



JEAN JAMES · MARY JAMES

Sea RED
Sea BLUE

SEA RED, STOP DEAD.
SEA BLUE, STEER THROUGH.

SEA RED,
SEA BLUE

Jean James &
Mary James

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SEA RED, SEA BLUE

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Dedication

To our loving and supportive families

1

The sound of screeching brakes drew Katherine to her frosted apartment window. Evidently, a late blizzard intended to swoop down on Chicago. After one glance at the icy roads, she decided to walk the six blocks to the church social. Probably few church members would brave the weather, but she needed some diversion to scour the residue of a horrible day from her mind.

Two minutes of the outside chill convinced Katherine she should have remained in her warm apartment. The almost deserted streets and empty sidewalks looked incredibly lonesome for that usually bustling neighborhood. Big flakes of snow rushed to bury the ice-covered walk, muting her footsteps. A few scattered streetlamps did their best to look friendly, but the snow dulled even their company. When wind penetrated brazenly through her usually adequate winter clothes, she pulled her collar up and quickened her pace.

A series of shrill horn blasts from somewhere behind startled her. She turned in time to see a speeding black car dash in front of a silver SUV. The SUV slid to a halt barely in time to avoid a collision. The vehicle's driver blasted noisy, but vain rebukes while the offending car leaped from the road and shot across a parking lot straight at Katherine.

As the car came closer, a shaft of light from a street

lamp revealed the outline of a large man hunched over the steering wheel.

Katherine sprang towards a pile of snow and realized, even as she dove, that she was too late. Just as the car reached her, the tires hit a patch of ice, and the vehicle began a crazy circular spin. When the car came out of the spin, it slid sideways almost thirty feet across the lot. Something brushed against her, knocked her purse to the ground and smacked her arm.

The motorist in the SUV eased up on the horn and drove closer to the curb to witness the catastrophe sure to befall the maniac driver, but the man had regained control of his car. He circled the lot and headed back in the direction he had come from, still at break-neck speed.

Katherine rose from the slushy pile of snow hardly able to believe she had escaped.

The SUV's driver rolled down her window. "Are you all right?" she shouted. Not waiting for an answer, she rolled her window back up to block out the wind and snow.

Katherine waved her hand. "I'm OK." Her voice sounded strange and inadequate, but the driver evidently understood her message and drove away.

For a minute, Katherine remained too stunned to think. She tried to tell herself it was an accident, but some part of her *knew* that the driver had his car under perfect control when he turned towards her, *knew* that an ice patch had saved her life.

She stood there in the temporarily deserted night, and a shiver, not caused by the cold, passed over her body. She scooped up her snow-filled purse and started to run back to the warmth and safety of her apartment, but her legs shook out of control, and she

took a nasty fall. With a twisted ankle and a jammed wrist, she started again at a fast limp, but even after she had locked her apartment door and pulled shut all the curtains, her heart still thudded heavily.

With lights off, she sat on the sofa by the front window and peeked around the curtain at the dark street. Repeatedly she revisualized the outline of the driver as he bore down on her—his large shape hugging the steering wheel. She couldn't subdue her mind's imagination or speculation. Had she suffered an impulsive act by some deranged thrill seeker or a premeditated act? Was the driver someone who knew her—a stalker or someone with a grudge?

She shivered and continued to examine each passing car. Once she thought she recognized a black car that cruised slowly by—too slowly. When the same car crept by a second time and slowed almost to a stop as it drew even with her apartment, her heart jolted. The vehicle looked like the car that had bumped her, black, shiny, and sporty, but she didn't know car models that well.

She kneeled on the sofa with her face pressed to the window and her cell phone in her hand. If the car came by again, she would not only call the police, she would take a picture of the offending vehicle with her phone camera. An hour passed and the car didn't show. She pulled the curtain shut, too tired to continue her vigil. Though still chilled, the worst of her panic had abated. She went for a blanket and turned up the thermostat.

Leaning back against a sofa pillow with her knees pulled up and the blanket wrapped around her, she gazed around the dark, familiar room. She wanted to settle her mind on something besides the man in the

black car, something happier and less scary, but the cheerless room didn't help. Maybe she shouldn't renew her lease. Her forty-five-day renewal notice came that day, and they had raised her rent again. She could afford a better apartment in a better location if she stayed with her real estate job, but that thought troubled her, too.

Katherine asked herself for the hundredth time why she went into sales work when she didn't enjoy sales. At length, she realized that the evening's fright had amplified her discontent in every area. She wished she knew what to do about it.

