I could take.”

“I understand. Let’s have a look.”

Mick took him up the stairs and pointed out the pool of blood at the back of the hallway. “I’d say there’s a body somewhere.”

Callahan shined the beam of his mag light onto the large red stain. “Good-size volume. I’d have to agree. I’ll get the team in here. We’ll let you know.”

Mick felt his body sag and sat down on the top step. His head throbbed and he tried to fight off the shakes.

“You okay?”

“No.” He watched Kate’s taillights disappear around the corner. Five years’ worth of mental compensation had just been spent in forty-five minutes. Five long years of a search that

never ended, a search for the car thief who'd killed his wife and daughter during a boost, and never looked back. The rumor was it had been a Robear behind the wheel that night. Was it her? Was she the one?

"Call me a ride out of here, Callahan. I need a gurney."

"You've got it, buddy."

KATE STEPPED OUT of the shower, coiled her hair in a towel and slipped on her bathrobe. She'd let the water needle her skin for twenty minutes, but she still felt like a zombie. Even a couple hours of REM sleep hadn't been enough to erase last night's confrontation with Mick Jacoby. Maybe the attraction she'd felt toward him was only imagined.

The buzz of the doorbell, followed by a couple of loud knocks, pushed into her brain. Tiptoeing to the door, she looked through the peephole. The focus of her thoughts stood on her front porch. She jerked back. He was even more sexy in daylight. She'd known he'd come around to talk to her, but 7:00 a.m.?

She took a deep breath, undid the dead bolt and swung the door wide. "Good morning, Officer." Her cheerful attitude didn't bring an iota of change to his solemn features, grayed by lack of sleep and blood loss, she guessed, but he was still the best-looking male she'd seen in too long. His formidable self couldn't change that.

"It could be." He moved past her into the house and stopped in the middle of the living room with his back to her.

Kate closed the door and watched him size up the place. His

silence and lack of visual contact annoyed her, but the full-on backside view of Officer Jacoby made her heart beat faster.

“Shall I lift the cushions so you can check for stolen cars?” Scurrying to the couch, she lifted the center cushion. “Nothing here. Maybe I keep them under the rug.” She stomped her bare foot a couple of times and pulled in a breath as he turned toward her and leveled a stare on her with eyes she guessed never missed a thing.

“Look, Ms. Robear. I didn’t come here to search the place... um, your...”

Heat radiated into her cheeks and she felt her face redden as his all-seeing gaze slid down the front of her robe. Reality along with the feel of air on exposed skin made her draw a sharp breath. She squeezed the gaping lapels together. “I’ll throw something on.”

She hurried from the room, alarmed by the tingle his stare had provoked. She certainly wasn’t a prude, but neither was she ready to provide a peep show for a cop.

Closing her bedroom door, she leaned against it. Why was it he always seemed to be judging her? She had the impression he’d dealt with her car-stealing family. Every cop in New Orleans had. He probably thought all Robears were created alike. Born to boost cars and chop them up for fun and profit.

Well, she took cars legally these days, and if it took every ounce of her persuasive power to convince Officer Jacoby of that, then so be it.

Moving away from the door, she picked out a pair of jean shorts and a plain white blouse and put them on. There was no denying Mick Jacoby was a looker, but he was also a man on a mission—something she'd be wise to never forget. But she had a mission, too. Keeping the Beamer and the five-thousand-dollar bonus that went with it. She composed herself and went back into the living room.

He stood in the same spot where she'd left him. She took a second to appreciate the thigh-hugging black jeans molding the outline of his quadriceps. His maroon T-shirt was pulled tight over washboard abs and bulging biceps hooked to shoulders as broad as the liberties she mentally took with his physique. She'd bet he could tell her how many tiles there were on the ceiling of the local gym.

Looking away, she swallowed and tried to put distance between her thoughts and the situation. Cop. Cop. Cop. Drilled in her mind.

“How did you do at the hospital last night?” She tossed the question over her shoulder while she moved into the kitchen and scooped coffee into the filter, filled the reservoir and turned it on.

“A single piece of buckshot. I'll live.”

Unsatisfied with his answer, she turned around. “How bad?”

“A fraction lower and you'd have hauled me to Dallas.”

Nibbling her lower lip, she studied him. He was tense, as if standing in her living room made him uncomfortable. She couldn't have that. “Why don't we sit down?” She'd be doing

herself a favor if she was on her best behavior. "I'll pour us a cup of coffee and we can talk."

