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SUSAN MALLERY is a USA TODAY bestselling author of over eighty books and has been a recipient of countless awards, including the National Reader’s Choice Award. Her combination of humor, emotion and downright sexiness has made her a reader favorite. She makes her home in Southern California with her husband, her very dignified cat and her not-so-dignified dog. Visit her Web site at www.SusanMallery.com.
The Only Way Out
To Jan. Okay, so it was tough at first. It’s turned out to be more than worth the trouble. I wish I could find the words to say how much your support and friendship have meant to me. You’re terrific. (I know it’s supposed to be a secret, but hey!) Here’s to being R&F, to maids, summer homes and bright futures.
He was less than twenty feet from the car when it exploded. The deafening blast threw Jeff Markum up against the side of a clothing shop. Glass, chunks of wood from a corner fruit stand and pieces of twisted metal from the car itself peppered his body like buckshot. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see, couldn’t hear anything except the powerful echo of the explosion. The blackness around him grew, humming louder and louder until he felt himself losing this world. Not yet, he thought desperately. He forced himself back to consciousness, driven by the need to rescue the two people inside what had once been a small red Ford. As he tried to push himself to his feet, pain ripped through his left leg. A quick glance confirmed the injury. Blood seeped from a tear in his trousers, and his knee bent at an awkward angle. Broken.

Around him, people stirred to life. He heard faint cries and louder screams. The uninjured scurried for cover in case the blast came again. Jeff knew they hid in vain. There was no need for another blast.

He gathered the little strength he had left and crawled along the littered sidewalk. Glass cut his hands. His broken leg dragged behind him. His shoulder was dislocated, but he couldn’t worry about any of that now. He had to get to the flaming, twisted heap that had once been his car.

Toward the inferno that housed his wife and child.

Fury drove him. Sorrow and guilt fueled his need. He was less than five feet from the car when he heard the sounds of the sirens.

They were too damn late, he thought looking at the flames licking skyward as if they could consume the heavens. No one inside could have survived. Even as he tried to comfort himself with the thought that they would have died instantly, he imagined he heard their screams.

Each high-pitched shriek of terror pierced him deeper and deeper until his soul started to bleed. He stared at the wreckage as black smoke began to obscure it from sight.

Then the siren stopped next to him and the medical team jumped out. Strong hands pulled him away from the fire, away from his wife and son. He fought the medics, but he had no strength. All too soon he was in the medical van and on his way to the hospital.

Jeff closed his ears against the clanging of the siren, and closed his eyes against the medic’s penlight. He would get the report tonight, but he already knew what they would find.

A car bomb. Nothing odd about that in a city that claimed hundreds of lives each year. Yet he’d been arrogant enough to assume that the statistics would never touch him. That he could pursue his enemy with all the fervor of a saint chasing the devil and that it would never get personal. Jeff had known Kray had marked him for death, but he hadn’t thought his family would have to pay because he loved his job.

“J.J. needs to be near his father,” Jeanne had insisted when her plane had landed in Lebanon. “And I need to be near my husband.”

Jeff had tried explaining the situation to her, and when that hadn’t worked, he’d resorted to anger. Jeanne had listened quietly, then continued unpacking. As far as she was concerned, it didn’t matter to her that she was in the middle of something ugly, something she would never understand. The rules in her life were simple. A wife’s place was at her husband’s side.

So he’d let her stay. Because a part of him had enjoyed the moments of normalcy in an otherwise chaotic life. Because he loved his wife and son almost as much as he loved his job, and because he
believed he could keep them safe. Kray had warned Jeff he would pay. Until this moment he hadn’t known how much.

Jeff let go of his thoughts and concentrated on the pain because the alternative was too horrible. Kray had ordered one of his men to place the bomb in Jeff’s car. The car Jeanne had borrowed that morning so she and J.J. could run errands. Jeff had grown complacent and overly confident. He’d killed his wife and child as surely as if he had set the bomb himself.

Then the buzzing in his ears grew louder and his thoughts more erratic. He couldn’t focus on Jeanne’s face or the sound of J.J.’s laughter. They were getting lost in the pain. Suddenly not finding his way back didn’t sound so bad.

