

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
THE PROTECTOR

The Protector delivers engaging characters, a fast-moving plot, and some very steamy love scenes. NL Gassert has crafted an exciting and entertaining romance that builds suspense and erotic tension with every turn of the page. Take it to bed...and plan on staying up.

Charles Casillo, author of *The Fame Game*

Sexy, sizzling—and sweet! NL Gassert manages to combine the tenderness of first love with thrilling action in *The Protector*. The tropical setting on Guam is fresh and beautifully evoked, and the engaging characters of Mason and Soren will keep readers turning the pages, rooting for these lovers against tropical storms and terrorist agents.

Neil Plakcy, author of *Mahu Surfer*

Literary chef Gassert serves up a delectable nine-course meal of murder, mayhem, money-laundering, terrorism, temptation, brutality, bisexuality, scandal, and sadistical (sic.) father-son abuse.

William Maltese, author of the Stud Draqual mystery series

Gassert delivers taut action and intriguing characters in a lush, exotic setting that really sets this book apart—a promising debut!

MJ Pearson, author of *Discreet Young Gentleman*

The Protector

The Protector

by NL Gassert

Seventh Window
Publications

The Protector © 2007 NL Gassert

All rights reserved. Except for brief passages quoted in a newspaper, magazine, radio, or television review, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. Though it contains incidental references to actual people, products and places, these references are merely to lend the fiction a realistic setting. All other names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Seventh Window Publications edition: December 2007
cover illustration © 2007 Aman Chaudhary – all rights reserved

Published in the United States of America by:
Seventh Window Publications
P.O. BOX 603165
Providence, RI 02906-0165
<http://www.SeventhWindow.com>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007940879

ISBN-13: 978-0-9717089-6-9
ISBN-10: 0-9717089-6-7

dedication

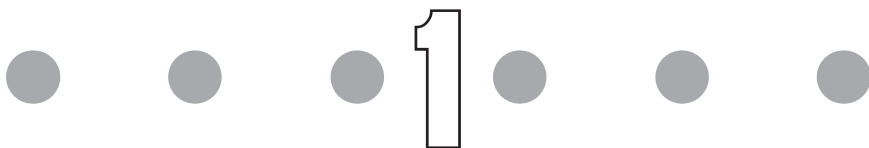
In memory of Loren Black

acknowledgments

With thanks to Josh Aterovis, Deborah Turrell Atkinson, Lori L. Lake, and MJ Pearson for answering my questions about the publishing business and offering sage advice.

Many thanks also to Ken Harrison for understanding what I meant to write and making me actually write it. I will have more details and less hair color the next time around, I promise.

A heartfelt thank you to Ella, Laurie, Loren, Nigel, Reshenna and Tru for your support, encouragement and input. You guys rock!



The air over the marina was thick with September humidity. Moored to the dock, boats gently swayed as moonlit waves slapped up against their hulls. The scent of the Pacific Ocean saturated the night.

Mason Ward smiled to himself. But while the scene was idyllic, the situation was far from it. For one thing, the redhead walking down the dock beside him wasn't a date, and he wasn't walking as much as he was dragging his feet. Mason didn't date much, had in fact not been on a date in months, but men weren't usually this reluctant to share his company.

Of course, he had a lousy track record where redheads

were concerned. Right out of high school and still very much in denial about his attraction to men, he'd married a lovely and fire-headed girl. Today, Angela, his ex-wife of ten years, was as disinterested in him as the young man walking down the dock next to him. Mason couldn't help but wonder what he'd gotten himself into.

Not two hours before, past a time when polite people decided it was too late to call anyone in the same time zone, Mason's phone had rung. Although determined not to answer it, he'd still checked the display. It was Kaoru. His friend Kaoru called him infrequently enough that this late night call had aroused Mason's curiosity. He'd answered, and in typical fashion, Kaoru—only the second FBI agent to be born and raised on Guam—had skipped the small talk to come right to the point. "Listen, Mason, old buddy, I've got this kid who's in trouble. I need a safe place to stash him for a week or two."

Mason groaned, seeing his weekend plans grinding to a halt. "Are you looking for a babysitter or a bodyguard?"

"Both. The kid's knee-deep in some serious shit. But I'm having issues with his story. I need him somewhere safe and out of reach."

"How out of reach?"

"Extended cruise out of reach. I need him sober and away from his father."

"This father, is he a problem?"

"Yes," Kaoru said. "I'm going out on a limb here for the kid. I need someone I can trust to take him off my hands for a while, someone who can handle him and, if worse comes to worst, the father."