She hoped he'd position himself on the sofa and relax a bit, but he pulled out a chair at the dining-room table. All business. Her business.

Mick settled into the wooden ladder-back chair, complete with a blue checked seat cushion. If Kate Robear was a car thief, she had to be the best disguised one he'd met. Her small house had a homey feel to it. From the floral sofa to the pictures on the walls, the place held her sultry warmth. He watched her move about the small kitchen. Notes of the song she hummed tickled his ear, but he couldn't name the tune. Her legs were long and shapely. She carried herself like an athlete. If she weren't on his witness list, she'd be on his gotta-have list. He shook his thoughts. She was a Robear. That was all he needed to know. No quaint gingerbread house and a cup of hot coffee was going to change that. He had to concentrate.

"Can we get on with this statement?"

"Oh, sure." She moved into the dining room and set a cup of coffee in front of him. "Do you take cream and sugar?"

"No." Mick flipped open his notepad, anxious to move his thoughts forward. "Last night, did you notice any other car besides the Beamer?"

"No, but there are lots of pull-ins on Bayou Road. I suppose I could have missed seeing a vehicle, if it was parked in the undergrowth."

Picking up his cup, he took a slow sip, eyeing her over the brim. She looked innocent enough with a towel around her head and large round eyes that crinkled at the corners when she was thinking.

“I had my friend Gabby drop me off. She waits for me to call her if the mark doesn’t show up. Then she’ll come out and get me.”

“I’ll want to talk to her. See if she saw anything.”

Mick wrote down the phone number Kate gave him. “What about the man you work for?” She hadn’t budged on the point last night. “It’ll go a lot better for you, Kate, if you’ll tell me who you work for.”

“David Copeland. He handles Dallas S & L. I’ve never had a face-to-face with him.”

“How long have you worked for him?”

“A little over six months.”

Mick rolled the man’s name around in his head. He’d have him checked out. “How does he contact you?”

“He calls me the day before a job. Gives me time to make arrangements for Cody.”

“Cody?”

“My son.”

Mick’s heart rate sped up. She had a child?

“Can you tell me what other cars you’ve reposed in the last six months?”

“Sure.” She stood up and went to a small desk, opened

the drawer and pulled out a notebook. "I keep track for tax reasons." She returned to the table and sat down. "Let's see. October a Porsche 944, owner Stephen Hacker, 1844 Caldwell. In November a Rolls, owner Hugh Keller, 3210 Jasper. I reposed a Mercedes E class in December from Nathan Morris."

Mick jotted down the make of the car, date and name of the owner. "Address?"

"Looks like 4060 Lindstrom, on the west side. Nice neighborhood. In January, it was a Porsche purchased by Jacob Estes, 4028 Garnet. In February, a red Mercedes convertible, owner Thomas Romaro."

Mick's internal alarm went off at a million decibels. Thomas Romaro was the victim of an unsolved homicide. His buddy Schneider was working the case. They'd pulled the guy out of the Mississippi in pieces. "Go on. Have you got an address on Romaro?"

"Westside, near the Garden District... 1019. In March it was a Jaguar XJ belonging to Orlando Durant, 4237 Vivian. Last night I went after the BMW."

Looking up from his notes, he paused, watched her lick her lips and focus her attention on him. The movement shot holes in his control and raised his heart rate, but he didn't drop his gaze from her face.

"It's strange. Every one of these deadbeats lived in an upscale neighborhood, but every house looked deserted except for the car in the drive. None of them were in the garage where you'd

expect an expensive car to be parked.”

He couldn't agree more, but it was the dead man that interested him. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but maybe not. “I need a date and time you repoed Romaro's Mercedes.”

He watched her run a long delicate finger down the list, wondering what it would feel like against his skin and not as a woman administering first aid.

“Looks like February 14. Valentine's Day. I think it was around midnight because I asked my date to bring me home early.”

“You don't sound too disappointed.” Mick watched her think; her eyes crinkled at the corners as she looked him square in the face.

“You could say we disagreed, but my love life isn't open for questions, is it, Officer?”

He liked the challenge he saw flash across her face, then vanish into the smile on her lips. Why was she being so compliant this morning? Belligerent, he could handle. Maybe she was feeling guilty for sticking it to him with a hot Taser, or was it something else? Perhaps a little charm as lubricant to wiggle out of an uncomfortable situation.

“We'll call it good for now, but don't leave town.” He watched her face go placid and knew she was thinking about the Beamer and a road trip to Dallas. “How much do you make recovering assets?”