“We’re losing him,” a disembodied voice called. “Pressure’s dropping. He’s lost too much blood.”

Jeff let himself sink further into the blackness. He didn’t care if he died. Jeanne was gone already, and with her, Jeff Jr. Dying might solve his problem. He would simply wait for Kray to join him in hell.
Five years later

Jeff Markum lay on his belly in the sand. Waving sea grass, bougainvillea and wild fig trees hid him from view. His powerful binoculars allowed him to see into the open windows of the exclusive villa situated at the far end of the hotel grounds.

Three men gathered around a table, as was their morning custom. They’d finished breakfast and were talking. A soft, tropical breeze carried with it the faint sound of laughter. Jeff couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he watched their lips moving and deciphered most of the words.

They were going fishing.

Jeff turned his head slightly to the right and saw the dock jutting out into the deep blue of the Caribbean sea. A well-equipped powerboat sat bobbing in the water. The crew was preparing for their day of fishing. Jeff looked back at the villa. The path from the front door to the boat was about fifty feet long. Nothing obstructed Jeff’s view of the area, so nothing would get in the way of his shot.

Kray would walk those fifty feet. He was a head taller than both his bodyguards. It would be easy to take him out.

Jeff lowered the binoculars and rolled onto his back. His hip bumped the gleaming rifle he’d laid out in preparation of what had to be done. Timing. This whole damn thing was about timing. Today it would happen. He could feel it in his bones, especially in his knee, which often ached if the weather was right.

It was early enough that the temperature was still pleasant. A rainstorm had passed through during the night, washing everything clean. He inhaled the thick air of the island, smelling the tropical flowers, the sea and his own sweat. He’d thought he might hesitate or be weighed down by indecision, but he wasn’t. Today. Now. Kray would die.

Jeff brushed his arm across his forehead and tried to relax. He’d killed men before. He wasn’t afraid to watch someone die. He wasn’t even afraid of dying himself. The plan was flawless. He was the ultimate weapon—an assassin willing to sacrifice himself for the target. Kray didn’t have a chance.

Jeff knew what would happen afterward. He hadn’t spent much time planning his escape, mostly because he didn’t expect to get away. Kray practically owned the island. He came here often enough to make the locals pliable to his wishes. While he was on St. Lucas, Kray liked to pretend he wasn’t a dangerous criminal, but instead, a wealthy businessman on holiday. So the villa had no alarm system, no heat sensors, no obvious security. It was perfect for Jeff’s plan. The three bodyguards who went everywhere with Kray wouldn’t even notice the single bullet that flew past them to find its victim. No doubt Jeff would be caught. So be it. He wanted Kray dead—nothing else mattered.

Jeff rolled onto his stomach again. Instead of the villa, he saw the small red car exploding into unrecognizable pieces. He felt the heat and smelled the burning wreckage.

He held himself very still and waited until the vision passed; then he picked up the rifle and stared through the scope. It had been five long years. In all that time Kray had never crossed the line. He’d never tried to kill Jeff again, and he’d never been caught. One of the most powerful crime lords in the world walked free because he was too smart and too lucky. Jeff smiled slowly. Kray’s luck was about to change for the worse. A single bullet to the head. That’s all it would take.
He was cynical enough to know Kray’s death wouldn’t change the world. Someone else would step in his shoes. But Jeff didn’t care about that. Part of the reason he was here—hell, all of the reason he was here was personal. Maybe when Kray was dead, his dreams about Jeanne and J.J. would haunt him less. Maybe then he could finally forget.

The sound of the boat engines cranking over caught his attention. He adjusted the rifle, shifting his arm on the sand, then stared through the scope. He closed his left eye. He could see the crew preparing to cast off.

Slowly he turned the rifle toward the villa’s front door. Within a few seconds, the first of the bodyguards appeared, carrying a canvas bag. The man was talking. Jeff couldn’t decipher his words. A second man stepped out onto the path. Kray’s assistant. Jeff waited.

