



Sometimes the water was glassy and still, and the boat sat on it like a piece of paper on a flat table. Motionless, utterly silent. Other times, particularly when they were tied up in port, the tide would push in a wave that made the boat hump over the water like a roller coaster topping the big hill. But on the rarest of nights, the ocean off the Keys was like a cradle, and on those nights it was safe to anchor a few miles offshore where the gentlest of swells rocked you to sleep and the water made kissing noises against the hull. Grace MacBride liked listening to that. It reminded her of the sounds Harley's koi had made when they took food from your fingers, before they'd all been butchered by some serial killer raccoon.

There were no human serial killers in the Keys that she knew of, and the proof was evident. She'd been living here for months now, without benefit of riding boots, black jeans, black duster, or a gun on her hip, and here she was, still alive. The heat and the humidity had

## P. J. TRACY

sent her to a boutique on her second day here, put her in a sundress and sandals for the first time in over a decade, and something about that change of outfit had changed her head, gobbled up the fear she'd lived with forever, as if bare toes and legs were the one antidote to paranoia she'd never thought to try.

Poor Magozzi. The Minneapolis Homicide detective was the only man she'd ever opened her heart to, if only just a tiny bit—and he'd worked so hard to get her to the point where she could walk outside her house without a gun, and, as it turned out, a sundress accomplished the goal in a single day. You can't wear a shoulder harness with a sundress. It just looks bad.

Grace MacBride hardly knew what to make of this new life, where the elements ruled and people simply went along for the ride. There was no choice but to cede control when a sailboat was running in front of the wind, and at first that had terrified her. For all her life, control had always been the key to her survival; excruciating attention to every detail of her surroundings had been the only security. Sailing had taken all that away. There were no startling noises out here; no muggers, no killers, no sudden movements caught in the corner of your eye that made you want to run for cover. Just the endless expanse of water and sky and the constant smell of salt on the wind.

She wakened every morning without a single thought of the myriad dangers she would face simply by leaving her house, and fell into a dreamless sleep in her tiny berth belowdecks each night, untroubled by nightmares of terror and murder and blood flowing down the bare legs of innocent women. John Smith had given this to her, this exotic experience of living without fear, as if she were a normal person living a normal life.

He was FBI, twenty years her senior, a solitary, humorless agent who lived for the job and little else. Three months ago he'd been assigned to work with Monkeewrench, Grace's computer software company, and the Minneapolis PD on a series of Internet murders.

They hadn't bonded in any serious way; even defining each other as friends would have been a stretch at that point. And yet when John had asked her out of the blue to go sailing with him in the Caribbean, Grace had said yes. To this day, she didn't fully understand why she had done that. The way he'd delivered the invitation hadn't even been particularly persuasive.

*I have a boat . . . When I get back to D.C., I'm going to get on the boat and just sail away . . . You want to come along?*

It had been a ridiculous question. What kind of person would walk away from her life and sail off with someone she barely knows? And yet the moment he asked it, one of the very few happy moments she'd had in an otherwise frightening childhood popped into her mind: the night when a weary, distant foster mother had relented long enough to read a bedtime story to her.

*The owl and the pussycat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat . . . they sailed away for a year and a day to the land where the bong-tree grows . . .*

To an unhappy child, the image of sailing away from her life had been magical. Maybe it still was. Maybe that was why she'd said yes to John.

Sometimes when the waters were gentle and the world was quiet, Grace let herself miss what she had left behind. Not Minneapolis in particular, but certainly her partners in Monkeewrench. They'd made a fortune in computers, writing educational software, crime-solving programs, and a game that ended up getting a lot of people killed. But

## P. J. TRACY

that work was salvation for Grace and the surviving three partners who were her family.

The great thing about computers was that they were utterly predictable. You entered the correct information and the results were consistent. Two plus two equals four. Always. It never worked that way with people. She missed the certainty of the work, but mostly she missed her partners. Fabulous fashionista Annie Belinsky; Harley Davidson, massive, bearded, tattooed, and lamb-gentle; and rail-thin, tenderhearted Roadrunner, the living embodiment of the scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*. Geniuses all. She missed Magozzi too, but she tried not to think of him too often.