In the intense quietness of the room, she longed for a friendly voice. She reached for her phone, ready to call her mother, but quickly put it down. The car incident would frighten her mom, and if she brought up the subject of her restlessness, it would only renew an old quarrel. She knew how her mother felt about her "wonderful career opportunity." Yet Mother lived the life she wanted to live in New York City and didn't apologize to anyone for her choice.

All at once, Katherine missed her father and wished he was still alive to advise her. He would understand. She stared over at her favorite picture, a blown-up snapshot of her dad and her on a rental motorboat. It was a prized memento of a long-ago Florida vacation. That glorious day had been her father's gift for her twelfth birthday. The two of them had spent the day on the Atlantic, glorying in the ocean. Though she couldn't see the picture clearly in the dimly lit room, every detail stood out clearly in her mind.

The spell of the sea filled their eyes and radiated from their burnt, smiling faces. A month later, her

father had died, and though Florida gleamed in her memory like an earthly paradise, she hadn't been near the ocean since. She walked over and took the picture down. When she returned to the sofa, she snuggled it close to her under the blanket. Lying there in the darkness, she prayed silently, *I know You must have something more planned for me, Lord. Please show me my path.*

The ring of her phone startled her awake from restless, dream filled sleep. Morning had arrived too quickly and with it had come a jolting flashback of her incident with the wild driver. She hurried to answer the call.

"H-Hello."

"Good morning, Katherine. Hope I didn't wake you. I just had a call from the bank. Their vice president, Mr. Pinkston, said you'd left a folder there yesterday."

"Yes, I did. Thank you, Lloyd. The bank closed before I realized I had left it. I'll pick it up as soon as they open."

An extended, uncomfortable silence followed and she wondered if he had heard her.

"I...will you...be coming by the office today?" he finally asked.

"Right after I run by the bank."

"Good. I'll see you, then."

That was strange. Why would the bank call her broker, and why would Lloyd call at seven fifteen in the morning over something so trivial? He never called before ten. *I guess last night's scare is causing me to*

question everything.

"Maybe it *was* an accident," she said aloud, "a crazy accident."

Daylight had relieved some of her trepidation, but the face that stared from the mirror seemed paler than usual and the green eyes expressed genuine agitation. Those eyes told her to believe what she wanted, *they* knew what they had seen, and when she looked deep into them, she saw more than fright. Real longing for a new chance at life blazed out from behind the fear and said, "Be bold. Don't wait."

When she left an hour later, her anxiety began to build again. She searched for lurking black cars and constantly checked her rearview mirror. Just as she pulled into the bank's parking lot, she saw Lloyd's car leave. He must have had business there, too. She hoped her business would only entail picking up the folder. She didn't want to face Mr. Pinkston, who had dismissed her like a naughty child when she questioned the insurance claim. Maybe he hadn't arrived yet. She hurried in and straight over to the secretary's desk.

"I left a folder in Mr. Pinkston's office yesterday."

"Please go right in. He'll see you shortly."

She groaned inwardly. Must she confront the man again? She took a deep breath and went through the door into his empty office. The folder's contents held no great importance to her because she had made copies of most of the papers in it, but it did contain the letter she meant to publicize if the bank didn't honor their agreement. She hadn't wanted them to see that unless she was forced to use it.

Fifteen minutes later the secretary came through the door with the folder. Evidently, Pinkston didn't

want to see her any more than she wanted to see him. Self-consciousness prevailed when she left his office. It seemed like the entire bank knew of the matter, but no one looked her way except one man who waited in a chair outside Pinkston's office. When he continued his intense scrutiny, her discomfiture turned into paranoia. She needed to go outside where the cold wind would blow away her foolishness—where tiny incidents wouldn't unnerve her. She avoided the man's eyes when she passed him, but he followed her out the front door of the bank.

"Ma'am...excuse me, Ma'am."

A southern accent tinged his low, mellow voice—a friendly voice. She turned around.

"I'm trying to locate someone. It's extremely important I find this person. He might work at the bank here, or...he could be a friend or associate of Mr. Pinkston. His name..."

"I don't work here. I'm a *customer*." She hadn't meant to snap in such a hostile tone, but the name jabbed into her already raw nerves.

He winced and his hazel eyes flashed a look of surprise.

"Excuse me," she said in a kinder tone.

He looked cold. The wind blew his dark-brown hair straight out. He wasn't dressed for early spring in Chicago. His thin, gray suit set off his tan, though. It looked like real suntan, a Florida tan.

"Have you tried his secretary? She might know something."

His amused expression flustered her. Had she been staring at him while he waited for her to speak? She certainly wasn't acting like herself today.