The call itself told Mason all he needed to know. His friend wasn't in the habit of looking for help outside the department.

"You won't regret it," Kaoru promised before he hung up.

Oh yes, I will, Mason thought. He had a feeling that bringing Soren Buchanan, James "The Smile" Buchanan's son, home with him had trouble written all over it.

Mason and Soren reached their destination at the end of the

long dock and Mason shot the sullen shadow to his right a very deliberate, very slow look, letting his eyes travel down Soren's lean frame. A few months shy of twenty-three. Just under six feet. Rangy. Hair like burnished copper. Eyes like jade. Cheekbone and jaw discolored with bruises. T-shirt stained with his own blood.

The kid shoved his hands into the front pockets of his faded Levis and stared at the dark yacht before them. "What's this?"

"A boat."

"I can see that."

Mason arched a dark brow and shrugged. The FBI's notes on Soren suggested that challenging authority came as naturally to him as breathing. And drinking. "Your home for the next two weeks."

"You've got to be kidding."

"I've been hired to keep you sober and out of your father's long reach. This will be it for the next two weeks."

The boat—a 58-foot Alaskan-style trawler—was a good idea. Not exactly Mason's first choice, because it was his home, but a good idea nonetheless. Still, the kid didn't seem inclined to board the yacht voluntarily. Mason gave him a firm nudge onboard when glaring at him didn't do the trick.

"Let me show you something." Mason maneuvered his guest into the pilothouse. He pointed to a navigational chart unrolled on the table. "We'll be here." He tapped the vastness of the Pacific Ocean with a manicured finger. "This is us right now." He swept his finger to the eastern edge of the chart where Guam's coastline was visible, making his point. He let that sink in.

"Now," he fixed the redhead with a measuring look, "let's get some things straight. There is no alcohol on board. None. And I'm a very thorough guy."

Soren shoved his hands back into the pockets of his jeans and tore his attention off the chart. "What does that mean?"

"That means," Mason explained, "I even threw out the mouthwash and the rubbing alcohol under the sink. You get into any scrapes, we've got peroxide."

“Screw you.”

Mason grunted. On an island populated with tawny-skinned, dark-haired beauties, Soren was an exotic exception that drew the eyes of men and women alike. Mason’s weakness for redheads aside, he wondered just how Soren would react to a come-on. Did Soren follow through or was he just a tease?

Mason grabbed him by the sleeve of his T-shirt, determined not to fall into the kid’s trap. He led the redhead down two sets of stairs and a narrow passageway, into a large stateroom where Soren shook off his hand and turned to face him with narrowed green eyes that radiated disdain.

Mason straightened and crossed muscular arms in front of his chest. “Take your clothes off.”

“What?”

Mason enjoyed the moment. Ruffling the kid’s feathers wasn’t easy, but it was certainly satisfying. “Your clothes,” he repeated. “Take them off. I want to look at”—he gestured, not sure what to call the result of abuse—“you.”

Soren ignored him, turning his back. He chose to inspect the spacious stateroom instead. His curious glance swept over gleaming teak and the dark sheets and blankets on the large, neatly made bed that dominated the room. He looked at books organized on shelves. Touched fingers to framed photographs grouped together between two open ports that let in the humid night air. Eyed the alphabetized CD collection. “This is nice.”

“Yes, it is. Thank you. Don’t get used to it. It’s my bedroom. Yours is down there. Less nice.” Mason pointed absently, sat on his bed and spread out the contents of his first-aid kit before him. There was the usual: adhesive bandages of all sizes, gauzes and such, and a few things he’d added over the years. Like Ben’s homemade and pungent cure for rashes of all kinds. And his grandmother’s ointment that soothed most aches and pains.

“Strip. Sit,” he said, pointing at the edge of the bed.

Soren wrinkled his nose. “What’s that smell?”

“Menthol.”

He didn't move. Mason waited, stared. It was a short stand-off. The kid caved in first. Mason heard Soren's muffled wince that accompanied the shirt sliding past red hair and saw the color drain from already pale skin.

Soren tossed the shirt to the side. It slid over the edge of the bed and onto the floor. He obviously didn't give it a second's thought, but Mason's fingers itched to pick it up. Instead, he waited until his guest sat gingerly on the bed, then moved behind him.

Someone had indeed been very pissed off, and from the looks of it Soren's back had suffered the brunt of the aggression, probably having been slammed up against a few hard surfaces. Mason suspected the kid was either still drunk or high on painkillers. Probably both. All the same, Soren hissed, cringed and flinched away from Mason's gentle touch and the cool salve he spread across the bruises and scrapes.