“More than you make getting shot at.”

“Tell me. What do you do with all that cash?” He wanted to push her. Money made people do strange things and she wouldn’t be an exception.

“I give to the needy.”

“I suppose that’s a worthy thing to do.” He felt anger charge through him. Hell, he deserved it, probing into her business. It looked more and more like she was for real, but he had to check out the list of marks on his notepad before he let her off the hook completely.

“I need to get your prints. We can do it here, or you can come into the station. What’ll it be?” She swallowed and looked straight at him, her expression trepid. The idea of entering the station frightened her? His suspicion bubbled up.

“I’ll come in this afternoon.”

“Great.”

The front door of the house flew open and a little boy burst into the room. Two steps behind him lagged a young woman.

“Mommy.” He threw his arms around Kate’s neck and knocked the towel loose from its coil. Her hair spilled over her face and he listened to her laugh. Soft, sweet, genuine.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. Did you treat Molly good?”

“Yeah.”

An awkward ache moved inside him as he watched the exchange, sucked into memories of years past and lives lost.

She smoothed her hair back. “Cody, this is Officer Jacoby.

He's a policeman."

"Where's his uniform?" The little boy looked up at him, determined to discover why he didn't look the part.

"Well, not every policeman wears a uniform. Sometimes they wear plain clothes and look just like you and me. Isn't that right, Officer?"

He stared down at the handsome little boy, with eyes the shade of his mom's. Thoughts of his own daughter churned in his mind and scrambled his words before they could make it onto his tongue. He nodded and found his voice. "That's right. Sometimes we don't want the bad guys to know we're around." He pulled his badge off his shoulder holster and held it out. "Here's my badge."

Cody ran his hand over the shield. "Wow."

The understanding of a child only encompassed a simplicity. He was free to be impressed minus all the muck that went with the job.

"It's nice."

"It's nice when it gets the respect it deserves." He looked into Kate's face and saw a hint of doubt, but he didn't need her respect. He needed the answers she could give him. How close was she to this case? How much did she know about that night five years ago that ripped his world apart? "Here's my card. Call me if you think of anything else." She took it from his fingers and slid it into her pocket.

"I've gotta go." Mick put his badge on and tried to cram his emotions into the mental box they'd escaped from. "I'll expect

you at the station.”

Chapter Three

Mick stepped out onto Kate's front step with her right behind him. He paused, scanned the street and looked for the source of the cautionary impulses that shot in and out of his brain. "I'm going to check out the names on this list." He turned toward her. "I plan to have the Beamer impounded."

"You can't do that." She touched him. A wave of heat flamed up his arm. "The bonus on that car pays my bills. If you lock it up, I can't collect."

"The law is the law. The owner of record is missing. He was under investigation for his involvement in an auto-theft ring." He looked into her face and waited for a response, some inkling that she understood his decision. But determination had set her jaw.

"How long before I get it back?"

"The lab will dust it for prints and search for physical evidence. We'll need to determine if Otis committed any crimes with the car."

"This is because I'm a Robear, isn't it?"

"No."

"You think because of what my family did for a living, it automatically makes me a car thief, too? Well you're wrong, Mick Jacoby. You're dead wrong and sooner or later you're going to have to stop hating Robears."

She pushed the front door open and slammed it shut in his

face.

Mick stood perfectly still on the step letting her words soak through his thick hide. The truth stung like a yellow jacket. Had he become so jaded he couldn't tell the good from the bad anymore? The day was when he'd had more faith in people, but the sun had long since set on that delusion. He shrugged off her observation and took the steps quickly. Once he reached his car, he scanned the street again and tried to shake the unease that gnawed at his mind and set his nerves on edge.

The cars parked in the street were all unoccupied. He watched the wooded area directly across the roadway for movement. Nothing.

If she was being watched, it would have to be by a phantom, because nothing was out of the ordinary. He climbed into his car and fired the engine.

KATE LEANED AGAINST the front door feeling the full effect of Mick Jacoby's heat. He had it in for her, but how deep would he dig?

"Kate, what's going on?" Molly asked.

"Nothing, just a cop with an attitude and an appetite for Robears."

"Well," Molly whispered, "he can take a bite out of me anytime."

"You goof." She had to admit there wasn't much wrong with the Mick Jacoby package—fair hair, light green eyes—a surfer stranded on dry land, with enough muscle distributed in all the

right places to make any woman fake drowning. “Okay. He’s hot, five million degrees, but cops aren’t my style.”