A third man moved onto the path. Jeff stiffened. Kray. He stared intently through the rifle’s scope. The crime lord looked like what he pretended to be: a successful businessman on holiday. His brown hair was short and brushed straight back. Thick eyebrows arched over light brown eyes. A full mouth curved into a smile at something one of the bodyguards said.

Jeff adjusted the scope until the cross hairs centered on Kray’s head. He touched the trigger. He’d been practicing with this rifle for over a year. He knew exactly how much pressure to apply, knew how heavy the loads were in the bullets and knew precisely what would happen to Kray at the moment of impact. He’d always been a good field agent, even if he’d spent the past five years behind a desk.

He thought about Jeanne and J.J. one last time, then cleared his mind. Nothing existed except the target. Nothing mattered. His breathing slowed, as did his heartbeat. His body stayed perfectly still in anticipation.

The fourth man stepped through the door and onto the path. He, too, carried a canvas bag. The group started moving toward the boat. Now, Jeff told himself. He drew in a breath, held it and started to squeeze.

“Monsieur Kray!” a female voice called.

Jeff froze, then forced himself to relax. There was still time.

Kray and his men turned toward the house. A dark-haired woman in a gray-and-white uniform ran down to the dock. She was holding a piece of paper. Kray waited impatiently as the woman approached him.

They spoke briefly.

The woman, her dark hair pulled away from her face, stepped between Jeff and his target. Jeff waited. Kray read the paper, then handed it back to her and nodded. The woman started toward the villa.

Before he could adjust his sights on Kray again, a flicker of movement from behind the villa caught his attention. He tried to ignore it, but years of training kicked in. Cursing silently, he swung the gun back toward the villa, using the scope as a magnifying lens.

A woman crept up to the rear of the villa, toward the French doors by the breakfast room. She wore jeans, a white T-shirt and running shoes. Despite her casual attire, she was as out of place as a mouse in a cage full of cats. Tourists didn’t go creeping around behind the crime lord’s villa, and operatives didn’t sneak around in the middle of the day. Who the hell was she? Her long blond hair and pale skin told of her Anglo heritage; she wasn’t a native. But she was trying to get in to Kray’s villa. Jeff knew enough about his enemy to know she wasn’t part of his entourage.

Jeff glanced at the maid. The dark-haired woman had paused at the front of the building to light a cigarette. He looked at the blonde and saw she was fitting a key into the French doors and cautiously pushing them open. If the maid smoked one cigarette, that gave the blonde less than two minutes before the maid interrupted her. Damn it all to hell.

He turned his attention back to the men at the end of the dock. In about ten seconds, when the
bodyguard climbed into the bobbing boat, he would have a clear shot at Kray. If he killed his old enemy now, the woman would be trapped inside the villa and caught at whatever she was trying to do. He told himself she wasn’t his responsibility. He was here to take out Kray, civilians be damned.

Except that wasn’t his policy. He trained his men to protect civilians. He couldn’t expect any less from himself.

Jeff closed his left eye and gently moved the rifle until the cross hairs centered on Kray’s ear. He touched the trigger.

“Bang, you’re dead,” he said softly, then lowered the rifle to the ground.

Kray spent at least six weeks every spring on the island. He met with his managers, talked money with the various banks that laundered his funds, gave expensive parties. Jeff was also going to be here for six weeks. This was only day five. He had plenty of time to deal with Kray.

He glanced at the maid. She’d finished about half of her cigarette and was watching the men on the boat cast off. One of the bodyguards called out to her. She smiled and waved.

Jeff quickly broke down the rifle and slipped the weapon into his backpack. As he put on his cap and picked up the binoculars, he heard the boat engines roar as they powered the vehicle out toward the open ocean. Blue skies and bluer water beckoned. They wouldn’t be back until late afternoon. He thought about the bags the bodyguards had carried. They might even stay away overnight.

He turned his attention back to the villa. The woman hadn’t reappeared. The maid was down to the last third of her cigarette.

“Come on,” Jeff said quietly. “You’ve got less than thirty seconds until she goes back inside.”

He didn’t know why he was rooting for the mysterious woman, except if she was Kray’s enemy, then she was his ally. He waited, counting out the seconds. The maid finished her cigarette and stubbed out the butt in the decorative sand-filled jar beside the door. She opened the front door and stepped inside.

