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THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
The Department of English

by

Bill Loehfelm

B.A. University of Scranton, 1991

May, 2005

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CHAPTER ONE

Barefoot, Jack tiptoed out onto the porch, easing the screen door closed behind him. He sat on the steps and closed his eyes. For the first time in weeks, he could hear only the gentle rolling of the waves to the beach, the rustle of the palms behind the bungalow. He set down his coffee mug and fished a cigarette from the pocket of his denim shorts. He lit up, following the deep first drag with a long, low whistle of an exhale.

Stretching his legs out into the sun, he watched the smoke float out over the sand where it caught a breeze and wafted off to his right, dissipating like a spirit over the dunes and sea oats that nestled against his bungalow. Jack's gaze drifted up the steep, grassy hill on the other side of the dunes. Atop the hill sat a two-century old, two-story mansion, sparks of sunlight sun bouncing off its brand-new bay windows. Finally, they're done. For the first time in three months, the house was quiet – no hammering, no power saws, no engines rumbling, no contractors hollering over the din.

As big a pain in the ass as the renovation has been, Jack thought, it's over now and private ownership of the old house was a lot better for the beach than another resort. Fearful rumors the house would be torn down and replaced with a resort, rumors of more fenced off beach and roped-off sea had floated up and down the coast since the Monroe House went on the market. But there was no reason for the new owner to fix up and move into a house he was planning to tear down. If the guy was a little strange, Jack thought, no big deal. There weren't many people on the coast who weren't.

Jack lit another cigarette and sipped his coffee. Well, the old joint's been saved from falling into the sea, and I've got my mornings back. Best of all, now that he's getting settled in his new place, Martin will finally get off my back about this one. In fact, maybe it's time for a peace offering. Jack headed back into the bungalow, this time letting the door bang shut behind him. He grabbed two Coronas from the fridge, considered and abandoned throwing on a shirt, bounced down the porch steps, and headed through the dunes and up the hill.

As Jack made the hilltop, Martin Michaels, a lean, jagged-faced man of sixty, appeared from around the side of the house. He snapped to a stop when he saw Jack. "Jack Donovan," he said, narrowing his eyes, his creased khakis and pressed white shirt fluttering in the breeze. "This is a surprise, considering the tone of your last letter."

"Obviously, that argument's over." Jack raised his hands, showing off the Coronas and gesturing at the Monroe House. "Congratulations on finishing the renovations." He sipped his beer, handing the other to Martin. "Welcome to St. Anne."

Martin took the bottle, holding it away from him and studying it. He glanced at his watch then set the bottle down in the grass without drinking. "A little early, isn't it?" he said.

Jack sipped his beer and glanced at his bare wrist. "Island time," he said. He studied the house. "You've done a hell of a job with this place. Good move restoring that second-floor balcony; the view must be unbelievable. You can probably see the whole damn coast."

Martin ignored the commentary, quickly striding right past Jack and stopping at the edge of the hilltop. He stared down at Jack's house.

“Place looks good from up here,” Jack said, easing up beside him. He smiled down at the wide, sugary beach that stretched from his front porch to the water. “A little slice of paradise.”

“I know what it’s worth,” Martin said, “and I’m already offering twice what you’d get on the open market.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Jack said, sipping his beer, watching Martin from the corner of his eye. Martin’s gaze remained fixed on the bungalow. Obviously, the argument was not over.

“What’s the answer here?” Martin asked. “Have I got competition? Am I in a bidding war that I don’t know about?” Martin chuckled. “Unfair but shrewd of you, Jack.”

Jack shook his head. “There’s no competition going on, Martin. There are no other offers. Simple fact is I’m not interested in selling.” He gestured over the view. “Look at the place. How could I part with that?”

Martin said nothing, frowning down at Jack’s property.

“Look, Martin,” Jack said, “I can understand why you’d want to buy my place. This house is gorgeous, but you’ve got no beach at the bottom of this hill. Put the two together and you’ve got quite the impressive estate.” He shrugged. “Fix up the mansion, tack on some beach, and you could sell the whole shebang for a small fortune.” Jack paused, waiting for a sign that he was on the right track. He’d figured this for Martin’s plan all along. Martin gave away nothing. “Or maybe I’m totally wrong,” Jack said.

Martin shook his head. “There seem to be no boundaries for your property at all,” he said. “There’s unobstructed access to your property from any direction.” He turned to

Jack. “Which means there’s unobstructed access to my property. How do expect me to live like that?”

Jack pulled on his beer again. Okay, maybe half a beer was neighborly enough. “It’s never been a problem,” he said.

“For you,” Martin said. He stepped back and eyed Jack up and down considering, Jack knew, whether or not he might present Martin with a problem. “Anybody can cross that beach right up the hill to my house,” Martin said, “unannounced, without warning or permission.” He paused and studied Jack as he would a stray dog that had wandered into his yard. “Much as you did,” he said.

“It’s never been a problem,” Jack repeated, slowly. “Ever. In all the years I’ve been here.”

“It’s a problem for me, Jack.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jack said, “but I don’t know what there is you can do about it.” He stopped, took a deep breath then a sip of his beer. This meeting wasn’t going the way he’d planned. He looked away from Martin and out over the ocean. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Should that remain the case, surely you can understand my position,” Martin said. “With you, and whomever you consort with, being right down there, in full view of my house, able to monitor my comings and goings, well, you can see how that’s problematic for me.”

Jack tried to smile. “Honestly, I can’t,” he said.

“What if it were you,” Martin asked, “fully exposed to strangers’ prying eyes and possibly ill intentions?”

Jack shrugged, struggling not to laugh. “No offense, Martin, but my consorts and I have very little interest, none actually, in you or your comings and goings. Your business is your business. And you’ll find a real shortage of ill intentions on this island.”

“That remains to be seen,” Martin said. “You’ve already shown quite an interest in my activities, your presence here this morning, a matter of hours after my arrival, being only the latest example. I received several reports of you trying to access the property during the renovations. And I well remember your letters, advising me of the regulations prohibiting building a resort in this area – though I told you explicitly that was never my plan.” He turned to Jack. “We’re both adults here, there’s no call to be dishonest with one another.”

“That was different,” Jack said. “You were trying to push me out of my house, off my beach, and you weren’t taking no for an answer. You made six offers.” He paused. “You have to admit, Martin, when someone wants something so bad, you have to wonder why they want it.”

Martin looked again at Jack’s house. “Indeed,” he said. “Well. It seems we remain at an impasse.” He rubbed his temples with his fingertips, his eyes closed tight.

“Well,” Jack sighed, again checking his imaginary watch, eager to depart. “It’s about time for me to head over to the bar. Good luck with, uh, whatever.” Jack turned to walk away but stopped when he felt Martin’s hand grip his shoulder.

“I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot,” Martin said. “Perhaps this is not the time to discuss plans and properties. Perhaps we can agree to disagree, at least for the morning. You came up here to be nice and I haven’t received you very well.”

Jack nodded, his eyes fixed on Martin's hand, which remained on his shoulder.

Martin tried to smile and took his hand away. "I'm a long way from home," he said. "You know how it is when you move, the stress." He backed away from Jack. "You leave a lot behind."

"It's cool," Jack said.

"There's probably quite a bit I can learn from you," Martin said, "about this island." He smiled. "You seem to be a man of large leisure. What is it you do with your free time?"

Jack shrugged. "Outdoor stuff. I fish a lot. Sleep on the beach. Hike the hills."

"Wait here," Martin said, turning on his heel and heading for the front door. "Let's see if we still can't make something of this morning."

Jack lit a cigarette and waited by the door. He envisioned Martin coming back outside with a couple of antique fishing poles in hand, sporting a floppy hat peppered with rusty spinners. He grimaced; he didn't really feel like spending the rest of his morning teaching Martin to bait a shrimp. I'll do it though, Jack thought, if that's what it takes to finally get him off my back. There are certainly worse ways to solve a dispute than a morning of sloppy fishing and awkward conversation. But if he comes back out with a Speedo and a bottle of coconut oil, Jack thought, I'm outta here.

Martin was inside only a few minutes before he reemerged, shouldering the door open, holding a glass of what looked like Scotch on the rocks in each hand. Jack set down his beer and took the drink Martin offered him. He sipped. It was indeed Scotch, a finer version than perhaps he had ever tasted. Maybe he and Martin would get along fine after all. Jack raised his glass in a toast.

“To island time,” Martin said. He sipped his drink then reached his free hand behind his back. Jack’s eyes opened wide when he saw what was in Martin’s hand. “Shoot much?” Martin asked, holding out the gun, a nine-millimeter automatic, in an open palm. “Where there’s good fishing there’s usually good hunting.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Jack said, raising his hands. “Never tried it. Not my style.”

“That’s what I like to do,” Martin said. “Hunt.” He walked away, drink in one hand, gun hanging at his side in the other.

Jack flicked away his cigarette, debating whether or not to follow. Martin couldn’t be serious. He wasn’t going to wander off in the jungle, shooting at things and sipping Scotch as he went. Martin crossed the gravel carport and headed up the narrow, dirt driveway that led to Ocean Avenue. Across the road was the edge of the jungle. Jack jogged after him, catching him at the roadside.

“I don’t think this is such a great idea,” Jack said. “I don’t know how safe it is, never mind legal.”

“Just doing a little shooting,” Martin said. “What’s the harm? It’s great for my stress. These hills must be crawling with birds and monkeys.”

“I’m familiar,” Jack said, “I’ve hiked these hills plenty of times. Lots of people do.”

“So you know there’s plenty. Who’s going to notice three or four fewer?” He smiled. “Birds and monkeys, I mean.” Martin gazed over toward the trees. “Sometimes I can’t decide what to shoot at first. Come with me. I’ll let you take a few shots. You know the good spots?”

Jack shook his head. “Stay away from the waterfalls. They attract the people.” Jack took a step closer, raising his hands, his eyes on the gun. “Look, Martin, this isn’t the kind of thing we do around here.”

“Things can change,” Martin said. “Besides, as you said, nobody’s much interested in what I do.” He grinned. “I’m sure it won’t be a problem.” He turned and marched across the road and into the jungle, disappearing instantly into the foliage.

Jack stood for a long time at the edge of the road, debating chasing an armed, and quite possibly cracked, stranger into the jungle. What was he gonna do if he found him? Wrestle Martin for the gun? Yeah, right. And get gut-shot in a “hunting accident.” Wouldn’t that be convenient for Martin? Jack shook his head and poured out his Scotch onto the pavement. All right, maybe that was a bit much, but goddamn if Martin hadn’t shat on yet another morning.

Staring into the trees, Jack noticed two ancient banyans at the edge of the jungle, about two hundred yards apart. Each tree had a slash of fluorescent orange spray-painted across its wide trunk. Jack frowned and started across the road for a better look. He jumped and turned back when, at Martin’s first shot, clouds of birds erupted from the tops of the trees.

When Jack arrived at the Lone Palm, he stopped just inside the door to watch the show. Harry Valentine, blue-eyed and black-haired, just over six feet tall and just short of movie star handsome, was at full throttle, standing on the bar, the crowd around him enraptured in his story, their eager half-smiles anticipating the punch line. Harry

delivered and, with a bow, accepted the laughter and applause. Grinning, he lit a cigarette and jumped back down behind the bar. Immediately, people were shouting drink orders at him. Harry glided from one end of the bar to the other, foam from the beer bottles he opened soaking his hands to the wrists, his white t-shirt spotted with mango juice.

“What’cha waiting for, Captain?” a voice said into Jack’s ear as an arm slipped around his waist. “This is your place, too.”

Jack didn’t turn around; he didn’t need to. He recognized the voice and the arm, the weight and the shape that leaned into his back, the scent of the shampoo wafting forward from hair he knew was red. He just gestured toward the far end of the bar, where three waitresses, hands on their hips, paced at their station, staring down a young, coffee-colored man with a black goatee. “That’s Tony,” Jack said. “He’s supposed to be Harry’s back-up tonight.”

Tony hovered over the ice bin, desperately avoiding eye contact, a bottle of rum in one hand, a bartender’s guide in the other.

“Looks like he could use some back-up of his own,” Samantha said, removing her arm and stepping into Jack’s vision. “Poor guy looks like he’s drowning, matter of fact.”

Jack shrugged then kissed her cheek. “Only way he’s gonna learn to swim,” he said.

“Have a heart,” Samantha said. “At least help out those poor girls. It’s their tips he’s blowing.” She wagged a finger at him, but smiled while she did it. “You forget I used to wait tables,” she said. “Your tough-guy, boss man act doesn’t impress me.” She kissed him. “How are you, Jack?”

“I’m good,” Jack said. “Had an interesting conversation with Martin this afternoon.”

“I want to hear all about it,” Samantha said, “but right now it’s Friday night and I need a beer.” She tilted her chin at the bar, still three deep with people. “Go do your job and I’ll meet you upstairs.”

Jack kissed her back and bounced down the stairs. Samantha watched him make his way through the crowd, slapping backs and shaking hands as he went, his brown eyes sparkling at every familiar face. It was all an act, she knew, his feigned reluctance to jump behind the bar with Harry and Tony. She and Jack had planned a quiet evening together, and he was deferring to her, and she appreciated it. But they had all night, the happy hour rush would die off soon, and she could feel Jack’s excitement as he stood beside her. He loved his bar, loved to be at its helm with his best friend beside him. Samantha fished a handful of coins from the bottom of her purse and headed for the jukebox.

Jack smiled at the waitresses as he pushed through them. He ducked under the bar and appeared beside Tony. He took the bottle and book from the younger man’s hands.

“Tony,” he said. “Relax. Remember that first and foremost.”

Tony nodded but didn’t say anything.

Jack laughed. “Take a deep breath,” he said. He picked up the first ticket in the long row at the service bar. “Three pina coladas,” he said. “Piece of cake. You can do this, right?”

Tony nodded and picked up the rum bottle.

“Not the Bacardi,” Jack said, “the coconut rum. Just make one at a time.” He glanced over his shoulder at the waitresses. “The ladies will give you a minute or two to catch up,” he said. They stared at him. “Right?”

Reluctantly, the waitresses backed away. Tony went to work with the blender. Jack watched him switch it off, rap the pitcher against the bar and pour a smooth, white, picture-perfect pina colada into the waiting glass. Jack poured the leftovers into a plastic cup and drank them down.

“Perfect,” he said. “A thing of beauty.” He slapped Tony on the back. “Be quick but not frantic. Make one drink at a time. You’re doing fine. Remember, this is a party.”

Harry drifted down to their end of the bar, wiping his hands on a bar towel. Hands waved in the air behind him.

“Evening, partner,” he said. “Didn’t think we were gonna see you. Nothin’ wrong with taking a night off for romance.”

“We’re only supposed to be here for dinner,” Jack said, “but I see the ship is sinking without me.”

“You flatter yourself, Captain,” Harry said. “But, then again, if you don’t, who will? How goes it with the young Jedi?”

Jack laughed. “Tony’s fine,” he said.

Harry pulled an envelope from his back pocket. “Extremely interesting missive in the mail this morning. Fascinating, even.” He shoved the envelope back in his pocket.

“Help me take care of these thirsty people and I’ll tell you all about it.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Lone Palm Café – boarded up, run down and lamented as the ‘late great Trader John’s – brought Jack and Harry to the tiny Caribbean island of St. Anne. It was a two-fold reclamation project; they needed each other.

As Trader John’s foundered on the sandy west coast of St. Anne, Jack Donovan and Harry Valentine foundered badly themselves on a very different island. After four joyous, beer-soaked years as college roommates, Jack and Harry spent five soul killing years sharing an overpriced Manhattan apartment, trying to run the rat race without turning into rats. Harry toiled his days away minding numbers on a computer screen for a Wall Street behemoth. Jack scratched and clawed his way to a Master’s Degree in English at City University, teaching for pennies at a private school.

On St. Anne, Trader John yearned to be free of the drunken partner who had run his namesake establishment out of business. He bought out the drunk with a small sailboat and case of cheap rum. Then he went looking to sell the bar. Jack and Harry’s modest offer proved enough for John to get his late father’s apple orchard out of debt. By the time the new proprietors arrived, the drunk and the rum were lost at sea, the sailboat discovered adrift a few miles offshore. For the cost of a tow and a long distance call to John, Harry became the proud new owner of a slightly used sailboat. Together, under the skeptical watch of their new neighbors, Jack and Harry became the proud new owners of a badly misused bar.

Keys in hand, Jack and Harry went straight from the airport to the bar. When they got there, the front windows were boarded up and the front door was unlocked. Tom hadn’t been gone that long, but the bar had the look of a place no one had much cared to

be for quite some time. Dust coated the long mahogany bar and the rows of half empty bottles behind it. Cobwebs drifted down from the ceiling when Harry switched on the ceiling fans. But they turned. And the lights, the few with functional bulbs anyway, lit up. There was no running water, no gas for the kitchen, and the phone didn't work. Fortunately, John had sent the names of all his old business and government connections, and very specific bribery instructions, with the keys.

At the back end of the building, past the bar and the dance floor, off to the right of the stage, a spiral staircase curled its way to the ceiling. When Jack and Harry threw open the trap door at the top of the stairs, they knew they were home. They stood on a broad, sun-washed deck, the resting jade ocean before them, rolling emerald hills behind them, and an arching dome of sapphire sky above. Jack imagined the deck dotted with tables, each table anointed with a candy colored umbrella, each umbrella shading laughing, sun-burned people from all over the island and the world. As Jack mused, Harry unfurled a sheet over the railing. It snapped like a sail in the warm trade winds. It read, in huge, red, block letters: "Lone Palm Café. Opening Soon."

After helping Harry and Tony fend off the early evening rush, Jack found Samantha at a corner table, a margarita in her hand and a plate of oysters on the table in front of her.

"Appetizer," she said, pushing the plate toward Jack as he sat down. "You guys still talking about putting a bar up here?" she asked.

Jack slurped down an oyster, washing it down with a sip of her drink. "Yeah. The girls hate those stairs," he said. "And some of the customers have trouble with them on

the way down.” He shrugged and reached for another oyster. “Just a question of where to put it.”

Harry, two bottles of Corona in hand, joined them at the table. He handed a beer to Jack, plucked an oyster off the tray, covered it in horseradish and swallowed it. “So I’ve been asking around,” Harry said, “about the Monroe House. You know that house has been there over a hundred and fifty years? Guy named Festus Monroe built it, an American from California. He was a rich prospector, came here late in the 1860’s to start a plantation, but it never took off. He disappeared not long after. Nobody knows where he went. Most popular theory says he headed for the Amazon. The land reverted back to the Dutch government. They used it as the governor’s mansion until three governors in a row went stone crazy from syphilis. Then they gave up on it.”

“That’s quite a story,” Jack said, “you spend all day at the library digging that one up?”

“It’s true,” Martin said, approaching the table. “Mr. Donovan, a word with you?” He nodded at Harry. “Mr. Valentine.”

“Martin, good to see you out enjoying the evening,” Jack said. “Pull up a chair, I’ll buy you a drink.”

“So will I,” said Harry, “if you promise to shitcan the Mr. Valentine stuff. Let’s celebrate, it’s your first night out in the new neighborhood.”

“No thank you,” Martin said, eyes dancing over Harry and Samantha’s faces. He stuffed his hands deep in his pockets. “It’ll only take a moment, Mr. Donovan.”

Jack leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. He raised an eyebrow. “So now it’s ‘mister’. Well, that mister stuff won’t get you anywhere with me, either,” he said.

“You wanna talk? Have a seat.” He reached across the table and took Samantha’s hand. “This is my girlfriend, Samantha Taylor. You’ve already met Harry. There’s nothing you can’t say in front of them.”

Samantha stood, extending her hand. “A pleasure,” she said.

Martin stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest. He blinked at Samantha, studying her as if she were a fountain statue lowered slightly askew into place.

“Samantha Taylor,” he said, wagging a finger at her.

Samantha looked at Jack. He shrugged. “Beats me,” he said.

Slowly, she sat back down, her gaze jumping back and forth between Jack and Martin. Martin smiled, studying her, tapping his jaw with his finger. Samantha swallowed and lowered her eyes.

Jack stood. “Martin, is this what you came here for, to spook my girlfriend?” He lit a cigarette. “I hope not, it’s bad manners.” He stepped close to Martin. “Care to explain?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss ongoing negotiations with uninvolved parties,” Martin said, backing away.

Jack drew hard on his cigarette then stubbed it out hard in the ashtray, glancing at Harry. He looked back at Martin, moving closer, their faces inches apart. Martin was sweating bullets, Scotch polluting his breath. “That bullshit doesn’t help any,” Jack said.

“Calm down, Jack,” Samantha said.

Jack backed off and Martin relaxed. He stood silent as Jack returned to his seat and took a long pull from his beer. Samantha stood, announcing she was going downstairs to get another round. Martin ignored her when she asked what he’d like to

drink. Harry said nothing, slouching in his chair, smoke from the cigarette in his lips clouding in front of his face. When Samantha disappeared downstairs, Jack turned to Martin.

“You came here to tell me something,” Jack said. “You got about eight seconds before I get your creepy ass escorted out the door.” He watched Martin’s face, the older man’s eyes narrow, the muscles in his jaw tense.

“I got a visit late this afternoon,” Martin said, “two men from the Ministry of the Interior. Seems someone called them about strange markings on the banyan trees behind my house.”

“Really?” Jack said, “I can’t imagine who it was.”

“Yes, well, they gave a stern lecture about clear-cutting land that doesn’t belong to me,” Martin said. “They also gave me a citation for defacing public land.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s a shame. They are strict about that sort of thing here.” He lit another cigarette. “I’m sure you can afford the fine.”

“I’m unconcerned about the citation,” Martin said, “I have a more than capable lawyer.”

“What does concern you, then?” asked Jack.

“The paint on my new house is hardly dry,” Martin said, “and already someone is in my business. Only this morning, Jack, you assured me that wouldn’t be the case.” He waved his hands in the air, as if chasing away gnats. He swallowed hard. “I hate when strangers are in my business. I hate when people lie to me.”

“Let me guess,” Jack said, “it makes you angry, and we won’t like you when you’re angry.”

Martin frowned.

Harry snorted, grinning as he stubbed out his cigarette. “All right, gentlemen, that’s about enough.” He leaned back in chair. “Look, Martin, we all appreciate you saving that old house. Anytime you wanna come in here for a cocktail, it’s on me. But do us all a favor, relax. Settle in, learn how we do things around here.” He shrugged. “You’ll probably find out you like it.”

“I doubt that,” Martin said. He walked away from the table then turned back quickly, striding right up to Jack and leaning over him. “I know it was you, Donovan. I knew you were sneaky. I knew you were watching me.”

Jack pushed Martin away and stood. “Beat it,” he said. “Go sleep it off in your belfry, you’ll feel better in the morning.”

Martin scowled at Jack then stormed away, glancing back once over his shoulder and nearly colliding with Samantha as she came up the stairs.

“Jaaack?” she asked, handing out beers and sitting at the table.

“I know what that kind of paint is for,” Jack said. “What? I should wait until the bulldozers show up?”

Samantha turned to Harry. “Translation?” she asked.

“Seems Martin had some plans for the hills behind the house,” Harry said. “Jack here seems to have gotten in the way.” He smiled. “Again.”

Samantha grinned and slouched in her chair.

“You would’ve done the same thing,” Jack said, tipping his beer bottle at Samantha, then Harry. “I simply brought the matter to the attention of the proper authorities. Good citizenship, nothing more.”

Harry raised his hands defensively. “Hey, I got your back.” He tossed the envelope on the table. “Anyway, check this out,” he said. “It was addressed to both of us.”

Jack picked up the envelope. “No return address. This type of shit always scares me. It’s always an ex or someone you owe money.” He tapped the envelope on the table, staring at Samantha.

“Oh, for god’s sake, Jack, just read the letter,” she said, laughing.

Jack unfolded the letter and read it silently. “It’s from Roswell, Martin’s attorney,” he said. He folded the letter carefully and tossed it back to Harry. “Mr. Roswell has something important to tell us,” Jack said.

“What is it?” Samantha asked. “Another offer on your house?”

“Doesn’t say,” Jack answered. “But I bet you’re right. It only says the meeting is of the utmost importance and will be greatly beneficial to everyone involved. He wants to meet in his office, in New Amsterdam. Friday afternoon.” He frowned at Samantha. “He extends his apologies for the short notice but insists it’s important.”

Jack stood and walked away from the table. He leaned on the deck railing and looked out over the sea. He didn’t like anyone insisting anything, especially what was and was not important in his life. A meeting at an office in the city? With a lawyer? What kind of bullshit was that? What did it take to get through to these guys? What was it about *no* that they didn’t understand? No meeting in some fancy lawyer’s office was gonna make him change his mind. Harry and Samantha joined Jack at the railing, standing on either side of him. Jack took a long swallow of his beer. “What does this guy want? That mansion on the beach ain’t enough? He can’t possibly still think I’ll sell him

the bungalow. Is it the bar?" Jack asked. "You think he's looking to buy in, maybe buy it outright?"

"Who knows?" Harry said. "Who am I to ponder the strange ways of the mighty rich? What's the difference? He's not getting either."

Jack tapped his beer bottle against Harry's. "You got that goddamn right," he said.

"You gonna go to the meeting?" Samantha asked.

"Fuck that," Jack said. "I got my business to run. Roswell wants to talk to me, he knows where to find me."

"Speaking of a business to run," Harry said. "It's about time I go downstairs and make sure Tony hasn't run out screaming." He slapped Jack on the back. "Forget it, pal. It ain't worth stressing over. I'll see you downstairs in a bit."

Samantha ran her nails over Jack's back and draped her arm over his shoulder. His eyes remained fixed on the sea.

Later that night, Jack and Samantha sat together on a blanket by the edge of the water, their surfcasting poles jammed in the sand at the water's edge. Jack lit the lantern and, after retrieving two Coronas from the cooler, sat the lantern on top of it. He popped the tops off both, handed one to Samantha, and lit a cigarette. She plucked a cigarette from the pack in the pocket of his Aloha shirt.

"It's a bad habit," Jack teased, lighting it for her.

"Never said I was petitioning for sainthood," Samantha said. "You've been real quiet, Jack."

“Just trying to figure out what Martin is up to,” he said.

“I don’t get the letter thing either,” Samantha said. “Maybe that’s just the way he does business. You know him better than I do.”

“That’s the thing,” Jack said. “I don’t know him at all. I only met him twice before today, the night he came by the Palm to ask about renting the deck and then the night he sat up there all by himself, drinking Scotch and staring at the ocean all night.” Jack shook his head. “Five grand, just to make sure no one else could get up on the deck that night. The guy’s not right. I don’t like him.”

“He’s a weirdo, all right” Samantha said, “but that doesn’t mean he’s up to no good. Maybe he wants to open a bar of his own. Maybe he is turning that old house into a hotel and wants you and Harry to help him get to know the island. You two would make great consultants. You know everyone on this side of the island, and they all love you.”

“Then why not knock on my door and ask?” Jack said. “Why come to the bar and freak everybody out? Why this stupid meeting?”

Jack got up from the blanket and walked to the water. He tested their lines with his fingertip. The tide had carried their bait inshore. He picked up his rod and started reeling. Samantha plucked her rod from the sand and did the same, careful not to tangle her line with Jack’s.

“Don’t forget, Jack, most of the world does business in offices, not in bars,” she said, exasperation creeping into her voice. “Sounds to me like he’s just trying to create a business relationship.”

“If this is how he goes about it,” Jack said, “then he definitely needs some advice on how to do business on this island.”

“You can tell Roswell that on Friday,” Samantha said.

Jack glanced at her, then lobbed his bait back out to sea. “You think I should go?”

“I think you should do whatever you want.”

Jack jammed his pole back into the sand. “All right, truce” he said. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on here. My life is exactly the way I want it, and I worked hard to get it there. If somebody’s gonna be trying to screw it up, I wanna know about it.”

Samantha turned to face him, her pole in one hand, the end of her line, the hook bare, in the other. “Baby, just go listen to the man. You won’t even be dealing with Martin. It’ll only be Roswell. What’ve you got to lose? He can’t take anything from you. I’m pretty sure Roswell won’t be putting a gun to your head. If he offers you something you don’t want, don’t take it.” She fished a shrimp from the bait bucket and ran her hook through it. “But it won’t cost you anything but cab fare to find out.”

Jack awoke the next morning and followed his nose to the fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen. Samantha had left him most of it. He poured a cup, loaded it with sugar and snatched last night’s Aloha shirt off the back of the couch. Samantha’s laptop sat amidst scattered papers on his coffee table. Jack stared at it over the rim of his mug as he swallowed a large mouthful of coffee. He didn’t like her bringing her work, her job, with her to his house. She didn’t see the problem. He wanted her full attention while she was with him, he said. She promised he had it. What was wrong with getting a little work done, with trying to get caught up, though she was never caught up, while he slept in, she asked? Jack answered that with a shrug. Because I like you a hell of a lot, but I’m not

sure I like what you do for a living, Jack thought. I don't think it's good for the island, he thought. He thought these things, but he never said them.