“Emm.” Molly wagged her finger in Kate’s face and moved toward the door. “I’d make an exception for that one.”

“No way.”

“All the same, you need a man in your life. Someone safe.”

“Where have you been, sweetie? Cops are about as safe as a five-year-old with a lighter.”

Molly grasped the knob. “Okay, you’ve got a point, but maybe you won’t ditch the idea completely?”

“Maybe.” She hugged her friend. “Thanks for taking Cody overnight.”

“No problem.” Molly waved and strolled down the sidewalk to her SUV. She climbed in and pulled away from the curb.

Kate was about to go back into the house when she noticed the sleek black car on the opposite side of the street, exposed now that Molly’s Suburban was gone. Normally it wouldn’t have bothered her, but the windows were black. Tinted to the point she couldn’t see inside the vehicle. A customized Honda?

Riding a wave of caution, she hurried inside and closed the door. She was being silly, but she’d never seen the car in the neighborhood. She looked around and spotted Cody on the sofa, TV remote in hand and Rugrats on the screen.

She plopped down next to him and rubbed his head. “So what did you and Molly do yesterday?”

“Nothing, Mom. Just went to the zoo and saw the animals. I

got some candy and we came home.”

“That’s not nothing, Cody. Did you thank her for taking you?”

“Yeah.”

“Good job.” She planted a kiss on his dark head and smelled his hair.

“Shall we go to see your daddy today, before you leave?”

“No. It smells funny.”

“We make exceptions for people we care about, son. Your daddy needs to see you.”

“Okay.” Cody fiddled with the remote. “He lets me push him’s buttons.”

She patted his leg. “That’s better. I’ll dry my hair and we’ll go.” She stood up and felt the weight of guilt turn solid in her stomach, as it did every time they went to see Jake Talbot, Cody’s father, a twenty-eight-year-old man strapped in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. A man she’d put there with a dare.

MICK SAT NEXT TO Sergeant Schneider’s desk with the Romaro file in his hand. “His address of record is Taft Street?”

“Yeah, real dump. I talked to the landlord. Said the guy was four months behind on his rent, claimed he hadn’t see him for almost a month. He opened the apartment, and damn if the refrigerator hadn’t seen the guy in a month, either. The power had been shut off and the place was a stinking mess.”

“Real winner, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Mick studied the autopsy photos. “So any idea who diced the

guy?”

Schneider shoved a toothpick between the gap in his front teeth and rocked back in his chair. “Always looked like a revenge kill to me. Up close and personal, but I could never connect the dots. The crime lab didn’t find any trace evidence on the body. He was probably killed somewhere else and dumped in the river. No way to know where he went in. The killer didn’t try to weight the body, guess he knew Mississippi mud does a scrub job.”

“Did you talk to Romaro’s family?”

“Nobody to talk to. Couldn’t find a thread to unravel. It was almost like the guy appeared out of nowhere.”

“An alias?”

“That’s my guess, but he had ID on him.”

“Prints?”

“We ran him through AFIS. No record.”

Mick laid the file on the edge of Schneider’s desk, frustrated by the lack of information. The address Kate had given him for the house where she’d repoed the car was nowhere near the victim’s apartment.

“I’ve got a list of deadbeats.” He pulled Kate’s list out of his notepad. “My witness repoed Romaro’s car along with the rest of these guys. Let’s run them and see what shakes.”

“No problem.” Ben took the list, eyeing it carefully. “What do ya know.”

“You got something?”

“Orlando Durant. I can’t believe he bought a car. Stealing

them is more his style. I got a fax a couple of days ago from the Michigan State Police. They caught him doing one hundred forty up I-75, headed for Canada. He was sitting behind the wheel of a brand new Maserati registered in his name. The kicker is there was a suitcase full of money in the trunk. They're holding him for reckless driving and eluding an officer. We've got first claim on him, but he's fighting extradition."

"Let me guess. Grand theft auto."

"Bingo, but there's more. He's claiming someone in Louisiana wants him dead."

"Running scared?"

"Looks that way."

"How soon are we going to get him back?"

"Couple of weeks, if finance coughs up the money."

"I'd like to interrogate him, maybe he knows something about Otis Whittley."

"I'll let you know as soon he arrives."

"Thanks, Ben." Did Kate know Orlando Durant? "I owe you one." He stood up and moved for the door.

"Anytime. Hey, I had a visitor this morning."

"Oh yeah, who?" Mick pulled up short and turned around.

"Byer stopped by for his annual how-the-heck-are-you chat."