Damn. Jeff picked up his backpack and rose to his knees. With a last glance at the departing boat, he crawled through the low-lying bushes around the beach and toward the back of the villa. The blonde hadn’t come back out yet. If the maid caught her, she would have a lot of explaining to do. If she did manage to escape, he would follow her and try to find out what she was doing here. Ally or not, he wasn’t going to let anyone get in the way of what had to be done.

Andie Cochran promised herself that when she was safely out of danger, she was going to find a quiet place out in the bushes somewhere and throw up. She hadn’t known it was possible to be this scared and still function.

Her muscles quivered and twitched. Her hands shook, her knees trembled. Even her breathing was ragged. Her stomach lurched threateningly and her heart raced. Nerves had kept her going for the past three weeks and she was hanging on by sheer force of will.

She glanced at her watch. She had no time left. She’d seen the nanny run down the dock toward Kray and his men. It had given her only a moment to act, but she’d taken it. There might not be another chance. Kray and his goons were gone on an overnight fishing trip. The villa was at the far end of the resort and the hotel housekeeping staff wasn’t due for a half hour. No one else was around. The building was empty except for the nanny and Bobby. She had the perfect opportunity to rescue her son.

Andie moved quickly through the silent house. It had changed some since she’d been here last. Of course, that had been over six years ago. She’d been young and innocent. A fool. As she passed by the elegantly appointed living room, she noticed that the cushions and draperies had been replaced, but the heavy carved mahogany furniture was the same. She and Bobby could live for three years on what
Kray had paid for the sofa and love seat alone. But then he’d always wanted the best, the most
beautiful, the rare. She must have been such a disappointment to him.

It didn’t matter, she reminded herself. None of it mattered. She turned toward the long hallway
and ran quietly toward the back bedrooms. Kray would take the master suite for himself, with his
bodyguards on either side and across the hall. That left only the last three bedrooms empty for her son.

Most of the doors stood open and she glanced in them as she moved past. Unmade beds, piles of
luggage, luxurious furnishings, but no people. When she approached the end of the hallway and the
last three rooms, she heard a voice.

“I’m not afraid, I won’t be afraid.”

The soft singsong crooning stopped her in her tracks. Instinctively Andie clutched her hands to
her midsection as if she could hold in the pain. Oh, God, what had Kray done to her child?

She flew down the last few feet of corridor toward the sound. When he was frightened, Bobby
would huddle in the middle of his bed and rock back and forth, singing the refrain over and over again.
It happened during rare Los Angeles thunderstorms, or when he’d snuck downstairs while she was
studying and watched a scary movie. She would hear the soft singing, then curl up next to him on the
bed, holding him close until he forgot to be afraid.

No one knew that, she thought, fighting the tears. No one knew anything about him. He’d spent
the past three weeks alone in a terrifying world. Living with strangers, missing her, not knowing how
desperate she’d been to be with him.

She opened the last door on the right and stepped into the darkened room. Drapes had been pulled
closed over the wide window. There was a bed in the center of the room, along with stacks of toys,
many of them still in their boxes. An untouched breakfast tray sat on a low table.

Her son lay huddled in the center of the bedspread, his back to her.

“Bobby,” she said softly.

The boy turned toward her. His hazel eyes widened; then he sat up slowly as if not able to believe
what he was seeing. “Mommy?”

She moved toward him, holding out her arms. He stood up and launched himself at her. She
caught him in midair. He wrapped his sturdy legs around her waist and his arms around her neck.
Familiar little-boy smells assaulted her, as his warm, small body pressed against her.

“Bobby,” she murmured, clutching him closer. His hair was longer, but still felt the same. Her
palm moved up and down against his bony spine, feeling the ridges and thin muscles that would one
day make him as big and broad as his father.

He cried, clinging to her as if he would never let go. His relief was as tangible as his thin arms, as
real as his words.

“I missed you,” he said between sobs that nearly ripped her in two. “I called for you, but you
didn’t come. Didn’t you hear me?”