The little green light on her computer blinked at him as he sipped his coffee again. He decided he wouldn't bring it up. What was the point? And anyway, he wanted her to be comfortable in his house, to feel she could do as she wished while she was there, that her life was welcome in his home. He pushed open the screen door, let it bang shut behind him, and settled on the porch steps to smoke the day's first cigarette while he waited for Samantha to come in from her swim.

Jack cradled his coffee mug in both hands and leaned back on his elbows. The Monroe House was silent. Enjoying the quiet, he stretched his legs out in front of him, digging his feet into the warming sand. As the mid-morning sunshine warmed his skin and the soft breeze danced across the porch and rustled the palms behind the house, Martin's strange behavior suddenly seemed unimportant. He felt petty for getting his back up over Samantha's computer. Just people living their lives, Jack thought.

He went inside to refill his coffee cup. When he re-emerged onto the porch, Samantha was toweling off at the water's edge. Jack sipped his coffee, set the mug on the porch and settled into his hammock to wait for her. He lit a cigarette. It burned in the corner of his mouth as his thoughts wandered. If Martin did want to buy into the bar, or do his own thing with that big house, Jack thought, who could blame him? Hadn't he and Harry done much the same thing? It was difficult, but Jack tried to picture Martin as he and Harry had been a few years ago. Eager for a new start, for a different life, a life created straight out of the best your imagination could offer, a life built by your own hands. A life built for comfort, not for speed, built somewhere warm and quiet, where

nobody knew anything or anyone that you'd left behind. A blank slate of blue sky, blue water and white sand. Who wouldn't want that?

Jack opened one eye when he felt Samantha step into his sunshine. Smoke curled into his eye and it watered. "See the dolphins this morning?" he asked, squinting like a pirate.

"Not at all," she said, shaking her head. "Trying to burn down the house this morning?"

"Nonsense," Jack answered. He plucked the cigarette from between his lips and waved toward the Monroe House. "Still quiet as a church on Saturday night."

Samantha leaned back against the railing and pushed the hammock into motion with her foot. "Maybe you scared him away," she said. "That was a tough stare you gave him last night."

"Ah, I'm not worried about that anymore," Jack said. "Haven't even thought about it 'til you brought it up. If Martin wants to make his way here, I say more power to him. Even if he really is after what I've got, he can't take it from me."

"So you're going on Friday?" Samantha asked.

"Why not? Figure it'll clear the air. I'd still rather Martin came down to the Palm and we hashed it out like men," Jack said. "But I don't see why I can't do him the courtesy of going to his little meeting. As somebody very wise recently told me, won't cost me anything but cab fare to find out."

"It makes me feel better to hear you say that," Samantha said. She looked over her shoulder at the Monroe House. "Maybe you and Martin won't be grilling steaks together every Sunday, but if you're going to be neighbors, I'd like for you to be on good terms."

Jack sat up in his hammock and bent over for his coffee cup. “I don’t see any reason why that can’t happen.”

Samantha left Jack’s house late Sunday afternoon. Jack tried persuading her to stay for dinner, but she resisted. She had hours of work she needed to do, well, to get ready for work Monday morning. For a long time after she was gone, Jack stood behind his house, a cigarette burning between his fingers as his gaze shifted between the tire tracks her Jeep had left in the coarse sand and the slow curve where the smooth blacktop of Ocean Avenue, and Samantha’s cherry red Jeep, disappeared behind the banyan and banana tree of the hills.

Jack wiggled his toes and a ridge of sand crumbled into the depression of the tire tracks. Samantha parked her Jeep behind his faded, blue bungalow, beneath the swaying twin palms, more and more often these days. Not just on weekend nights anymore, not just for one night anymore. It was a trend Jack knew he wanted to continue.

CHAPTER THREE

Monday morning, Samantha stood by the glass window that doubled as the back wall of her office and stared down through the double-paned glass to the street below. She breathed in the cool, circulating air and sighed, her breath clouding the glass. Six stories below anonymous pedestrians crowded the sidewalks. Traffic on Phillips Avenue was at a standstill. She thought of Jack. Your island is changing, baby. It's growing. With or without you.

Samantha's company, the Ellison Corporation, was an enthusiastic contributor to that growth. From her office here in the Kipling Building, Samantha managed the daily affairs of Ellison Clothiers, the corporation's budding chain of upscale department stores. There were two new stores thriving on St. Anne, and a new store opening Saturday in Grand Cayman. Over the next six months, half a dozen boutique-style stores, complete with salons and coffee bars, were opening in resort complexes in Puerto Rico, Jamaica and Bermuda. The boutique chain had been Samantha's idea, an idea she'd ultimately had to surrender to the board of directors. Her resentment cooled considerably when the board handed her complete control of Sixth Floor, the nerve center of Ellison Clothiers' daily operations. When the boutiques were finally up and running, the general manager of every shop would answer directly and only to Samantha's office, as the general managers of the flagship stores already did.

As she watched two delivery truck drivers argue silently below her, Samantha thought of her silent admonition to Jack, and worried again that her own island, the island of Sixth Floor, was also about to change. Literally any minute now, actually, she thought.

Just when she had gotten things running the way she wanted. She jumped when the phone rang. Samantha answered and eased into the chair at her desk.

“Taylor,” she said.

“Ms. Taylor, Erica Ellison. I know we haven’t spoken much lately but the board members are calling all our most important people personally. I wanted you to know that the acquisition of our company has been completed. Things went well, we’re confident Ellison is in good hands. The bid was rather substantial, so a number of us, myself included, are retiring.”

“Congratulations,” Samantha said. “I’m happy for you. Must be delightful to retire comfortably at 43.”

“Thank you very much,” Erica said. “It is quite delightful, though I’m sure Bob and the kids, among other things, will keep me busy. The changeover, Samantha, will have no effect on Sixth Floor. The boutique openings should go ahead as planned. You and your people have done extraordinary work for us.”

“I thank you,” Samantha said, “and that news is a relief. Can you tell me one thing?”

“Certainly.”

“Who do we all belong to now?”

Erica laughed. “Of course,” she said. “I think half my brain has retired already. It’s an American, one man. From Los Angeles. His name is Martin Michaels.”

Samantha felt her stomach tighten.

“He’s a recluse, apparently, bit of an eccentric,” Erica said. “We never saw him. I don’t know how much you’ll be seeing him, either. A man named Roswell seems to

handle just about everything for him.” Erica laughed again. “An extraordinary looking man. I’d imagine he’ll be through at some point. He’s already expressed an interest in meeting you.”

“From CEO to matchmaker,” Samantha said, feigning a laugh. “I look forward to meeting him, but I’m not one to mix business with pleasure.”

“Of course not,” Erica said, “you’ve always been the consummate professional. Thank you very much for all your hard work, Ms. Taylor. You always have been and I’m sure will continue to be a true asset to this company. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I suddenly have the day off and an irresistible craving for a bloody mary.”

This time Samantha laughed for real. “Thank you, Ms. Ellison. Enjoy your retirement.”

Samantha felt the knot in her gut relax as she hung up and walked back to the window. The Ellisons were happy. Sixth Floor wouldn’t change. Sure it was weird that Martin was suddenly her boss. Jack would certainly think so. But then again, it all kind of fit together. Move into a new house, start a new business. Start a new life. People did that on St. Anne all the time, probably half the population. Jack did it, Harry did it. St. Anne was a refugee island, for sure. She’d done it herself, Samantha thought, when she took the job at Ellison and left her life in Miami behind. What had Jack called it? Making your way on the island? If Martin wasn’t working on such a grand scale, say buying bars and bungalows instead of corporations and mansions, his arrival on the island would hardly be remarkable at all.

Fears assuaged, Samantha returned to her desk to craft an e-mail to her staff. Her people had fears of their own, like whether or not they’d keep their jobs. Soon, thoughts

of bungalows, bars, mansions and millionaires were lost to Samantha in the action of her day. The tension that had enveloped the office for months dissipated as the news spread. Keyboards clicked. Phones rang. People bustled from cubicle to cubicle with bounces back in their steps. Problems from around the Caribbean poured into the office and solutions radiated out. All of it transpired under the sharp, green watch of Samantha's intelligent eyes.

Sixth Floor had not always been this way. With her promotion nine months ago, Samantha inherited a disaster area. The cubicles were hiding places and stress filled the air like a hot fog. The antiseptic chatter of modern business camouflaged a sputtering, impotent machine. Samantha wondered briefly if her promotion was a reward or a punishment. Then she decided to devour the challenge of overhauling the machine.

She fired all the malcontents she could justify firing. It was a hideous two-week period the staff still referred to as "the bloodbath." She interviewed every replacement herself, three times. Prospective employees were warned about the hostile situation they were coming into. Anyone who flied didn't make the cut. With her superiors wringing their hands, her own clock ticking and the new people in place, Samantha launched the next stage of her plan.

The key to success was the small things, she preached. Attention to detail became office law. The copiers will never run out of paper, no more calls transferred to the health club on the third floor, if a fax isn't for you take it to who it's for and "For God's sake, if you take the last cup of coffee, make the next pot!"

It took some time, but a transformation took root. The new people melded with the old. The staff realized no one worked harder than the boss, who was always first in

and last out. They laughed when they showed up for work one Monday and a banner that read “H.M.S. Bounty” hung from the ceiling, though they never found out how she knew they’d been calling her “Bligh” behind her back. Human voices became the hum of the new machine and everyone had coffee when they wanted it.

At a quarter to five, Samantha answered a knock on her office door. It was a delivery, a basket of flowers. She set the basket on her desk and reached for the phone to call Jack at the bar. He must’ve gotten the message she’d left with Harry that afternoon. When she read the card, she slammed the phone down. “Looking forward to meeting you,” said the card. It was signed – David Roswell.

That evening, Jack and Harry stood side by side, slicing lemons and oranges on the bar as the last of the evening regulars wandered in for dinner. Mondays were slow, hardly worth opening for money-wise, but a good night to get the bar back in shape. They made for a relaxing comedown after the weekend craziness, a weekend that started again every Wednesday night, when the first of the week’s cruise ships docked up the coast.

“So,” Harry said.

“So,” answered Jack. He picked up his cigarette and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. It was soaked with the juice from his fingers, agreeably altering the taste. Jack set down his knife and studied the cigarette. “Hmm. Citrus cigarettes. Whadda think, Harry? Camel Citrus. We’ll make a mint.”

“You say that every time we slice fruit,” Harry said. “I told you, Camel beat you to it a couple of years ago. On to more important bullshit. What’s your take on Samantha’s situation? You haven’t said much since I told you about it.”

Jack swept the lemon slices into a plastic cup, dunked the knife in the sink and started on a lime. “What’s to say? You said she said everything was cool. She knows a lot more about the business world than I do. If she says she’s not worried, then I’m not worried, either.”

“Well, it bugs me,” Harry said. “First Martin buys the Monroe House. Then he takes over Samantha’s company, that whole thing’s a secret until this morning. And don’t forget the meeting on Friday.” Harry waved the knife in the air. “The point of which, right now, is a secret. Suddenly, he’s looming over everything. Who is this fucking guy?”

Jack looked at his friend’s profile, uneasy by the furrowed brow. Harry never frowned.

“Wasn’t it you just telling me not to worry about him? Don’t get all Edgar Allen Poe on me here, partner,” Jack said. “This guy isn’t the raven. He’s just some schmuck with a lot of time and money. When I find him perched above my chamber door, then I’ll worry.”

“Nevermore, nevermore,” croaked Harry. He set his knife on the bar and looked at Jack. Jack said nothing and resumed his slicing, focusing his attention on the lime and the cutting board.

CHAPTER FOUR

Wednesday morning, Harry ambled down the creaking driftwood stairs from his apartment to the back door of the bar. It was only ten in the morning but the day was already hot. The trade winds wouldn't cool until sunset. He opened the door and turned on the lights. The ceiling fans leapt to a high-speed spin.

Harry never told anyone, but this was his favorite part of the day. For these few minutes, the bar belonged entirely to him. It was clean and beautiful. He plugged in the jukebox and played his usual morning selections: one Jimmy Buffett, one Van Morrison, and one James Taylor. He switched on the coffee pot behind the bar, smoked two cigarettes while it brewed, then poured a cup.

As she always was, when he opened the front door, Catherine Jane was waiting outside, leaning against the boardwalk railing. She had come to St. Anne by way of San Antonio, San Diego, Portland and who knew where else before that. Another runaway from the States. Curvy, buxom and petite, with long, glossy, black hair and deep chocolate eyes, Catherine Jane was the only woman on the island who inspired in Harry anything beyond fleeting lust. For the first time since the sixth grade, when Mae Quinn broke his heart, Harry fell victim to an unrequited crush.

"Mornin', Catherine Jane," Harry said when she raised her sunglasses and smiled at him.

"Mornin', Boss." She was holding two cups of coffee.

"One of those for me?"

"For Navajo," she answered. "His coffee pot is busted, and he can't drink that rocket fuel you brew every morning. He's spoiled on that Kona his mother sends him."

Harry stepped aside as Catherine Jane slipped past him through the door. He plucked the mail from the box, stuffed in the back pocket of his khakis and walked over to the boardwalk railing. He heard Navajo's heavy footsteps and a quiet "Aloha, boss," behind him. That meant it was about ten-thirty. Around eleven the rest of the staff, the other waitresses and the kitchen guys would show up. Most of them, anyway. At noon, the lunch crowd of surfers, fishermen and morning sunbathers would wander in. Out on the water, Harry could see the early morning charter boats headed back to port, swift and white in the sunshine. It was Wednesday, the start of the weekend, and all was well on the island. When Harry walked into the bar, Navajo was out of sight, probably on the deck opening umbrellas. Catherine Jane sat at a table, rolling silverware and humming along with the Neil Young song she'd played on the jukebox. Harry finished the rest of his coffee, tossed the mail on the bar and headed into the kitchen for ice.

In New Amsterdam, Sixth Floor was in an uproar. Roswell was coming. He had called mid-morning, giving an hour's notice. Samantha did her best to calm the staff and to hide how nervous she was herself.

"We're professionals, top of our field," she reminded them, checking her watch. It was time. "We could do nothing better than to show him a typical day around here," she said. She closed the glass door to the office behind her and strode down the hall to meet her new boss.

The elevator doors slid open when Samantha was halfway down the long hall. Roswell stepped out of the elevator. Samantha felt her eyes widen. She thought of her conversation with Erica Ellison. Extraordinary looking was exactly the right description;

merely handsome would've been a criminal understatement. She chided herself for her reaction. Very professional, she thought. Samantha felt his glittering gray eyes lock onto her; they seemed to meet her in her place, and she unconsciously quickened her pace. Roswell smiled at her and tugged at the cuff of his sleeve, still looking at her. He wore a finely cut gray suit, perfectly tailored to his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

Samantha gripped the hand he extended. "Samantha Taylor," she said. "Welcome to Sixth Floor."

He smiled, his eyes dancing lightly over her. "A pleasure," he said.

"Good to meet you, too," Samantha said. She realized she was still gripping his hand. She released it. The hall was full of awkwardness, and Samantha knew all of it was hers. Roswell gestured down the hall.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Of course," Samantha said. "Follow me."

Roswell walked beside her instead. "I apologize for imposing on such short notice," he said.

"There's no apology necessary," Samantha said. "We're happy to have you here." She felt her poise returning, relieved to be in motion.

"Good, this visit is exactly that," Roswell said. "A visit. My employer and I would like faces to put with names. We're anxious to get to know everyone."

Samantha pushed the door open, holding it as Roswell passed through. "Here they are," she said. "The best in the business."

As she instructed, no one took notice of their entrance. Samantha pointed to her office door in the back, instructing Roswell to simply knock after he'd had a chance to

meet everyone. With the slightest of bows Roswell took his leave of her to make his way around the office.

Harry was behind the bar reading the mail when Jack made his noontime appearance. Jack slapped the bar as he walked past and disappeared into the kitchen. He re-appeared holding a glass plate of a dozen sliders on ice. He walked behind the bar, set the plate on the counter and poured a cup of coffee, spooning in three heaping spoonfuls of sugar. He held the plate out to Harry. Harry refused. Jack swallowed an oyster and sipped his coffee.

“What’s up?” Jack asked.

“Not much, Captain,” Harry said. He folded his arms and leaned back against the counter. “Slow start today. The ice is watery. Evan quit. Catherine Jane won’t sleep with me.” He smiled, his eyes following her as she carried shrimp sandwiches to a table near the stage. He handed Jack a postcard. “You know, the usual.”

Jack took the card. On the front was a photo of the Brooklyn Bridge at sunset. On the back was a short note in an infantile scrawl. Jack didn’t have to read the message to recognize its author. “Woody’s planning another visit?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “Hopefully he’ll cancel like he has the last four times he threatened to come see us.”

Jack laughed. “I don’t know why you’re so against him coming down. It’d be good to see one of the old boys again.”

“Fine,” Harry said. “He stays with you this time, then.” He scowled. “His last two week visit lasted for two months, and my apartment smelled like feet for three.”

“Well, we can settle that if he ever actually shows up,” Jack said. He tossed the card on the bar, wondering again why Woody always sent postcards from where he lived to where he went on vacation. “Wait a minute. Evan quit?” Jack asked. “Again? What is it this time? He going back to school, at least.”

“Yeah, Evan quit,” Harry said. “Apparently he’s a chauffer now. Moving off the beach and into the city, even.” He shrugged. “I haven’t talked to him yet. All of this came from Rob, while he slammed around the kitchen this morning, hollering about how he’ll be damned before he washes the dishes.”

Jack put his coffee down and popped open the cash register. From underneath the cash drawer, he produced a pile of papers, job applications. “I’ll call one of these guys,” he said.

“Tried that,” Harry said. “No dice. I got Navajo walking up to Mr. Peaceful’s place. His kid always needs a coupla bucks, if he’s on the island.”

Jack started to put the applications back, looked at them, then tore the stack in half and tossed them in the trash.

Harry laughed out loud. “That’s what you get for trying to get all professional,” he said.

Jack picked up another oyster from the plate and slurped it down. When Catherine Jane slapped a ticket down at the service window, Jack waved Harry off and made the margaritas himself. Harry could make any cocktail you could name, but he couldn’t touch Jack’s margaritas. No one on the island could.

“I’ve gotta tell you,” Jack said, setting the drinks on the bar, “I’m getting curiouser and curiouser about Friday.”

“Listen to you,” Harry said. “I thought you weren’t going to waste any time thinking about Friday. Martin really did get inside your head the other night, didn’t he? Or are you going because Sam wants you to?”

Jack sipped his coffee. “Neither,” he lied, and he knew Harry didn’t buy it. “Well, maybe both. Hey, I blame you. You were the one talking about him looming over everything. Yeah, I’d like a better idea of what he’s really all about. Roswell seems a reasonable place to start.”

“I’ll go as your attorney,” Harry said. “Legal representation here might be essential.”

“Nah. I was thinking I’d do this myself, actually,” Jack said. “Ignoring the fact you have no legal training whatsoever, it only takes one of us to tell this guy to shove any of his offers up his ass. Besides, someone’s got to stay here and make sure the dishes get washed.”

Harry smiled knowingly. “That could be you,” he said. “I can tell him to shove it as well as you can.”

Jack looked down at the floor. “Yeah, that’s true. I mean, you could do it if you wanted. I guess it doesn’t make a difference which one of us goes.”

Harry laughed and slapped Jack on the back. “You’re a riot,” he said. “Like I really give a shit about going.” He reached into the cooler and pulled out three Coronas. Their metal tops pinged off the bar in three different notes. He slid them, one by one, down the bar to Catherine Jane.

Samantha was chewing on a pen cap and staring at the computer screen when Roswell knocked on her door.

“Come in,” she said, not looking over.

“Did you not get the flowers?” he asked.

She turned. “Oh, I did,” she said. “They were gorgeous. But alas, they started fading rather quickly. I know I’m weird, but dying flowers depress me.”

“Oh....well. Not the reaction I anticipated. I’m sorry,” Roswell said.

“No, no. I appreciate it. I do,” Samantha said, blushing. Great. Embarrass the man within eight seconds of his entering your office. Well done. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Roswell said. He stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. “This is an impressive operation, Ms. Taylor. Sixth Floor is efficiency incarnate.”

“Thank you, but I’m sure you studied up on us before you came over. Our numbers speak for themselves.”

“Right on both counts,” Roswell answered. “I read up on Sixth Floor quite a bit. I’ve been following the boutique plans very closely. In fact, Mr. Michaels would kill me for mentioning this, but that plan was a big part of sealing the deal. We have high hopes.”

Samantha’s face brightened. “Really?”

Roswell walked to her desk. “As I understand it, the boutiques were your idea.”

Samantha hesitated, unsure of how much credit the board had let trickle down her way. “I did help get it off the ground,” she ventured.

“Your modesty is unnecessary,” Roswell said, “though it flatters you. Ms. Ellison said it wouldn’t have happened without you. The way things run around here, I’m prone to believe her.”

Samantha flashed back to Sunday morning in Jack’s living room, to the work she did, her laptop glowing as the sun rose and he slept. The boutiques are only the beginning, she thought. I’ve got more, another, better idea. Another plan we can launch from right here on St. Anne. She looked at Roswell. Was now the time?

“Have you had lunch yet?” he asked, settling on the corner of her desk. “I have a lot I want to ask you about. I was hoping you could fill me in somewhat, on the caprices of island life and such. I’ve only started getting used to it.”

Samantha looked down at her cluttered desk. “I usually eat in the office,” she said, “and I’m especially swamped this afternoon.”

Roswell smiled and leaned forward. “I haven’t cooked a meal in years, and I need to find at least one good restaurant,” he said. “Mr. Michaels is picking up the tab. As you know, he’s got deep pockets.”

“It’s tempting, it is,” Samantha said, “but it’s a bad day for me to leave the office.” She picked up a computer printout and held it up, as if it were justification for her refusal. “The takeover has the Caymans in a panic.”

“Unduly,” Roswell said, standing. “But I understand.” He extended his hand and Samantha rose from her chair to shake it. “Soon,” he said. “Mr. Michaels wants us to get to know each other better, and, well, he really likes to get his way.”

Roswell turned and walked out of the office. Samantha sat back down, staring at the space he had occupied in her office. She caught him in the hall, grabbing his elbow.

“You know what?” she said when he turned. “I haven’t been someplace nice in a while.”

As the limo pulled away from the curb, Samantha named a small, classy Cuban place she had enjoyed on one of her last dates before she met Jack. She had liked everything about Lola’s, she recalled as Roswell relayed the restaurant’s name and location to the driver, except for the company – an arrogant lawyer she’d been out with half a dozen times, which was four times too many. Roswell listened attentively as Samantha narrated their quick tour of St. Anne’s capital.

“The west coast is stuck in a time warp,” she said as they weaved through the business district, “but New Amsterdam has been growing steadily for five years or so. A lot of people from Europe, and from the States especially, are discovering the tax and banking situation here is at least equal to Grand Cayman. Two new office high rises opened this past spring. They’ve each rented half their space already.”

“Impressive,” said Roswell, “though I hope the place doesn’t lose its charm. Martin was attracted to the Cayman’s himself but he preferred someplace the rest of the world hasn’t quite caught up to yet, someplace just beginning its ascent.”

“Well,” Samantha said. “The Ellisons had the same idea. They were smart. We had to wait for technology to catch up for a couple of years, but now that St. Anne has started to really grow, we’re solidifying and expanding throughout the Caribbean while everyone else is just getting started here.”

The limo cruised under a stone bridge, emerging into Old Town, the arts quarter and original site of the city. Roswell remarked on the change, the suddenness of it, as if

the bridge had been a time warp. None of the buildings, square, stone and painted fading pastel colors, stood taller than three stories. Tall, ragged palm trees lined the streets. The asphalt beneath the car turned to cobblestone.

“This is more what I was looking for,” Roswell said. “The real heart of the island.”

“This is certainly more the real St. Anne than downtown,” Samantha said. “The government’s worked hard to balance expanding the economy with preserving what people come here for in the first place.”

“Where’s tourism fit in?” asked Roswell.

“That’s a good question,” Samantha said. “There’s always an uproar whenever a new cruise ship wants to dock here, or somebody wants to put up a new hotel, especially on the west coast.”

“Where Martin’s house is,” Roswell said.

“Exactly,” Samantha said. She laughed. “And exactly where my boyfriend, Jack, owns a bar.” She turned and faced Roswell. “Well, you know about that. The Lone Palm.”

“Ah, Jack Donovan,” Roswell said. “He’s your boyfriend. He owns the bungalow down the hill from Martin. I haven’t had the pleasure, though I look forward to meeting him Friday.”

Samantha gazed out the window. “Even Jack gets queasy every time someone floats a rumor about a new hotel or, God-forbid, a full-fledged resort.” She turned back to Roswell. “You’d think he’d be for it, being that he owns a bar that fills with tourists, but he hates the idea of the island growing. He’s not even native.”

She wondered now if Roswell had heard anything she'd said. He was studying her, and she sensed thoughts that had nothing to do with her understanding of the tourism question. It was not the way he had looked at her when she met him at the elevator earlier that day, still and cool. Now, his eyes quivered, as if at work, as if they were trying to see something behind her by looking through her.

“Ms. Taylor, some people are, despite their potential, of limited ambition. They're just more easily satisfied than the rest of us. It's not a crime; it's just one of those things that make people different from one another. I mean no insult to Jack. And who knows? Maybe Friday he'll surprise the both of us.”

The car poured up the curb outside of Lola's. Samantha rapped on the window. “Here it is,” she said.

“Excellent,” Roswell said. “I'm starving.”

They took a table for two in the back, by the fireplace. Over lunch, Roswell did the talking. Martin felt he had exhausted his options in Los Angeles, he explained, and was seeking out new horizons. He had amassed a considerable fortune in real estate in the 80's, doubled it in the dot com boom of the 90's, and, following Roswell's advice, had gotten out of it before the bust. Martin had dabbled in Hollywood as of late, producing a couple of awful but profitable B-grade horror films. By then though, Roswell said, making more money wasn't enough. Despite the films' profitability, they, and their producer, became a running joke at cocktail parties and in boardrooms throughout Hollywood. The criticism was savage, bloodier, Roswell said with a rueful smile, than the movies themselves. Martin abandoned the movie industry in haste – angry and

embarrassed, two emotions he took to very unkindly. It was time to start over, Martin, had declared. A different, quieter place and a different, quieter, much less public business.

“And what does Martin know about buying and selling high-end, contemporary fashion?” Samantha asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” Roswell said, smiling. “But he’s got an obscene amount of money, which makes it easy to buy the right properties. Plus,” he went on, opening his arms, “he’s got me.”

“And you’re a fashion authority?”

“Hardly,” Roswell said, eyes sparkling, “but I know damn near everything about people. Makes it easy to hire the right ones.”

David Roswell had run point for Martin Michaels for over fifteen years, Samantha learned. He’d practiced corporate law for fifteen years before that. He knew all there was to know about his employer. Roswell said with pride that he was the only person on the planet who could make that claim. He had warned his notoriously private employer to stay away from Hollywood. It was the last time, Roswell whispered conspiratorially over crème brulee, Martin failed to heed his advice. Samantha didn’t doubt it. She was, in fact, fascinated. She considered him as he spoke, enjoying his smooth, expressive voice. He looked ten, fifteen years younger than he had to be to fulfill his resume. Roswell finished an anecdote about Martin’s trying to buy the movie rights to a book about fat vampires that only preyed on people following the Atkins’ diet and leaned back in his chair.

He waved for the check, handed the waiter a credit card and excused himself to the restroom. Samantha watched him walk, smiling at his snakeskin boots. He was a

knockout, and oh, that voice, but what she really wanted was his past. She wanted the bloody details of twenty-five years in the trenches. How had he sealed his victories? How had he recovered from his losses, if there had been any? She had ascended the ranks at Ellison with amazing speed, comfortable in the wisdom of her decision to leave a huge company in Miami and to take a chance on a smaller one on a largely nowhere island. But while Samantha felt she was still in the early stages of her career, Roswell was a veteran. He had answers and knew secrets. She wanted to grill him for hours, right there at the table. She feared he could see that in her eyes as he returned to the table.

“I have a proposition for you,” Roswell said, signing the credit card slips. “Rather than exchange phone calls and e-mails and the like, why don’t we do this on a regular basis?” He waved his arm over their table. “Late lunches, early dinners. Here, or where ever, in order to conduct general business. Seems a much better way to stay acquainted than the horribly impersonal manners I mentioned before.” He smiled. “Seems much more the way of the islands.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Samantha said. “I’m all for it.”

Roswell held out his hand and Samantha slipped hers into it as she rose from the table. He escorted her through the restaurant to the idling limousine by the curb.