Mick thought of the ex-partner who'd saved his butt more than a couple of times, but they'd fallen out of touch over the years.

"How's he doing? Staying out of trouble?"

"You know Bret. He's top dog over at customs. Sitting on

big money and bigger benefits. Something to do with manifest approvals.”

“I heard that, but then he always pushed to get ahead. Not like you and me, happy to be at the bottom of the food chain.”

Schneider smiled. “I wish the sharks at the bottom of the food chain would chew my butt off before next week. I’ve got to pass my physical.”

“Good luck.” Mick left the homicide division with a smile on his face. He hadn’t thought of Bret in at least a year. They’d grown up in the same town in Florida, attended the same college and played on the same football team. They’d become fast friends and eventually went through the academy together.

His cell phone rang. “Jacoby.”

“Officer?”

He recognized Kate’s voice, laced with panic. “Kate. What’s wrong?”

“You better come out to the storage unit. There’s been some trouble.”

“I’ll be right there.”

KATE STOOD AT the storage-lot gate, her face the color of a sun-bleached sheet. She put in the gate code and climbed in beside him.

“Did you touch anything?” The question came out like an accusation and he instantly regretted it.

“I’m not an idiot.”

“I’m sorry.” He touched her hand where it lay on the seat and

felt her warmth invade the dark places in his heart. He put his hand back on the steering wheel where it belonged and made the turn down the row of units.

The door to the large unit at the end was open, the butt of the Beamer visible. "It's still there."

"You should see the inside."

He braked and popped the gearshift into park. "I'll get the lab boys over here and deal with the fallout later."

"Fallout?"

"This car should be in impound. I should have called it in last night." He looked at her, caught by the way her mahogany-colored hair framed her face and curled up on the ends. She was a beautiful woman. A flash of desire pulsed through him and settled in his gut.

"I wish it was there, too. I'm probably going to lose my job over this."

"Don't panic. Let's have a look." He got out of the car and moved into the storage unit. Except for the bullet holes in the trunk and the shattered rear window, the car was pristine. He bent closer and looked into the side window. The seats had been slashed and lay open. Stuffing littered the floorboards, white and billowy like a collection of clouds.

"Who else knew about this place?"

"Just us. For security, I never told anyone where I took the cars. Not even my boss."

Mick straightened and moved around to the front of the

vehicle. Caution slid through his veins and he stopped, but before he could warn her to stay back, she was beside him. He heard her sharp intake of breath.

DIE SLOW KATE. The words were painted across the windshield in dark red.

“Go outside.” He leaned close to the glass and drew in a smell of the substance on the windshield. The iron-rich odor turned his stomach.

Blood.

He backed away and pulled the handheld radio off his belt. “Dispatch, officer 557. I need a lab team at A-1 Storage in Paradise, unit B-3.” He was guessing, but whoever’s blood had been used to paint the message was more than likely dead. His hunch was it belonged to Otis Whittley.

Kate stood outside the unit, her face in her hands. He moved toward her and felt an overwhelming need to protect her from the ugliness inside and the danger outside. “I’m sorry you had to see that.” He stepped next to her. “It’s probably just an idle threat made by some punk kid.”

“Is it...blood?”

“Yeah.”

She leaned into him, taking him by surprise. Like a bomb hooked to a physical timer, desire exploded inside him and he craved her like air. He put his arms around her and pulled her against his chest, satisfied when she relaxed into him. “The Beamer will go to evidence, then to impound. If the lab confirms

it's blood on the windshield, you're looking at posttrial before the car is released." The return of the BMW wasn't his worry. The threat bothered him.

"Do you think we were followed last night?"

"That would be my guess."

"Maybe not." She looked up at him and he saw a flicker of fear in her eyes.

"What do you mean?" He released her and stared into her upturned face, watched her swallow, and look away.

"I came over here this afternoon."

"What!"

"I wanted to make sure you hadn't had the car hauled away. It's my livelihood. After you left this morning, there was a black car parked across the street. I couldn't see the driver or get a plate number, but after I went inside, it took off. I thought I was just being paranoid. I took Cody to see his dad, and we made a swing by here."

"We have no idea what's going on." Mick grasped her upper arms. He had to infuse some caution into her.

"It didn't seem important."

"Everything is important. The threat on the window doubles it."

"Look, Mick, I can take care of myself."

"Where is Cody?"

"He's with my friend and her family. They took him to Disney World for a week."