"So, who did this to you?"

Soren closed his eyes. He hung his head and his tousled hair—a tad too long for Mason's taste—fell to hide his face. "What do you care?"

His father, James "The Smile" Buchanan, was an active player on the political court. Despite four marriages, their failures and his appetite for vastly younger women, Buchanan could have been governor twice over. His whirlwind marriage to Soren's mother, a Swedish supermodel—a relationship whispered to have been a publicity stunt—had catapulted him out of the realm of politics and into full-fledged celebrity status. His list of wealthy and influential friends and acquaintances read like the Who's Who? of Guam.

But there was more to James Buchanan than his public persona. He wasn't a man to cross. He was too influential, too well connected, and, if rumors were true, too ruthless. Mason had the feeling that talk of a short fuse and a bad temper wasn't just idle gossip, not with the man's battered and bruised son sitting before him.

He watched the kid's shoulders tense as he ran a salvaged and slippery hand down Soren's bruised flank. Soren had the porcelain complexion of a natural redhead. The touch of bronze the

constant and unrelenting Guamanian sun had added was barely enough to produce a tan line. It was quite a shame that the freckled skin was marred with bruises.

“So, Kaoru said your father did this to you. That true?”

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

“I get paid to ask questions.”

“Ah.”

“So, is it true?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Soren sighed, shrugged, and winced. “I wasn’t a model son. I embarrassed him in front of his business associates.”

Mason made a low noise in the back of his throat. James “The Smile” Buchanan had a temper. Even Kaoru suspected violent opposition or he wouldn’t have suggested taking the kid off the island. “Did you embarrass him?”

“I was drunk.”

“You’re drunk a lot.” It was in the notes he’d read.

Soren’s eyes snapped open and his head came up. He held Mason’s even stare with a fierce look of his own. “No, I’m not.”

“Uh huh.”

“I am not.” He jerked back when Mason examined a large bruise covering his ribs. “I’m not,” he said again. “I don’t drink all the time. Matter of fact, I don’t drink all that often.” He glared and sucked in a startled breath when Mason touched the bruise. “But when I do, I’m serious about it. I drink to get drunk. Shit. That hurts.” He clamped his mouth shut and grimaced.

“I see.” Mason’s unsympathetic hand prodded the bruise again. “I don’t think it’s cracked. Take a deep breath.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Soren pursed his lips and took a breath.

Mason sat back and fixed him with a look that would have had another man sucking more air into his lungs. “The idea is for you to move that rib when you breathe.”

Soren did and grimaced again. “He waited until the next

day. My father. Waited till I was sober. Even gave me an aspirin for the hangover. Then he beat the shit out of me.”

“Considerate.”

“Yeah. You were kidding about the boat and the two weeks, right?”

“No.”

“Shit. What if I get sea sick?”

“Do you?”

“I just might. You know, apparently being a recovering alcoholic and all.”

“Wiseass.” Oh yeah, he’d invited trouble onboard for sure. Trouble that had nothing to do with Soren being The Smile’s son and everything to do with him sitting on Mason’s bed, half naked, vulnerable, red hair tousled. He was a temptation, and Mason’s dormant hormones—jarred awake by hands sliding over warm flesh—were begging for a taste. There was such a thing as professionalism, though. Hormones notwithstanding, Mason knew he’d reached the line that separated medicinal touch from caress. Reluctantly he took his hands off the kid.

“I don’t have any clothes.”

Mason nodded toward his dresser. “You can borrow some of mine.”

Mason felt Soren’s appraising glance slide over his body like a warm touch. He groaned and got to his feet, bringing distance between the tease and his willpower.

“I doubt they fit.”

Mason took his own lingering look. “Feel free to strut around naked.”

Soren pulled his split lips into a grin. “You wish.”



2

“Less nice, my ass,” Soren grumbled the next morning. When he’d thought his cabin would be a smaller version of Mason’s bedroom, he’d been sorely mistaken. His 5-foot by 8-foot space came with an upper and a lower single bunk and just enough room for a man to take a deep breath.

Soren stumbled out of his cabin and up the few stairs. The man who stood in the galley, forking breakfast eggs and rice into his mouth when Soren shuffled past wasn’t Mason. He was shorter and less broad across the shoulders. His dark hair and beard were shot through with silver. Glasses perched on his nose.

“Good morning,” the man said. “Soren? Right?”

“Yeah.” Soren squinted past sleep-tousled hair that fell onto his face and rubbed his throbbing temple. He heaved himself onto one of the stools in front of the galley counter, his back to the salon and the oversized couch he wanted to stretch out on, dropped his elbows onto the counter and his head into his hands. “Who are you?”