“Evan here will take you to your office,” Roswell said, taking Samantha’s hand again as she eased into the backseat. “I have a second car coming shortly.” He leaned on the car door. “It has been a pleasure, Samantha. I look forward to our next encounter.”

“As do I,” Samantha answered.

Roswell stepped back and closed the door of the car.

Samantha watched him through the rear window as Evan directed the car into the afternoon traffic. A light rain started to fall. Roswell remained at the curb, unaffected by the sudden change in weather. He retrieved a small cigar from his jacket pocket and lit it. He was standing there, smoking, when Samantha turned back around. She glanced at her watch and caught her breath, then began searching her handbag for her cell-phone. She'd been out of the office for almost three hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

“This is it, Captain,” called Elvis from the front of the cab, snapping Jack awake.

He yawned and stretched, gazing sleepily out the window at the city streets.

People in suits and sunglasses and fancy shoes, cell-phones to their ears, hustled up and down the sidewalks, satchels, bags and briefcases slung over their shoulders or gripped tightly in their hands. Jack patted the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket. He took a smoke out and lit it. The cab in front of them pulled away from the curb, and Elvis slid his battered red and white car into the slot.

“What do I owe you?” Jack asked, counting out bills.

“Please, Captain. I’m insulted,” Elvis said. “It was on my way.”

“On your way?” Jack laughed. Elvis ran up and down Ocean Avenue, back and forth between the hotels and the boardwalk. New Amsterdam was over an hour out of his way. He reached forty dollars over the seat. “We couldn’t be more out of your way,” he said. Elvis waved him off.

“Call me when the big lobsters come in and we’ll call it even,” the cab driver said. “You need a ride back?”

“No thanks,” Jack said, stepping out of the cab and leaning in the door. “I’m gonna swing by Sam’s office after this is over and surprise her. And it’s a deal, the biggest one of the lot is all yours. Bring Priscilla.”

“Will do,” Elvis said. “Good luck.” He gave Jack the thumbs-up and pulled back out into the traffic.

Jack took a last drag of his cigarette, crushed it out underneath his sandal and peered up at the office building in front of him. He took a deep breath, darted across the sidewalk and shoved his way into the revolving door. Two security guards stopped him when he emerged into the marble-floored lobby and directed him to the information desk. Jack insisted he wasn't lost and produced the letter from Roswell. He signed in as Mickey Mantle while security called Roswell's office to confirm Jack's appointment. They pointed him to the elevators and reminded him there was, of course, no smoking in the building.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Jack said, shaking hands with each of the three security officers. "Have a good day and keep the faith," he said.

Riding the elevator, Jack smirked at the other passengers. His Aloha shirt managed to clash with the neutral suits and dresses that surrounded him. As they passed the ninth floor he placed a cigarette between his lips and let it dangle there, pretending to search his pockets for his lighter. His fellow passengers edged away from him, but no one said a word. For those few minutes he was having a good time. His nerves buzzed to life on the fourteenth floor, as he stepped from the elevator into the hall outside Roswell's office. He put the cigarette back in the pack and pulled open the door.

Roswell's secretary looked up from her laptop as the door clicked shut behind Jack. She was a very young woman. Her close-cropped brown hair framed a pretty face. Jack noticed her skin had the orange tinge of a tanning salon. He felt her beaming smile land on him like a spotlight.

"Good afternoon," she said. "You must be Mr. Donovan."

Jack nearly fell over. That again. “I guess so,” he said, trying to smile back. There was no matching or deflecting the wattage directed at him, and he gave up. He pulled the letter from his back pocket. “I have an appointment to see Mr. Roswell,” he said, embarrassed. Like there’d be another reason for me to be here, he thought. Maybe I really am lost.

“Of course you do,” she said. “Have a seat and I’ll let Mr. Roswell know you’re here.” She pressed a button on the phone on her desk. “Excuse me, sir. Mr. Donovan is here.”

“Thank you, Daisy. Can you ask him to give me a couple of minutes?”

“Sure. No problem,” Jack said.

Daisy beamed across the room at him. “Have a seat and he’ll be with you in a moment. Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

“Sure,” Jack said. “Black, extra sugar. Thank you.”

Jack settled into the black leather couch against the wall and watched as Daisy made his coffee. As she moved, strolling across the room, reaching up for the mug, lifting the full coffeepot, her sleeveless blouse and short skirt revealed the well-muscled arms and strong thighs of an athlete, probably a runner. Jack smiled. He thought of Samantha, the way she looked in one of her racing suits, maybe walking across the beach, her snorkeling gear dangling from her hand. He loved the way women wore muscle, Samantha especially. Muscle didn’t make them squared-off and bulky like it did men; it made women sleek and graceful. You only really saw it when they moved, a ripple here or there, like a breeze rippling a glassy sea. Jack lit a cigarette and looked around the office.

Tasteful if anti-septic – clamshell walls, charcoal carpet, black furniture. It had the distinct air of a new arrival trying to give the impression of having been around awhile. Jack fingered the leaves of the short palm at the end of the couch. It was fake. Daisy appeared in front of him, holding his coffee and wearing a frown.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Donovan,” she said, “there’s no smoking in this building.”

Jack looked at the cigarette as if he had just noticed it himself.

“Sorry about that.” He searched for a place to put it out. Devoid of ideas, he took one last drag and crushed the cigarette out in the fake dirt of the planter. Daisy handed him his coffee, which he accepted silently. Wearing a forced grin, Daisy fished the butt out of the pot with her nails, nodded and walked back to her desk. She dropped the butt in the trashcan. Jack stared down into his steaming coffee.

“Would you ask him to come in now?” he heard Roswell say.

When Jack entered the office, Roswell was standing behind a large oak desk, hands in his pockets. He wore a dark gray suit, a white shirt and a multi-colored tie. Some kind of abstract print in reds, yellows and greens. Stacks of files covered the desk, a laptop perched atop one of them. Jack wondered if his life was in one of those files, or maybe sequestered in the vast memory of the small computer. Plaques and framed documents adorned the walls, awards, Jack figured, for making rich people richer. He remembered he was in this office because he had something Roswell wanted. He recalled Samantha saying she liked this guy, and that he was, for all intents and purposes, her boss. Jack extended his hand across the desk. “Nice to finally meet you,” he said.

“Likewise,” Roswell said, shaking Jack’s hand. He gestured at the chair beside Jack. “Please, sit down.”

Jack sat, cradling his coffee against his chest. Roswell lifted stray files off his chair, stared vaguely at the piles on the desk, then dropped the files on the floor.

“Thank you for coming all the way out here, Mr. Donovan,” he said, “on what I’m sure is a busy afternoon for you and Mr. Valentine. As you can see, I’m chained to this desk.”

“No worries,” Jack said, “but can we please cool it with the Mr. Donovan stuff? It makes me feel like I’m in trouble. It’s Jack. What can I do for you?”

Roswell eased into his chair. “As you know, my employer is establishing himself on St. Anne. The two of you are neighbors and of course there’s your involvement with Samantha, who now works for us.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at the use of his girlfriend’s first name. No way she lets him call her that, he thought.

“Your point?” Jack asked.

“Mr. Michaels is always on the lookout for an opportunity. His moving to your part of the island has provided that. It also provides a great opportunity for you. My point is that you have something Mr. Michaels wants, and he has assigned me the task of acquiring it.”

Jack raised up on the arms of the chair, blowing air. “I hate to disappoint you, Mr. Roswell,” he said, waving a hand at the stacks of files, “and I don’t want to make anybody’s job more difficult,” he leaned forward, “or get anyone in trouble with his boss,

but my house is absolutely, positively not for sale. To anyone. At any price. We've been through this."

Roswell laughed. "Look, man to man, I'm as tired of these negotiations as you are, but, in my professional capacity - "

"There are no negotiations," Jack said. "There never were. I thought I made that clear to you."

Roswell shrugged. "In my professional capacity, I've got my orders. Mr. Michaels insists on buying your bungalow, or to be more specific, the property it's on. We did a lot of research before we got here: on the Monroe House, on the west coast, on you. We know what that stretch of beach is worth. More importantly, we know what it could be worth, the money it could produce, if it were utilized properly. Mr. Michaels has told me you can name your price."

Jack ran his tongue over his front teeth, drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. So, here's a wad of cash, Jack. Pack it in and move along. "What do I have to do to convince you guys I'm not selling?" Jack said. "And what makes you think you can call me in here, wave a big fat check in my face, and get me to give up my home? Because that's what you're asking. That bungalow's not some investment property I inherited from a crazy uncle. It's not some condo I'm looking to turn for a profit. It's my home, a home I'm perfectly happy in, that I worked really hard, for a really long time to get. It's not for sale."

"Please, Jack," Roswell said, "calm down and try not to take offense. No one's asking you leave the island, or even the coast. Just that tiny piece of the beach. Nobody's questioning how hard you work. Martin respects your place as one of the coast's most

successful businessmen.” Roswell raised his hands. “We know it’s difficult to move out of one place and get settled in another. Mr. Michaels is going through it right now. We wouldn’t have asked you to leave one house without ensuring you could find another. Daisy can have a list of available properties for you by Monday. Not that you’d have to leave that soon.”

Roswell abruptly stopped. Jack figured his face must have betrayed him. Roswell smiled. “Don’t forget, I’m a lawyer. I’d be happy to help you get re-settled, negotiate a good deal for you. I can cut a check for you this afternoon,” he said. “Say, half a million?”

Jack struggled to remain calm, to keep his head clear, as he listened. Boy, he and Harry could really do some things for the Lone Palm with a chunk of that money. Re-outfit the whole kitchen, replace all that old, leaky plumbing. Weather-proof the place so they would’ve have to sweat and pray through another hurricane season. They needed bigger bathrooms. The waitresses needed raises. He wished Harry had come with him, tried to imagine what his partner would say.

Roswell was offering far more money than Jack’s slice of beach was worth, ridiculously more money than Jack knew he’d ever make running a beach bar. That’s exactly what the offer was, Jack thought, ridiculous. Who offers five times what a piece of property is worth, the first time they make an offer? Finally, Jack’s head did start to clear. That’s exactly what Harry would call the whole thing, he thought. Fucking ridiculous. The offer is so ridiculous because it’s not for the beach, Jack thought. It’s so ridiculous because it’s for me. Martin wasn’t offering half a million for the few hundred yards of sand and shells that fronted his house. He’s offering half a million for me. For

me and for the seven years I've put into getting my life exactly the way I want it. He felt the blood rushing to the back of his neck again. Felt his temper kicking in, coiling in his stomach.

Roswell leaned forward. "You're quiet, Jack. Anything I can do to help? You can use the phone if you like, call your partner and consult with him on this." Jack didn't answer, didn't look up. Roswell stood. "I'll leave you alone for a few minutes," he said, stepping out from behind his desk. Jack stopped him with a raised hand then waved Roswell back to his desk.

"I don't need a few minutes," Jack said. "Again, I decline your offer, with emphasis and prejudice."

Roswell frowned. "Is it not enough money?"

Jack laughed. "It's not about the money," he said. "It's never been about money."

Roswell shrugged, raised his hands to show his confusion. "I don't get it," he said.

"Of course you don't," Jack said. "Your kind never do." He stood and set his coffee on the desk. "But I'm here to help you. You see, it's insulting to be thought of as a someone walking around with a price tag on his forehead. Maybe that's what you're used to seeing, what you see when you look at people. But, some people? That's not how they are, no matter how many zeroes you line up in front of them." Jack dropped back into his seat and re-claimed his coffee. "I sense a potential oversight in your research."

"My kind?" Roswell repeated, blinking. He gathered himself. "Look, Jack, I'm not the one who's misunderstanding the situation. Your sense of romance is compelling, but even you have to be aware of the world around you. True, St. Anne has proven uncannily conservative when it comes to progress but that is soon to end. There's simply

too much money out there. The flood of money and investments from the States and from Europe is unstoppable. Everybody's putting everything up for sale. Why not get in on that? So many of your sister islands, populated with people just like you, Jack, have been smart enough to get their share while they still have a say in things. We're offering you a chance to reap a huge profit on the inevitable. You may not be, but St. Anne's wearing a for sale sign. Don't be too blind to see it."

"I'm sorry," Jack interrupted. "Is this where I have my heartbreaking moment of disillusion? I was thinking about my hammock and lost you for a second."

"Be as flippant as you want. Like I need any more proof I'm dealing with an amateur. When you lay back in that hammock with a head full of margaritas, you'll think about what I said. And you'll know I'm right. I can't guarantee my employer will be as generous, or as cordial, the next time around."

"Look, tough guy," Jack said, "you can run this doom monger trip as long and as hard as you want, but you can't change the fact that I own that house and I'll burn it to the ground before I sell it to the likes of you and your employer. Dress it up however you want, but this is a case of me having something and you wanting it. Don't keep wanting what you can't have, it's frustrating. Pass that along to your boss. This meeting is over."

Jack walked out, slamming the door behind him. Roswell scowled at the empty chair in front of him. Martin was going to be unhappy. Delivering the bad news was going to be unpleasant. This meeting was, however, was hardly going to be the end of things. Roswell walked over to the bar and mixed himself another martini. Fine, Mr. Donovan, have it your way.

* * *

As she piloted her Jeep through the hills, the top off, the rushing air cooling as she neared the beach, Samantha kept taking her eyes off the road, trying to sneak looks at Jack's profile. At her office, he'd shrugged at her inquiries about the meeting, changing the subject when she pushed, avoiding her eyes. He was tough to read when he brooded, but she couldn't stop herself from trying. He was so cute when lost in thought. His eyes darkened and a deep crease appeared between his eyebrows. She was dying to know the details, and she felt for him, but she couldn't help revisiting the pleasant memories of when they'd first started dating, of when, realizing how attracted she was to him, she crossed her fingers hoping there was a brain beneath those thick, brown curls.

Samantha brought her knees up to the steering wheel, re-securing her ponytail with both hands. "Come on, Jack, talk to me," she said. "What's going on in there?"

Jack glanced at the speedometer. Its needle caressed the eighty-mile-per-hour mark. His eyes moved from Samantha's knees to the oncoming bend in the road.

"I was wondering if I had spent the last day of my life running around the city instead of at the beach," Jack said.

Samantha laughed. "Oh, stop. You know how careful I am. I've made this drive a thousand times. Tell me about Roswell and the meeting."

Jack stretched his arms and let his hands wave in the wind. "There's not much to tell," he said. "There was an offer, again. I refused it, again." He paused, wondering how for he should go. "He and I bumped heads over it. I don't know if he'll be coming over for steaks on Sundays, either."

Samantha set her hands back on the wheel. "An offer on the bar?"

"No. Martin still wants to buy my house," Jack said.

“The bungalow?” Samantha asked. “Hasn’t he got enough house on his hands?”

“It’s not the house as much as the beach,” Jack said.

“What for?”

“We didn’t get that far,” Jack said. “Roswell made the offer, I turned it down, he pushed, I pushed back, we kinda got into it a little bit.” Jack looked at Samantha, wondering how she was taking things thus far.

“Can you define ‘got into it’?”

Jack squirmed. “I mean, well, he’s not real good at taking no for answer. I had to kind of spell it out for him, and he may have taken a little offense.” He tried to smile. “Don’t know if I’ll be at the office Christmas party this year. He and I might be better off avoiding each other.”

“Well, you don’t get to where he is by taking no for an answer,” Samantha said. The she grinned, the corners of her mouth turning up slowly. “Jack? Are you doing some shrewd negotiating?” She glanced at him. “You’re bold, taking on a man like David.”

Jack turned to the trees rushing by along the roadside, smoothing his face with the palm of his hand, sorting out what to react to and what to let go before he spoke. David. We’ll let that go for now. What exactly is ‘a man like David?’ What’s bold about telling a huckster to take his road show elsewhere? He turned back to her.

“There’s no negotiating going on here,” he said. “It’s nothing like that. There wasn’t much to argue about. It was just an unacceptable offer.”

“Wasn’t even worth considering?” Samantha said.

“Not at all, well, maybe a little bit,” Jack said. “But, no. I never seriously considered taking it.”

“I hate to ask this, Jack,” Samantha said, “but my name didn’t come up, did it?”

“No,” Jack said. “I’ll give him that. He was professional enough to leave you out of it.”

“That’s good,” Samantha said. “I’d just, I’d hate to get caught in the middle of something.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Jack said. “He and I are through with each other.” Jack leaned over and ran his fingertips up the inside of her thigh. “That asshole has taken up enough of my day,” he said. “Let’s forget about him.”

Right, Samantha thought, that’s good advice, forget about him. She shifted her hips, covered Jack’s hand with her own, and slid them both up her skirt.

CHAPTER SIX

Martin stepped onto the balcony that wrapped around the second floor of his new home. Leaning on the railing with both hands, he peered into his shadow emerging black and amorphous from the shadow of the house. From the balcony, he could see far down the coast.

Beyond Jack's bungalow, beyond the dunes beside it, Martin could see the boardwalk, people still milling about in front of the shops as the sun melted into the sea, then the Lone Palm. The deck teemed with people, the umbrellas beetled toward the sun. He wondered if one of those anonymous figures was Jack. Further south, he saw the hotels standing white and clean against the cloudless sky, their windows scattering the dying sunlight. They were small, the tallest at ten or twelve stories, compared to those he knew in California. Ah, California. It was best not to think about that place. There was time for that later.

Martin spat into the huge shadow below him, settled his elbows on the railing and focused on Jack's house. Roswell had tried to convince him not to bother, and then, just a few minutes ago, had tried to convince him that Jack might be tougher than either of them had thought. Roswell was forever trying to convince him of things. Often, the lawyer was right. Martin was man enough to accept that. It's what Roswell was for. He had been right this time. Martin fully expected to own the bungalow already. Roswell preached patience, and he was trying to listen. There was time. For him to do what he wanted on St. Anne. Time for California. Haste and carelessness had sentenced him to this island, this Caribbean Elba, but restlessness, as it always had, rattled in his belly like rats in a wall.

I used to come here to do nothing, to disappear, for a week, Martin thought, if I could stand it *that* long. How the hell am I going to live here, doing nothing but watching Roswell watch a bunch of strangers sell clothes? He watched the palms behind Jack's house sway in the evening breeze. In all his trips to the island, he'd never given Jack much thought. He was always just part of the background. Never even knew that bungalow was his. To Martin, Jack was a man who knew his station. He didn't ask questions, made a good martini, and took the tip with a smile. But now, now Jack was someone he didn't like at all, someone he hadn't met too often in his sixty-two years. Jack was someone who had told him no.

Staring at the palm trees, Martin wondered what it would cost to have them uprooted and carted away one afternoon. I could re-plant them, he thought, one on either side of my front door. Not that I ever liked palm trees, but it would send Jack the right kind of message.

"How obvious is it I just had a screaming orgasm at eighty miles an hour," Samantha asked, peering into the Jeep's rearview mirror, trying again to discipline her ponytail. They were parked behind the Lone Palm.

Jack laughed out loud. "That is absolutely the best question anyone has ever asked me," he said. "It's not obvious at all. Don't worry."

She handed Jack her underwear. "They go in your pocket," she said, "not on your head."

"Why would you even say something like that?"

"Because I know you," Samantha answered.

Jack stuffed the underwear in the pocket of his shorts and held the door open for her.

Happy hour was in full swing. Jack and Samantha, hand in hand, worked their way through the crowd.

“Hey, Captain,” Harry yelled, holding three bottles high, the liquor streaming into a silver tumbler on the bar. “What’s the good word from our fair capitol?”

Jack ducked under the service window and surfaced beside Harry. Samantha squeezed into a space at the bar.

“Pretty much what we thought,” Jack said, “with a little variation on the theme.”

“We’ll pow-wow,” Harry said. “Tony’ll be in any minute.” He handed Jack a ticket. “Check on this in the kitchen for me?” Jack took the ticket and disappeared. Harry poured out his concoction into three highball glasses. Catherine Jane darted by and swept the drinks from the window.

“She still won’t go out with me,” Harry said to Samantha.

“Hang in there,” Samantha said. “You gotta work for a woman who knows she’s a prize.”

“For four years?” Harry asked. “Make me feel better, Sam. Tell me she’s just intimidated by my astounding good looks, or my razor-sharp intellect, or my vast wisdom.”

“Maybe it’s all three,” Samantha said.

Harry smiled. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, Sam.”

Catherine Jane arrived at the window, slamming her tray on the bar. “Who’s ass I gotta whip to get some drinks made around here?” she yelled. “I got three tickets still

sitting here, Valentine, and you're gabbing away." She smiled at Samantha. "Hey, Sam, how ya been? Thanks for that catalogue. I'm having a hell of a time finding a new swimsuit." She scowled at Harry and vanished again into the crowd.

"Okay," Harry said, "maybe intimidated was the wrong word."

"That much hostility," Samantha said, "can only mean she's in love with you."

Jack burst from the kitchen, ticket still in hand. "Five more minutes," he told Harry. "Rob swears."

Harry nodded and went back to work on the drink tickets. Jack moved up and down the bar, starting tabs, closing tabs, passing sweating bottles of beer to hands stretched over ducking heads. A Corona appeared in front of Samantha, though she never saw him put it there. He churned out pitcher after pitcher of margaritas, frozen, rocks, salt, no salt. Catherine Jane came and went, as did 'her girls': Jodi, Raven and Belle. Samantha sipped her beer, occasionally passing a bay breeze or a rum punch over her shoulder, and watched with admiration.

At the service well, Harry hands were nearly a blur, bottles clanging as he yanked them from the well or dropped them back in, his eyes glued to the tickets constantly slapped down in front of him. He never paused, never hesitated, knew every waitress by her handwriting, or the color of her nails as she tore another ticket from her pad and slapped it down in front of them. His head bobbed up and down as he listened to them rattle off complaints or special requests from the customer: extra this, none of that, just a little of something else.

Jack worked the bar from end to end, always smiling, somehow always in control of the crowd, never doing fewer than three things at once: rattling a chilled shot in one

hand, making change at the register with the other, the blender running behind him, carrying on three separate conversations. He was a natural improviser, never breaking stride as customers changed orders mid-stream. He recited directions, charter boat schedules, fishing tips and the weather forecast. He entertained numerous different groups at once, or introduced them to one another through jokes and anecdotes. Time after time she watched him connect one group of strangers to another, passing stories, opinions and questions up and down the crowd like beach balls at a rock concert. Often, Samantha wondered how many friendships her boyfriend, with his casual manner and quick wit, had mid-wifed.

Sometimes, when she watched him behind the bar, Samantha tried to imagine Jack in a shirt and tie, working in an office, fingers dancing across the keyboard, the phone at his ear, reading something an assistant had handed him. In the daydream, Jack would always eventually turn to her, as an actor turns to the camera, and ask her why she was doing this to him. She could never work his crooked grin into the picture. That she could not fully fit Jack into that picture made her happy, made her feel she understood him. That she could not re-imagine his life told her it was a perfect fit for him. She admired, and envied, his knowledge of what made him happy.

She watched Tony duck under the service window and appear beside Harry. Tony stroked his goatee as Harry listed the supplies they needed to continue the shift. Nothing was written down. Minutes later Tony returned with cases of beer and bottles of liquor. He put it all away, disappeared again, and reappeared with buckets of ice. The bar crowd thinned as many wandered outside to watch the last of the sunset. Jack washed his hands

in the sink and strolled over to Samantha, bottle of tequila in one hand, shot glasses in the other, Tony now in his place before the blender.

“I don’t know, Jack,” she said. “You guys came dangerously close to making it look like work.”

Jack waved a hand before her eyes. “All an illusion, darlin’. I haven’t done an honest day’s work in seven years.”

He poured three shots from the Cuervo bottle. Harry and Samantha followed suit when Jack raised his glass. “David Roswell,” he said, “kiss my ass.”

Jack collected the empty glasses and dropped them in the sink.

“Things went that well?” Harry asked.

“Tony, you’re at the helm,” Jack shouted.

Tony smiled and saluted.

“Let’s talk about this upstairs,” Jack said, fishing two beers from the cooler. He opened them both and handed one to Samantha. “You wanna join us?” he asked her.

She declined. “I’m sure you two want to conspire in the strictest confidence,” she said. She winked at Jack. “I’m gonna stroll the beach, enjoy the breeze.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t even want to know.”

As Samantha headed for the front door, Jack and Harry made their way up to the deck. All the tables were taken, so they repaired to a corner where they could watch the ocean. Jack recounted the meeting in detail, pausing to recall Roswell’s exact words as best he could and to drag on a succession of cigarettes. He included his tentative conversation with Samantha in the Jeep. Talking to his partner was a relief. Samantha

was a great listener, but Harry and he lived on the same wavelength. Harry said nothing while Jack talked.

“So that’s the story,” Jack concluded.

Harry patted Jack on the back. “You handled it admirably, Captain,” Harry said. “I especially like the ‘with emphasis and prejudice’ part.” He sipped his beer. “But despite your eloquence I don’t think we’re done with these guys.”

“Why not?” Jack asked, surprised.

“Nature of the beast,” Harry said. “Who knows how long Martin’s been planning whatever it is he’s up to? Probably since he first laid eyes on this beach. He’s not gonna give up on it that easy. I agree with Sam, these guys didn’t get stupid rich taking no for an answer. They’ll come at you again.”

“So what do I do now?” Jack asked.

“Nothing. Leave the next move up to them,” Harry said. “What can they do, really? They make another offer, you reject it and ‘round and ‘round we go until they get tired of it, and you, eventually. Martin will find something else to spend his money on. Think of them like sunburn. Not much you can do about it, but it cools off and flakes away eventually.”

“Doesn’t sound like much fun.”

“Who says everything in life is fun?” Harry asked. “Well, we do, but other than us, who?” He chuckled to himself. “We can always find a way to make it fun, I suppose.”

“What’re you thinking?” Jack asked.

“Nothing in particular,” Harry said, “but I bet the opportunity will present itself.”

Jack stared out over the sea. He was quiet for a long time. “Let me ask you this,” he finally said, “and tell me the truth, would you have taken the money?”

Harry lit another cigarette, taking his time with his answer.

“I know most people consider me cheap and sleazy,” he said, “and I don’t blame them. I work that image every time I open my mouth in a crowded room.” He shrugged. “It’s fun and who knows better than you I could give a flying fuck what most of the world thinks of me. But I do have enough soul to know there are some things you can’t put a price on. Things like the life we make for ourselves.”

Jack nodded in assent, relieved to hear his thinking articulated for him. Harry continued.

“Taking that money would’ve changed things,” he said. “No matter how hard you tried not to let it, it would – you, our friendship, this bar. And I’m not even talking about what you’d do or not do with the money. I’m talking about letting someone put a price on your life. Letting someone do that, no matter how high the price, would change you forever.” He looked at Jack. “You did the right thing. A hurricane could blow through here tonight and destroy everything we have, and I’d always believe you did the right thing.”

“Can you explain all this to Samantha?” Jack asked.

“Why don’t you? From what you told me, sounds like you hardly tried.”

Jack waited to answer. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Not sure about what?” Harry asked. “That you can explain it, or that she can understand it?”

Jack couldn’t answer.

“You need to take that risk,” Harry said. “You’re both human. The sooner you two get disappointing each other out of the way, the better.” He sipped his beer. “It’s gonna happen eventually.”

The next morning Michaels sat in his new office at the Monroe House, auburn curtains drawn over the windows. Tiffany lamps cast a muted glow over the room, shadows over the bare walls and the hand-carved mahogany furniture. Roswell eased into the blood red leather chair in front of Michaels’ desk.

“You’ve done quite a job with the place, Martin,” he said. “Inside and out. You must be thrilled.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Michaels said. “You can take the grand tour when we’re done.” He drummed his fingers on the desk. “Explain Jack Donovan to me, please,” Martin said. “I can’t come up with an answer. I pay you to be smarter than me. Explain to me how some grubby bartender can say no to half a million dollars, and mean it.”

“Because he is a grubby bartender,” Roswell said. “He probably spent half his life wandering around New York, dreaming of living the life he’s living now. I’m sure he still can’t believe he fell into it sometimes. He sees any change as the pin that’s going to burst his bubble.”

“He can buy a new goddamn bubble, six new bubbles on three different islands, with all the money we offered him,” Martin said.

Roswell shrugged. “He likes this one.”

“I’m not convinced,” Martin said. “If Jack feels he’s the luckiest man alive, wouldn’t our offer strike him as the natural course of events? I mean, half a million?”

“Well, that leads me to something else,” Roswell said. “I think maybe we offered him too much money.”

“Too much money?” Martin said, sinking back in his chair. “You’re making less sense than Donovan.”

“Think about it,” Roswell said. “Being who and what he is, his mind lacks the power to grasp that much money as a reality. Half a million means nothing to you, to him it’s an unfathomable amount. It’s not real to him. Jack doesn’t feel he’s lost anything in refusing.”

Martin shook his head. “I don’t buy it. You know what I think? I think it’s much simpler than all this psychobabble you’re spouting. I think Donovan’s doing this to aggravate me for disturbing his precious peace and quiet. He just flat out doesn’t like me, or that I’m here, or that I’m so rich.”