He relaxed his grip on her and dropped his arms to his sides. “Do you have somewhere else you can go besides home?”

“I suppose.”

“Go. Chances are whoever did this watched your house this morning and followed you here. It’s not safe. Someone means business.”

“I can’t leave.”

“Look at me.”

She complied, staring into his eyes, making his heart race as he searched her face, hoping she didn’t fight him. “This isn’t a polite request. It’s an order. If I didn’t think you were in danger I wouldn’t ask you to leave. It’s better to use caution.” He touched her arm and a zap of heat infiltrated his system.

“How long?”

“As long as it takes to get a handle on this case.”

“I have to put my life on hold while you look for a handle?”

“It’s a lot more interesting to hunt Robears than to try and reason with them.” He wanted the words to stick, to raise her awareness level to the danger he could feel in the air, but she gave him a sly smile instead.

“You’ll have to hunt me if you drag this out.”

“Understood.” She smoothed a stray strand of hair and tucked it behind her ear. He didn’t doubt she would run if given the chance.

KATE GLANCED in her rearview mirror at Mick’s headlights. It was comforting to know he was behind her. A

foreboding she couldn't shake had taken hold of her at the storage unit and its grip was unrelenting. Did someone have it in for her? Mick certainly seemed to believe it. Should she believe it, too?

Flipping her blinker, she pulled down the quiet street lined with little square houses. It wasn't the best neighborhood, but it was one she could afford. She parked in the driveway, turned off the engine and climbed out of the Bronco.

Anxiety bubbled inside of her. The early twilight air held a trace of humidity, but it wasn't cold. Somewhere nearby a dog barked, probably at the end of a chain or shut up behind a backyard fence. The smell of a barbecue hung in the air. All was well. There was no visible cause for her feelings.

Mick pulled into the driveway and got out of his car. She studied him in the glow of the porch light as he moved toward her, like the hero in a vivid dream. Maybe he was the source of her unsettled emotions.

"If you grab a bag, I'll take you to your friend's house. I want to make sure you're not followed."

"You don't have to coddle me." She took the steps slowly. "I'm not helpless."

"I'm painfully aware of that, but you are the focus of my investigation and it got personal today." He was right behind her.

Turning on him, she prepared to reason herself into her own bed, but his features were hardened with determination.

"Don't even, Kate. Never mind that you can take care of yourself. I need to get some sleep tonight and if that means you

stay somewhere safe, then so be it. Would you rather I slept on your couch?"

A twinkle of mischief sparkled in his green eyes and she tensed as anticipation hatched in her mind and flowed into her bloodstream. "I'll get my bag." A night with Officer Jacoby a short distance away was more than she wanted to deal with right now.

She pushed her key into the lock. The door gave against the pressure and creaked open.

"Mick..." Terror sizzled through her veins.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"The door's been jimmed." The sound of gunmetal against leather alarmed her, as he slid his pistol from its holster.

Was someone inside? Waiting?

Mick reached for Kate and pulled her behind him, taking her place on the step above. He stayed to the left and pushed the door all the way open.

In the back of the house he saw movement. For a brief second a human silhouette appeared in the hall and disappeared into another room.

"New Orleans police. Come out with your hands up." He reached inside and flipped the living-room light on.

The once-cozy place was trashed. The sofa and chairs had been sliced to ribbons. Pictures lay on the floor with the glass smashed out. Chaos reigned.

"Go to my car." The house was as still as death, but he'd seen

the room the suspect was hiding in. “Lock the doors and stay down.”

“Okay.” She shuffled off the steps behind him and a measure of relief invaded his body. The perpetrator would have to go through him first.

“Come out. No one has to get hurt.” Mick crept into the entryway and scanned the dining room and kitchen. All clear.

Footsteps echoed on the other side of the kitchen wall, then the distinct snap of a window latch clicked.

He hugged the wall. Gun ready. His heart pounded in his ears as he slipped down the corridor and paused outside the room. “This is your last chance. Give it up.” The sound of the window being opened reached his ears. In an instant the suspect would be gone. Movement at the front door caught his eye and his heart slammed into his ribs.

Kate stood in the doorway, her eyes filled with terror. A knife, inches from her throat.

Chapter Four

A split-second decision solidified. He darted into the dark room, grabbed the man who was halfway out the window and locked him in a choke hold.

“I don’t have anything, man.”

Mick patted him down and shoved him toward the doorway with his gun aimed at his temple. “Why are you here?”

“Let me go. You can’t do this.”