“Ben Marques. Mason’s business partner.”

Soren took one look at the forty-something Spaniard and pegged him for a silent partner, definitely not a bodyguard. His skepticism must have showed, because Ben smiled.

“I’m the office manager,” he explained. “Want some breakfast?”

“Got a soda?”

“For breakfast? No. Sorry. No sodas.” He laughed and held up his hands when Soren lifted his head and glowered at him. “No, what I meant to say was no sodas period. Mason doesn’t believe in soda.”

Soren made a face and jerked his chin in the direction of the large stainless steel fridge. He needed something to wash the sour taste off his tongue and jumpstart his sore body. “What’s in there then?”

Ben abandoned his breakfast plate and stuck his dark head in the fridge to report his findings, “Milk. Water. Tomato juice.”

Tomato juice? The thought alone made Soren’s stomach churn and his bile rise. He gagged and for a split second considered downing half a glass. Throwing up might make him feel better. Little else would. “Where’s the warden anyway?”

Ben chuckled. “In the shower. Want me to hunt down some aspirin for you?”

“Coffee?”

Ben grimaced. “Sorry, kid. No coffee either.”

“No coffee? You’re kidding, right? The man doesn’t drink coffee?”

Ben shook his head.

“No soda. No coffee. What the hell?” Soren yanked a hand through his bed hair and eyed the long galley counter. Sure

enough, there wasn't a coffee maker visible. What he did see when he let his gaze linger, and he had an eye for that, was the skilled craftsmanship that had gone into the joinery and cabinetry in the galley. Nice boat, he admitted reluctantly, then shook his head to clear it of the distraction.

"Well, what about me?" he whined. "I drink coffee." He narrowed his eyes at Ben. "What does he drink? Milk?"

"Tea, Mason drinks tea. But he's very particular about it. Between us," Ben lowered his voice and leaned in closer across the counter, "it needs sugar, lots of sugar, just don't let him see you put it in."

Soren groaned. He wasn't sure what he'd expected when he'd fled his father's house and turned to the FBI for protection. He'd been prepared for a no-nonsense motel/hotel, a duo of disinterested law enforcers, and take-out Chinese food; he watched TV after all. He hadn't expected Mason. Tall, dark and built like The Rock. About as unforgiving and unimpressionable as a freaking rock, too. With a fifty-some-foot boat. And a very gentle touch that sent pleasant shivers down Soren's spine. "I'm stuck with a freak. Jesus, he's not a vegetarian, is he? There's no way I can deal with vegetables for two weeks."

"There're a couple of steaks in the freezer," Mason said, and Soren all but jumped off his stool. "I hope you like fish. You'll be eating a lot of it."

His heart hammering against sore ribs, Soren rolled his eyes. "Probably have to catch it myself," he grumbled and shot Mason a dark look from under long lashes.

Freshly showered and shaven, in casual shorts and nothing else, Mason strolled around the long galley counter and dropped his large hand on Soren's shoulder. "Damn straight. This is no vacation. You'll have to work to earn your keep."

"I don't have to do shit."

Mason and Ben exchanged looks.

"I'm not doing your laundry," Mason said evenly as he crossed muscular arms over an equally impressive chest.

"What laundry?" Soren's memory was a little hazy, but he did remember packing a backpack before climbing out his

bedroom window and turning to the FBI for help. Not that an extra T-shirt and a change of underwear would get him very far, which was partly why he sat here in the same clothes he'd worn the day before, which he'd worn the night before, which he'd pulled on after his father had finished with him and before he'd gotten drunk again.

"And if you plan on eating, then you better include cooking and dishes in those plans, too."

"You want me to do chores? I don't do chores."

"Tea?" Mason asked.

"What?"

"Do you want some tea?"

Ben was gesturing and shaking his head behind Mason's broad back, but Soren wasn't smart enough to take the advice. Or was it a warning? "Sure, I guess."

"Now, let's get some things straight. I'm not a U.S. Marshal, and I'm not with the FBI. So don't get any ideas about me having to follow any kind of official rules."

Soren made a face. Hulking Mason might be nicer to look at than the average law enforcer and his boat was a hell of a lot nicer than the average motel/hotel, but right now all Soren wanted was the kind of protective custody TV shows portrayed, with unlimited minibar privileges and take-out breakfast. And protectors that were easily manipulated.