“Martin,” Roswell said, “do you really think this guy would walk away from five-hundred thousand dollars just to spite you?”

Martin stared at Roswell for a long time then turned away and went back to the window. “I believe it,” he said. “In LA we offered people who had plenty of money a lot less money than we offered Donovan. They always said yes.”

“Not always,” said Roswell, smiling.

“You get my point,” shouted Martin. “He should take the money. There’s no rational reason for him not to.”

“This isn’t California,” Roswell said, calmly. He paused, studying his cigar. “Donovan is not the usual animal, and we can’t treat him as such. I’ve said from the beginning the direct approach was doomed.”

“Don’t start with that,” Martin said, turning back toward Roswell, “don’t start with the ‘I told you so’s.’” He leaned forward on the desk, his weight on his palms.

“Admit it, Roswell, you’re as stumped as I am.”

“Hardly. I told you exactly what I thought we should do from the beginning,” Roswell said.

“No,” Martin said. He shook a finger at Roswell. “No. You know what? It’s a new day. I’ve got my own ideas. I’m going to take care of this myself.”

Roswell folded his hands in his lap. “Handle it yourself?” he said. “Like you did Ruth. Like you handled Lisa?”

Martin stormed around the desk. “What? What did you say?” he yelled, leaning into Roswell’s face. “You got as deep into that as I did! Don’t you dare!” He was screaming now. Roswell didn’t flinch.

“I only got in so deep,” Roswell said, speaking in a near whisper, “to get you out.”

“Now there’s an idea,” Michaels yelled. “Get out! Get the hell out of here!”

Roswell stood, buttoned his jacket, and walked out of the office. Martin watched him go, then kicked over the chair Roswell been sitting in. He stood staring at it until he heard the limousine pull away. Then he went downstairs, fixed a scotch and soda at the bar in the living room and stretched out on the couch, his insides on fire from his groin to his throat.

Late Friday night, Jack lay stretched on the couch, his dog-eared copy of *Huckleberry Finn* splayed open on the floor beside him. He cradled a glass of watered-

down rum on his belly. On the coffee table, candles burned and a neglected cigarette smoked away in the seashell ashtray. He heard Samantha sit up in bed, listened to her sleepy stagger as she padded into the living room wearing her underwear and one of his Aloha shirts.

“Baby?”

“I’m right here,” he said.

She wandered over to him. Jack sat up, and Samantha sat down beside him, raking the hair from her eyes with her nails. She yawned. “Whatcha doin’?” she asked.

“Just thinking,” Jack answered. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Samantha said. She grinned at him in the candlelight. “I did my best to wear you out.”

Jack settled his hand at the back of her neck, running his fingers up under her hair. “Wear me out?” he said. “I thought you might be the death of me there at the end.”

“What is it then?” she asked.

Jack took his hand away and rescued the cigarette from the ashtray. Then he killed it with one long drag. “When I told you Roswell’s offer was an insult, what did you think I meant?” he asked.

“It was too low,” she said. “I mean, he seems like a nice enough guy to me.” She shrugged. “But it’s rude, I guess, trying to low-ball a guy on his house. Then again, business is business. I can see how he would drive a hard bargain, too.”

“They offered me half a million dollars,” Jack said, his eyes fixed on Samantha’s face as he sipped his rum. She blew out her breath, blinking at him. He could tell she was

trying to clear her head, that she was figuring out this conversation was more serious than she thought.

“That much,” she said.

“That much.”

“And you were insulted by that?” Samantha said, confusion seeping into her voice. “You think this property is really worth a lot more than that?”

Jack sipped his drink again. “To me it is,” he said. “Too me, it’s priceless.”

He waited for the light bulb to appear over her head. She just frowned at him.

“I mean, half a million,” she said. “Good Lord. You know how far that would go on this island? You could’ve built any kind of house you wanted, anywhere you wanted.”

“I know.”

Samantha sat still, staring into the candles. Jack set his drink on the coffee table, picked up his pack of cigarettes and walked out onto the porch. Samantha jumped when the door slammed behind him.

Jack lit up and sat on the steps. The night was cool, the sky cloudless and peppered with tiny stars. He watched the fragmented silver reflection of the moon dance on the dark sea. She’ll get it, he thought. She’ll get it. He waited for a sound from inside the house, waited to hear her footsteps disappear into the bedroom. When she sat beside him, he reached his arm across her shoulders.

“I would’ve taken the money, Jack,” she said. “I would’ve been at the bank before the ink dried on the check.” She turned to him. “Especially if I owned my own business.”

“Can you understand why I said no?” Jack asked.

“No,” Samantha said. “Not right now.” She kissed his cheek. “But I’ll come around when the shock wears off.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Saturday morning, Jack found Harry standing outside the Lone Palm with a smoking cigarette in one hand and bloody Mary in the other.

“Mornin’, Captain,” Harry said. “You’re up this way early.”

Jack lit a cigarette. “I’ve suddenly got a free morning,” he said, “and afternoon and evening, maybe.”

“Oops,” Harry said.

“She’s at the office,” Jack said. “We were on the beach, taking the sun, next thing I know she’s all hyped-up about some project and climbing into the Jeep.” He shrugged. “Said she’d be back in a few hours, but I don’t know.” He pulled his Aloha shirt from the back pocket of his shorts and put it on. “I told her about the money last night.”

“A-ha,” Harry said. “The money. Give her a little room. Even you had some second thoughts about it.”

“You’re right,” Jack said. “I was thinking the same stuff on the walk up here. It just bugs me.”

“What? That you and your girlfriend had a disagreement and you feel bad about that?” Harry laughed. “Tough being normal sometimes, ain’t it?” He sipped his drink. “Or so I hear.” He held the glass up to the sun. “Come inside. I’ll have Catherine Jane make you one of these. Her special recipe. Guaranteed to get your mind right.”

Jack stood behind the bar, lingering over his drink as Harry, Catherine Jane and Navajo completed their morning rituals. After he finished his bloody Mary, he brewed a fresh pot of coffee. He stood by the coffee maker, sipping a cup, and waiting for the

others to realize he'd made it. Everyone had declined his help, and Jack wondered exactly when he had drifted away from being part of the Lone Palm's mornings. It wasn't Samantha, though making time for her on the weekends certainly cut into his time at the bar. That was why they'd hired Tony. And were talking about hiring someone else. It was before Samantha, some time after he had bought the bungalow and left the upstairs apartment to Harry. Seemed to make sense then for Harry to open up. He had only to walk down a flight of stairs. Still makes sense, Jack thought, lighting a cigarette. But it didn't explain why he felt so out of place in his own bar. Jack poured the remainder of the coffee into a thermos and put it in the kitchen.

When Tony came in at one, Jack offered him the day off, which Tony accepted with gratitude. There was this girl, he said, who worked all weekend – except for Saturday afternoons. Jack wished him luck and gave him twenty-five bucks from the register.

By mid-afternoon, nearly everyone that had challenged the morning heat on the beach had wilted in the blazing sun. They staggered up from the beach in small packs, sunburned and thirsty, smelling of sweat and tanning lotion, seeking refuge in the air-conditioned confines of the Lone Palm. The bar filled slowly and steadily around Jack and Harry, who worked at a comfortable but accelerating pace. Jack smiled when, as he washed glasses, sweat dripped off his forehead into the sink. He felt good, light on his feet as he moved around behind the bar. During a wane in the rush, when everyone had their first round or two in them and turned their attention to the jukebox, or the menu, or the people next to them, Jack realized how much better he felt than when he watched

Samantha's Jeep tear away up Ocean Avenue. It would wind its way back, tonight, or maybe tomorrow, but soon. He was sure.

As Jack passed a pair of Red Stripes over the bar, Catherine Jane appeared in front of him, shouldering customers out of the way as she stood on the bar railing.

"There's someone here to see you," she said.

Jack smiled and headed for the service station, but Catherine Jane intercepted him there. "It's not Samantha," she said. "It's Martin."

Jack raised his eyebrows and said nothing.

"Says he'd like to talk to you, when it's convenient," Catherine Jane said. "Said he didn't want to interrupt your work. He's over at table twelve." She picked up her order from the bar and disappeared.

Jack lit a cigarette and called Harry over to him. "Martin's here," Jack said.

Harry nodded, stroking his chin. "At least we didn't have to wait long," he said. "I figure this, Captain, is the next move."

Jack poured himself a healthy shot of tequila and drank it, chasing it with a long drag off his cigarette. "I imagine I'll be back shortly," he said, pouring another shot. "Keep the hatches battened."

Harry nodded. "You keep your wits about you, sailor," he said.

Jack ducked under the waitress station and vanished into the crowd.

Harry waved Navajo over from his post by the front door.

"What's up, boss?"

"Why don't you wander over to table twelve and be a presence," Harry said.

Navajo straightened his enormous frame to its full six foot-eight. "Trouble?"

Harry looked up at the huge Hawaiian over the heads of several cowering customers. "I don't think so," he said. "The Captain is conducting a business meeting. Negotiations may get tense. I want to flex a little muscle on his behalf."

Navajo smiled. "Consider it flexed, Harry." He tucked his pen and crossword puzzle in his back pocket.

Martin watched Jack cross the floor, exchanging smiles and nods with customers slurping frozen drinks and devouring huge sandwiches with joyous gluttony. Good Lord, Martin thought, I can't believe Roswell couldn't solve this guy. The grimy sandals, the raggedy cut-off shorts, the obnoxious shirt. Drink in one hand, cigarette in the other. Until he met Jack and Harry three years ago Martin had hardly believed such people existed. It was too much. There must be something underhanded afoot around here, Martin thought, though he couldn't see any evidence of it. How else could this freak show stay in business?

He rose from his seat as Jack approached the table, extending his hand. Jack stuck his smoke in his mouth and shook.

"Roswell gave me your message," Martin said, sitting, "but I thought you might forgive one last visit."

Jack waved off the apology and sat. He set his cigarette in the ashtray and his drink in front of them. "Words spoken in anger," he said. "We've never minded having you here, Martin."

Jack felt none of the unease or hostility he had experienced in Roswell's office. He casually appraised the sweating, twitchy man across the table, trying to separate him

from the reserved but pleasant man he had served in his bar. White linen shirt, sleeves rolled up at uneven lengths. Flecks of diamond in his watch face. Linen slacks the color of sand. Salt and pepper hair, cut short, swept back and gelled into place. Martin crossed his legs in a failed attempt to look relaxed and bumped the table, nearly toppling Jack's drink. Jack offered him a cigarette, but Martin declined.

"You sure we can't get you something to drink?" Jack asked. "Something to eat? Our food is our best kept secret."

"Nothing, thank you," Martin said. Because it was so grotesque, Martin had difficulty not focusing on Jack's shirt.

"Quite a piece of work, isn't it?" Jack said. "Won the brightest shirt in Key West contest three years in a row. Used to belong to Coco Robiceaux, New Orleans blues musician extraordinaire." Jack beamed with pride. "They had to retire it. Girl I met at Mardi Gras gave it to me."

"A little piece of history," Martin said. He cleared his throat. "Look, Jack. I know you're busy so I'll get right to business. I was rather taken aback by your refusal of my latest offer. Mr. Roswell alluded to you possibly trying to drive up the price, but I have my doubts about that. You must know half a million is extremely generous."

He paused, waiting for Jack's response. Jack sipped his drink.

"I was thinking," Martin went on, "that perhaps it wasn't the amount you resented but the manner in which the offer was presented. I apologize for the way I handled things. I'm used to doing business a certain way." He stopped and shrugged, forcing a grin.

"Through Mr. Roswell, basically. But this I should have handled man to man from the

beginning. Hell, we already know each other. No reason I couldn't have just stopped by the bungalow."

Jack stubbed out his cigarette and leaned forward. He was enjoying the show. He watched Navajo walk over and stand behind Martin. Martin turned. Arms folded across his bulldozer-size chest, Navajo winked at Martin.

"Sir," Navajo said.

Martin turned back around and looked at Jack. Physical intimidation was an amateurish move, but the presence of the huge Hawaiian disturbed him nonetheless. Martin wondered what behavior, if any, he could safely consider below the man across the table. He tried to gather himself.

"You've carved an untroubled niche here," Martin said. "I understand your not wanting to alter that. Had I been able to keep things the way I wanted them in L.A., I might still be there. But change isn't always a bad thing. And as a business man, I can't understand why another business man would refuse such an opportunity." He forced another grin. "People everywhere dream of something like this happening to them."

Jack lit another cigarette with a flick of his Zippo. "And many people would use that money and try to get exactly where I am now."

"You have a point," Martin said. He wiped his hands down the front of his pants. He had hoped Jack would jump at another shot at the money, instead of sitting there reveling in the groveling. He had hoped he could call Roswell and gloat over how simple it had been, and over how wrong the lawyer had been. Martin drew his feet under his chair and leaned forward, his hands flat on the table, his face now inches from Jack's.

“I’ve tried apologizing,” he said. “I’ve tried being reasonable and you’ve done nothing, Donovan, but get more and more smug. I don’t care for it. I don’t care for your thug standing over my shoulder when I’ve been nothing but polite.”

“And I know it’s been killing you,” Jack said. “You keep sweating like that and you’re gonna need another round of gel.”

Martin clenched his hands into fists. “I told Roswell this is what it was about. You don’t like me, Jack. Why? Because I made a little noise getting the house together? Because I might steal your throne as king of the beach bums? Relax. I’ve got no aspirations to your crown. Take the money, buy yourself a new one.”

Jack downed the rest of his drink. “You know what, Martin? You’re right. I don’t like you. You’re a punk. Worse, I don’t trust you. Don’t trust what you’ve got planned for this beach. It makes me happy to be in your way. And why is that? Because, as I explained to your associate, your offer is pretty damned insulting and neither of you can understand why. It ain’t business, it’s bribery. What the fuck makes you think you can buy me? You think ‘cause I’m not a big shot like you I got a ‘for sale’ sign on my forehead? You see one on my door?”

“Good. We’re finally done with the bullshit,” Martin said. “We don’t like each other. Fine.” He reached into the pocket of his slacks. “Now that we’ve cleared the air, maybe we can do business.” He tossed a folded, light green check on the table. “Pick it up, Donovan. Hold it in your hands.”

Jack just stared at the check like it might sprout legs and scurry around the table.

“Makes things different when it’s right in front of you, doesn’t it?” Martin said. He pushed the check closer to Jack. “Open it. I threw in a little extra, a little something for the peace and quiet I cost you.”

Jack picked up the check and opened it. Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Jack studied the figures, the numbers scratched into the paper in black ink. He looked at the way a number that large looked written out in words. Took up almost the whole line. There was his name, ‘Jack Donovan’, written in Martin’s slanting, schoolboyish hand. And there was Martin’s signature at the bottom. The dual M’s, each followed by undecipherable squiggles. With his left hand Jack held his burning cigarette over the ashtray. In his right hand he held three quarters of a million dollars. He could tuck it in the pocket of his favorite shirt. Jack glanced at that shirt, then his eyes floated around the bar.

Everything moved in slow motion – the half dozen twenty-something dancers a few feet away, Navajo leaning down to take a picture, his arm around a gray-haired lady in a straw hat, Harry lighting the cigarettes of two young ladies at the bar. Catherine Jane floated by, tray held high, draft beer foaming over the brim of frozen mugs, bright red crab claws falling over the sides of plates. Laughing, smiling, dancing people dressed in kaleidoscope clothes and daffy hats. Pale skin turned, maybe just for the week, chestnut, copper, coffee, and cardinal. I made this, Jack thought. I made this. And this made my house.

The house that’s always waiting for me when all the colors fade and all the people go home. The weather-warped porch with its dip in the middle, the ever-present rings from my coffee mugs. The hammock I watched old man Sanchez make with his long,

bronze fingers. The front door that I haven't locked since I moved in, that I don't even own a key for. The ever-present sand that scratches the cool tile of the living room floor. The sound of the waves that floats into every room. The creak of the ceiling fan in the bedroom. The bedroom where I make love to Samantha. Samantha. I hope this makes sense to you.

"Meet me at the bar," Jack said. He folded the check into the pocket of his shirt and rose from the table.

Martin followed. With relief he watched Navajo skirt the crowd and return to his post at the front door. He watched Harry acknowledge Jack's signal to meet him at the end of the bar. Harry's eyebrows jumped, and his eyes opened saucer-wide when Jack showed him the check. Harry shrugged and patted Jack on the shoulder. Then he nodded solemnly, wrapping his fist in a bar towel.

Martin wanted to laugh. It was always the same old story. They had to put up enough of a fight to save some pride, but once the hook was in it was only a matter of time before you had the stringer through their gills.

Harry spoke into Jack's ear, and Jack grimaced. He put the check back in his pocket and waved to someone at the other end of the bar. The Taylor woman. All the better, Martin thought. I get to watch Donovan give up the throne in front of his queen. Better than the guillotine. Harry walked down the bar and talked into Samantha's ear. Her face was expressionless. Jack ducked under the waitress station and climbed onto the bar. Wordlessly Jack waited, and as they noticed him atop the bar, the revelers settled down.

Martin shook his head. I should have expected something ridiculous, he thought. Let the clown have his spectacle, hide his humiliation behind a show. Might be fun to

watch. Just wait until Roswell hears about this. Jack raised his arms and the crowd fell completely silent. Somebody cut off the jukebox. Martin could hear the creaking of the ceiling fans.

“Citizens of the Lone Palm nation,” Jack began, his voice loud. “First, let me apologize for interrupting the festivities. We will resume shortly. Everyone’s next round is on the house.”

The crowd cheered. Jack raised his arms and they went quiet again.

“There are important matters, however, certain recent developments, that demand our attention. Before I go into detail, let me introduce a key player in our drama. To my left, not far back from the bar, finely appointed in white and tan, is Mr. Martin Michaels. Many of you know him by face if not by name.

“Mr. Michaels is now an official resident of our beloved beach having just this past week moved into the Monroe House. We owe him a debt of gratitude for restoring our long-neglected landmark and a tip of the bravery hat for taking on the ghost of Festus Monroe. Let’s give him a warm, St. Anne welcome.’

There was strained applause. Jack locked his eyes on Martin and gave him a wry smile. Martin stared back until Harry caught his eye. Unlit cigarette dangling from a wicked grin, Harry packed ice into a blender.

“But, as we know from some of our longer nights here at the Palm,” Jack said, “you can have too much of a good thing. Apparently, Mr. Michaels’ interest in real estate extends beyond that big ol’ house on the hill.” Jack placed his hand over his heart. “I fear Mr. Michaels interests are less than benign.”

Martin sensed a change in the air. He glanced at the front door just in time to see Navajo lock it. His face flushed and the back of his neck heated up. He strained to find Samantha, hoping she would put a stop to what he feared was coming. Jack reached into his shirt pocket and removed the check. Harry held two liquor bottles high above the blender and poured.

“I have here a check for an extremely large sum of money,” Jack said. “A sum of money offered in exchange for my home and the land upon which it sits.”

A rumble went through the crowd. Michaels rolled down his sleeves and made a silent vow. Whatever happened here would be visited back ten-fold.

“I won’t mention the exact amount because those of you who know me, and there are many of you here, know it’s the gesture, the idea, that matters, not the money. It’s an awful lot of money. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t flinch.”

Jack’s stare shut out everyone in the room but him and Martin. Martin did his best to answer it.

“You’ve been generous and patient, Mr. Michaels, and you deserve an answer to your offer. A final, definitive, absolute answer about which there can be no question. Here you go, son.” Jack dropped the check in the blender. “Fuck you.”

Harry lit his cigarette, capped the blender and pushed a button. He waited half a minute then turned it off, removed the lid and handed the pitcher to Jack. Seizing it in his right hand and raising it to his lips, Jack closed his eyes and gulped down the most expensive margarita in the history of humankind. The crowd went crazy. They rushed the bar and pulled Jack down. They raised him above their heads and passed him around the Lone Palm, chanting his name. Martin shoved his way through the chaos, heading for the

front door. He got knocked over once, smashing the crystal face of his watch when he hit the floor. He would get even, he thought, in ways Jack couldn't possibly imagine. He stumbled up the steps to the door.

“Open this fucking door,” he screamed at Navajo. Chuckling, Navajo unlocked the door and pushed it open wide.

“Band starts at seven,” Navajo said as Martin pushed past him. “No cover.”

Not far behind Martin, the entire population of the Lone Palm, jubilant to the point of hysteria, surged through the door. Jack rode their shoulders. They carried him across the boardwalk and down the beach. With a final roar they heaved him, arms and legs flailing, into the ocean.

Harry and Samantha partook of the spectacle from the boardwalk. They stood side-by-side, elbows at the railing. Harry took a long drag of his cigarette and exhaled. Samantha plucked it from his fingers and took a drag for herself. Harry shook his head and smiled as they watched Jack stride out of the sea, Aloha shirt hanging off one shoulder.

“I don't believe what I just saw,” Samantha said.

“Certainly a first,” Harry said. “Even for this place.” He refused the cigarette when Samantha offered it back to him and drew another from his pack. “We are in for it now.”

“What do you think Martin will do? He couldn't possibly think...”

“I'm talking about Jack,” Harry said. “Do you know what we're watching?”

Samantha shook her head.

“We are watching the birth of legend. This is huge, and now you and I have to put up with him.” He laughed. “We’ll be living with the consequences of this day for a long time.”

Samantha patted Harry on the back. “Jealous?”

“Nah. I’ll become legendary by association,” Harry said.

Samantha rubbed her temples.

“Give him an hour,” he said to her. “He’ll remember he just publicly fucked over the guy who signs your paychecks.”

“Oh, that,” Samantha said. “Yeah, that could become a problem.” She watched Jack recount the story for a group who had wandered over from down the beach. “But look at him. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen him so happy. I don’t know if he’s brave or insane, but he sure is beautiful.”

Harry studied her profile. She was captivated. Remember this, Harry wanted to say to her, when he tells you how big that check was. Or when you get reassigned to the mailroom at work. But he said nothing about it. That would be for them to settle.

“There before us,” Harry said instead, “stands the rarest animal of all. Someone who has found his place in life and is smart enough to recognize it.”

“Damn,” Samantha said. “I think I’m jealous.”

The crowd began breaking up and drifting toward the bar.

“Uh-oh, here they come. Better fire up the blender,” Harry said. “See you back inside, Sam.”

Samantha was already making her way to the water’s edge, where Jack now stood alone, basking in the afterglow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Well, sir. That was quite a performance.”

Jack stood ankle deep in the ocean, smiling at Samantha and swinging his arms at his sides. “Was, wasn’t it? I think I made my point.”

Samantha stepped to the edge of the water. “How’re you feeling?” she asked. She slipped off her sandals and let the tide lick her toes.

Jack exhaled and looked around as if the answer might be floating somewhere over the beach. He tugged at his wet shirt, failing to right it on his shoulders. “Oh, I’m pretty drunk, I think. I had two shots in me before that margarita. And Harry loaded that up pretty good.” He kicked at the water. “A nap might be in order.”

Samantha extended her arms. “Come to me,” she said, “and I’ll take you to bed.”

Jack came as far as the water’s edge. Then he grabbed both of Samantha’s hands and dragged her out to sea, soaking her pants to the knees. Laughing, she yanked her hands free. Jack stumbled backwards, arms flailing, and fell into the water. She watched him sink and settle onto the sand, his clothes drifting in the current, the ocean so clear she could see his grin. He sat up suddenly and spat water at her. She bent over and swept the hair from his eyes, lifted his face to hers with her fingertips and kissed his lips.

“You are a ridiculous man,” she said.

He shrugged. “You talkin’ about the shirt or the money?”

Samantha put out her hands again. This time Jack played no tricks and let her lift him to his feet. He followed her towards shore and stood in the water as she retrieved her

sandals from the beach. Shoes dangling from her fingers, Samantha joined him in the shallows, and they waded along the shoreline towards the bungalow.

“I wasn’t talking about the money,” she said, finally.

“Wanna know how much?” Jack asked.

Samantha shook her head. “That’s your business,” she said. “I certainly would’ve done things differently, but I can respect your decision.” She turned to him. “Is it over now?” she asked. “This pissing contest between you and Martin.”

Jack stopped walking. “It was over for me when I left Roswell’s office on Friday,” Jack said. “Hell, it was over for me the first time I turned them down. It was Martin who kept bringing it up.”

“I know that,” Samantha said. “Look, I’m in a tough spot. Martin is my boss now. You just publicly humiliated him. He knows I saw it, I’m sure.” She spread her hands. “I just don’t want your keeping the house to cost me my job.”

“You really think that’s gonna happen?” Jack asked.

Samantha thought for a moment. “No. Probably not.” She paused. “Can we just, can we just not make things any worse.”

“I didn’t realize they’d gone bad,” Jack said.

“C’mon, Jack.”

Jack started walking again. Samantha walked alongside him on the dry sand, a foot or two of beach between them.

“All right,” he said. “What do you want from me?”

“Just, if he comes at you again,” she said, “can you be a little more adult about it?”

Jack glared at her and then turned away. “Ouch.”

“Jack, please, I’m determined not to fight about this.” She stepped closer to the water and reached out her hand. Jack took it. “Poor choice of words,” she said.

“Maybe,” Jack said. “But I see your point. If he bothers me again, I promise I’ll be more...restrained.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you.”

Jack shrugged and nodded up the beach at the bungalow. “Wanna go be adult? Do adult stuff?” he asked, stepping out of the water and reaching for her. She put a hand to his chest. Jack dropped his arms and pretended to sulk.

“One more thing,” she said. “In a way, I admire the hell out of what you did in turning that money down.”

Jack stepped back from her. There was more she had to say, but she was struggling with it.

“I would’ve taken the money the first time,” she said, “I know that for sure. But I don’t know,” she looked around, avoiding Jack’s eyes, “I don’t know if that’s a strength or a weakness. This whole thing has really made me think. I don’t have anything, anywhere, that I wouldn’t give up for that much money. I think,” she raked her hair back with her fingernails and held it in two fists, “I don’t feel very good about that.”

Jack pulled his soggy pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stared at it then stuffed it back into his shorts. He waited for her to continue, looking at her with soft eyes.

Samantha chuckled. “What? You want more?”

Jack smiled at her then wrapped her in his arms. He felt the hardness of her chin on his shoulder.

“I wish sometimes I had a place I loved as much as you loved this place,” she said. “I wish I had a life I loved like you love yours.”

Jack squeezed her tighter. “Do what I did, Sam,” he said. “Just go get it.”

She slipped her hands into Jack’s back pockets. If only it were that easy, she thought. If only I knew what it was to go get. She eased back in his arms and looked into his eyes, praying he couldn’t read her mind. I know you can’t tell me the answer, she thought, but I still wish you would.

When she was sure Jack was asleep, Samantha slipped out of bed and back into her clothes. She rolled up the wet, sandy cuffs of her slacks and left her blouse untucked. She peeked out the bedroom window at the Jeep. She had forgotten to bring her overnight bag. God, what a weird day. Running out on Jack to go to work. Running back to him to get away from it. The cuffs scratched at her ankles as she walked into the kitchen to get a beer. She dropped off her pants in the kitchen and tossed them onto the couch. Beer in hand she walked out onto the porch, careful not to let the screen door slam behind her.

The sun was setting over the sea, spreading pastels of apricot and violet over the horizon. She listened for Jack then eased into his hammock. It received her weight, rocked gently then eased to a stop. She dropped her foot to the porch and set it rocking again. She reached underneath the small of her back. A book. Huckleberry Finn. Flipping the pages, Samantha realized she had never read it, and set it on her belly. Jack was reading it all the time. Well, she rarely saw him reading it, but Huck Finn was always around, next to the hammock, next to the couch, the bed. She sipped her beer, dribbling a second half-mouthful down her chin.

She wiped her chin with the back of her hand and found herself longing for a cigarette, and wanting to take off the rest of her clothes. Is this how it feels to be Jack, she thought. Simple longings you never hesitate to satisfy? The whole rest of your world a short, sunny stroll away? Is this all there really is to happiness? She sipped her beer again and wished Jack would get up and bring her a cigarette. Maybe answer these questions she doubted she'd ever ask him while he lit it for her.

Samantha didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until Jack woke her up. He was standing beside her, leaning on the railing, a shadowy figure against the black ocean and the night sky. She yawned and stretched. The stars were out.

"I missed the sunset," she said.

"Never fear," Jack said, "They'll be another tomorrow." He sipped his beer. "I know tomorrow's Sunday, but you're still invited." He leaned over and rested his palm over her eyes. "Close 'em up for another second," he said. "I got a surprise for you."

Samantha closed her eyes. A moment later, Jack called for her to open them. She gasped when she did. Along the length of the porch, tiny white lights twinkled in the eaves. They cast just enough light for her to see him standing by the screen door, obviously pleased with himself.

"Put 'em up while you were asleep." He smiled and sipped his beer. "Wanted some stars of my own," he said.