“No,” she said, pressing her cheek against his. She felt the moisture there, then realized their
tears mingled. “I wanted to be here, sweetie, but I couldn’t find you right away. I’m here now.”

Bobby leaned back and stared at her. He sniffed. “I don’t wanna stay, Mommy. I hate Daddy.” He
said it defiantly, as if expecting her to scold him. At five, life was simple. Bobby loved his mother, his
friends and his teacher. He liked school and tolerated bath time. He hadn’t yet learned to hate. Until
Kray had torn him away from the only world he’d ever known. But his anger and fear obviously
troubled him. Boys weren’t supposed to hate their fathers.

Most fathers weren’t Kray.

“It’s okay,” she promised, then prayed she wasn’t lying. “I’m going to get you—”

The front door slammed closed. Andie’s heart thumped loudly against her chest as she realized
she’d wasted precious time. The nanny had returned. What now?
She glanced at the open bedroom door. The nanny’s footsteps sounded loud on the tiled floor. She and Bobby couldn’t go back that way. She’d hoped her luck would hold and they could walk out the way she’d come in. But that wasn’t going to happen. Still, she would find another way. She had to; Bobby was depending on her.

She set him down. He started to protest, but she touched her fingers to his mouth. “Hush,” she whispered. “We have to escape. You must be very quiet. Do you understand? Not a word.”

He nodded, wide-eyed.

She moved silently to the door and peered out. The nanny was in the great room by the front door. Andie could see the hem of her dress as she bent over a sofa. They still had a few seconds.

Andie closed the door quietly and turned the lock in the knob. Then she glanced around to find another way to escape. There were two doors. She tried them both. One led to a closet, the other to a bathroom. That meant they were trapped. Her gaze lingered on the pulled drapes. Unless they went out the window.

She looked down at her son. He was dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, both new. Kray had taken nothing when he’d stolen her child from her. His athletic shoes were sturdy. He would be fine.

She took his hand tightly in hers, and led the way to the window. “Come on, Bobby. We’ve got to go right now.”

He stared at her while she opened the drapes, then fumbled with the catch. The glass slid open.

“Are we ‘scaping?”

“Yes, we’re escaping.” She released his hand so she could lower the screen to the ground. A blooming azalea bush provided a small amount of cover. From the front of the villa she could hear the tap-tap of the nanny’s heels. The sound kept advancing. Andie didn’t know how much time they had left. They just needed a few seconds. Please, God, grant them that.

The window was about chest height on her, which meant she needed a step up. She glanced around the room, then saw the child-size chair by the low table. She grabbed it, along with the roll from the untouched breakfast tray. She stuffed the bread in her jeans pocket and placed the chair below the window.

Andie looked outside. When she didn’t see anyone, she reached for Bobby, picking him up under his arms. He was heavier than he looked, but she was used to his growing weight. She heaved him onto the windowsill, then stepped onto the chair. The plastic seat sagged under her, but didn’t give way. She had him scoot around so his legs were hanging outside the window, then stretched as far as she could, lowering him to about ten inches from the ground.

“Jump for the last bit,” she said.

“Okay.” He hunched up for the drop. She released him and he hit the ground in an exaggerated crouch. “Made it, Mom,” he said, grinning up at her.

His familiar smile made her weak with relief. Whatever Kray had done to him in the past three weeks, it hadn’t destroyed his spirit. Now they just had to get away and off this damned island.

Using her arms as leverage, she pushed hard off the plastic chair and turned as she moved through the air so that she landed on the windowsill on her hip. She pulled one leg up and through the window, then the other. Motioning Bobby to step back, she dropped to the ground, then picked up the screen.

The footsteps were definitely louder now.

“Bobby?” a female voice called. “You can’t stay in your room all morning. It’s a beautiful day. Would you like to play in the water?”

The footsteps got closer. Andie ducked down behind the building, knowing at any second the nanny was going to try the door and find it locked. She glanced around frantically, wondering which
path would be the safest. Fear gripped her, but she had to stay calm. She couldn’t let Bobby know the
danger they were in. He’d been through enough.