"Kaoru is paying me to keep you out of trouble just long enough for him to decide what to do with you. He wasn't specific about how I was going to do that as long as it involved taking you on a fishing trip. So you can spend the next two weeks in your cabin or you can pitch in around here."

"Pitch in?" Soren glanced at Ben for help, but the man just shook his head. Was he coming on this trip, too? "Never mind. Listen, I appreciate the help, really, I do, but this isn't going to work out. I should ... go."

Mason put the tea kettle on the stove. "Go?"

"Yes, go. Like somewhere else." Where they had coffee and soda, where he wasn't required to wash his own clothes or fish for his dinner. "You're ... we're ... I didn't know what the hell I was doing ... I can take care of myself."

“Yeah, I can see that.” Mason reached across the counter, took Soren’s chin in hand and tipped his bruised face to the side. “Ben can see that, too.”

Ben nodded.

At six foot four and over two hundred pounds, Mason had an intimidating physical presence that made meeting his eyes no small feat. But Soren’s natural defiance overrode whatever common sense should have told him not to antagonize Mason. “I don’t have to stay,” he said.

“You’re not going anywhere. You’re staying put. You earn your keep. You do as I say and when I say it. You don’t try to swim back. You won’t come up with any harebrained schemes to make me bring you back. And I should warn you. I was trained as a field medic.” Mason slapped his hand on the breakfast bar. “Short of brain surgery, I’ll do it all right here.”

Soren studied the large man for a long moment, his gaze sliding over the tanned face. Under full brows, Mason’s eyes were so dark, there was no telling where his pupils ended and his irises began. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He remembered the way Mason had gently slathered his bruises with soothing cream. He thought he could still feel Mason’s fingers cupping his chin. He had no doubt Mason would tie him to the breakfast counter and take his appendix out if the need arose. Damn him. Smug bastard.

The water inside the kettle on the stove began to boil.

“Got any sugar to go with that tea?” Soren asked.

The answer was no.



3

Soren shouldn't have been surprised when Mason declared he had no sugar on board. None whatsoever. But if Soren had known then, seven days ago, what he knew now, he'd have begged Ben for a ride out of there. Hell, he'd have thrown himself into the Pacific while the coastline of Guam was still visible.

But he'd stayed with Mason who drank his tea Japanese-style—bitter and refreshing—abstained from refined sugars and didn't believe in television. The man lived a truly freakish lifestyle.

Mason was a morning person, going to bed early and rising before dawn. The fact that Soren was a night owl who

didn't usually climb into his upper bunk until way past midnight and subsequently didn't enjoy getting out of bed before noon didn't keep Mason from waking him up at the crack of dawn.

Mason's while-I-watch-the-sun-rise routine included chin-ups, a leisurely eighty push-ups and eighty sit-ups in two minutes, respectively, and a fifteen-minute shower. Soren who was ready in a fraction of that time broke out in a sweat just thinking about exercise before breakfast.

Even their grooming habits were completely different: Mason's dark hair was precisely cut, a habit left over from his Army Ranger days. Soren's copper hair had outgrown its last haircut months ago, and half the time he didn't bother yanking a comb through the tousled red mop.

Mason enjoyed his morning (and sometimes evening) ritual of lathering up and scraping beard stubble from his face, which he followed up with facial moisturizers. Soren couldn't be bothered with shaving every day. Bringing a sharp blade near his throat probably wasn't a good idea any time of the day. And the only cream that touched his skin had an SPF of 50.

In fact, while Soren was into layers—his fair skin didn't reward sunbathing—Mason wore nothing but canvas shorts.

They weren't all opposites, though.

They both missed alcohol: Mason a good glass of wine after dinner or while sitting on the foredeck, watching the sun sink below the horizon, and Soren any time of the day to dull his boredom.

They swam and snorkeled and, much to Soren's surprise, Mason had no problems lazing away an hour or two in the shade of the covered aft deck, where Soren spent most of his time, lounging in a comfortable deck chair, reading one of Mason's many books out of sheer desperation.

But they bonded over the beautiful teak paneling throughout the boat, the hidden storage nooks and crannies, and the cleverly arranged shelves that kept Mason's books and CDs from spilling to the floor should the boat pitch and roll in rough waters. Soren marveled at the craftsmanship and work

that had gone into the cabinetry, immensely pleased that his keen eye and interest surprised and impressed Mason.

The Sea Sprite, he had no trouble admitting, was a very fine boat. A classic, in fact. She'd been condemned to the dry dock when Mason found her. It had taken Mason, Ben and the cabinetmaker two years to gut, restore and reconfigure her to suit Mason's needs.