Samantha stretched in the hammock again and opened her arms to him.
"Beautiful."

Late Saturday night, still in his suit, David Roswell stood before the enormous, flat-screen television that engulfed one wall of his living room, staring at CNN and sipping precisely three fingers of Stolichnaya over ice. He checked his cell-phone again, though he knew there was no way he could have missed the call, had it come. He dropped the phone back into his pocket and picked up the *L.A. Times* financial pages off of the coffee table, scanning articles he had already read twice. He tossed the paper on the floor and fell into a plush leather armchair. What effort it took, he thought, to feel the least bit connected to the real world. He turned off the television and downed the rest of his drink, the bite of the vodka tightening his throat.

Maybe the phone wasn't going to ring tonight, Roswell thought. Maybe Martin had calmed down and wised up, and they would talk about the whole Jack Donovan situation like reasonable men. He laughed to himself. He was daydreaming. He knew Martin too well to really believe things would go that smoothly. Martin would have to be stung before he came around. It was so often that way when his ego got involved, which was ninety-percent of the time. Roswell pulled himself out of the chair and headed into the kitchen for another drink.

As he pulled the vodka bottle from the otherwise empty freezer, Roswell thought of the ridiculousness that had chased them out of Los Angeles. It hadn't technically been part of the plan but it had worked in their favor when the divers from the state police found Lisa's dead, drowned body a week after the doctor reported her missing. Her death looked a lot like a suicide, which was a much more plausible end to so sick and fragile a girl than her outright disappearance. When Martin identified his daughter and the coroner

rolled the body back into the cold darkness of the freezer, it seemed to tie a tight, neat bow on a situation that had become unendurably problematic.

Roswell leaned against the counter and sipped his drink. His throat tightened again, but this time it wasn't the Stoli. It was that goddamn doctor, the same one who first reported her missing. That one fucking doctor that wouldn't play along. The rest had been content the mess had so easily been cleaned up. No one in the ward said it aloud but they were relieved to be rid of Lisa, considering the ugly turn things had taken. Both Martin and Roswell had been sure that Dr. Vance would fall in line with his older, more experienced colleagues. By all accounts he was talented and ambitious. There was no reason to think Vance would do anything to undermine his own promising career.

Everyone had thought wrong. Vance turned out to be more than young and ambitious; he turned out to be dumb. Dumb enough to think that running his mouth about his success with Lisa would turn into his big break. Dumb enough to talk all about the articles he was going to publish in psychiatry's biggest journals. Fool enough to discuss his conspiracy theories with other doctors at the hospital. Dumb enough to start asking questions about Lisa's mother. Roswell sipped again and smiled. His own investigation hadn't taken long to reveal that the doctor had a dirty little secret of his own. Dr. Vance was a junkie, twenty-eight years old and hooked on prescription morphine. Once Roswell learned that, the rest was easy.

The police were alerted when Vance missed work two days in a row and all efforts to contact him failed. They found him dead at the bottom of his bathtub, a used syringe floating on the water's surface. They found a medicine cabinet full of tiny morphine bottles and shrink-wrapped syringes, all stolen from the hospital. When they

searched the files on his computer, they found a series of personal journal entries that detailed a spiral into depression that began with the death of Lisa Michaels, the patient with whom, according to the journals, he had enjoyed a decidedly less than professional relationship.

Lisa's doctor turning up dead so soon after her death was enough of a coincidence to stick a scent under the nose of one particularly determined detective, but Roswell cleaned up that mess, too. No hard evidence surfaced and, without Roswell or Michaels' help, all Lisa's files from the hospital conveniently disappeared. The investigations into both deaths were quickly closed. So Roswell was shocked when Martin called in a panic one night weeks later, absolutely insistent that they get out of L.A., out of the States even, as soon as possible and for an indefinite but extended stay.

At first Roswell refused, convinced Martin's hysteria was fueled by extreme embarrassment. The twin deaths made the tabloids and for the past several weeks, Martin's face, or Lisa's, or Vance's had appeared on the cover of the *Sun* or the *Enquirer*. Martin demanded Roswell fight back, that they file massive lawsuits for slander, libel and extortion. Roswell counseled restraint. Engaging the gossips, he argued, would only give them more to write about. He assured Martin the sensation would blow over as soon as some gorgeous, young celebrity checked into rehab. But then the *Sun* uncovered Ruth, splashing her face across their cover.

The photo was fifteen years old, but Roswell recognized it right away. It had been taken outside the courthouse, the day she filed for divorce. The article asked all the wrong questions. Why had she vanished so suddenly a decade and a half ago? Where had she been all these years? Why had she been silent throughout the tragedy and scandal of

her daughter's death? Why couldn't anybody seem to find her? When Martin got much worse, Roswell knew he had read the article.

Martin started calling every day, sometimes ten times a day. From payphones around the city. His phone was tapped, he said. Reporters, the police, private investigators, they were all following him, conspiring together against him. He fired all of his maids and groundskeepers, convinced they were spies, and his mansion in Beverly Hills fell into conspicuous disrepair. There were shadows in his yard at night, he said, despite the lights and dogs and alarms. He bought guns and started patrolling the grounds himself, twice nearly shooting his own security guards.

Much more than embarrassment had driven Martin this far around the bend, Roswell knew. It was fear, though of what he was never quite sure. The tabloids had been closer than they probably knew to several nefarious truths, but their own lack of credibility better exonerated Martin than Roswell could have in court. Roswell would've suspected guilt, but he wasn't sure Martin had a conscience to haunt him. Maybe it wasn't drugs at all that landed Lisa in the asylum, but genetics, bad wiring passed down from her father. Whatever the true source of his behavior, the fact remained Martin was so convinced somebody somewhere was after him, and that it had to do with Vance and Lisa, and maybe Ruth, Roswell feared Martin might crack and give them both away.

Roswell briefly entertained the idea of disappearing himself, maybe Europe, maybe Japan, and of leaving Martin to deal with the shadows in his yard on his own. But he thought better of it. If Martin did go crazy, it would be very public. And there were things Martin knew that Roswell simply couldn't afford being public knowledge. That Roswell had murdered Vance, and enjoyed doing it, was not among the least of them. He

had to get Martin somewhere he could control him, where he could make sure their host of shared secrets stayed secret. St. Anne, somewhere Martin had been, somewhere he had a history of going, somewhere he could be kept him on a short leash, seemed a natural choice.

So Roswell prepared the press releases explaining both Martin's suddenly erratic behavior and their hasty departure. Martin Michaels, overwhelmed by grief and cruelly harassed by the paparazzi, was limping off to more hospitable environs – in search of healing solitude and change. Roswell refused to disclose their destination or the duration of their sojourn. Martin went into a fevered, impatient seclusion. Roswell made the arrangements. Then they left California.

Roswell walked back into the living room and stood before the television, debating whether or not to turn it on again. And now here we are, he thought, sweating our asses off on some backwards Caribbean bug farm, selling four hundred dollar pantsuits and begging to buy a few yards of empty beach. Pathetic. He was pulling off his tie when the phone rang.

“Yes, sir,” he said, setting down his drink and sitting beside it on the edge of the coffee table.

“I may want to hear your ideas again,” Martin said.

Roswell felt a curl at the corner of his mouth. “I take it your plans didn't go well.”

“You take it correctly,” Martin said. “Let's just say that he not only rejected the offer but he also did a fair job of making a fool of me in the process.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“Like hell you are,” Martin said. Roswell could tell from Martin’s breathing that he was pacing, probably squeezing his temples with his free hand. “The last thing I need is wise-assery from you, David. Now is not the time.”

“I’ve got some ideas,” Roswell said, “some new ones. When should I come see you?”

“Monday,” Martin said. “I can’t deal with this tomorrow. I need to get out on a fishing boat and kill something.” There was a pause. “And find out about big game on this island. I may need to shoot something. Something big. Like a boar. Any wild boars on this island? Get to work on these things immediately.”

Roswell sipped his drink, savoring the liquor while he collected his thoughts. “Martin,” he said, laughing, “you’ve never hunted big game in your life. Really. Why don’t you relax tomorrow? Maybe sightsee in Old Town.”

“Spare me,” Martin said. “The only sight I want to see is a pile of ash where that stupid little bungalow is now. I’m looking at it right now. He put twinkly lights on it.” Roswell heard Martin light a cigar. “To irritate me,” Martin said. “So I could still see it at night.” Then, to Roswell’s surprise, Martin chuckled. “Maybe there is some real fun to be had on this island after all.”

After Michaels hung up Roswell set his phone on the table. Good. He got up, refilled his drink, settled back into his chair and clicked on the giant television. Now maybe we can get back to doing things the right way, he thought. Maybe now we can get back into doing some real business.

After locking up the bar in the wee hours of Sunday morning, Jack, Samantha, Harry, Catherine Jane, Navajo and Tony dragged a cooler out to the beach and built a campfire. The boys played football at the water's edge. The girls fished and talked. As they stood beside their poles, secured in the sand at a safe distance from the game, they wondered why Tony wouldn't talk about his most recent date. They tried, but neither could recall how Navajo made his way from Kona to their humble island. Nor could they figure out, though they resolved to ask, why a giant Hawaiian called himself Navajo.

Catherine Jane told more stories about her cross-country flights by motorcycle. She amazed Samantha with the tale of her high-speed, coffee-fueled run across the desert from Santa Fe to Houston, where she sold her stolen BMW bike and, after a frustrating trip through the classifieds at the library, picked St. Anne off a National Geographic map of the Caribbean.

"Anne was my grandmother's name," Catherine Jane said, reeling in her bait. "Seemed as good as reason as any."

Samantha lifted her beer from the sand and sipped. "Probably a better reason than the one I came here for," she said.

"What was that?"

Samantha shrugged. "I wasn't making it fast enough in Miami. I wanted a better position, more responsibility, more money. But the place I worked for was just too big. Too many other people in line ahead of me who wanted the same things." She tested her line with her finger. "Then I heard through the grapevine about the position at Ellison. I thought I'd get up through the ranks much faster at a smaller company. Take a big, fat resume back to the States one day."

“Seems to be working out for you,” Catherine Jane said. “From what you’ve told me, you practically run the whole company.”

“I don’t know about that,” Samantha said. She shrugged. “But I’m getting what I wanted. Things thus far have gone according to plan.”

Catherine Jane nodded her head in Jack’s direction. Jack had apparently just scored a touchdown and danced wildly in the sand. He yelled when Harry pushed him over. “Your plans changed any?” Catherine Jane asked.

“Things here have gone really well,” Samantha said. “But it is an awfully small island. And Ellison isn’t exactly global. Who knows how long it’ll last under Martin anyway?” She shrugged and forced a smile. “But I’m trying to stay open minded about the future.”

“I think that’s a very good idea,” Catherine Jane said.

The women reeled in their lines and returned to the fire. They laughed as Navajo dragged Harry around the beach while the considerably lighter bartender tried to wrest the football from Navajo’s powerful arms. When Jack and Tony jumped on Navajo, the big man finally toppled and all four tumbled into the ocean. The fall ended the game and the boys finished their beers by the water.

“So what’ve you been talking about?” Harry asked as they approached the fire.

“Cock,” Catherine Jane answered. “Great big cock.”

Samantha fell back in the sand, laughing loudly at the shocked faces of the others. Catherine Jane rested her hand on Samantha’s shoulder. “Absolutely the best and quickest way to get a man to lose interest in your conversation,” she said.

Samantha stayed with Jack late into the afternoon on Sunday, but she was back in her apartment, planted at her desk, the glow of her laptop lighting her face, when the sun went down. She was still there at ten, a neglected plate of mango slices and cheese beside her at the desk. She cradled a glass of wine in one hand and fingered a shark's tooth from Jack's beach with the other, completely absorbed in the numbers before her on the screen. The question she pondered was whether or not the thick stack of pages, a year's worth of work, waiting beside her printer could make those numbers a reality. She sipped her wine and reached the same answer she'd been reaching for the last month. Whatever glitches there may be in the plans, Samantha knew *she* could make those numbers a reality – as long as she could get someone at Ellison to give her the chance. She set down her wine, reached for the phone and dialed Roswell's number.

It would be a delicate dance, inviting Roswell into this project, considering Jack's animosity toward him. But Roswell was the answer, the ally she needed. Jack would understand. She would make sure of it.

“David,” she said when Roswell answered, “can I drag you out for a drink? I have something I need to discuss with you.”

CHAPTER NINE

Monday morning, Jack walked into the Lone Palm soon after Harry had opened. Navajo sat just inside the front door, chewing on a pen cap as he concentrated on his crossword puzzle. At the end of the bar, Catherine Jane flipped through a magazine and nursed a cup of coffee. Quiet pairs and trios of tourists sat at the tables by the stage, sipping ice water and perusing menus.

“Mornin’, Captain,” Harry said. He stood behind the bar, an unlit cigarette in hand, shaking pepper into a bloody Mary. “What brings you here so early?”

Jack poured a cup of coffee. He sipped, winced and picked up the box of sugar cubes by the coffee pot. He shook five into his hand then stirred them one by one into his coffee. He sipped again. “Much better,” he said. “Let me get through half of this and I’ll be much more civilized.”

Harry put half a dozen lemons on the bar and lit his cigarette. “Make yourself useful,” he said. He pulled the rag from his belt and started dusting the liquor bottles.

Jack sipped more coffee and began slicing the lemons into wedges. “We got Woody’s number around here?” he asked.

Harry set his hands on his hips and thought. “Somewhere,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I’ve got it upstairs. Dare I ask why? You’re not inviting him down, are you?”

“You think he’d dig up some dirt on Martin and Roswell for us?” Jack asked.

Harry shrugged and puffed his cigarette. “Well, sure. Hell, he’s got all the resources of a major metropolitan newspaper and no professional ethics whatsoever. Besides, he owes me.” He looked at Jack. “Care to explain this to me?”

“I was doing the dishes last night,” Jack said, “staring out the window at that damn house, just trying to add things up, worrying about what I may have gotten Samantha into.”

“And looking for a way to rattle Martin’s cage?” Harry asked. He tore open a case of Corona and loaded the bottles into the cooler.

Jack shrugged. “I’m not looking for trouble,” he said, “just information.” He swept the lemon slices into a plastic cup and cleaned the knife on a bar towel. “He did plenty of research on me,” Jack said, tipping the knife toward Harry, “and you. I figure turn about is fair play.”

Harry stood and lit another cigarette. He gathered up the empty cardboard boxes. “Talk a walk with me,” he said, handing Jack two of the boxes.

They walked out the back door, carried the boxes over to the Dumpster and tossed them in. Trash was piled nearly to the top.

Jack lit a cigarette, squinting in the sun and frowning at the container. “I know I paid these guys this month,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “Like that matters. They don’t come tomorrow, I’ll sick Catherine Jane on them.” Harry crushed out his cigarette and lit another. “What’s going on with you, Jack? Why are you suddenly into playing this guy’s game?”

“What *is* Martin’s game?” Jack asked. “What’s he really trying to do here? That’s what I couldn’t figure out last night. A B-movie producer turned fashion magnate? C’mon. Then why isn’t he in Paris or New York?” He straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. “This whole thing fucking stinks.”

“Samantha buys that whole story?” Harry asked.

“She buys anything that comes out of Roswell’s mouth,” Jack said, rocking back on his heels. “That’s where she was last night when I called, out talking shop over drinks with that character. You should’ve heard her. They’re going to do great things together, apparently.”

“What things?” Harry asked, grinning.

“Something bigger and better than the boutiques,” Jack said. “But exactly what she wouldn’t say.” Jack frowned. “It’s a surprise.”

Harry laughed. “I see where this is going. Sam’s a little too starry-eyed over Roswell, and you’re looking to tarnish the halo a little.”

“Out of concern,” Jack said, “not jealousy. She hasn’t seen the side of him I have. She doesn’t know him like I do.”

“You don’t know him at all,” Harry said.

“My point exactly. I’m concerned,” Jack said. “I’m concerned about these two shitheads that fell out of the sky and into my life. I wanna know what they might go after next.”

“Okay, okay,” Harry said. “I get it. I certainly don’t trust them, either.” He jabbed a finger into Jack’s chest. “But what’re *you* after? Anything you get involved in, I’m involved in.”

“Leverage,” Jack said. He smiled. “I’m merely looking to beef up our defenses. Just in case.”

“I can get with that,” Harry said, nodding. “Knowledge is power. We’ll call Woody today.”

“Good,” Jack said. He lit a cigarette. “Let’s keep this between you and me. I don’t think Samantha needs to know about this. Yet.”

“Ah-ha,” Harry said. “You think that’s wise?”

Jack rolled his shoulders. “I kinda promised I wouldn’t kick up any more of a fuss about those two.” He took a long drag and let the smoke curl out through his nose. “And I won’t. I just want to fill in the blanks. Just for my own peace of mind.”

“All right,” Harry said. “This stays our secret. But if I were you I’d limit my sins to those of omission.”

“I’ll tell her,” Jack said, “eventually.” He shrugged. “Probably won’t even have to. She’ll find out what kind of guy he really is soon enough.”

* * *

As the limousine passed the Lone Palm, Roswell could see Jack and Harry in the parking lot. What in the world, he thought, is a woman like Samantha Taylor doing running around with those clowns? There were things about smart women he would never understand, primarily the unlimited ways they found to be dumb. Though, he thought with a smile, I’ve often counted on that very propensity. Was Samantha that way? She was certainly smart enough. He had no trouble admitting he was markedly impressed with her physically. And she was almost as impressive professionally. She’d held his attention away from bedding her for nearly an hour with her plans for the surf shops. Well, he thought, as the limo parked in front of the Monroe House, I’m due for a challenge.

When Roswell walked into the office Michaels was standing behind his desk, staring out the window. One hand held aside the curtain, the other drummed fingers on the wooden windowsill.

“Martin,” Roswell said from the doorway. “I’m here.”

“Sit down, David,” Michaels said, not turning around. When he heard Roswell sit, Martin let the curtain drop across the window and headed for the doorway. “Follow me,” he called from the hall. Roswell sighed, pushed himself upright then went down the hall after Martin. He found him standing on the balcony overlooking Jack’s beach.

“You understand,” Martin said, “this is no longer about that slice of sand down there. I want you to be very clear on this.”

“I’m clear,” Roswell said.

“From here on out, this is about me,” Martin said, pressing his hands to his chest, “and him.” He pointed to the bungalow. “Him. There are people *still* sitting on the floor of the Pacific Ocean for doing a lot less, a lot less, than what this guy did to me. Allowing him to get away with what he did in that bar sets a dangerous – a dangerous precedent. I can’t accept it.”

“You’re unnerving me, Martin,” Roswell said. “This place is too small, and the animosity between you and Jack too public for anything bad to happen to him, for him to end up on the floor of any ocean.”

Martin stepped back from the rail. “This is what I pay you for? To tell me things I already know?” He stepped right up to Roswell. “What is your plan for dealing with this?”

Roswell held up his hands. “My plan? I thought my job was to follow through on your plans? Frankly, I don’t see why you continue to bother with this nobody at all.

Think about it, Martin. He’s nothing, a peon, a peasant. Why bother?”

“I oughta snap your neck and throw you off this balcony,” Martin said.

Roswell slipped his hands in his pockets and watched Martin’s face turn red.

“Go ahead! Say it!” Martin yelled. “You want me to admit I’m licked. You want me to admit this...this bartender beat me. This is the sum of the new ideas you were telling me about? Are you kidding?”

Roswell shrugged, holding back his smile. “I’m not asking you to say anything of the sort.”

“He humiliated me,” Martin said. “In front of people who know me, people who *work* for me. I’ve bought and sold guys like him a thousand times in my life. He thinks he can humiliate me and I’m just going to crawl away? Hide away in my big house like I did in California? Never again. He needs to be put in his place, David, permanently and with prejudice.” Martin gripped the railing with both hands. “Licked? I haven’t even started yet.”

“So then you’re ready to listen to me?” Roswell asked.

“I haven’t completely forgotten about snapping your neck.”

“We tried things your way,” Roswell said. “And here we are.”

Martin crossed his arms and looked away. “Talk.”

Roswell grabbed Martin’s shoulders and turned him to face Jack’s house. “There lives a man who has everything, who arises to greet each day surrounded by the things he loves. How do we hurt such a man when we can’t physically touch him?”

When Martin said nothing. Roswell leaned in closer to him, settling a hand on his shoulder. “How do we hurt such a man when we can’t touch *him*?” Roswell asked again. Martin narrowed his eyes. “How do we break such a man without breaking his neck?” Roswell asked.

Martin smiled. “You break his heart. You break his spirit.”

“And away he blows,” Roswell said, stepping back, “like sand through your fingers.”

“So we take this guy apart,” Martin said, “piece by piece, like pulling the legs off a spider.”

Roswell’s mind seized with the image of an eight-year old Martin Michaels sitting in a playground, giggling wickedly as he plucked leg after leg from a twitching daddy-long-legs, pausing between amputations to enjoy his victim’s frantic, futile struggle. It was disturbing.

“A gruesome metaphor, Martin,” he said, “but appropriate.”

Martin smiled again and slapped Roswell on the back. “It’ll be just like old times,” he said.

Harry held the phone to his ear and waited for the offices of the *New York Post* to answer.

“Yeah? Hello? Woody Willis’ desk, please.”

Jack set out menus for the couple sitting at the bar and looked expectantly at his friend’s profile. Harry didn’t like what he was hearing.

“Yeah, Woody Willis...Whadda you mean he don’t work there anymore? Libel suit? No, I don’t know nuthin’ about that.”

Jack laughed at Harry’s rediscovered New York accent. Harry shrugged, then frowned.

“WhadoIwant? I wanna know where that cocksucker is. Don’t you worry yourself with why. Let’s just say that bastid owes me a favor... Yeah, I’ll give’m a message. What’s that number again? Yeah. Awright...And Jimbo said what? And Alice wants her Yankee tickets back?...yeah, that sonuvabitch is somekinda ballplayer. Thanks for the number. I gotta go. My boss is up my ass. Yeah, I’m sure you do know all about that, punchy.”

Harry hung up. Jack was doubled over laughing, and the couple had retreated to a table far from the bar.

“The Yankees got Rodriguez,” Harry said. “Can you believe it?”

“Nothing they do surprises me,” Jack said. “So there goes that idea.”

“Maybe not,” Harry said. “I’m sure he’s still got plenty of connections and I’ve got a number where we can reach him.” He smiled. “A bar on Staten Island.”

“Let me guess, the Cargo Café.”

“Ding, ding, winnah,” Harry said. “Some things never change. Let’s give it a shot.” He shrugged. “Can’t hurt.”

“He’ll squeeze us for free vacation over this,” Jack said.

“That’s all right by me,” Harry said. “It’s your turn to put him up.”

“He’s gonna have to earn it then,” Jack said. He set the phone on the bar. “The Cargo open this early?”

“Doubt it,” Harry said. “What’s your hurry, Captain?”

Jack stared at the phone, thinking about calling Samantha and telling her what they were up to. He had more time to decide, he thought. Technically, since he and Harry hadn’t actually talked to Woody, and Woody hadn’t said yea or nay to the idea, they weren’t really up to anything yet. “Nothing,” he said, putting the phone away and assembling his now famous blender. “No hurry at all.”

By the time Roswell appeared at her office at noon, Samantha had been at her desk for seven hours, working on the changes to her plans that he had suggested the night before. He hadn’t hesitated to meet her at Seafeathers, a little bar not far from her apartment but across town from his. And he had listened intently as she outlined her plans for the chain of surf shops she wanted Ellison to launch. Roswell hadn’t given any official go-ahead, but he had voiced approval, both of her ideas and of her initiative.

“I’m seeing where I can make the changes we talked about,” Samantha said as Roswell walked into her office. Her eyes stayed fixed on the computer screen

“Why am I not surprised you’re at work on this already,” Roswell said. “He shook his head. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Barely,” Samantha said. “About three hours after I got home. Ideas kept popping off in my brain. I can’t relax when that happens.”

“After three Tequila Sunrises, I was plenty relaxed,” Roswell said. “Slept like a baby.” He leaned on her desk. “Anything you want me to look at?”

Samantha chewed her pen. “Not yet,” she said. “But soon.”

“We still on for lunch on Wednesday?”

“Absolutely,” Samantha said. “I’m already looking forward to it.” She tapped her computer screen. “I’ll definitely have something for you by then.”

“Lovely,” Roswell said. He stood, ready to leave. Samantha reached out and caught his arm.

“David, about last night,” she said, “thanks for not mentioning that fiasco at the beach. I’m sure Martin was absolutely livid. I’m sorry if you took any heat for that.”

“We do have us a unique situation,” Roswell said, “but I can manage Martin just fine.” He leaned forward conspiratorially, his face beside hers. Samantha could smell his aftershave. “You have my word, there won’t be the slightest of professional repercussions.” She felt his breath on her ear. “I’m doing all I can to put an end to the whole thing.”

Samantha wanted to say thank you, maybe promise to do the same on her end, with Jack, but the words caught when she drew in her breath. Her eyes turned to her right hand, which still rested on Roswell’s arm. It fell away from him when he stood.

“I’ll see you Wednesday,” he said, smiling at her as he backed toward the door. “I’ll send the car for noon. Anything comes up between now and then, please call.”

“I will,” Samantha said. When Roswell was out of sight, she fanned her face and neck with a manila folder. “All right,” she whispered. “That’s enough of that.”

Harry snatched up the phone on the first ring. “Lone Palm. Harry Valentine, King of the Tropics. What can I do ya for?...Oh, hey, Sam. Yeah, he’s here. Hang on.” Harry set the receiver on the bar. “Hey, Jack. It’s your better half.”

Jack closed the jukebox and locked it. “Meatloaf?” he asked.

“What can I tell you? The kids, they love it,” Harry said. He handed the receiver to Jack. “Worse comes to worst, we can program the machine to skip *Paradise*.”

“Hey, baby,” Jack said, making a mental note to order the new CD’s himself next time. “Everything okay?”

“A little tired,” she said. “I was up early working.”

Jack waited as she paused. He knew what was coming.

“I have to cancel for Wednesday,” she said. “I have to keep the evening open.”

Jack squeezed his forehead in hand. “Work?”

“Yes, work. I have work to do on the new project. I told you last night David gave me a whole list of things to work on.”

“So you’ll be working late with Roswell,” Jack said.

“I’m not even going to ask if you’re pissed,” Samantha said, “I just want to know if it’s the work or who I’m working with.”

“My answer gonna change anything?”

“Okay, I can see this is going nowhere,” Samantha said. “You working tonight? Can I call you later?”

Jack gestured to Harry for a cigarette. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said. “Maybe if I knew more about this project I’d feel better.” He took the cigarette and lit it.

“David’s my boss,” Samantha said, “I need his input on this. I like working with him, but I’d have to even if I couldn’t stand him.”

“I get it,” Jack said.

“I’ll talk to you tonight,” Samantha said.

“You coming out here?”

“I hadn’t planned to. Maybe. Either way, I’ll call.”

“I’ll be here.” Jack handed the off the phone to Harry. Harry hung it up and set an ashtray in front of Jack, who dropped his smoke in it and rubbed his face with his palms.

“Relax,” Harry said. “It’s not like it’s the first time she’s broken a date on account of work.”

“First time she’s broken one to work with him.”

Harry poured two cups of coffee and handed one across the bar to Jack. “Take a walk with me,” he said.

Jack just sipped from the mug.

“C’mon,” Harry said. “Everyone in the joint’s on vacation, no one’s in a hurry.” He hopped over the bar and headed for the front door. Jack got up and followed. Harry held the door open. “Let’s look at things in the bright light of day.”

Jack walked to the boardwalk railing and leaned his arms over it, savoring the heat on his face and arms. Harry joined him at the rail. They sipped their coffee in silence, watching the rolling sea.

“You got things in perspective now?” Harry asked. “Here’s how I see it. That woman adores you. Look at the shit she puts up with from you. You’re ugly, lazy, you’re not all that smart and, I have to be honest with you, at least three of your ex-girlfriends told me you’re no good in bed. And yet this smart, attractive, successful woman is out here with you every weekend. Sometimes during the week. And Catherine Jane tells me she even sleeps with you.”

“Thanks, Harry. I’m glad I have you to straighten me out,” Jack said with a laugh. “Jesus.”

“What can I say? It’s a gift. Secondly, forget Roswell. She’ll see through him eventually.”

“I’m just worried about what has to happen before she does,” Jack said. “I don’t trust him. At all.”

“You trust her?”

“Sure.”

“Then just be patient, grasshopper,” Harry said. “Let the woman do her thing. She’s got a career she cares a lot about, and Roswell may turn out to be a big ticket for her. It sucks, but it’s a fact.”

“All right, great sage of the coast, you heard me step in it back there,” Jack said. “What do I do to make this right?”

“Let it go. You don’t have to sit around and trade David Roswell is my hero stories, but keep your cool when his name comes up.” Harry sipped his coffee. “And show a little more interest in this big project of hers.”