A sharp ringing cut through the silence. At first she thought she’d imagined the sound. Then she
leaned against the villa and exhaled her relief. The footsteps moved away from Bobby’s room as the
nanny went to answer the phone.

After closing the window, Andie leaned the screen against the glass, hoping it would take the
nanny some time to figure out how Bobby had escaped. With any luck the other woman would search
through the house before realizing her charge was gone.

They had a few more seconds reprieve. It would be enough. She took Bobby’s hand and led him
around the villa, back toward the way she’d come. She’d left her rented Jeep about a half mile away.
It was parked on the side of the highway. All they had to do was get away from the villa and into the low
bushes and trees. The undergrowth would protect them. She should know. She’d spent most of
yesterday and the four hours since dawn hidden by a small bush, praying no one would discover her.
Just thinking about it made her feelitchy all over. For all she knew the plant had been poisonous, but
it hadn’t mattered. Getting Bobby out alive was her only priority.

She kept moving and kept low, hugging the building, making sure they couldn’t be seen from the
windows. Bobby trailed behind her. She reached back and pulled him close to her body. He looked
worried. Why wouldn’t he be? They were escaping from the man who had casually walked into their
town house and kidnapped him on the day of his fifth birthday.

Big hazel eyes stared up at her. She took the time to brush the hair from his flushed face and
smile.

She picked him up. They would move faster with her carrying him. Besides, they were about to
cross open ground. If someone did shoot at them, her body would protect Bobby. She shuddered, not
able to believe what she was thinking. This was so far from her regular, boring life. Yet it was
painfully real. Kray had threatened to kill her if she came after her son. She believed him.

“I love you, pumpkin,” she said.
“I’m not a pumpkin,” he answered, slipping into the familiar game. “I’m a boy.”
“Really?” She pretended to be surprised. After dropping a quick kiss on his forehead, she took
one last look around. “We’re going to run to those trees there,” she said, pointing.
Bobby looked over his shoulder. “Are you going to go fast?”
“Yup.”
“So Daddy can’t find us?”
He was so young to have had to deal with everything that had happened. Her heart ached for him.
But there was no time to discuss it. That would come later. When they got away. If they got away.
“Yes, Bobby. So Daddy can’t find us.”
He gripped her arms and buried his head in her shoulder. “I’m ready. Let’s go.”
Let’s go, she echoed silently. She moved between two large windows and stood up. The stucco
building felt warm. She could feel the sweat on her back. Shorts would have been cooler, but she’d
been afraid of getting scratched as she crawled through the brush on her way to the villa.

“Here we go,” she said softly, and took off across the manicured lawn.

She moved as quickly as she could, keeping low. Bobby clung to her like a burr, but his weight
pulled at her and she could feel the strain on her back and shoulders. Her breath came in rapid pants.
At any second she expected to hear the nanny yelling at her to stop. Her muscles tensed in anticipation
of the gunshot that would follow, because she sure as hell wasn’t going to stop for anyone.

She ran hard and fast into the low brush and trees, slowing only to avoid a fall. Just a few more
feet, she told herself. Then they would be out of view of the villa.

She circled around a tall mahogany tree and ducked behind it. Coming to a stop, she leaned
against the massive trunk to catch her breath.

In between her rapid panting, she listened for the sound of someone following. Nothing. Just the call of the gulls and the crash of the waves on the shore. They’d made it.

Andie clutched Bobby closer and nuzzled his neck, making him giggle. She chuckled with him, then raised her head and took off to her right. After going about ten feet, she turned and doubled back.

Something moved. She spun around.

Her scream never got further than her throat. The man had appeared from nowhere. She’d never seen him in all the time she’d been waiting by the villa or heard him moving through the trees. Now he stood in front of her, dressed in military camouflage with a pistol pointing directly at her head.
“Who the hell are you?” Jeff asked, staring at the woman clutching the child to her chest.

She blinked at him but didn’t answer. The boy in her arms twisted until he could see Jeff; then his mouth dropped open and fear filled his big hazel eyes.

“Mommy, that man has a gun.”

“Hush, Bobby, I know.”