"My apologies, Ma'am. You came from his office,

and I took it for granted *you* were his secretary." He didn't wait for her reply, but hurried off down the sidewalk.

This looked to be the start of another awful day.

2

She made her way through traffic and dirty, snow lined streets to the real estate office. While she stomped slush from her shoes, the office door obligingly opened.

"Thank you, Lloyd," she said to the tall man who hurried her into the office. In spite of her haste, a blast of chilly air followed her in. "Business must be downright slow if my broker works the door."

"Nice day, isn't it? Such a cold, miserable, gray, windy Chicago day."

"I wonder what it's like in Florida right now."

"About eighty degrees with sunshine, probably." He smiled and glanced out the window.

"What a terrible thing to tell someone who dreams every night of palm trees and beaches and a blue-green ocean."

Lloyd laughed. "You and your talk of Florida. Let me know when you plan to leave. We'll put together a luau to send you off."

Everyone had heard her threats to leave Chicago and move to the land of sunshine.

"Not this week, anyway," she said as she removed her coat. "I have to deal with tiresome bank trouble over a friend's insurance claim. With all the business our office gives them, you'd think we could expect civility."

"Come into my office and tell me about it. Maybe I

can help.”

Surprised at his offer, she followed him in. Although Lloyd could be friendly, even joke on occasion, he rarely got involved with his associate’s problems unless they involved a real estate deal about to be consummated—or lost.

“What’s the trouble?” he asked as he closed the door and settled at his desk.

“You remember when I sold that two-story affair on Burton Street to my friend Laura and her husband? The Frasers?” She rummaged in her briefcase for copies of the papers she had given to the bank.

“The Abbott house, you mean? Nice home.”

“Not now. Those storms we had a couple of weeks ago caused a lot of damage. The Frasers have an arrangement where they pay their insurance premium directly to the bank, but now the bank claims there’s no such agreement. These papers prove otherwise.” She handed the two documents to him.

“Mr. Pinkston has seen these?” He asked as he skimmed the papers.

“I left copies with him yesterday, and I threatened to give this information to the newspaper and the consumer helps reporter on Channel 4 if the bank didn’t take care of this matter by Friday.”

A frown tightened Lloyd’s face. He bowed his gray head over the papers and studied them more closely. When he returned his attention to Katherine, his smile and easy-going manner had returned. “Don’t go any further with this until I see what I can accomplish.”

“Thank you. Actually, I didn’t plan any more action...until Friday, anyway.” Before she left, she added, “I have more copies of those papers, so I won’t

need them back. I'll be at my desk off and on today if you need me."

Katherine filled her coffee cup and set it down by the disordered pile of documents on her desk. Too unsettled to pursue sales leads, she decided to organize upcoming work. An hour later, she had two neat piles of papers and an empty coffee cup. One pile contained leads and sales opportunities. The other pile was sales that awaited consummation—three closings due to come up in the next few weeks.

She decided she needed a break and walked down the block to a donut shop. After ordering a large espresso and a cream filled donut, she tried to relax, but every black car in the passing traffic caught her attention. Another fear filled night loomed.

Her cell phone beeped with a call from Lloyd. Expecting news about Laura's house, she greeted him with some degree of apprehension.

"Katherine, you can relax about the Frasers' problem. I have influence with the board of directors at that bank, and I've put someone to work on it there."

"You can't imagine what it will mean to the Frasers if something can be done."

"Actually, the Frasers are meeting with Mr. Pinkston right now." The pleased tone of his voice said more than his words.

"That's the best news I've had all year. Thank you, Lloyd. I'll be back in the office shortly." Katherine picked up her untouched donut and enjoyed it.

Five minutes later a bubbling-over Laura called. "They've taken care of everything, Kay. Not only will they pay our rent while they repair our house, but the settlement will be more than we expected."

"Did they explain why they suddenly changed

their minds?"

"Oh...yes. They said that a new employee hadn't paid the premium. He didn't know that the bank held part of our payment money in escrow for insurance, and he filed the papers away in the wrong place, so no one caught the mistake. Anyway, they fired him, and everything's OK now. Thank you for all that you did."

"I'm glad, Laura."

Laura went into a lengthy description of her rebuilding plans. She literally overflowed with ideas for her old-new castle.

"Have they put everything in writing for you?" Katherine asked when Laura stopped for a breath.

"They're getting the papers ready. I guaranteed them we wouldn't pursue any publicity, or anything of that sort. I don't want to anger them now that they're so generous." She giggled happily. "Kay, I'll call you back. We have to go in now."