“I’ve shown plenty,” Jack said.

“But not the right kind. Be interested in more than how often it eats into your time with her.”

Jack was quiet for a while. When he thought back on it, he had to admit Harry had him there. Early in their relationship, he bragged often of Samantha’s drive and intelligence and success. He enjoyed that she knew so much about things of which he knew little. That she had a life of her own. But lately, Jack had to admit he’d been prone to complaining about those very things that had attracted him to her. Okay then, Jack

thought, time to re-group. Forget, or try at least, what Roswell was to him, and try to remember what Roswell and Samantha's career meant to her.

Jack stared at his friend. Harry smoked and gazed again at the ocean, content to let his wisdom hang in the air about him, mingling with his cigarette smoke. He wondered what Harry was thinking about now. "You're fucking amazing, Valentine. You really are. When do you think this bullshit up?"

"It just comes to me," Harry said, "It's a gift few have and fewer understand. Let things simmer on that hot plate of a brain of yours for a while. Sometimes it takes a lesser mind longer to come around."

Jack laughed. "It's a gift all right. A gift for bullshit like one I've never seen."

"It ain't bullshit," Harry said. "I wouldn't bullshit you about Samantha. Love is way too important to bullshit about."

Jack blinked at Harry. "Love? So now I'm in love?"

Harry fixed his eyes on the ocean. "Have been for some time."

"Thanks for telling me," Jack said. "Why'd you wait so long?"

"C'mon, Jack. What's with you these days? Remember who you're talking to."

Harry turned and looked at Jack. "You've been over the moon since she first set foot on your porch. And after all this time, you still look like you're gonna fall over every time she walks in the room."

Jack smirked, but he couldn't hold Harry's eyes.

"And you know what else?" Harry said. "You oughta tell her. You'll be damn sorry if you don't."

Jack just stared at the sea, uncomfortable and a little stunned with the turn of the conversation. He felt ambushed, but kept quiet. He certainly couldn't lie and tell Harry he was wrong. "Duly noted," Jack said.

After a few moments, Harry sighed and smiled to himself. "Enough sermonizing for one day." He shook a finger at Jack. "But you think about what I've said, young man." He slapped Jack between the shoulders and walked back into the bar, leaving Jack leaning on the railing, his mind spinning.

Exactly how long was 'all this time'? Had it been six months already? Jack thought back to when he'd first met Samantha, when she rapped on the railing of his porch as he rocked in his hammock reading. Her coffee-colored drawstring pants and oversized University of Miami T-shirt billowed in the breeze. She was barefoot. She wore sunglasses and the tip of her nose was sunburned. Her hair was back in a loose ponytail and a backpack rested on the steps beside her. Though Jack was only half-awake, she lit him up inside with her smile. She looked vaguely familiar.

"Mind if I swim in your ocean?" she said.

Jack just shook his head. She smiled again, bounced down the stairs and strode off across the beach. From the porch Jack watched her undress down to her bathing suit, revealing long legs and strong shoulders, and unpack her snorkeling gear. He sat with his smile at the ready, waiting to catch her eye, but she never turned around again. The bar, he recalled, he had seen her in the bar. Had pointed her out to Harry as she leaned over the jukebox one night.

All afternoon, Jack kept looking up from his book, watching her snorkel vanish and re-appear like a periscope, her breath exploding when she surfaced, her swim fins

splashing and kicking the air as she dove. She was in the ocean for hours, returning to land only once for a drink of water. Watching her explore, Jack realized he had never thought much about what was out there, in his front yard, to look at. When Samantha returned to shore for good and started toweling off, Jack brought her a cup of coffee and asked her what she had seen.

Jack straightened at the boardwalk railing and gazed down into his coffee mug. How his relationship with Samantha was affecting Harry was something else he hadn't thought much about. He knew Harry wanted the best for him. They'd looked out for each other like brothers for all the years they'd been friends. Because of that, Jack was well acquainted with Harry's past.

One time, years ago, Harry'd built with a woman what Jack was beginning to believe he and Samantha were building. It had lasted just long enough, and come to a bad enough end, to leave Harry with permanent scars. Since then, Jack could name the women Harry had let in for more than a few weeks, count them on one hand and have fingers left over. Jack had listened as Harry circled the reasons why he had sent them on their way. Jack knew every excuse Harry offered was a pearl lie protecting the raw grain of a single truth.

Looking up from his mug and out over the sea, Jack realized that Harry, in his way, was simply trying to protect him from avoidable pain. Jack's heart swelled with loyalty to Harry and to Samantha. He poured the cold dregs of his coffee into the sand and resolved to follow Harry's advice.

Jack and Harry worked together through the lunch rush. Beach goers wandered up for lunch and a cocktail. A bachelor party from Chicago, twenty strong, came in to tune up before an evening run of marlin fishing. They kept Jack and Harry jumping for two hours as they knocked off four bottles of Patron and swallowed nearly a hundred oysters. Harry was glad he wasn't the captain of whatever boat they had booked; Jack was glad the forecast called for glassy seas. When the drunken fishermen piled back into their rented van, Jack and Harry noticed the Palm was nearly empty without them. The waitresses smiled as they counted their tips. It was a good Monday.

Harry set the phone on the bar. "Let's catch Woody while he's relatively sober."

"Think anyone else from the old crew still hangs there?" Jack asked.

Harry listened to the line ring on the other end. "Probably. Not big on change, those guys. Bet they all still play ball for the place."

On the fifth ring, someone in New York picked up.

"Cargo."

"Hey, howyadoin'," Harry said. "I'm calling for Woody Willis, skinny guy, blonde. Tell him it's Harry Valentine."

"Valentine, that's some name. You a pimp or sumthin'?"

"Porn star," Harry said.

The bartender on the other end didn't laugh. "Hang on, porn star."

"Valentine! What the fuck?" Woody's voice shouted. "Where are you?"

"Down on the island," Harry said.

"Yeah, so am I. Though I'd rather be on your island. This place blows. To what do I owe the honor?"

“Well, pal, Jack and I need a favor,” Harry said.

“What luck,” Woody said. “My friends in the tropics need a favor and here I am in New York – in desperate need of a vacation.”

“Before you buy the tickets and the suntan oil,” Harry said, “you ought to hear what the favor is. It’s a big one. And we were counting on your newspaper connections.”

“Ain’t that some shit with the *Post*?” Woody said. “Since when do they give a shit about what they print being true? Sources? Who uses real sources anymore? Like they’re the fucking *Times*. Fuck them. I’m going freelance. Gonna be my own boss, like you guys. Write what I wanna write. I even have my own business cards already. Cost next to nothing over the Internet. But enough about me. What’s this big favor?”

“Jack and I need some information about a guy. We’re a little short on resources down here.”

“Gimme what you got so far,” Woody said.

“There’s this guy from L.A. Shady greedhead named Martin Michaels. He’s been giving us a hard time, Jack especially. He’s been running some shit about the movie business but we don’t buy it. Got some flunky working for him, David Roswell. Both big, big money. Michaels is early sixties. Roswell’s about ten years younger. We figured some background info might help us get Martin to cool his jets.”

“Blackmail,” Woody said. “Awesome.”

“Not blackmail,” corrected Harry. “Leverage.”

“Hey, whatever. What else have you got on these guys? What did Google tell you?” Woody asked.

“Who?”

“Google. The search engine? On the internet?”

Harry laughed. “Nets around here get thrown in the ocean after shrimp,” he said.

“I wouldn’t know Google from a crystal ball.”

“You really do need some help. Let me write this shit down.” Harry heard Woody call out to the bartender. “Hey. Gimme a pen and paper. Pain in the ass, nothin’. I tip you well, don’t I? Yeah? As a matter of fact, this *is* my office...I pay Carlos fifty bucks a month, that’s how. Bring me another Scotch and soda.” There was a pause. “Sorry about that, Valentine. I don’t know why I stay in this city, the way people treat me around here.

“I can do this,” Woody said. “I’m on it already. Michaels was in Page Six not long ago. They still love me around the old office; I can get into the morgue and sniff around. I’m excited. You guys could be my first big story.”

Harry winced. “We don’t want to be anybody’s big story,” he said. “Just find us something a guy like Martin wouldn’t want guys like us to know. Send us a bill; we’re good for it. But try and get back to us, you know, soonish. And keep it quiet.”

“I hear ya, Valentine. We’ll talk soon. You think of anything else, call me here. I may be changing apartments soon and those fuckers at the paper cancelled my cell-phone.”

“Sounds good.”

“And about the rate,” Woody said. “I’m thinking I’ll cut you a break on the fee and come down there for a while as a trade-off. In three months or so, when the weather up here turns shitty.”

“All right,” Harry said. “Jack’ll be happy to work that out with you. Good luck with that suit. When’s it go to court?”

“I forget exactly. Eight, ten weeks, I guess. Why?”

Harry laughed and shook his head. “Just curious. Keep in touch, Woodrow.”

“Will do, Valentine. Take it easy.” Woody hung up.

“What’s the deal?” asked Jack.

“He’ll do it. Get this, he’s a freelance journalist now. We’re his first big story.”

“I hope not,” Jack said. “What exactly am I working out with him?”

“The vacation he gets in lieu of fees,” Harry said. “This was your idea.” Harry took his cigarette pack from his shirt pocket and sniffed the half a joint he had in the box.

“Think you can mind the shop for evening? Been a while since I took the boat out.”

“By all means,” Jack said. “Take off.”

Harry grabbed a six-pack from the cooler. “Thanks. I’ll be back shortly after sundown.”

CHAPTER TEN

Wednesday morning, Samantha stood before the mirror in her bedroom, decked out in most of a brand-new, fire engine red suit. Turning in the mirror, she ran her hands over the short, snug skirt and studied the black, scoop-necked tank top. She reached for the jacket and slipped it on. Under the jacket, the tank was more revealing than the camisole she had discarded. You could hardly see this top at all, but Samantha decided she preferred a show of healthy, tan skin to the implications of black lace. And she decided she looked very good, taller, a little slimmer, that she looked sexy. But still professional enough for the office, though all this skin was a change sure to be talked about there. Was today the right day for it? Everyone in the office knew Wednesday was the day she went to lunch with David. She glanced across the bedroom at her open closet, at her old suits.

She had gone shopping Tuesday after work, bored with blacks, whites and grays. She had noticed a few months ago that she still dressed in waitress colors, decided she wanted to stand before her mirror and feel like a woman, not just a businesswoman. Feel like she did when she was with Jack. She wanted to feel like she did at the beach, when she wore parrot-colored bikini tops above washed-out, low-slung jeans and festive, gossamer dresses that reminded her she was beautiful, let her feel the hot sun on her skin, and turned him on. What about *her* time, she had thought, roaming the stores. Why leave that at the beach? She spent so much time at the office. She wanted to feel good there too.

She'd held David's image in her head as she shopped. The way he looked professional and commanded respect, all the while turning heads when he walked into a

room. They'd talked about that on Sunday night. He used his looks, he admitted, but why not play all your strengths, he said. Indeed, why not, she answered. Three more new suits, canary yellow, powder blue and clover green, hung in her closet. She hoped David would be impressed with her new look, and she was happy to be learning from him already.

The revised plans for the surf shops were packed into her briefcase, along with a conservative clam-shell blouse, just in case. She was curious to see how David would respond to her new look. She was glad, and surprised, Jack had called Tuesday night to wish her luck with Wednesday's lunch. Not an unkind word about Roswell, or about the fact she had fallen asleep on her couch Monday night and jerked awake too late to call him at the bar. She fixed teardrop diamond earrings to her ears. A matching pendant rested against the tan skin of her chest. It was going to be a good day.

When Samantha's limo pulled up outside Lola's at twelve-twenty, she saw Roswell sitting at a table by the window, a glass of red wine in front of him. She lingered in front of the car, pretending to search for something in her purse, pretending not to have seen him, letting him see her. When she reached the table, Roswell stood. Samantha gestured for him to sit.

"Good afternoon, David," she said.

"Good afternoon. What a stunning new suit," he said. "Bit a change for you, isn't it?"

Samantha shrugged and ordered a club soda. "I figured maybe I should be more in tune with the company, a little more fashionable."

“Dare I say you’re setting a new standard, if you’ll permit such an egregious breach of professional etiquette.”

“Consider yourself forgiven,” Samantha said.

“Thank you,” Roswell said, raising his wine glass. “To your spirit of adventure.”

Samantha clinked glasses with him. “To the success of those adventures,” she said. “While we’re on the subject, I have revised versions of those plans with me.”

Roswell laughed. “Let’s at least order first. I’m starving. Then I’ll be more than happy to go over what you’ve got for me.” He opened his menu, scanned it and set it down. Samantha did the same then questioned the waiter about the specials.

“What are you having?” she asked Roswell.

“Paella. Same as the last time.”

Samantha smiled. “Didn’t we just toast to adventures?”

“Not with food. My professional life has been so full of risks,” he said, “I need at least one area of my life to be conservative.”

The waiter took their order. Roswell stuck with his original plan; Samantha ordered the fish special. She promised to let David try a little.

“About those revisions,” Samantha said.

Roswell laughed. “You are tenacious,” he said. He raised his hand. “But leave the briefcase on the floor. Just tell me about it.”

“I agree fewer shops might be a better start for the first year,” she said, “with a more graduated schedule. I adjusted everything for one right away, two more at the six-month mark and three in the final quarter. So six in the first year, instead of ten.”

“Wise,” Roswell said. “You understand my financial concerns.”

“Of course,” Samantha said. “Not that we don’t have the capital, but I agree my original estimates were probably overly optimistic about the U.S. economy, with this war lingering on.”

“Vacation spending is tough to speculate about,” Roswell said, “but it’s a given that disposable income is what goes first when an economy stagnates. I can accept six stores in the first year. I think you’re right that increased tourism from Europe will help balance out any potential losses from the U.S.” He shrugged. “The boutiques are working so well, they should pay most of the start-up for the first three shops.”

“Exactly my thinking,” Samantha said. She was beaming. The one on one was exciting. She hadn’t had this give and take under the old guard at Ellison. So much was presented on paper then, or on screens in darkened boardrooms. This was how Samantha had always dreamed of doing business. She took off her jacket and hung it on the back of her chair.

“So, the first shop,” Roswell said, “have you decided? An American friendly island or a more European one?”

“I figure we split the difference and find an island that has it both ways,” Samantha said.

“Which island is that?”

“This one.”

Roswell was taken aback. “Where?”

“The boardwalk,” Samantha said. “Out on the west coast, by Martin’s house.” She could tell Roswell was skeptical. “Our target demographic does more shopping there than

anywhere else on the island, and there's a sizable concentration of locals. Tell me there's a better location on the island for selling swimming and diving gear."

"The location has its advantages," Roswell said.

"I spend a lot of time there," Samantha said. "I see them all the time. They get off the cruise ships and come down from the hotels in their drab khakis and olives, but after a few days, they want the long, flowered trunks and the Aloha shirts, the pastel T-shirts and the leather sandals. They want to wrap themselves in the island, take it back to Des Moines with them. We should be the ones selling it to them."

"You're forgetting something," Roswell said. "The west coast is paradise to everyone else, but to the new owner of Ellison, it's become a decidedly hostile environment."

The waiter set their plates down. Samantha decided she had pushed enough for now. When Roswell ordered a second glass of wine, Samantha pushed away her club soda and asked the waiter to bring her a glass of white wine. They ate in silence for a while.

"I need to know," Roswell finally said, "what exactly did happen in the Lone Palm last Saturday. You did see it."

As they finished their meals, Samantha recounted the story of the world's most expensive margarita. Roswell was amused and he seemed to enjoy the story of Jack one-upping Martin. It thrilled her to make him laugh. When the story was over, Roswell thanked her. He said she had made his day.

"And it certainly explains a lot," Roswell said. "Though it's going to complicate things for us and your new plans."

“Martin’s not holding what Jack did against me, is he?” Samantha asked. “You told me I wouldn’t suffer for that.”

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” Roswell said. “I know Martin, and I know he’s not going to be crazy about doing any more business on that part of the island, about being anywhere near Jack.” Then he smiled and waved his hand dismissively over the table. “Not to worry, really,” he said. “I’m sure I can get him to see things our way. It’ll just take a little work.”

Roswell rose and excused himself to the men’s room. Samantha watched him walk. He moved with feral grace that matched his personality. She had a crush; there was no denying it. She blushed and then wondered why she did so. It was hardly her first one. Some men inspired her with how they filled out their jeans. Others she wanted because of how they spoke and what they knew. A few she had taken to bed, but none since Jack. She smiled. Which one had he been? Both, she decided, and that was tough to find. Though what she felt for Jack now could hardly be called only a crush. She was feeling guilty for being so attracted to another man, Samantha thought, one her boyfriend not only knew but that he didn’t like or trust. That was why she had blushed. But why? What can one do about the way one feels?

The Lone Palm was always full of beautiful women. She watched them flirt with Jack all the time – their eyes soft with liquor, their sunburned chests falling out of their bathing suits as they leaned over the bar. Samantha watched him take the phone numbers off the bar and drop them in the trash as he said thank you. She watched him push room keys back into their hands. Often, he looked right at her as he did it, smiling and shrugging. It didn’t happen every day, but it happened, when she was and wasn’t there.

He was a man. He had to be tempted once in a while. It was the law of averages. An “occupational hazard” as Jack put it.

And there were a couple of women who came to the Palm, Samantha could tell by the way they looked at him, and more by the way they looked at her, that had been to his bungalow. When she first noticed him working at the Lone Palm, before she headed down to his beach to get a better look at him, before she knew he owned the place, she was convinced he was sleeping with Catherine Jane. Of course that idea vaporized when she learned it was Harry who had it bad for Catherine. That was something Jack couldn't do. And Samantha was quite sure, since she and Jack had gotten together, though there had been no promises, that there had been no one else for him but her.

She watched Roswell walk back to her across the dining room. What might it be like to be *his* lover? She was willing to wager there were many women who knew. But how many knew the other sides of him, the sides she was getting to know? That number, Samantha decided, was markedly lower. She could have him, she knew. She had seen the change in the hue of his eyes when she had taken off her jacket, a flicker of red heat behind the blue. She'd felt herself warm inside at the reaction. Blushing again, Samantha felt a twinge of regret. She flirted the same way with Jack, asking him with her body if he wanted her, waiting for that flicker of yes in his brown eyes. She shouldn't be asking David and certainly shouldn't be pleased at his answer.

Samantha smiled at him, innocently, as he sat down. Was she being too hard on herself? Who didn't want to be wanted? And what was the difference between her attraction to Roswell, she thought, and the occasional vacationing chippy that maybe

tugged at Jack's imagination? Samantha was sure Jack kept count of potential conquests. It was natural. Being in a relationship didn't mean you stopped being human.

"I took the liberty of calling for your car," Roswell said as he paid the bill. "I hate to cut our discussion short, but I have other matters that need my attention this afternoon."

"What about this evening?" Samantha asked as they walked to the door. "Are you free?"

"Rather," Roswell said.

"Why don't you come by the apartment tonight?" she asked. "We can put something together for you to take to Martin. You can help me cater it to him."

Roswell held the door open as Samantha walked through.

"Ideal," Roswell said. "Seven? Eight?"

"Seven," Samantha said. "1107 Little Harbour Boulevard. 3C. Bring a bottle of something fun. I'll make us something to eat." Samantha watched her limo settle to a stop at the curb. "We don't have to be all business. I don't want to bore you."

"I doubt you ever could," Roswell said. "Along those lines, I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot."

"Perhaps one evening this weekend we could get together and do no business at all," he said.

Samantha raised an eyebrow at him. Roswell raised his hands.

"I'm well aware of your attachment," he said, "and I have every intention of respecting it." He took her hand. "But, to be honest, I am getting a little bored, and you're

the only person I've met so far that I genuinely like." He squeezed her hand and released it. "Think about it." He opened the car door for her. "We can talk more tonight."

"I like the idea," Samantha said. "I already have a few places in mind." She slid into the car and looked up at him. "I'll see you tonight."

Roswell smiled, nodded, and Samantha pulled the door closed. Seconds later, the limousine was out of sight.

Roswell called his driver and removed a thin cigar from the case in his jacket pocket. He studied the gold, embossed case, an antique, and recalled the dancer from San Francisco who had given it to him. That had been fun, while it lasted. She had been none too happy though, when he sent her away. He noticed in his reverie that the dancer and Samantha looked quite a bit alike. Smiling as he lit his cigar, Roswell wondered if they were alike in other ways as well.

On the way back to her office, Samantha gazed through the tinted glass, watching the city change as they left the Old Town and moved into the business district. She would take David out Friday night. She wanted to move quickly, capture the opportunity to forge an alliance with him. She would still have the rest of the weekend to spend with Jack. He would be upset about her canceling again, twice in one week, both times to see Roswell. She was asking a lot of him, she realized, and giving little in return. That will change this weekend, she thought. I'll answer anything he wants to ask. Tell him all about the plans for the surf shops. There wasn't much point in keeping that a surprise anymore.

The boardwalk shop was in the plans from the beginning, since before she even met Jack, or David. It had also been her plan, from the beginning, to bring Jack in on it with her. As a consultant, maybe to run the shop for her. He knew the coast so well; his knowledge would be invaluable. And he loved the coast so much. The shop would just make him that much more solid there, that much more established. As she got to know him better, she began to think that maybe she could learn from him – how to relax, how to slow down, be more personable, flirt and tell jokes as she did business. These were the things she was going to tell him when she revealed her plans. When they were finished and approved.

But now, now that Martin had taken over Ellison, she knew there was no way Jack would want any involvement in the shop. Now, Samantha thought with a sigh, the shop was more likely to be something that came between them than something that brought them closer. It was going to be a hard sell, but once Roswell won over Martin, as Samantha knew he would, she wouldn't be able to hide her plans from Jack any longer. It was something they were just going to have to work out. Jack would have to deal with it. He'd be unhappy, he'd rant, and then he'd pout, but he'd adjust. And she would reward him handsomely, as a lover if not a business partner, for it.

* * *

“Mr. Roswell?” called the driver.

“Yes, Evan?” Roswell watched the smoke curl from the end of his cigar and slip out the window.

“I heard something you should know.”

“What would that be?”

“I know I’m new, and I don’t want to be rocking the boat,” Evan said, “but I heard Samantha’s driver talking about her over the radio.”

“Really? You thought this would interest me why?”

Roswell watched Evan’s face in the rearview mirror as he took off his hat and raked his fingers through a mop of blonde hair. The young man was angry. Roswell dropped his cigar out the window and moved to the center of the seat.

“Two reasons,” Evan said. “First, I figured it was inappropriate to talk about a client over the radio. Second, the things he said were pretty rude. It’s bad enough talking about a client like that, but I know Samantha, and, well, that made me like it all the less.”

“What did he say?”

Evan blushed. “Do I really have to repeat it?”

“It’s just us men here,” Roswell said. “And the more I know the better I’ll be able to deal with the matter.” He watched Evan glance at him in the mirror and swallow hard.

“He said she was smiling like she was gonna be stuck to the seat when she got back in the car, that he was gonna have to hose out the back seat,” Evan said. “If you know what I mean.”

“I understand perfectly,” Roswell said, fighting back a smile. “I agree her driver was totally inappropriate. I assure you it will be dealt with, and that I will keep you out of it.” He could see Evan was relieved, having successfully defended Samantha’s honor.

“Let me ask you this, Evan. How do you know Samantha?”

“I washed dishes at the Lone Palm on and off for a couple of years,” Evan said.

“It was the last place I worked before I got this job.”

“So you know Jack and Harry?”

“Oh yeah,” Evan said. “They’re the coolest. They have it made, you know? Owning a bar on the beach, beautiful girls around all the time, though Jack’s pretty much off the market since Samantha came around. Harry still gets his though, hits the herb every now and then, takes the Sandpiper out whenever he wants. Both of them, they do it right.”

“Sounds like it,” Roswell said. “I’ve met Jack, actually, but I haven’t had occasion to visit the bar. The Sandpiper? That’s a boat?”

“Harry’s sailboat. He wasn’t much of a sailor when he got here, but he’s really got it down now. Ask him about it. He’ll take you out.” Evan pulled the car into the circle drive of Roswell’s building. “Here we are, Mr. Roswell. I hope I didn’t talk too much. That thing with Samantha was an exception. I don’t go around blabbing about clients’ business.”

Roswell reached into his jacket. “I’m not concerned, Evan. On the contrary, I appreciate you looking out for one of my people. I appreciate that kind of loyalty.” He pulled a one-hundred dollar bill from his money clip. “A bonus,” he said.

Evan hesitated, but he took the money. “Thanks,” he said.

“Ellison is getting ready to buy its own cars,” Roswell said. “When that happens, I want you to come work for us. You’ll make a lot more money. Twice as much.”

Evan smiled from ear to ear. “That would be excellent, Mr. Roswell. You just let me know when you need me.” He looked at the bill in his right hand. “And I appreciate the money, but you don’t have to do this to get me to do the right thing.”

“That’s why I don’t mind giving it to you,” Roswell said. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Evan tipped his cap and climbed back in the car. Roswell walked through the glass doors and stopped at the security desk.

“Did my papers come?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said the guard. He heaved a stack of newspapers into Roswell’s arms. “Here you go. The bookstore gave me a hard time about how they don’t deliver.”

“They did?”

The guard laughed. “Until I gave them the tip. Starting tomorrow, they’ll be here by six in the a.m.” He glanced at the closed-circuit feed from the fitness room. “Ah, aerobics class, right on time.” He turned back to the empty space where Roswell had been standing.

Roswell was already in the elevator, willing it to the top floor with his eyes. Outside his apartment door, he tucked the papers under one arm and punched his code into the keypad. He dropped the papers on his desk and turned on CNN, without the sound. He pulled off his tie and headed into the bedroom, where he stripped down to his boxers. He hung his suit in the closet. Turning, he examined himself in the mirror. Broad, hairless chest, flat stomach, thick arms. The definition wasn’t what it used to be, but at fifty-five he could easily pass for forty. He thought of Jack and Harry, how they had to be twenty-years his junior. How easy it was going to be to take them apart.

He walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Enough. Enough time with the rest of the world. He rolled back the glass door and a cloud of steam poured over him. Enough bribing and conning drivers and security guards and bookstore clerks, all in pursuit of bartenders. Back in L.A., he had plenty of others to do this kind of grunt work for him. Slumming made him feel dirty. He stepped under the pounding water. It was

painfully hot. He thought of Samantha stepping out of the limo in her new red suit.

Immediately after came the thought of her stretched across the back seat without it. Sure,

I'm slumming, he thought, but at least there are suitable rewards.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Wednesday night, the band tumbled into the opening number of their first set, a thick, heavy groove all wah-wah guitar and sloppy snare, and the Lone Palm nation turned their backs to the bar and gravitated to the stage. By the end of the last slide guitar solo, every one in the crowd was as sweaty as the beer bottles they clutched in their fists. Behind the bar, Jack lit a cigarette, crossed his arms and leaned back on the counter, contemplating the strange spell a live band cast on a crowded barroom. The crowd surrounded the stage as if it were the only doorway out of a burning room. Elbow to elbow people stood, from the first song through the last, all of them ignoring the empty space in the back of the room. They packed so tight that people danced holding their cigarettes high above their heads, the only way to smoke without burning someone else. And then, at the set breaks, the tide turned and the merry swarm descended on the bar. Lines formed outside the bathrooms. It was as if only when the music stopped that the people remembered they were in a bar. Once the music started again, the crowd again moved as one back to the edge of the stage.

Jack called Harry over, pointed out the phenomena and asked his opinion. Harry, without missing a beat, cited an ancient genetic drive that made people crave tribal congregation. When Jack scoffed, Harry gestured to the dance floor and explained.

“Look at what we’ve got out there. A group of people dressed in brightly colored clothes, singing and dancing to rhythmic music and partaking of mind-altering libations. Sounds tribal to me.”

Harry poured three shots of tequila, handing two off to Jack and Tony. Harry downed his and wiped his forehead with a clean bar towel. "God, it's hot as fuck in here tonight." Jack and Tony held their glasses and waited for the master to continue. "Live music and professional sports are the last bastions of positive primitive behavior in modern society. Those two, and gathering around water." He waved an arm over the bar. "To the hopelessly ignorant, this is just a bar full of loud music and drunk people. To the wise, insightful and pure, this is an essential renewal of humanity's common cultural history. Here, with our help, gentlemen, a million years of evolution gets shot to hell every night over three chords and some booze. I, for one, am proud to be a part of it."

Harry poured himself another shot and drank it down. He tilted his empty glass at Tony. "And I didn't waste three years of my life in grad school like the Captain, here." Harry dropped his glass in the sink and smiled.

"I heard that bullshit, Valentine!" a voice bellowed. "You'd never have made it. You lack the fortitude."

Jack and Harry turned. "Murphy!" Jack shouted.