The child looked to be about five or six. Not much older than J.J. had been when he’d been killed in the car explosion. Jeff didn’t want to think about that now. He glared at the woman in front of him. What was going on here? Who was the woman and what was she doing with that kid?

“Is he going to hurt us?” Bobby asked.

“I don’t know.” She adjusted her hold on the boy, pulling him more securely against her. Long blond hair had been pulled back into a braid. Her face paled under her slight tan, her eyes were wide, her mouth trembling.

“Who are you?” she asked with an obvious effort to keep the fear from her voice. “What do you want?”

“That’s what I’d like to know about you. I saw you climb out of the villa with that kid.”

His gaze drifted over her cotton T-shirt and jeans. She wasn’t concealing a weapon. He flicked on the Beretta’s safety, then shoved the pistol into the holster attached to his waist.

Her breathing increased and he could smell her fear. The boy was confused, but not frightened. His mother looked as if she expected to have her throat slit.

“It has nothing to do with you,” she said, desperation adding an edge to her voice. She sidestepped him and continued moving away from the villa. “Please just let us go.”

“I can’t do that,” he said. Not after she’d seen him. Whatever kind of game she was playing with Kray, he didn’t want any part of it. Once his old enemy knew he was on the island, Jeff would be marked and hunted until they found him. Some woman with a grudge against her old lover wasn’t about to interfere with what he had to do.

She spun toward him. Blue eyes met his. He saw her panic. “Oh, God, you work for him.”

He didn’t answer.

“You’re going to kill me. No, you can’t. I won’t let you. He can’t have Bobby back. He can’t.”

She took off running. At first, Jeff was too startled to do more than stare after her. What the hell was she going on about? He didn’t look like one of Kray’s men. They dressed like businessmen and tourists. He glanced down at his camouflage fatigues. He looked as if he were going to lead jungle warfare exercises. But if she was with Kray, she should know all that. And if she wasn’t—

He loped after her, moving quietly through the dense brush. As he got closer, he heard the sound of her breathing. Bobby clung to her shoulder and stared behind them.

“I don’t see him, Mommy,” he said quietly.

“Good.”

“Was he going to hurt us?”

Jeff didn’t bother listening to her response. He circled around them and stepped into her path, two feet in front of her. She saw him and stopped instantly.

Perspiration had collected on her forehead and upper lip. A single drop rolled down to her damp T-shirt. It was barely after ten in the morning, but the temperature was already in the mid-eighties.
Her lips moved, but there was no sound. He realized she was praying. She started backing away from him.

“No,” she whispered. “No. No. No.” Her breathing came in rapid pants. The child clung to her.

“Mommy, I’m scared.”

This was more than a lover’s spat, he realized. She was genuinely terrified. “Who are you?” he asked, frustrated and confused. “What are you doing on Kray’s island and who is that kid?”

The woman stared at him, then bent over and let the boy slip to the ground. “Run,” she ordered him.

The child hesitated, hovering near her.

“Run!” she screamed.

Bobby took two steps away. Jeff moved toward him. The kid could get lost in the tropical jungle and not be found for weeks, if ever.

The woman sprang between him and her child. She raised her fists in front of her and balanced on the balls of her feet as if she expected him to physically fight her.

“Listen, lady, let’s just calm down.” He didn’t need a hysterical woman on his hands.

“Run, Bobby,” she called and lunged forward.

Jeff sidestepped neatly, letting her run harmlessly past him. The boy hovered by a large mahogany tree and clasped his arms tightly in front of him. He began to rock back and forth.

Jeff started toward him when he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to the right as the woman barreled into his left side. Before he could reach out and steady her, she’d curled her fingers into claws and started going for his eyes.

“Damn it, woman, be careful,” he muttered, grabbing her upper arms to hold her off.

She wrenched free of him and kicked at his knees. Great. She’s had just enough self-defense training to hurt herself, he thought grimly as he jumped out of the way and caught her neatly around her midsection. She screamed and fought him, her hands pulling at his hold. He hauled her hard against him. Her heel came down on his foot. He barely felt the impact through his heavy boots. Her elbow connected with his belly. He exhaled audibly.