“Wanna bet.” He squeezed until he heard his prisoner gasp for air. “What are you after?”

Pushing him into the hall, he sucked in a breath and froze in place.

The suspect had a counterpart, and he had Kate.

His brain fired in rapid succession as he formed a plan. He forced the thug into the livingroom.

“Looks like a standoff.” Focused on Kate, he willed her to be calm. “How about a trade? You let her go, and I’ll turn over your friend.”

A navy-blue ski mask covered the man’s face, but Mick pulled in every available detail about him. The man’s hand trembled; his breath was labored with excitement. He lacked the smoothness of a career criminal. That fact alone made him more dangerous. Mick tensed and moved closer.

“We’ll swap and you can disappear, but if you hurt her I’ll put

a bullet through your head.”

The assailant looked around, wide-eyed. “Let’s do it.”

Mick moved him to the front door, careful to leave enough room for them to escape. “On three.”

He nodded his head.

“One...two...three.” Mick released the punk at the same time the assailant let go of Kate. He lunged for her as the two masked men bolted out the door.

In one swoop he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her away from the doorway. His pulse thundered in his ears and he held her next to him. Outside a car engine fired. Tires squealed on pavement and the men vanished into the night.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty stirred up, but I’m alive.”

She was alive, nestled against him. He pulled in a breath and caught the whisper-sweet scent of her hair.

“That was risky.”

He held her back and stared into her upturned face. Kissing her came to mind, but he reined in the thought. “There’s always a risk where a hostage is concerned. I wagered he wanted his accomplice more than he wanted you or a bullet in his head.”

She reached up and cupped his cheek with her hand. The gesture sent sparks through him.

Stepping back, he pulled her hand away. “Just doing my job.” He’d come too close to kissing her. Too close to crossing the line. “I’ll check the bedrooms and call in forensics.” He stepped away,

moved down the hall and swept the rooms before returning to the living room, where Kate had positioned herself on the remains of an upholstered chair.

“It’s all clear.”

“Would you look at what they did?” She let out a small moan and scooped up a picture of herself and Cody, setting it carefully back on the shelf where it belonged. “I’d offer you the couch, if I had one.”

“Don’t touch anything.” Mick eyed what was left—a pile of fabric and stuffing. “You’re coming with me. This is no coincidence. The MO looks identical to the job on the Beamer. They could come back. I’ll take you somewhere safe.”

“This scares me. What if Cody had been here with a sitter?”

He watched her very own words force the color from her face. She stood up.

“Don’t get riled up, Kate. They were looking for something. We just have to figure out what.”

She paced back and forth in the small room, making him nervous. “I don’t have anything. No jewelry.” She looked around the room. “My stereo equipment is still here.”

“Don’t try to guess what motivated them. Did you see anything that could help?”

“They were driving the black car I saw this morning.”

MICK STOOD IN THE HALLWAY. The first rays of dawn were pushing between the slats of the blinds, reminding him morning was here. The moment stalled in time as he watched

Kate, asleep on his sofa.

Every safe house in New Orleans had been full last night, so he'd brought her home. He smoothed his hands over his head. He'd offered her the bed, but she'd refused. Why did she have to look so damn beautiful, snuggled against the white pillowcase, her mass of dark hair tousled around her face? Beautiful, yes. But innocent?

He ground his teeth together. He didn't trust Kate Robear with his mind, but his heart had other plans. How could he separate the two? Had his years with the New Orleans PD made him into the man he was or just kept him alive while he hunted for answers?

Turning around, he went into the bedroom and closed the door. He'd let a Robear spend the night in his home. A home that had sheltered his wife and daughter before they'd been killed. Four walls that still echoed with sounds of their lives. For all of Kate's claims of innocence, her blood ran with Robear genes. She couldn't be trusted. Maybe it was a good thing she was here so he could keep an eye on her.

Mick cranked on the sink faucet in the master bathroom and soaked a washcloth in hot water. He couldn't let Kate get under his skin. It was easier to mistrust her than to give her credence. He pressed the cloth to his face and warred with his choices. Could he pass up the case and risk never knowing who killed his family? Could he let her walk and kiss his only chance at the truth goodbye?

Anger churned his insides. Indecision wasn't his thing. There

was only black and white. Gray had never colored his decisions... until now. He couldn't let her go.

KATE AWOKE WITH A START. Where was she? Looking around the room she settled back against the sofa cushions as last night's memories surfaced. She was on Officer Jacoby's couch. She sat up. A mess waited for her at home. She had to move, had to focus.