Tonight the boat was a cradle rocking, gently rocking, and the sailcloth overhead made a sound like sun-dried sheets billowing on a midwestern clothesline. Charlie was snuggled up to her leg in the narrow berth, breathing doggy breath against her skin, snuffling a soft snore that was music in itself, and all these sounds and movements started to put Grace to sleep, as they always did.

And then she heard the noise that didn't belong.

Grace bolted up in bed, her ears straining to the point of numbness. She could hear the gentle baffling of the sails and the rattle of fittings in the breeze, but she could also isolate soft, stealthy footsteps. Too many of them for John Smith, unless he'd grown a few extra legs in the hours since they'd parted company and retired to their sleeping quarters.

She and John were no longer the only two occupants on this boat, and Charlie knew it too, because he rose from his sleep curlicue of canine joy, stuck his nose in the air, and let out a soft growl.

Within an instant, Grace's quiet heart rediscovered the blazing sear of an adrenaline push she'd been so happy living without. Now

it was business as usual; no thoughts in her mind, just instinct and the action of her body as she rose to a crouch and peered out the porthole.

It was black out there, as black could only be when you were out at sea, and the scope of her vision was limited by the tiny window. But still, she could see there was something out of place in the shadows she'd come to know so well. Something that looked like a rope, fastened to the railing with a makeshift knot no sailor worth his salt would ever tie. It hadn't ever been there before, and it shouldn't have been there now.

She felt her heart kick in a few extra beats, and the skin on her face start to prickle with heat. Goddamnit, for three months she'd been safe, unafraid, almost feeling like a normal person for the first time in her life, and oh God, she'd licked that up like a child tasting her very first Popsicle. And now, in the space of a blink, it was all gone, taken away by whoever was up there, whether their intent was innocent or evil.

Grace ducked back into her berth. Charlie had gone from vigilant to frozen, and she could see even in the darkness that his black lips were curled back. "Stay, Charlie," she whispered in the dog's ear, then grabbed her Sig Sauer off the miniature, boat-scaled nightstand.

As she silently crested the few short steps to the top deck, she briefly wondered what she was up against, or if it really mattered.

Sea legs. It had sounded like a menu item the first time Grace MacBride heard the phrase, but now, months later, she knew what it was, and she knew she had them.

She was standing on the teak deck in almost total blackness, bare feet spread wide for balance, because even the gentle swells could throw you off a little if you weren't used to them. Lucky her, steady on

## P. J. TRACY

her practiced sea legs, invisible to them because they weren't used to starlight. The idiots had brought flashlights, which served nicely to illuminate their intentions, but kept Grace hidden in the darkness beyond the circles of artificial light as long as she didn't move.

They hadn't heard her pad up the steps from below decks, hadn't even searched the boat for another passenger, so they didn't know she was there. That was good; excellent, in fact, since there were two of them, and she'd need the advantage of surprise to handle them both.

Clothes had always been her first line of defense; always black, always covering her from toe to neck, cloaking her body and her fear. And yet here she was in bare feet, bare legs, and a shortie nightgown, still and quiet and utterly unafraid. What an amazing feeling that was.

She watched them for a few seconds to make sure they weren't innocent door-to-door salesmen who just happened to be making a call on a boat ten miles from shore in the dead of night. And then she saw them grab John, saw the flash of a knife blade at his throat, and the time for watching was over.

Charlie the Wonder Dog bounded up the steps at the sound of the first shot, in spite of her earlier command to stay. He breached the deck with his teeth bared around a growl, but by then she'd pulled the trigger on the big Sig Sauer for the second time, and both men were making a mess of the pretty teak deck with their blood.

"It's okay, Charlie." She laid her hand on the dog's wiry head and felt the tremors of fear she would have shared not so long ago.

John Smith was using his hands to push himself to his feet, and once he was standing he had to grab the rail to remain upright. Grace had to get close to see the spot of blood on his neck where the knife

had started to go in. She touched it with her finger. It looked black in the starlight. “Just a prick. Sorry about that.”

He was breathing through his mouth, too fast and shallow, and his neck was clammy and cold under her finger. “Jesus Christ, Grace.”

She slid her hand down to his chest and felt the pounding there. “Deep breaths. Slow it down. You’re going to have a heart attack.”