Just as they were getting along, though, Mason had to ruin it by reminding Soren that when he'd designed his home-style galley he'd forgone a dishwasher in favor of an additional freezer, a fact he brought up without fail right before he assigned dishwashing duty to his guest.

In Soren's estimation, Mason enjoyed bossing him around entirely too much. Wash the dishes! Rinse the snorkel gear! Drive the Sprite! Learn to use the radio in case of an emergency! Memorize Ben's phone number! Pick up after yourself!

But while Mason might have expected military-like obedience, Soren did nothing without first questioning it. Soon their routine included a variation on the same conversation:

"I don't see why I have to do that."

"Because I told you so."

"I'm a guest. I should be treated with respect."

"Right," Mason would drawl, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "On my boat, I'm the captain. I give the orders."

Soren had yet to come up with a good counter argument.

And that was precisely why he was in the galley, staring down at the mahi mahi he'd caught that afternoon. The fish's sightless eyes peered up at him from the cutting board, and Soren wasn't hungry anymore. He was okay with catching his own dinner—fishing beat doing the dishes hands down—but gutting his catch? He grumbled and shot Mason a dark look over the counter that separated the galley from the salon.

Mason, the smug bastard, grinned from ear to ear. He was stretched out on his custom-fitted couch that hugged the starboard side of the Sprite's salon, looking comfortable and not the least bit interested in helping Soren.

“You do it,” Soren said, putting down the flat knife. “I’ll do the damned dishes.”

Mason shook his head, closed his eyes and turned his face toward the sunlight streaming in through open blinds. “You’ve seen me do it a dozen times. I have total confidence in you.”

Soren snorted. “Come on. I catch. You cook. I do the dishes. Seems fair.”

Mason cracked open an eye, his gaze meeting Soren’s plea with a renewed shake of his head and an even wider grin. “Will you quit negotiation and just gut the damn fish?”

Soren bit back a curse and slid the knife into the fish like he’d been shown. He grimaced the entire time he cleaned and filleted their dinner, vowing never to get suckered into fishing again.

“Now be honest,” Mason challenged after they’d eaten what had turned into a fine grilled meal, “isn’t this better than having someone set a plate in front of you?”

Soren shrugged. He felt Mason’s gaze on him and decided to go on the offensive. He rose from his stool at the counter and stretched, fully aware of the espresso-colored eyes that followed his movements.

But Mason wasn’t that easily distracted. “You don’t feel the slightest sense of accomplishment?”

“You must think I’m an inept, spoiled brat.”

Mason shrugged. “No need to sugarcoat it for me.”

“You don’t get it.”

Mason walked around the long counter into the galley and helped himself to a bottle of water from his fridge. “So explain it to me,” he pushed.

Soren dropped down on the massive couch. He rested his head on the armrest and looked up at Mason, still in the galley. He watched Mason’s throat work as he drank and licked his own dry lips. “Independence and self-sufficiency might have been valued in your family. It’s more of a four letter word where I come from.”

Mason shook his head. “You’re right, I don’t get it.”

Soren opened his mouth to defend a life he didn’t particu-

larly enjoy, but Mason held up a hand and stopped him in his tracks. He found his stool again and leaned back against the counter. “I get the idea that your father kept you dependent. Fine. But what I don’t get is why you’re hiding behind him.”

Soren’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re making excuses,” Mason continued. “I’m not trying to be judgmental here, Soren. I understand where you’re coming from, but I thought you were here because you don’t want to go back there. Not to your father’s house and not to whatever situation you were in.”

Soren gritted his teeth. In a drunken fit of spite against his father, he’d climbed out of his bedroom window, went to the FBI and landed on the Sprite. He couldn’t say that he’d given his future much thought.

Mason seemed to have done that, though. “Quit using his methods to keep you dependent on him and his money to hide behind. Make a decision for yourself. This is your life now. If you’re going to buy frozen fish sticks from now on, that’s fine with me, but stop blaming your father for the choices you are making now.”

Soren made a face and pushed a hand through his tangled hair. Really, he tried to avoid thinking of his future as much as possible, but Mason, like a terrier with a ball, kept bringing it up. His only recourse: the lapse into brooding silence.

“Ben is stopping by tomorrow,” Mason said eventually. “Bringing supplies.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and I believe he said he had something to help you cope.”

Soren dragged the Gameboy Mason’s nephews had left behind out from under the couch. “Batteries?”

“He didn’t say.” Mason got to his feet. “Just how long did it last?”