Shuffling into the kitchen, she spied the coffeemaker. His home was neat and tidy, not the typical bachelor pad she decided, as she opened the cupboard above the pot. Sure enough, a plastic container of coffee sat amongst perfectly positioned boxes of Earl Grey, English Breakfast and green tea. Sexy and organized.

She pulled the canister down and filled the coffee filter, then filled the reservoir at the sink. Flipping the switch to brew, she returned to the couch and folded the blankets.

A fireplace dominated the end of the room and she drifted to the mantel, adorned with photographs in various styles of frames. It looked more like a shrine than a casual grouping.

Every picture contained a woman and a little girl. Each one seemed to catalog a stage in the child's life. The woman smiling back looked happy.

Her gaze settled on a picture in the middle. Mick held the little girl on his knee and the woman stood behind him with her hand on his shoulder. She felt like a snoop, digging into caches where he kept his private things. The woman's wedding ring was obvious. She looked at Mick's left hand in the photo. The gold

of his wedding band gleamed back.

Maybe they were divorced? It wouldn't be something to come up in conversation. She moved past the pictures until she reached the end of the mantel. The last picture was in a sterling silver frame. A date was inscribed. Never Forgotten 5-10-2000.

Odd, a divorce would produce such a feel of finality. She focused on a small object next to the picture frame. Curious, she reached for it.

“Don't!”

Kate froze in midtask and let her arm fall to her side. She turned around.

Mick stood behind her, anger etched in the line of his lips, and a hard stare fixed on her with green eyes that had darkened to the color of jade.

A tentacle of fear wrapped her spine, and she swallowed. “I'm sorry, I was just wondering what it—”

“It's mine. That's all.”

His short answer stirred her curiosity, but she'd respect his privacy. If he wanted to leave a small chunk of metal on his mantel, who was she to question his reasons?

“I want to go home.”

“You can't go home.” He moved toward her and stopped. “Not until we catch the guys who slashed things up.”

“That could take weeks, maybe months. I have a life.”

“No, you don't. Not until we get them.”

She stared at his bare back as he strutted into the kitchen, the

defensive set of his naked shoulders, the narrow taper of his waist as it disappeared into the waistband of his pants. Liquid desire flowed through her veins unchecked and opened the pores in her cheeks, leaving her hot and embarrassed.

“Coffee?” he asked over his shoulder.

She followed him and watched him pour her a cup.

“Have you considered that whoever is doing this may try to hurt you when they can’t find what they’re looking for?”

“I’d be an idiot if I hadn’t.” She was suddenly irritated that he could even think she wouldn’t have that horrible thought nested in the back of her mind.

He set a cup on the counter in front of her. “On the surface this looks like burglary or vandalism, but thugs like that rarely make it personal. They don’t scribble threats in blood.”

She watched him over the rim of the mug as she took a sip.

His jaw tightened and he wouldn’t look at her. “I didn’t want to alarm you the other night at Whittle’s place, but there was blood at the scene. We found marks on the riverbank that indicate a boat of some kind was pulled ashore. There was a cigar butt in the water. The lab is trying to obtain DNA, but the water may have corrupted the evidence.”

“Cigar butt?”

“Yeah.”

“I smelled it the night I reposed Otis’s car.” She downplayed the shudder that wiggled up her spine as she mentally connected the information. “They were there, in the bayou...waiting for

Otis, watching me? They did the BMW and trashed my house last night?" She willed her frayed nerves smooth. "What now?"

He looked at her. "You hang at a safe house until I apprehend them."

"No way." She set her coffee cup down with a thud. "If you think I'm going to kick back and let these maniacs keep coming around to screw up my life then you're nuts. I plan to be involved all the way."

"Kate." His tone was soft, like a parent scolding a naughty child. "You know I can't allow you to get involved."

"Not involved? I'm in this up to my neck. If I'm going down, I at least want to know who's pulled me under. I'm not some helpless woman. I can take care of myself."

A nerve played along his jaw as her sharp words cut a path through his macho mentality. She wouldn't let him leave her out. She had too much to lose.

"If you don't let me help, I'll go out on my own. I have all the information I need."

He stepped next to her; inches separated them. She could smell the tang of aftershave warmed by his body heat. She watched the rise and fall of his bare chest, half obscured by a large white bandage plastered on his side. Arousal sparked the nerve endings beneath her skin. He was too close. She stepped back.

Mick couldn't believe his ears. What if she got her pretty little neck...

“I can arrest you, right now.”

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