Then something or someone rushed him. Small hands grabbed his shirt.

“You let go of my mommy. Let go!”

Jeff turned toward the boy. The woman took advantage of his distraction and went for his gun. He read her intentions before she even got close to the pistol, but it was enough. His brain shut down and he reacted instinctively.

His left hand clamped down hard on her right wrist. With one quick, fluid movement he jerked her arm around behind her, pinning her hand to her back. She winced in pain. He spun them both, putting the woman between him and the boy, then wrapped his right arm around her neck, cutting off her supply of air. He applied enough pressure to frighten her, but not enough to kill.

“Now that I have your attention,” he said softly, “you’re going to answer a few questions.”

He could feel the heat of her body and the curve of her breast where it brushed against his elbow. She trembled against him.

“I’m going to let you breathe enough to talk, but I’m not going to let you go. If you give me any more trouble, I’ll make you very uncomfortable. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

He loosened his hold on her throat. She gasped in a breath of air, then coughed. Bobby rushed at her. “Let her go! You let go of my mommy. My daddy will come back on his big boat and he’ll hurt you.”

Sunlight filtered through the trees and brush around them. The scent of the saltwater and the faint
The child moved closer and angrily swiped at the tears on his face. Sunlight caught the brown of his hair, then highlighted the shape of his nose and chin. Raw anger radiated from the child’s eyes. Anger so like another man’s rage.

“Let her go,” Bobby demanded again.

Jeff released the woman and stepped back. He bumped into a tree and grasped its smooth trunk for support. Bobby continued to glare at him. Those eyes, so large and expressive. So like his father’s.

Jeff swallowed hard, remembering another child with big eyes, a boy about four years old, laughing as he climbed down the plane’s steps and flew into his father’s arms.

“I crossed an ocean,” J.J. had said proudly as Jeff had swooped him up.

“Did you?”

“I wasn’t afraid.”

Jeanne had followed her son down the steps, moving a little slower, the long flight and time changes making her weary. “He’s not afraid of anything.”

Fierce pride had burned through Jeff, as though he had something to do with his child’s bravery. Perhaps he had taught him something about courage, but more likely, J.J. hadn’t encountered anything to be frightened of. He’d been surrounded by loving parents and family from the moment he’d been born.

So much life snuffed out by a single explosion. An explosion meant for his father. Jeff stared at the boy in front of him, and at the woman crouched down beside him. She held the child to her and watched him fearfully, as if he’d gone mad. He had gone mad.

Loathing rose up inside of him until he could taste the bitterness. Hatred, anger, rage. Revenge. He advanced slowly. “What’s your last name, Bobby?”

“C-Cochran,” the child answered.

There had been rumors, of course. Whispers of a brief marriage, hints of a child. But few had seen the mysterious woman or her son. Word on the street was that she’d left Kray after six months of wedded bliss. Kray had kept his secrets. And the woman had kept hers.

Jeff continued to approach. The woman stood up and moved the boy behind her.

“You can’t hurt him,” she said. “He’s just a boy.”

“He’s Kray’s son.”

“No. He’s mine. Until three weeks ago, he’d never even seen his father. He thought he was dead. Bobby is nothing like Kray. Nothing.” Her voice grew louder with each word.

“Mommy?” Bobby clung to her leg and whimpered.

Jeff reached for the custom grip of his pistol. His hand brushed against the cool steel. He froze.

What the hell was he doing?

He shook his head to clear away the anger, then tamped down the remaining emotions. He couldn’t let his personal feelings get in the way of his job.

He gave the boy a half smile. “Don’t be scared, son. I won’t hurt you.”

Bobby sniffed, but didn’t release his death grip on his mother’s jeans.

Jeff returned his attention to the woman. She, too, had large eyes. High cheekbones sculpted her face. For the first time he realized she was beautiful enough to stop a man in his tracks and make him think about the forbidden. Or beautiful enough to tempt a man to try to own her, much as Kray owned objects from all over the world.

“How old are you?” he asked Bobby.

“F-five.”

His gaze narrowed as he studied the woman. That meant she’d married Kray about six years ago...
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