“I almost made it to the championship game,” Soren wouldn’t have chosen the soccer game for himself, but while it lasted it had served its purpose, keeping him entertained and thought-free for an hour or two.

“I’m turning in, kid.”

Soren nodded and waved Mason away, but his eyes remained on Mason’s broad back until his host disappeared down the steps and hallway that led to his stateroom. Soren had to give the guy credit—Mason was in great shape for a man his age, which Soren guessed to be in his early thirties. He wondered if Mason slept in the nude.

Soren felt his hormones take notice at the thought and groaned. He could not be held responsible for his growing interest. It was boredom, pure and simple. Watching Mason work out and glide into the Pacific for a swim was his only entertainment. Of course, he’d begin to wonder what all those muscles rolling and flexing under tanned skin would feel like against his body. Then his mind would wander and the next thing he knew, he’d be imagining what it would feel like to be under the solid weight of that glorious body.

Hard, he figured, reaching into his shorts to adjust himself. Rock-hard.



4

The feds came to my house asking questions,” Lauro Miciano whined. The Filipino paced James Buchanan’s sprawling downtown Hagatna office, wiping sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

Officially, Miciano, who’d been naturalized decades ago, supplied furniture, antiques and souvenirs from the Philippines to local gift shops. Unofficially, he traded money and information with the kind of people who were classified as terrorists these days.

“It is a scare tactic.” James did not bother looking up from his laptop. On his list of immediate concerns, Miciano’s panic ranked near the bottom. “You are clean,” he assured his

client. “The hearings are a formality. In your case, they are not worth losing sleep over.”

“Feds, James, feds. At my house.”

A quick tightening of the lips betrayed James’s annoyance. He closed his files and shut down the laptop, before he pushed away from his desk. He got up to fix his client and himself a drink, dropped ice cubes into French crystal tumblers and filled the glasses with Perrier bottled water. “Trust me. They can have their forensic accountants look all they want.”

James Buchanan, an accountant himself, knew what he was talking about. As a boy from upstate New York, he had come to Guam with the Navy and promptly fallen madly in love with a beautiful, tawny-skinned native Chamorro girl with dark, soulful eyes. They had married, and after his time in the military, he had made Guam his home and gone into business for himself.

Forty years later, James was the proprietor of a large and exclusive accounting firm. He had been mayor of Mangilao for two consecutive terms, was on the Hagatna City Council and on a first-name basis with the governor. He had regular dinners with the business elite and played golf with the president of one of the richest banks in Guam. James was in his early sixties, but thanks to a strict workout regimen and diet, he looked no older than fifty. He had a mop of stark white hair, blue eyes that had lost some of their brilliance with age, and a trademark smile, which he had whitened on regular business trips back to the U.S. mainland. There was no one on the island who knew more clever ways to evade taxes or invest the proceeds of illegal activity.

Then the governor’s chief of staff had been indicted with bank fraud, conspiracy to commit bank fraud, three counts of money laundering and one count of conspiracy to commit money laundering. Amateur!

Now the Department of Justice and its financial investigations taskforce was scrutinizing the bank the governor’s man had worked with, as well as her clients and customers. It just so happened that James did a lot of business with the same

bank, legally and illegally.

Lauro gulped down the water and resumed his pacing. “I know. I know. I trust you.” He loosened his tie and raked a hand through his thinning hair.

“What is it then?”

“It’s Jolina.”

James’s widening smile was a reflex. He could not stand the crazy bitch, was in fact only catering to her whims because her connections made him a lot of money. “And how is your lovely niece?”

Lauro grimaced.

James took pleasure from the man’s discomfort. While lovely was certainly a way to describe Jolina, dangerous and volatile were better fitting adjectives. Unfortunately, she regularly came to Guam to visit and party. In fact, she had only just left, rather abruptly, after yet another fight with Soren who was her favorite pastime while on Guam. He had no qualms about introducing her to his rich friends, but he staunchly refused to sell her drugs to them, which made it a constant source of friction.

James was certain his son would reconcile with the temperamental Filipina. Their latest break-up was nothing more than a spat, a short-lived quarrel. James thought he had made that abundantly clear. He still remembered their conversation the night before he had had to beat some sense into Soren.

“You better be at the hotel tonight,” James had snapped at Soren, his patience spent. “You will drool all over Jolina. And after dinner, while I discuss business with Lauro, you better fuck her senseless. That is if you are man enough to hold your liquor and get it up.”

Alcohol was not the problem, James knew. His son seldom returned home sober after a night of partying. Whatever the reasons for Soren’s increasing disinterest in Jolina—what reasons could a healthy young man have to balk at bedding a beautiful woman?—he would have to get over them. “By God, son, if you fuck this up for me, if she complains again that you are not receptive to her charms, you will regret coming home.”