A thin man, Hooter's T-shirt stretched tight over his pot belly, New York Mets cap pushed back on his balding head settled into a stool at the bar. The wrinkles around his eyes showed his seventy years, but the blue eyes themselves twinkled with sixteen-year-old mischief. "I gave the best years of my life to education," Murphy said. He slapped the bar. "And that's Doctor Murphy to you, Valentine, you besotted Philistine."

"Best years of your life," Harry said. "That's a lie."

"Absolutely," Murphy said. "The best ones, actually, would be those I'm currently enjoying."

Jack reached a hand across the bar. “Good to see you, Prof.”

Harry reached under the bar and produced a bottle of Jameson’s. “The usual?” he asked.

“They call it that for a reason, boy-o,” Murphy said. He winked at Harry then nodded at Tony. “Who’s the young jedi?”

“Tony,” Harry said, pouring the whiskey over ice, “meet Dr. Happy Murphy, retired scholar and pirate pilot for hire.”

Murphy offered a hand across the bar. “Well met,” he said. “You working at this circus?”

“Trying to learn,” Tony said.

Murphy raised his glass. “You’re in the hands of the best. True masters. That one? Donovan? I made him the man he is, so I should know. Valentine? Well, that’s why some species eat their young.” He cast a leering eye around the bar. “Where’s that fine lookin’ lass of yours, Donovan? You don’t think I came all the way across the island to look at you ugly mugs?”

“She’s working late with her new boss,” Jack said. He looked at Harry, then at Murphy and smiled, shaking his head. “God, I can’t believe I just said that.”

“Working?” Murphy said. “What the hell for?”

Jack shrugged. Murphy winked at Harry again. “Our man’s not too thrilled about this new boss, is he, Valentine?”

Jack waved off the question before Harry could answer. “Long story.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Murphy said. “I’m not in the mood tonight.” He ran his eyes over the dance floor. “Here to get laid, actually.” He shrugged. “Plane’s in the shop ‘til Monday.” He pushed away from the bar, raised his glass and headed toward the stage.

Harry sighted Catherine Jane at the service bar, waving a ticket. “Call my name, baby,” he shouted, heading over. “Yell it loud.”

Tony turned to Jack. “Happy? He’s a doctor?”

Jack nodded. “He was one of my professors in grad school,” he said. “My mentor, you could say. He moved here years ago, long before Harry and I. He found this place for us.”

Tony laughed. “I should’ve gotten a Masters in English, then I could own a bar in the tropics.”

Jack winked at him. “One day, boy-o. If you study hard.” He lifted bottles from the well in front of him. “Now, young jedi, finish the liquor pull before the end of this set.”

Clad in a sheer black slip, Samantha sat on the edge of her bed, an old four-poster that was the only piece of furniture she had shipped over from Miami. Roswell was due in half an hour and she couldn’t decide what to wear, and she hated herself for letting it matter so much, for wanting to look good to him. What is this, she thought, high school? That was exactly how she felt. Like she was a schoolgirl and the varsity quarterback was coming over to study. Well, she thought, standing, smoothing her slip over her hips, this wasn’t high school, and tonight wasn’t some study date, and unless she wanted to coo,

and babble and blush away her best chance at advancing her career, she better get a grip on herself before the doorbell rang.

But she had said herself the night should be more than that. How had he taken that? How, Samantha wondered, had I meant it? It didn't matter. Roswell was coming over to talk business, and that was all that would happen, whatever thoughts to the contrary she was trying not to admit to herself. She sat back down on her bed, resting her elbows on her knees, twirling a strand of still-wet hair in her fingers. Suddenly, she was exhausted. She wished she was out at the beach, fishing, or just propped up in a beach chair talking to Jack as he heaved his bait so far out over the dark sea neither of them could see where it splashed and sank.

Figures, she thought. I have the number one executive in the company coming over for a private conference, a conference I've dreamed of having, a conference that might make me number two, and now all I want to do is sit on the beach with my boyfriend. Her gaze shifted to the photo of Jack on her nightstand.

She had taken it on their third date, before he took her hiking in the hills to the Saint Sebastian waterfalls. In the picture, he leaned against the outside wall of the bar, in between the painted words 'Lone' and 'Palm'. He was grinning, that grin of his that turned up only one corner of his mouth and sparkled in his eyes. His sunglasses rested on the blue bandana that subdued his thicket of brown curls. His Aloha shirt was unbuttoned to his navel, the breeze blowing it open and exposing his tan, smooth chest and his cowrie shell necklace.

Who shows up for a date, a *third* date, she had thought as he approached her on the boardwalk, even an outdoorsy, hiking date, in a bandana and an unbuttoned, wrinkled

shirt covered in parrots and palm trees? And on the heels of that thought, as he kissed her cheek, came the realization that he was the sexiest man she had ever seen. That was why she had taken the picture, though she told Jack she was just testing her new camera. So she could look at it later and figure out just what the hell was so sexy about him. Now, three-quarters of a year later, after numerous nights falling asleep on that chest, after numberless orgasms ridden with that necklace in her mouth, Samantha realized she still didn't have an answer. The question on the heels of that thought was why did she suddenly care?

She stood and set the picture back on the nightstand. There was no time for that now. Roswell was coming, and she was still in her underwear. She picked up the phone and dialed the Lone Palm. Jack answered on the fifth ring

“This is your Captain speaking.”

“Hey, baby. How are you? Too busy to talk?”

“Sam? Hey. I can barely hear you.”

“Should I call later?” Samantha asked.

“Later? I'm not doing anything later,” Jack said. “But I think we're in for a long night here. Don't know if I'll be worth much after.”

“No, Jack,” Samantha said, embarrassed to be shouting into the phone. “I'm coming Saturday instead of Friday.”

When he didn't respond right away, Samantha was afraid.

“Okay,” Jack said. “Work?”

Samantha checked her watch. “Yes, work.” The lie was out before she knew it.

“Okay,” Jack said. “Okay, that's cool. Today go well?”

“Yeah, it did. We’re meeting again in a little while.”

“You get the go-ahead on the top secret project?” Jack asked.

“Not yet. We talked at lunch and ...” She stopped when Jack swore loudly into the receiver.

“Sam, I’m sorry,” he said, “I gotta go. The AC just conked out again...What? The ice machine? ...Sorry, darlin’. I want to hear all about it on Saturday.” He paused. “I’m excited for you.”

“Thanks, Jack,” she said. “Go, go...fix things.” The line went dead in her hands.

Samantha set the phone down, vaguely insulted at Jack’s casual response to news she had so feared delivering. She laughed at herself. Figures. She checked her watch. There was no time for that now.

Jack counted out the cash for the band, handed the money over the bar to the drummer and wiped the sweat from his eyes with the tails of his shirt. “Fucking air-conditioner.” He turned to Harry. “When can we get those fuckers in here to fix this?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ll call in the morning. What else we gonna do?” He lit a cigarette. “I didn’t hear anyone complaining but you.”

Jack wouldn’t rise to the bait. “It’s the band I’m worried about. I thought we were gonna have to carry that singer out on a stretcher.”

Harry laughed. “Yeah, the band. He’s like that after every show, got nothing to do with the heat. You wanna avoid the stretcher, hide the rum after the third set.” He pulled two Coronas from the cooler. “Gimme a break. Let’s go upstairs.”

It was a clear night. From the deck the sea was an open jewelry box of opal and silver. Jack and Harry nodded to Navajo as he closed the last of the umbrellas. Jack wagged a finger in the air. “Bout time we gave him a raise,” he said.

“I agree,” Navajo said, heading down the stairs with a bag of trash over his shoulder.

Harry proceeded directly to the railing and waited for Jack to join him. “Cancelled again?” he asked.

Jack sipped his beer and gazed up at the stars. “Yup.”

“Roswell?” Harry asked.

“Yup,” Jack said. “Well, maybe. She’s not coming out ‘til Saturday ‘cause she has work to do Friday night.”

“With him?”

“I guess. We didn’t get that far,” Jack said. “The bar was loud, that was when the AC shit the bed for good. I had to rush her off the phone.”

“So you’ve got half the story,” Harry said, “and you’re filling in the blanks with nightmares. Think that’s wise?”

“It isn’t by choice,” Jack said. “It’s just where my head goes.” He sipped his beer. “At least I was cool about it with her.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I was,” Jack said. “Told her I was excited for her. And I am.”

“Go on,” Harry said.

“I can see where she’s at,” Jack said. “She wants to impress this guy, and it looks like she’s succeeding. He can do things for her career. And I hate him. It’s a tough spot. I hope it works out for her.”

Harry rested a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “It’s a tough spot for you too, pal. The seas’ll smooth out.”

Samantha, dressed in jeans and a blue silk blouse, did her best to re-organize the papers strewn about her living room. Roswell re-packed his own briefcase. It was nearly three in the morning.

“I’m sorry,” Roswell said. “I had no idea it had gotten so late.”

“Me either,” Samantha said, stretching. “But I think we got a lot accomplished.”

Roswell plucked the last grape from the bowl and popped it in his mouth. “I would say so.”

“So you’re satisfied with the changes?” Samantha asked.

“I am.”

“But? There’s a but coming.”

Roswell flopped back onto the couch. “The way you present things,” he said, “I see no reason not to get the surf shops underway immediately. But I don’t get to make the decision.”

“It’s up to Martin,” Samantha said.

Roswell nodded.

“Well, you can sell him on this, David,” Samantha said. “I know you can.” She sat next to him on the couch, folding her legs underneath her. “I can go with you.”

“Martin’s a peculiar character,” Roswell said. “No matter how good an idea is, he needs to think it’s his before he’ll authorize it.”

Samantha’s shoulders sagged. “So after all this work, I’m going to lose this project like I lost the boutiques.”

Roswell slid closer to her and set his hand on her shoulder. “I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is we’ll just have to take a circuitous route around Martin’s ego.”

“Explain.”

“Monday, I’ll go to him and guide him into the idea,” Roswell said, rubbing her back. “Convince him we need to assemble a special committee to put the project together.”

Samantha dropped her head as Roswell rubbed the back of her neck. She felt her eyelids getting heavy. “And I run the committee,” she said. The exhaustion from earlier in the evening returned.

“Exactly. Martin won’t want any part of dealing with people. He’ll hand that job to me.” Roswell said. “And I’ll hand it to you. You hand pick two or three folks from your office, have them help you get things started and in a couple of weeks, we go to Martin with a glowing report with your name all over it.”

Samantha set her hand on Roswell’s knee. “That’ll work?” Samantha said. Roswell ran his palm down her spine.

“I guarantee it,” Roswell said. “Trust me.”

Samantha tightened her grip on his leg as his hand stopped at the small of her back. It’s not you I’m worried about, she thought. She stood.

“David, I’m exhausted,” she said. She looked at the stacks of paper around the room, blinked at the two empty bottles of wine on the kitchen counter. She feared the room would start spinning. She feared Roswell had felt her skin heat up under his hand.

Roswell rubbed his hands on his thighs. “I’ll leave you to your bed,” he said. He stood and smiled at her. He picked up his briefcase and headed for the door. She met him at the doorway, standing before him in the threshold.

“Good night,” she whispered. “And thank you.”

Eyes closed, she raised up on her toes. She’d moved with the intention of kissing his cheek, but met his lips. It was a brief kiss and Samantha, eyes shut tight, pulled back immediately, goose bumps raising on her arms. Her lips parted with a wet sound, and before she could say a word Roswell covered her mouth with his. This was a very different kiss.

Samantha responded, her tongue meeting Roswell’s in her mouth. His hands settled on her hips, and her fingers slipped through his hair. Echoes whose source she couldn’t track banged off her ribcage. Roswell’s mouth found the hot skin behind her ear as she leaned into him, licking her lips, her eyes still closed. She needed to speak before she lost her breath completely.

“David, I think,” she said, “David, bad idea.”

Roswell stepped away, grabbing one of her hands and staring as if he’d just remembered his name. His eyes refocused quickly.

“Samantha,” he said.

She shook her head, letting her hair fall over her face. “We need to stop now,” she said, “before it gets any worse.”

“Because?” he asked.

“Because, because I’m exhausted, I’m confused,” she stepped back away from him. He held his place in the doorway. “I’ve had too much wine and too little sleep.”

“Really, Samantha, too much wine?” Roswell said. “We’re not teenagers. That kiss had nothing to do with wine. That kiss started the first time we had lunch together. We both know it.”

She straightened and placed her hand on his chest. “Don’t push me, David,” she said. “Not now, not tonight. I’m sorry to do this to you.”

He let go of her hand. “I’m sorry to see you do it to you,” he said. “Think about what you want. You know how to find me. I’ll be available.”

He smiled at her one last time and walked away down the hall, briefcase swinging at his side. Samantha shut the door softly behind him, exhaling long and hard, then turned and stared at the living room, leaning back against the door as if a wind might blow it open. Roswell had left his tie on the couch. She strode through the living room and into the bathroom, glancing the tie with her fingertips as she passed.

Leaning on the sink, she turned on the cold water, more for the sound than the water. She looked at herself in the mirror, pulling her hair away from her neck, searching her skin as if that brief embrace had left a mark. Her cheeks and neck were red. She’d lost control of herself, before the kiss in the doorway, before he’d even touched her, maybe before he’d even come over that night. She’d stared as he’d taken off his tie, caught herself thinking about telling him not to stop there, or maybe holding his eyes and peeling off her blouse in response. Girlish thoughts, she’d told herself, harmless thoughts. Just to see what he’d do. Now, after the kiss, she knew exactly what he’d do. She wanted him to

do it. The red rose fiercely again in her face. She felt it on her skin all over her body. She wished the blush was rising because of shame. She wished she didn't want to lose control of herself again.

Samantha turned off the water and snapped off the bathroom light. In her bedroom, she undressed and slid into bed. She curled up in its center, waiting for the sheets to cool her skin, waiting for the wine to put her to sleep. Tomorrow, she thought, blinking into the darkness, tomorrow I'll go see Jack.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thursday morning, Jack took his coffee out onto the front porch. After lighting a cigarette, he sat on the steps and gazed over at the Monroe House. There were mornings he woke up feeling he might not find it there, that he might have dreamt the whole thing, or that in the middle of the night the house had tumbled off its perch on the hill and washed away in the sea. Fat chance of that, Jack thought. After the hurricane of '64, the Monroe House was the only thing, including the palm trees, left standing on the west coast. Just another one of those stories. I can't wait, Jack thought, until Martin Michaels is just another one of those stories as well.

He found himself wondering more and more about Martin these days. What did he do all day? Jack never saw him walking, tanning, or fishing. Never saw him swimming, or out at sea in a kayak, or a catamaran. Harry had checked up at the docks, but as far as anyone knew Martin had no boat. Of course, Jack recalled, I never saw him doing any of these things when he was just a tourist. Never heard him talk about any of it. Occasionally, a limousine picked him up early in the morning. He saw the car drop Martin off in the evenings. Ellison, Jack figured. Or maybe he was real estate shopping elsewhere on the island, though except for west coast, there wasn't much more exploitable beach.

The pointed south end of the island was all swamp. The east coast, except for St. Peter's Bay, was all sheer cliffs created when a third of the island broke off and sank a thousand years ago amidst the death throes of the small volcano that made up the island's center. And you couldn't buy an acre of mountain land unless you'd lived on the island

for ten years; the government was that paranoid about marijuana farming. The northern coast was where most of the native islanders lived, where they could still shrimp and shark and sponge, there and in the lush hills inland from west coast. Martin had a better chance of seeing Jesus on a jet ski than he did getting his hands on native land.

The desire to pound on the door, seize Martin by the collar, drag him into the seashell driveway and demand the truth about what he was up to hit Jack as he stared at the house. The impulse, Jack feared, came from taking the cowardly way out, from asking his friend a thousand miles away to do his dirty work. But then he thought that he could beat Martin within an inch of his life and still not get anything near the truth. And then there was Samantha. He'd already gotten away with one with the blender escapade. And now he had a friend bird-dogging her boss's ghosts behind her back. It was best to sit and wait.

There were nights when Jack, walking home from the Palm, saw Martin out on the balcony, not a light on in the house, pacing the boards, watching the beach, or the bungalow. Sometimes, Martin reminded Jack of the ocean widows he had read about in Victorian novels. Bereft women waiting in vain for drowned husbands whose corpses had long ago been devoured by the beasts of the sea. But Jack doubted Martin was mourning. He didn't seem the type. Waiting maybe. Plotting. But hardly mourning.

Jack stared down into his coffee and drummed his fingers on the mug. He was anxious for word from New York. It had only been a couple of days, but almost since Harry had made the call Jack had been questioning whether Woody would come through, whether he really could do anything and wasn't just talking – a proclivity of Woody's. If

he doesn't, we'll come up with something else. Maybe I'll end up beating on that door after all.

Enough of this, Jack thought, I've got important things to take care of, like a spinning reel with sand in the gears, like the pile of laundry devouring the bedroom. He stood and looked one more time at the Monroe House. He was surprised to see Martin out on the balcony looking down at him.

After work, as she left the city behind and hit the straightaway where Ocean Avenue crested the valley that cradled New Amsterdam, Samantha pushed her Jeep up to ninety. The wind was murder on her eyes, even with her sunglasses on, but she needed something to blow out the thoughts that had been sparking in her head all day. When she popped awake that morning, the night before, only for a moment, only long enough to allow a teasing flutter of relief, felt like a dream. But it hadn't been. Like strange music coming through an apartment wall, thoughts of the night before and what she could do about it invaded her brain. It had happened and something had to be done about it. Something nagged at her to tell Jack, but logically she couldn't see the point. Why upset him? Didn't undo anything. And Samantha was afraid of somehow passing the responsibility for what she had done, and what she still felt, onto Jack. Part of her simply wanted to tell him so he would tell her what to do about it, though she knew she shouldn't need Jack to find an answer. This was her mess, and she would clean it up herself, while it was still a small one.

She pulled her ponytail out when she hit the hills, her red hair exploding into the wind. The road bent before her in a long, sinuous curve as she sped toward the sunset.

The failing light shadowed the trees rushing past her. If she hurried, she might make it to the beach in time. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. And what about David? Thank God he hadn't stopped by the office. Think about what you want, he had asked. No, not asked, demanded. Well, she owed him something. An apology? The rest of what she'd offered the night before? She almost smiled. There were women, women she knew, who would kill to be in her position. The impulse to smile disappeared. There were women, women she knew, who would kill anyone who threatened what she had with Jack.

Her stomach flopped as the Jeep dipped downhill. Samantha felt the air rushing around her cool off. An unmistakable sign that she was nearing the sea. She laughed with relief. She always loved that feeling, that drop in temperature. It marked passage into another world. The weight that had perched on her shoulders all day began to dissipate. She'd call David in the morning; take the initiative with him. She was happy she hadn't called Jack and looked forward to the happy surprise on his face when he saw her.

When Samantha parked behind the bungalow, all that remained of the sunset was a swath of indigo across the horizon. The house was dark and the stereo silent. Samantha peeked into the bedroom, but the unmade bed was empty, the sheets tangled at its foot. Peering through the screen door, she saw Jack asleep in his hammock, his arms crossed over his bare chest, and his Aloha shirt balled at his feet. The top button of his denim shorts was undone and she could see the tan line an inch below his navel. *Huckleberry Finn* lay in the hammock by his hip. A half-empty coffee mug sat on the porch railing. It was the mug she had given him, black with a white skull and crossbones emblazoned on one side. Jack shifted in his sleep, and the hammock rocked gently back and forth. It was

full dark now, and she could barely see his face. In the darkness, she leaned on the railing, and stared out at the sea and the stars, content to wait for Jack to awaken on his own.

There was no way she could tell him about the previous night. There were a lot of things about David, about herself really, that she couldn't tell him. What was the point of disturbing this peace? She didn't like the idea of keeping secrets from him, but felt she hadn't left herself any choice. There was no way she could explain her feelings for David, whatever they were exactly, without hurting Jack. What would she say? That she thought about David at times and in ways that had nothing to do with work? That she had kissed him? That she would've gone to bed with him, would probably still be in bed with him if it weren't for Jack. Somehow, Samantha thought, Jack wouldn't take that as a compliment.

Jack stirred again, and she jumped. Shame washed over her. Even thinking these things with Jack so close to her made her feel guilty. She feared somehow he would sense what she was thinking and call her on it, insisting at least that something was wrong. Then she'd either have to tell him the truth, or lie to his face, neither of which was anything she wanted to do. The weight that had lifted when she neared the beach returned. This thing with Roswell had to be taken care of, she thought. Right away. Tomorrow. She'd take him out as planned, but set him straight early on in the evening, but carefully. She'd still be working with him nearly every day. And she needed him to get the surf shop project past Martin. But she would do it. Stop this thing before it really got started. Then, after everything had settled down, maybe she would tell Jack about that

kiss, if keeping that secret still ate at her. Maybe there were other things, things about how she felt for Jack she would tell him as well.

“Sam?” she heard him say.

“In the flesh.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Jack said.

Though she couldn't see his face, she could hear the smile in his voice. “Happy to see me?” she asked.

“Can't really see you at all,” Jack said. “Why don't you turn on the stars?”

Samantha walked to the door and, reaching down, plugged in the party lights. They twinkled in the eaves, casting a warm glow over the porch.

Jack stretched and rifled through his Aloha shirt for his cigarettes. He swung his legs over the side of the hammock and lit one. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asked.

“David and I got a lot of work done last night,” she said. “He's taking my new project to Martin on Monday.” She braced herself for questions, about the project, about Roswell, but Jack just blinked at her. “I want to tell you all about it,” she said.

“I'd love to listen,” Jack said. He rose from the hammock. “Listen, I know I've given you a tough time about this guy, and about work in general. I just...”

Samantha stopped him by putting an index finger to his lips. “I understand,” she said. “Don't worry. Finish your cigarette while I go inside and make us a couple of Cuba libres.”

Jack shrugged and tried to remember when he had been offered a better deal. He had his shirt back on and was sitting on the steps, smoking a second cigarette, when

Samantha returned with the drinks. She had abandoned her suit and changed into jeans and a black tank top, which she modeled for him in the doorway, a drink in each hand. Jack smiled at her.

“What did I do,” he said, “to deserve waking up to this?”

Samantha handed Jack his drink and sat beside him. She plucked a cigarette from the pack on the steps and let him light it for her. “You’re a good man, Jack Donovan,” she said. “I’m lucky to have met you.” Samantha wondered for a moment if she was talking to herself or Jack.

Jack cocked his head to the side and studied her. He wanted to take the compliment, and the surprise visit, and the drinks and the skin-tight top and just be thankful. But something in her voice sounded distant. “Thank you,” he said, and he clinked the rim of his glass against hers.

Samantha set her drink down and stepped down into the sand. She stretched her arms out to him. Jack took her hands and rose.

“Bring the drinks,” she said, “and let’s take a moonlight stroll on the boardwalk.”

The boardwalk was a quarter mile row of small shop fronts and food stands that stretched most of the distance between Jack’s beach and the Lone Palm. Years ago, long before the Lone Palm or even Trader John’s had been built, there was an open-air market where the boardwalk now stood. In that time, the fishermen sailed down from the north to the west coast to sell or trade their catches to the hill people that lived on the lower skirts of the volcano. The hill people brought down the fruits, vegetables, animals and herbs they cultivated in the hills. When Jack had asked Sonja, the ancient woman who owned

the boardwalk's flower shop what had happened to the market, the old lady shook her head sadly.

“Storm,” she said.

Jack learned from Sonja that the great hurricane of '69 had decimated both the fleets of the fishermen and the crops in the hills, as well as blowing the threadbare structure of the market out to sea. The market never quite redeveloped after that. The fishermen rebuilt their boats, but found American fishing fleets swarming their hunting grounds. What they could catch, they sold to American and Canadian seafood companies. When the government began the construction for Ocean Avenue, the two-lane roadway was cut right through where the old market had stood.

“But we are lucky,” Sonja had said, sipping her mint tea outside her shop, “the government, the prime minister, he is old like me.” She sipped again and winked at Jack. “Though he remembers me well from when we were young. He remembers the old days, and so he did the best he could. When the road was done, and the hotels began to open, he built us this boardwalk and these shops.” She winked again, “And I went to see him when the shops were done, and we spent a little time remembering the old days. My flower shop was the first shop to open here.”

Sonja's shop was the first, but many followed soon after. The government sold the spaces instead of renting them, and made generous loans and grants available – as long as you were a third generation native. Jack counted off the shops as he and Samantha strolled past them. An ice cream stand after the flower shop. After that came handmade jewelry, then a kite shop, then bait and tackle, then a gumbo and sandwich shop, next to that a cocktail stand. Out of one storefront an old man sold Panama hats

made from palm leaves. Out of the next a young woman sold hammocks she and her grandfather wove by hand. Jack recalled the hammock on his porch was one of theirs. Then finally the shops that catered to the daily needs of the beach-goers. One sold beach towels and rented chairs and umbrellas; the other sold lotion and oil and cheap sunglasses and cold Cokes from ice chests.

And then, Jack thought as he gazed at the Lone Palm, there's me. A perfect fit. The hum of conversation and the clink of bottles and glasses drifted down to him from the deck. He smiled, knowing the owners and employees of the shuttered shops he had just passed were in his bar, talking beach business, doing beach business in their friendly casual way while enjoying the generous hospitality and free drinks Jack and Harry extended them.

Samantha slipped her arm around his waist and nuzzled his neck. "What's that grin all about?"

Jack draped his arm across her shoulders. "Just happy," he said. "It's good to take a walk around the neighborhood now and again, appreciate it like I should."

"You've done well here," Samantha said.

"Quite well," Jack said. "Better than I hoped." He laughed. "And I had high hopes." He gestured toward the bar. "Shall we?"

Samantha shook her head. "I don't want to go in just yet." She led Jack back down the boardwalk, stopping at the railing halfway back to his house. She unfolded a piece of paper she had retrieved from the back pocket of her jeans and handed it to Jack. He held it up in the moonlight and tried to read it.

"It's a drawing," he said. "What's that say across the top?"

“Island Style,” Samantha said.

“Cute,” Jack said. “What’s it a name for?”

“A surf shop.”

“The surfing on this island sucks,” Jack said, “except for storm season.”

“It’s not really for surfing,” Samantha said. “Think of surf as ‘ocean’. It’ll sell wetsuits, bathing suits, snorkeling and scuba gear, sport fishing gear, hiking boots, sandals, all that stuff.” She smiled and tugged at Jack’s shirttail. “Maybe a few Aloha shirts.”

Jack looked at her and back at the plans. “Who’s doing this?”

“I am,” Samantha said.

“Really?” Jack was taken aback. “You’re gonna open your own place? Wow, that’s good news.” He kissed her cheek. “I’m glad you’re getting out of that office.”

He folded the drawing and tucked it his pocket. So this was the big surprise, this was what she had been in the living room working on those mornings while he still slept. She was striking out on her own. It all made sense to him now, even this sudden attachment to Roswell. He had the experience. He was a lawyer, a business lawyer. There would be licenses and permits to secure, Jack thought, like when he and Harry had opened the Palm. “Sam,” he finally said, settling his hands on her hips. “I’m so impressed.” She looked confused. He frowned at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Well,” Samantha said, “you are.”

Jack was confused. “I am? About what?”

“The shop,” Samantha said. “When I said I’m opening it, I meant I researched and designed it, and I’ll oversee its creation, but it won’t be my shop like the Lone Palm is your bar.”

Jack stepped back. “Whose will it be? Where will it be?”

“It’ll be right here,” Samantha said, gesturing at the two storefronts before them. They stood in front of the hat shop; the hammock shop was next to it.

“Sam, there are shops here already,” Jack said. He drew a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it, staring at Samantha over the flame from his lighter. He dropped the lighter in his pocket and drew on his smoke, never taking his eyes off of hers.

“*Whose* will it be?” he asked.

“It’ll be Ellison’s,” Samantha answered.

Jack pulled hard on his cigarette. He wished he could see her face better. “It’ll be Martin’s,” he said.

“No it won’t,” Samantha said. “It’ll be mine.”

“How so? You just said it’ll be Ellison’s.”

“But I’m going to be in charge, I’m already in charge.”

“Jesus, Samantha,” Jack said. “It’s Martin’s company. He owns it. He’s in charge. You answer to him.”

“I answer to David.”

“Who answers to Martin,” Jack said.

Samantha raked her fingers through her hair. “David said...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. David said? You trust that guy?” Jack paced the boardwalk. He was furious. “He’s been Martin’s flunky for years. You don’t think he’d cross you to

benefit Martin? He'd sell you out in a heartbeat." Jack flicked his cigarette over the boardwalk railing. "You and your plans don't mean a thing to him. He's using you."

"For what?" Samantha asked. "We're just opening a new store. How's that using me? David's just helping me do my job."

"He's using you to get his hooks into this beach," Jack said. "I can't believe you can't see that. He couldn't get in through the front door, through me, so he's using you to walk him through the back door."