Relief flooded Katherine. She hadn't expected such swift results. She swallowed the rest of her coffee and headed back to the office.

When Lloyd saw her, he motioned her into his office. "Come in, Katherine. Close the door, would you, and have a seat."

"Thank you so much for your help with the Frasers. Laura is ecstatic." She settled into a plush leather chair.

"I'm glad that concern won't trouble you anymore."

"Yes, but it does bother me the way the bank acted almost...deceitful. Maybe something more should be done."

"An honest mistake, I'm sure. I'd forget it, Katherine. By the way, the bank faxed me a statement

that admits their liability in this matter. It guarantees they will honor Frasers' claim promptly and with additional compensation for the delay and mix-up. I made you a copy to use in case you've already contacted any news media and need to show them something official to cancel pending actions." He handed her the sheet of paper.

She examined the brief, three-sentence statement. Mr. Pinkston admitted the bank's liability, listed the name of the employee who made the error, and signed it at the bottom. "I'll file it away with my other papers, but I won't need to use it. I haven't contacted any media, yet. Thanks to you, that won't be necessary."

He gave her his best salesman's smile. "Now, I have an idea that might appeal to you. Your mention of Florida this morning made me think of it. You've made it clear for some time that you're contemplating a move there, and this morning I happened to get a call from a broker friend of mine who lives in Naples, Florida. That's a spot you'd really love, right on the Gulf, white-sand beaches, wonderful climate. He has new condominium projects that have just reached the sales stage, and he needs salespeople to sell the units."

Katherine had mentioned Florida many times, had even threatened to move there, but no one had taken her seriously—or had they? "Naples sounds like a wonderful place, but I'm not licensed to sell in Florida."

"You wouldn't need a license with him. He owns quite a few condominium complexes and office buildings. You could sell directly for him until you have a chance to take the Florida real estate course and get your license."

"That sounds like a very pleasant prospect, but..."

"Let me check further into it. By the way, what deals do you have pending?"

"Three closings, all of them should come up this month."

"It would be a shame to let them get in the way of an opportunity like this. I could easily handle the closings and mail your commission checks to you. Listen, I have to talk with him again in a little while. Let me get all the particulars on this for you."

"Thank you." She nodded, uncertain. "I have to run home for a while." When she rose to leave his office, he came over and shook her hand.

"I'm glad I can help a little in this matter, too. I know how you feel about Florida."

He might as well have fired me, she thought ruefully as she drove homeward. Brokers aren't supposed to act like that when they are about to lose one of their top salespeople.

When she pulled into her parking space, her side mirror revealed a black car parked along the adjacent road—the vehicle resembled last night's car. The man in the driver's seat gazed in her direction. Before she could take a closer look, the car melted into the traffic.

Her hands shook so violently she could hardly unlock her apartment door. After a quick study of the street, she pulled the door closed. Although it felt foolish, she searched the closet and under the bed.

Katherine turned her thoughts to the life-changing decision that lay before her. She had come home to consider Lloyd's Florida idea, unhampered by his influence or counsel. She picked up the picture of her father and stared into his loving eyes, as if he could advise her in the dilemma. The sudden ring of her phone startled her and she fumbled the photo to

answer the call.

“Katherine, good news—*great* news, for you!” Lloyd answered her timid hello. “I talked again with that broker I told you about, Buzzy Amano. He said you could start work immediately. In fact, it’s imperative that you go at once, because he has to put someone in that job right away. I’d recommend leaving tomorrow since you have a twenty-hour drive ahead of you. The job involves both sales and office work, and he’ll pay wages until you get your real estate license. He also said he’d help you find an apartment when you get there. Now how does that sound?”

She had heard Lloyd use that master-salesman’s voice before. At least, he couldn’t see her face as she stood there speechless, her over-whelmed mind trying to process his information.

“Katherine? Are you there?”

“OK. I guess I could leave tomorrow. That sounds...fine.” Katherine wondered if the lure of Florida was clouding her judgement, but last night’s episode intruded on those thoughts.

“Good girl. I need you to organize your closing papers, and we’ll go over them at the office later today. Goodbye, until then.”

This is crazy! I’m crazy. Her peaceful life now marched to a fast double time, and she could barely catch her breath. Lloyd’s call may have brought the matter to a head, but she knew he hadn’t caused her decision. The black car had already triggered an alarm inside her. She was afraid to stay in Chicago.

“I’d better pack now, before I weaken,” she told the picture she still held in her hand. Her father seemed to smile his approval and blessing. “And I’ll pack you, first.”