He already thought he would have to beat some understanding into Soren the next morning. That boy would entertain Jolina whether he wanted to or not; nothing else was acceptable. “Be there. Tonight. At the hotel. Jolina is expecting to get laid. And I am expecting you to oblige her.”

Of course, Soren had not done as he was told. Indeed, the news that he had had the nerve to dump Jolina proved to James what he had suspected all along: his son sorely lacked the proper perspective.

James had not thought much of Soren’s absence since that morning. He often disappeared for a time after one of their arguments, but had it been a week already?

“What about Jolina?” he asked Lauro, stopping the man’s sweaty pacing in front of his desk.

“She’s back.”

“I will be sure to tell Soren.”

Now he understood Lauro’s concern. The legal money Lauro sent to the country of his birth ended in the illegal hands of his niece, who then funneled it to her cousins, who in turn used the funds to arm themselves. They may have started out as communist rebels, fighting a government busy hunting down Islamist separatists, but in truth they were barely more than common criminals interested only in robbery, extortion and kidnapping for ransom.

The thought of Jolina, her drugs, and possibly her cousins who enjoyed partying as much as she did, under Lauro’s roof with the chance of a return visit from federal agents at the same time made James’s stomach churn.

Lauro set his glass down on the desk where it was sure to leave an unsightly watermark and collapsed into the leather chair before the desk. “I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all.”

James snatched the tumbler off his desk and carried it to his bar. It was after hours, and it was late. The offices of his employees were dark, the hallways abandoned. He wanted to go home, not listen to Lauro Miciano whine.

“Tell me again what happened.”

Lauro recounted for the second time a short and routine

visit from a federal agent with a few simple questions, none of which worried James.

“Like I said, just a formality. Why do you not go home and let me worry about your money, Lauro? Our dealings with the bank will stand up to any scrutiny.”

Lauro sighed and heaved himself out of the leather chair. He dabbed at the sweat on his upper lip with his kerchief and forced a smile. “You will tell Soren about Jolina?”

“I sure will,” James promised and saw Miciano out.

At the door, James nodded at the man responsible for his personal safety. He was not more than an intelligent, barrel-chested thug, but a spiffy title immediately improved his credibility.

After all, James Buchanan did not surround himself with thugs and hooligans. His impeccable daytime reputation and community standing would suffer. Thus, he employed a chief security officer, a bodyguard and several security specialists. Never mind that none of his goons knew the first thing about professional personal security.

No, his men were more useful collecting on the loans James graciously provided to a less than law-abiding cross section of the Guamanian population that could not or would not find legitimate banking for their business ventures.

“I do not care where he is or how you do it. Find Soren,” James ordered. He did not ordinarily care about Soren’s whereabouts, especially not after one of their altercations. Soren would go off, sulk, lick his wounds, and, after a few days, reappear. He would remember who paid his bills and financed his lazy lifestyle and come home.

Maybe James should have paid more attention to his men’s report that Soren had been seen entering the Maite Branch First Hawaiian Bank Building, which housed the FBI’s local offices.

James was not sure, could not be sure, if an information exchange had been initiated between his wayward son and the FBI. Who had approached whom first? Had the feds gotten to his son? Had Soren betrayed him out of spite? One thing he was certain of, Soren did not bank with First Hawaiian.

It was not as if James was asking for much. Truly, he was not in the habit of interfering with his children's lives as long as they kept their priorities straight. Active interest in the family business was the least he could expect. Soren, of course, had other ideas. Who knew what his priorities were?

It was clear to James what his son's priority should be: Jolina. Keeping Lauro's crazy niece happy while she visited was the least Soren could do for the family business. It was not as if she was an unattractive, unappealing young woman. Keeping her happy and in a forgiving mood was important, because it kept Lauro, a man easily rattled, from worrying and attracting undue attention.

Now Jolina, who had flown back to the Philippines, had returned quicker than anticipated and she'd probably brought her no-good cousins with her.

Unlike most of the people James did business with—dubious Japanese and Filipino businessmen among them—the outfit Jolina ran with was skittish enough to do away with complications. The bank hearings were a minor complication. Miciano sweating every time he saw a federal badge was a minor complication. Soren talking to the feds was a major complication, though. Not only did he know about his father's daytime and nighttime books, he also knew whatever Jolina had shared with him about her daytime and nighttime activities.

If Soren had indeed become a snitch, then he was in for some unpleasant surprises.