“Yeah, well excuse me. No one’s ever tried to slash my throat before. Jesus Christ.”

“Sit down.”

“No.”

“Sit down before your legs give way. What were you doing up here anyway?”

“Meteor shower.”

“Oh brother.”

She picked up one of the flashlights rolling on the deck and shone it down at the faces of the two men. “You know them?”

John looked at the two men, both dark-skinned, black-haired, and absolutely unfamiliar. “No.”

“What do you think? Pirates?”

John dropped his head, fighting back nausea, still breathing hard. “Sometimes . . . sometimes the Mexican drug cartels highjack boats for drug running, kill the occupants.”

Grace dropped to her haunches, looked at the two dead men carefully, then started going through their pockets. She pulled out their wallets, checked the IDs and a few scraps of paper she found inside, then tossed the wallets over to a place on the deck that wasn’t bloody. “These aren’t Mexicans. They’re Saudi nationals here on student visas.”

**P. J. TRACY**

John shrugged. “The cartels and the terror groups are working the drug trade together now. Hezbollah’s turning into a big player in Mexico. So is al-Shabaab out of Somalia.”

Grace shook her head at a world gone mad, then continued searching the men’s pockets. The only other thing she found was a folded sheet of paper. She opened it and put the flashlight to it. “Oh my God.” She rocked back on her heels and looked over at John.

“What is it?”

“It’s a photograph of you.”

“What?” His hands trembled as he took the picture and stared at it. Gradually, the paper stopped rattling in his hands and his breathing slowed while thoughts raced through his head like rats in a maze. “Good Lord. I’m a target.”

Grace looked down at the two men she’d just killed. “They’re assassins?”

“Looks that way.”

“Who wants you dead, John? What the hell have you been doing?”

“I don’t know who wants me dead. It has to be a mistake.”

“Did you have any cases involving the cartels that might be coming back to haunt you?”

“Never.”

“How about organized crime or counterterrorism?”

“No, Grace. I was strictly cyber crimes, a desk jockey, bored out of my mind for most of my career. The first time I ever saw any action in the field was when I came to Minneapolis to work with you and MPD on the Internet serial case last summer.” He paused and smiled a little, as if at a blissful memory. “Great.”

Grace almost rolled her eyes. John had ended up in a gunfight on a golf course with a psychopath. Only a man would consider that a



career high point. “These men found you in the middle of the ocean, John. The only way they could do that was tracing your computer through the satellite link.”

He shook his head firmly. “Impossible. The Bureau insists on Federal firewalls, even on our personal computers. No one gets through them.”

Grace snorted softly. “Except the Chinese, the Russians, and probably a dozen others just getting warmed up. So let’s assume that’s how they tracked you. There’s no other explanation. So now the question is, what have you been doing on your computer that would make you a target?”

He shook his head helplessly. “Nothing. I’ve been using the Monkeewrench software you gave me to monitor jihadist websites. Even though the Federal firewalls may be vulnerable, Roadrunner said the ones you put on that software are impenetrable.”

“They are. What do you do with the information?”

“If I find something suspicious, I send it on to law enforcement.”

“Are you still on the job?”

“Definitely not. But counterterrorism is spread paper-thin after all the budget cuts. We don’t have enough agents keeping eyes on terrorist communications, so I help out. Anonymously.”

She raised her brows in a question.

“I wasn’t certain how the Bureau would react to a retired agent having access to that software, and I didn’t want it to come back on Monkeewrench. Anyway, we have thousands of agents monitoring these websites every day, and no one is trying to kill them . . . Jesus, Grace, what are you doing?”

She was using a bare foot to move the body of the one who’d held the knife at John’s throat. “Burial at sea.” One more push and the man

**P. J. TRACY**

rolled under the rail and splashed into the water. The second one was heavier, and she had to use her hands.

Charlie was sitting next to John now, shoving himself under a limp arm, and both of them were looking at her as if she were a stranger. “You can’t do that, Grace.”

She had a bucket over the side now, hauling up seawater, splashing the blood on the deck over the side. “You want to take these bodies back to report what happened? Then you might as well rent a billboard that says you’re still alive.” She untied the dinghy the men had arrived in from the rail and watched it bob away over the swells to become someone else’s mystery.