"I don't understand, Jack. I don't understand this...this paranoia about Martin. So he wants to open a business on the beach? So what? It's no different from what you and Harry did."

"It's totally different," Jack said. "What makes you think Martin's gonna stop at a surf shop? How long before he buys out another one of these shops, and then another, and then another?" He paused to light another cigarette, continuing to pace. His hands trembled and he fought to calm himself. "Then the whole thing's torn down, and there's some blueblood resort being built. Then all these people who owned their own business get turned into hotel maids and cabana boys, and I can't walk the beach from my own house to my own bar. Sam, can't you see where this is going?"

"This is just business," Samantha said, "not a barbarian invasion. You're totally overreacting. You hate Martin so much you can't see this for what it is. Jesus, Jack. It's one little store." Jack stopped pacing and crossed his arms. "It's a test run for the rest of the line, on other islands," said Samantha. "Neither Martin, nor David, nor I, are looking to wreck this place." She gripped his forearms. "I love this beach too. I loved it here

before I met you, and I love it more because of you. I'll protect it. I'll protect the both of you."

"It's hopeless anyway," Jack said, looking away from her. "You can't own boardwalk property unless you're native."

"Unless you buy it from a native," Samantha said, "That's the law. David and I looked it up. We've already talked to the government about this. It's all legal, all above board." She smiled at him, trying to soothe him. "We're tendering offers to Carlos and Marta in two weeks," she said. She stepped to Jack. "Generous offers. More than enough to keep them, and their kids, and probably their grandkids from becoming chamber maids and cabana boys.

"You know why I kept this a surprise?" she asked. She tilted her head back and smiled, laughing at herself. "I started all this before Martin ever showed up. It was going to be something we could do together." She looked into his eyes. "It still can be. You're so worried about what's going to happen? Make sure it goes right. Help me with it, Jack. Help me set up the store. Help me hire the right people. Help me make sure the store fits in."

Jack laughed. "And go to work for Martin? That's insane."

"I'm not asking you to work for Martin," Samantha said. "Give me a little credit. I'm asking you to help *me*. There's all the difference in the world."

"I don't see any difference at all," Jack said. "You work for him. Helping you is helping him, Sam." He put his hands on her hips. "Don't do this."

Samantha shook her head. "Island Style's going to open," she said. "And it's going to open here."

Jack crossed his arms. “This is a huge mistake, Samantha. Huge.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” Samantha said, “and I think you’re dead wrong.”

Jack stared at her for a long time. He wanted to be careful with his words. There was no good way to say it. “I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that store never opens. I’m talking to Carlos and Marta tomorrow. They’ll never sell.”

Samantha straightened her shoulders. She stared at Jack’s face, looking for something in his eyes or in the set of his mouth that would betray a bluff. Something that would tell her Jack wouldn’t put himself, their relationship, between her and the biggest moment of her career. She saw nothing that comforted her.

“This,” Jack said, “this is what I meant by using you.” He began pacing again. “Martin figures I won’t fight him if I have to fight you, too.” He stopped. “But I will.”

“You’re out of your mind,” she said. “That’s so fucking insulting. So now I’m just a pawn, a dumb little pawn in this ridiculous turf war between you and him. Is it so impossible that maybe David and Martin respect my professional judgment, my skill, my ideas?” Her voice was rising and she couldn’t, wouldn’t stop it. “This isn’t your beach, Jack. You don’t own it. You don’t get to make all the rules for it.”

Jack stared at her. She had never raised her voice to him before. He wasn’t going to be sucked into a screaming match.

“For Martin and Roswell,” Jack said, calmly, “any kind of respect is impossible. They’re carnivores, pirates. I know this from how they treated me. And now they’re using what you’re best at to get what they want, and what they want is wrong – for this beach and everyone who lives on it, depends on it, loves it. By your own admission, that includes you.

“You’re right, this isn’t my beach. But it is where I’ve chosen to make my life. I waited my whole life to get here. Left everything I had behind. Can’t you understand, Samantha? You’re talking about a store; I’m talking about my life. I won’t let them wreck this beach and take my life with it.”

“And what about my life?” Samantha asked. “You’re wrong. I’m not just talking about a store; I’m talking about my whole career. I worked on these plans for a year. If these stores are a success, who knows what I can do next?” She turned and walked away from him, then turned back to face him, shaking her arms at her sides as she spoke. “What would you have me do? Go back to David and tell him, sorry, my boyfriend doesn’t approve? Humiliate myself in front of the first boss who’s given me a real chance?”

“For God’s sake, Sam, I’m not asking you to humiliate yourself. Just change your plans a little.”

“And when he asks why,” Samantha said, “what do I tell him?”

Jack shrugged, dropping his eyes to the boards at his feet. Samantha fumed only a few feet away; he could feel the heat of her anger all around him. Was she right? Was he simply being selfish, declaring his life more important, more worthy, than hers? He felt for her, knew she was sincere about how important these stores, these plans, were to her. He knew he was hurting her. He drew a cigarette from the pack and studied it. He was suddenly desperate to re-direct the conversation, to concede something. Do something to bring her to him. But he couldn’t give in, couldn’t let her make this mistake.

Samantha’s career, and their relationship, could recover, Jack thought. He had enough faith in himself and in her to believe that. But his beach, his beach would never

recover once Martin's radioactive greed leached into the sand and the air and the water. Jack couldn't let that happen, couldn't let Martin get one more fistful of sand than he already had.

"Do it in New Amsterdam," Jack said, "or put the store in one of the hotels up the beach, like with the boutiques." He smiled. "They've worked out great. Just put that store anywhere but here and I'll be you're biggest fan on this project. I'll do anything I can to help." He lit the cigarette. "But not if you put it here." He smiled again, tilting his head to try and catch her eyes. "You do that, and we're gonna have a hard time not going to bed mad at each other."

"Then maybe," Samantha said, "we ought to sleep apart."

Jack's smile vanished. "What're you talking about?"

Samantha took his face in her hands. She understood the finality he had heard in her words and wondered herself if she had meant them that way. It was too soon to choose, even though that seemed to be what Jack was demanding – that she choose between him and her career, between him and David. She shook off the thought. It was too big a question, too big a decision, she thought, to make at that moment. "Tonight," she said to him. "I'm talking about tonight. I'll come out here on Saturday. We'll talk some more."

Jack stood straight, despite the writhing in his stomach. Inside, he was desperate for an answer, but feared the one he would get if he pushed. "Okay," he said. "Saturday."

Samantha leaned in to kiss his cheek, and Jack wrapped her in his arms. "I won't talk to Carlos and Marta until after the weekend," he said.

“Okay,” Samantha said and she turned away, walking the boardwalk toward Jack’s house. Jack watched her until she was no more than a shadow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Friday morning, Jack did his best to sleep through the storm, but by noon the rain still pounded on his roof. He dragged himself out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen to make coffee. After putting the kettle on and grinding the beans, Jack retrieved his cigarettes and headed for the stereo. He needed something that matched the weather, which in turn matched his mood. He ran his fingers across the spines of the CD cases as if he were selecting a book from the library shelves. Coltrane? No, though jazz was the right choice. Armstrong? No. Jack wasn't ready to feel better about last night and knew Satchmo would do too good a job cheering him up. Miles. That was the way to go. Jack tipped "Kind of Blue" out of the rack and dropped the disc into the player. As the first notes drifted from the speakers, the kettle whistled.

As Jack poured the hot water into the French press, he recalled he had dreamed of Samantha. He couldn't remember what had happened, only that she had been in it and it hadn't been good. He remembered lying awake afterward, fighting off sleep, listening to the rustle of the palms behind his house, and trying to make sure the dream had fully dissipated before he closed his eyes again. Despite his efforts, he still felt the dream had trailed him into the kitchen.

He stared into the brown froth bubbling at the top of the press, trying to ground himself in the reality that surrounded him. The mingling scents of the brewing coffee and the storm-charged, salt-heavy air that blew through the house, the smoothness of the cool tile beneath his feet, the plaintive wail of Miles' trumpet. The wind in the palms behind the house. The friends awaiting his arrival a short walk away. With deep breaths he tried

to release both the night before and the day to come. Jack poured his coffee and went outside.

From the porch, he watched the rain stucco the surface of the ocean. Despite the storm the sea remained docile, the breakers tumbling in low and fanning across the sand as they died. Jack decided it was the right kind of day to spend at the bar. There wouldn't be any business, at least not until the weather broke, but the infrequent lazy and rainy days were fun for exactly that reason. They reminded him of when he and Harry had first opened the place, before the first distrustful local faces bent around the doorway, before the Lone Palm made the tourist guides, hell, before St. Anne made the tourist guides.

Sipping his coffee, Jack recalled those days five years ago, when they were putting the finishing touches on the airport in New Amsterdam. He and Harry had shared the apartment above the bar and lived like two kids given the keys to their own candy store. They opened and closed when they pleased because they could, drank more inventory in a day than they sold in three, walked the boardwalk with jugs of margaritas and gave drinks away in plastic cups. Several times they loaded a case of Corona onto the Sandpiper and anchored just offshore in front of the bar. They sat on the deck and drank and stared at the Lone Palm, still trying to convince themselves it was really theirs, and that there was no return flight to New York they had to catch in a day, a week or even a month. And although turning the place from a rum-addled, two-man summer camp into a viable business, so they could forever avoid that return flight, had hardly ruined their fun it had turned their permanent vacation into a daily life. Slowly, the Lone Palm and the life he built around it stopped feeling like a gift to Jack and began to feel like something earned. Jack found he loved it that way even more. And now things were changing, or

threatening to, again. Jack stood and lit a smoke. Well, growing the bar into a business had been a natural transition, he thought, part of the order of things. In a way, the island and the bar were growing up together. Martin Michaels bringing his empire building to the beach was an invasion, a disturbance. Martin's ideas created a dangerous crossroads where someone had to make the right choices. I'm sorry, Samantha, but Martin isn't going to happen to this beach, Jack thought. We're not going down that road. Not on my watch. He slipped his sandals on and headed for the Palm.

* * *

"Look who's here," Harry shouted when Jack walked in.

Jack waved from the doorway, stopped to shake hands with Navajo and bounded down the stairs toward the bar. Except for a lone man seated at a table by the stage, and Happy Murphy planted on his usual stool, the place was empty. Jack settled in next to Murphy as Harry popped open a Corona. Jack sipped from the bottle. He nodded to Murphy and the pilot nodded back.

"Had to cancel three tours today," Murphy said. "Ain't no flying in this gumbo."

Harry splashed some rum over ice for himself and leaned his elbows on the bar. "The rain is killing business all over, but we've had some fun," he said. "Tony's sleeping it off on the roof."

Jack shook his head. "We gotta toughen that kid up."

"Damn straight," said Murphy.

"I know, I know," Harry said. "I'm tryin', but he still needs a lot of work."

Catherine Jane appeared out of the women's room by the stage, checked on her table and headed for the bar.

“Puking it up?” Harry asked as she set down her tray and sat beside Jack. Murphy chuckled into his Scotch.

“Hardly,” she said. “One of these days, Valentine, I’m taking the title right out of your greasy little mitts.” She glanced over her shoulder at her table. “That guy’s giving me the creeps. Keeps saying he wants to take me sailing.”

Murphy smiled at her. “You do put a rise in a man’s tide,” he said.

Catherine Jane smiled back. Then she leaned across Jack and kissed Murphy on the cheek. “You’d be a creepy old man if you weren’t so cute,” she said.

Harry leaned back and, winding a bar towel around his fist, studied the guy’s back. “Send him up here.”

“I can take care of myself,” Catherine Jane said. She pulled her butterfly knife from her apron, flipped it open and began paring her nails. “I’m just preparing you in case you need to clean up the blood.”

Jack laughed. “What d’you need a blade like that for around here? Slicin’ mangoes?”

“Exactly,” Catherine Jane said, smiling coquettishly at Harry. “Never know whose mangoes might need slicing.”

Jack laughed again. “What the hell have you guys been drinking?”

“Prairie fires,” Harry said. He set the tequila and tobasco on the bar. “Want one?”

Jack grimaced and shook his head. “Hell no.”

“Smart man,” Murphy said.

“Don’t make that face at me,” Harry said to Jack. “It was her turn to choose.”

Catherine Jane shrugged, flipped her knife closed and slipped it back into her apron. “Thought I might catch him off guard. Poor Tony never stood a chance.”

“Silly girl,” Harry said. “And now the innocent suffer for your ignorance.” He looked at Jack. “Catch *me* off guard.”

“What was the final tally?” asked Jack.

“Catherine Jane cried uncle at six,” answered Harry. “I stopped at eight. One to win and one more to make a point. Tony turned green after four and went upstairs to get some air, in the rain.”

Navajo appeared over Jack’s shoulder, bouncing a yo-yo from his enormous hand. “That guy is at table sixteen again.”

Jack turned and looked at the table. Again? Jack couldn’t recall having seen him before. The man sat with his shoulders slumped protectively over the drink Jack was sure sat before him. His black hair was wild and his white shirt badly wrinkled. He certainly didn’t look like he had come to party. “Duly noted,” Jack said, then he turned back and waved at the tequila bottle. “How many’d you do, Prof?” he asked.

Murphy snorted. “I don’t get involved in that childishness,” he said. “Pissing contests are for younger folk.” He pushed back from the bar. “Speaking of which, pardon me while I drain the lizard.”

Catherine Jane slid off her stool, wobbling just a little as she stood. “One of these days I’ll get ya, Valentine,” she said, walking away.

“Don’t tease me,” Harry said.

She smiled over her shoulder and patted her apron on her way across the dance floor.

“Was that thing with the knife the sexiest thing you ever saw, or what?” Harry asked; his admiring glance still fixed on Catherine Jane. “God, she makes me want to watch her stab somebody. That’s sick. See what she does to me?” He turned back to Jack. “Holy shit. I almost forgot. Woody called this morning.”

Jack perked up. “And?”

“He was calling from JFK,” Harry said. “He’s on his way to Los Angeles. He got a couple of leads, says the story’s heating up and he wants to do some interviews. He uncovered a contact in L.A. he told me will blow the lid off those two. He’s gonna call us again tomorrow.”

“Contact?” Jack asked. He sipped his beer. “Let me guess. She’s a six-foot blonde with a mammoth rack.”

Harry shook his head. “Ye of little faith,” he said. “It’s a guy, a cop, LAPD.” He leaned in closer to Jack. “A cop who went after Martin and Roswell for murder.”

Murphy returned to his seat. “I know that look,” he said to Jack and Harry. “Used to see it in the Air Force, right before guys did something that landed them in the brig.”

At eight, Samantha, clad in a black cocktail dress she hadn’t worn in two years, walked out of her building and into the humid city evening. Roswell waited by the shining limousine. He too wore black, emanating both elegance and decadence in a perfectly tailored suit that ended, of course, in a gleaming pair of black snakeskin boots. Roswell leaned against his long car, a casual smile flirting with his lips. Samantha couldn’t decide if he was a dream or the devil himself.

“Good evening, Samantha,” he said, pulling the car door open for her. She accepted his kiss on the cheek. “You look stunning.”

She faced him and patted his lapel. “You don’t look so bad yourself, David,” she said. The urge to kiss him back, on the lips, suddenly fluttered up against the inside of her ribcage, surprising her. She swallowed it and got in the car, hoping he hadn’t noticed. He gave no indication he had. He simply smiled down at her as he closed the door.

Roswell entered through the other side and settled in beside her. “Have you eaten yet?” he asked.

“No,” Samantha said. “I worked late and didn’t have time to fix anything.”

“I suspected as much,” Roswell said, “so I took the liberty of making reservations at the Ambassador.” He knocked on the divider and the car rolled into motion.

“Acceptable? I read they have a torch lit courtyard, full of jasmine and hibiscus. Should be very...”

“Romantic?” Samantha cut in. She knew they needed to have this conversation, but now? It could end the evening right there in the driveway. “David, I don’t blame you for getting ideas after Wednesday night but...”

“I was going to say ‘tropical’,” Roswell said, patting her knee and smiling.

Samantha blushed. “I’m sorry.” She smoothed her skirt over her thighs.

Roswell waved away her apology. “No matter,” he said. “Shall I call and cancel?”

“No, no,” Samantha said. “I’ve always wanted to go there, just never really found the time.”

Roswell settled back into the leather. He turned and smiled at her. “The Ambassador it is then. We’ll have our first time there together.”

The bar at the Ambassador was so crowded Samantha and Roswell could barely pass through. He made way for both of them, holding her hand as he led her through the room. She noticed they turned a large number of heads, and she realized, when she caught their reflection in the mirror behind the bar, that they did make a striking pair. The maitre'd nodded when Roswell gave his name and led them across the cobblestones to a shadowy corner table in the back of the courtyard. Roswell ordered martinis as the waiter held out Samantha's chair. They sat and opened the menus.

"This is my last one for a while," Samantha said, looking up when the waiter brought the drinks. "I had one at my place, and I'm already feeling the one I had in the car."

"Probably a good idea then," Roswell said. "I don't want our evening to end before it gets started." He raised his glass. "To successful partnerships."

Samantha met his toast, sipped and smiled at him as she set her glass down. She glanced at the menu. "I'm torn between the oysters and the shrimp."

"Only one solution to that," Roswell said. He called the waiter over and ordered two of both. "Why not indulge?"

Samantha smiled at him and then sipped her drink, gazing into the torch that burned beside their table and then around the courtyard. Passion flowers and night-blooming jasmine crawled over the brick walls. Lush date palms lorded over the hibiscus, lilies and ginger plants that ringed the yard. There was no electric light; a few gas lamps augmented the glow of the torches, casting the entire scene in fluid shadows. Samantha conceded aloud the setting was appropriately tropical - and rather romantic.

David reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Good choice?” he asked.

Samantha let her hand linger a moment in David’s then reached for her drink.

“Excellent,” she said, turning her full attention to him.

She sipped her drink, watching his face. She crossed her legs and settled back in her chair, feeling pleasantly decadent. All the unease she had felt climbing into the limo had evaporated. Roswell glowed in the torchlight; his face had browned beautifully.

“David, I do believe you’ve gotten some color,” she said.

He touched his cheek. “I was over at the coast yesterday,” he said. “I had to go see Martin, and I stopped by our new properties.”

“They’re not ours yet,” Samantha said.

Roswell shrugged. “Two weeks.”

“Yeah. There’s something I should tell you about that,” Samantha said.

“Jack?”

“I told him about it last night,” she said. “It didn’t go over very well. He’s going to fight us on it. He said he’s going to Carlos and Marta.”

“Really?” Roswell said. “Why?”

Samantha sighed. “This crazy thing with Martin. Jack’s convinced Martin is out to take over the whole beach.”

Roswell laughed, shaking his head. “Why would he want to do that?”

“I don’t know. I tried explaining it to Jack,” Samantha said, “that it’s just one little store. If I hadn’t told him Ellison was doing it, he’d never have known the difference.”

Roswell leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs and drawing one of his small cigars from his jacket pocket. Samantha watched his eyes, narrowed in thought, as they moved over the courtyard. She felt a queasiness in her gut that had nothing to do with the cocktails. Something had suddenly gone wrong.

“But I’ll take care of things with Jack,” she said. “I’ll talk him down. He just needs some convincing.”

Roswell said nothing.

“And even if he does fight us,” Samantha said, “I like our chances.”

Roswell nodded, holding his cigar to his mouth, but he still wouldn’t speak. Samantha took a big swallow of her martini then sat back in her chair, casting her eyes about the courtyard, anywhere but at David.

It’d been a mistake to tell him about Jack and his threats. He’d probably had his fill of Jack just in dealing with Martin. She should’ve kept the whole thing to herself, fixed things with Jack without Roswell ever knowing about it. She probably shouldn’t have told Jack about it at all. She should’ve known he wouldn’t understand. She hated herself. Nice work, Taylor. Successful executives made things happen, they didn’t go out and find ways to screw up their own projects. Whatever ground she’d gained in impressing Roswell, Samantha feared she was quickly losing it now.

She and Jack must have looked ridiculous standing there on the boardwalk, snapping at each other. She realized the argument still made her angry. Who’d put Jack in charge of that beach? First telling Martin, and now telling her how and where to do her job. She understood Jack’s love for the coast, she really did; she felt it herself. But Jack could seem so naïve, with his ideas about how things should always stay the way they

are, the way he wanted them No matter how much he loved that beach, it couldn't stay the same forever. She shouldn't have to explain that to him, and she wasn't going to take the blame for it. Nothing stayed the same. Jack had to know that.

"It's funny," Roswell said. "The only obstacle on my end is getting Martin to do business that close to Jack." He stopped as the waiters presented the wine and set the plates down. "It all looks excellent, thank you," he said, and puffed on his cigar. He turned back to Samantha. "Another round?"

"Why not? Make it a double," Samantha said to the waiter. She needed this one for nerves, not for pleasure. The waiter nodded and disappeared into the shadows.

"I floated the idea to him yesterday," Roswell continued, pouring the wine, "just the basics, nothing in detail."

"And?"

"He was skeptical," Roswell said, crushing out his cigar. He pushed the ashtray aside and grinned. "But I promised him he'd never have to set foot in the place. Martin'll do almost anything that lets him sit home and collect the profits."

"So it's a go?" Samantha asked.

Roswell spread his napkin in his lap. "Not officially, he'll make me go through the formality of presenting the plans. And he'll probably want to see you about it. But it's a given, I would say."

Samantha beamed and raised her martini. They toasted, and she swallowed the rest of her drink. "Thank you so much, David," she said.

As they ate, she and David said little. Despite her excitement over David's news, the argument with Jack gnawed at and distracted her. Did Jack really think he could go

on forever like he was now, running a beach bar at fifty, sixty and beyond? He'd have to sell out, or at least turn the place over to somebody, even if it was twenty years down the road. Who? Harry? What did Jack expect from him? Harry had to have plans of his own. What if he finally did get Catherine Jane to fall for him? What then? And what, Samantha thought, what did Jack expect from her? The future wasn't something they talked about, really, beyond the next weekend's plans. Nothing had been promised or declared between them, but that turning point was approaching. Did Jack think she'd spend the next twenty years driving down to the beach on weekends?

After dinner, both of them waved off dessert. Samantha unclipped her hair, spilling it over her eyes and bare shoulders as she raked her fingers through it. Enough, she thought. None of these questions have to be answered tonight. She wished she had asked Jack for the whole weekend away instead of just the night. She needed more time. She breathed deep and the mingled scents of the flowers filled her head. This was why I moved here, she thought, breathing them in again. This is why I took this big chance on this sleepy little island. Anything could grow in the tropical heat, things were always growing and changing, and anything was possible. The metallic ring of Roswell's lighter caught her attention.

She watched him re-light his cigar. He smoked with his chair pushed back from the table and his legs crossed, gazing over the courtyard as if he had conjured it himself.

Sitting on her bed earlier in the evening, waiting for eight o'clock, Samantha had thought hard about how to address their kiss in the doorway. Beyond their exchange about his choice of words in the car, she hadn't. He'd touched her several times over the evening, taken her hand and held it twice, all perfect opportunities to set the record

straight. Now, fingering the rim of her glass at the table, she wasn't so sure she wanted to. Almost all the talk had been about business, but when he touched her, the way he touched her, that felt like something else. Like something she wanted. Like something Jack would be decidedly unhappy about. There you go again, she thought, letting Jack make all the rules. She shook her head and the gesture brought Roswell's glance.

“What's on your mind, Samantha?” Roswell asked, signing for the bill.

She stood and held out her hand to him. “I need to dance,” she said.

She took him to a cavernous dance club in the old city called Calle Real, replete with art deco pinks and blues, throbbing with dancehall reggae music. Samantha felt cast back into her predatory days in Miami. Despite the flashing, bouncing streaks of color and light, the club was a dark place. The front half was an arc shaped dance floor flanked on either side by a long bar. When they arrived, the dance floor was already packed with people in their tight and colorful Friday night best, swaying and gyrating to the furious bass notes hurtling from the speakers suspended overhead.

Short staircases led off the dance floor and past the bars to a carpeted lounge. Small clans orbited a huge oval bar. In the darkness, these groups seemed a chaotic swarm of starving eyes. The eyes flashed over the dance floor and flitted over the other faces floating and bobbing about the lounge. Samantha felt them feeding on her and Roswell and she enjoyed their attention.

The more conspicuously casual gravitated out back to where plastic tables and chairs littered a ranging concrete patio. Eager to display their weariness with the hunt, people reclined out there. They sat and stretched beside the waterfall and the shallow

pool, trying to look as bored as possible, wearing their manufactured ennui as a badge of honor. Potted palms bordered the yard, an effort to hide the hurricane fence and rolls of razor wire that contained the party. A multi-level, wooden deck curving along the back of the yard provided a perfect location for observing the festivities. Samantha could feel Roswell's eyes on the backs of her thighs as she led him up the stairs to the top level.

They stopped at the bar, ordered two daiquiris and took them to a small table by the railing.

"It's a long way to the dance floor from here," Roswell said.

"Much too crowded," Samantha said. "I was getting claustrophobic just walking through." She pulled at the front of her dress, which was stuck to her chest. "And far too much sweat flying around."

Roswell was visibly relieved. "If you change your mind, don't let me hold you back, but I don't think I'll be joining you."

Samantha cradled her drink in her hand and settled back in her chair. "I'm pretty comfortable right here," she said.

Roswell loosened his tie and loosed the top button of his shirt.

"And you?" Samantha said.

"Getting there," Roswell said, grinning.

"Keep going until you get it."

Roswell slipped off his jacket and hung it on the back of his chair. Locking eyes with Samantha, he unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up. He slouched in his chair just a little and stretched his legs out under the table. "How am I doing?" he asked.

"Exceptionally well," Samantha said.

Roswell shifted his eyes to his drink, unsure of what to make of the bright pink concoction in the oversized tulip glass. The bartender had served it with an overlong curly straw, neon green. There was a fat strawberry floating on the top, pierced by a paper umbrella. He glanced over at Samantha.

“Oh, come on, David,” she said. “Man cannot live by martinis alone.” She drew on her own straw. “See? It’s easy.”

David leaned over the drink and sipped. He sat back in his chair with a self-satisfied smile. “There are people I know in California who would find this unbearably hilarious.”

Samantha waved her hand. “Forget them, forget that place,” she said. “Forget everyone.” She gave his ankle a playful kick under the table and raised her glass. “You’re in the Caribbean now.”

That round of daiquiris disappeared quickly and Roswell got up for another. While he was away from the table, Samantha realized she had no idea what time it was. She decided she didn’t care. What did it matter? Tomorrow, today maybe, was Saturday. She had nothing to do, nowhere to be. She could spend all day in bed if she wanted. When was the last time she did that? Samantha smiled up at Roswell when he returned with the drinks.

“You ever spent all day in bed?” she asked.

Roswell set the drinks down and sat. He smiled at her. “On the rare occasion I had suitable reason to stay there.”

The bartender appeared at the table and set down two large shots of dark liquid. Samantha eyed the glass in front of her and raised her eyebrows at Roswell.

“Cuban rum,” Roswell said. “Maybe the finest in the world.” He leaned conspiratorially across the table. “I can’t believe they had it in this place.”

Samantha picked up her glass and leaned forward, setting her glass and her arm against his. Her hair fell forward, enclosing their faces. Hers was inches from his, the dark spice of the rum floating in the air around them. “We are in the Caribbean, after all,” she said.

Roswell leaned his forehead against hers. “Where anything is possible,” he said, and then he kissed her, his tongue chasing immediately after hers. She let him catch it and fought to still the quivering glass in her hand.

He broke away first, pulling back a few inches, waiting. Samantha swallowed the shot, the liquor burning a hot trail through her body. “Take me home, David,” she said. She saw the thought of a second rejection cloud his eyes. She ran her hand up his thigh and into his lap. “Take me home or get arrested with me here.”

Samantha dragged Roswell through the doorway of her apartment by the belt buckle. He kicked the door closed behind them. She had resisted his pleas to mount him in the limo, even as she came, squirming and panting, against the hand she’d guided up her dress. She wanted the bed, wanted to take him full on, unrestrained by limited space or cumbersome clothes or the shadowy presence of the driver on the other side of that black plastic screen. She slipped away from him, stumbling, when he tried to maneuver her onto the couch.

“No,” she simply said, wagging a finger at him as she dropped her dress to the floor. If they were going to do this, they were going to do it right. She left her underwear in the hallway.

As they passed through the bedroom door, she turned to slide his shirt off his shoulders but her hands found only bare skin, warm beneath her fingers and already slick with perspiration. Samantha fell back on the bed, calves dangling over the edge. Roswell stood above her, between her legs. He leaned forward, his mouth again hard on hers, then hot on her neck. She pulled open the buckle of his belt and with one authoritative snap of her arm his belt was free and dangling like a caught snake from her hand. In an instant he was naked. Samantha never felt his hands leave her body, nor did she hear his clothes hit the floor. It appeared his grace never left him.

Roswell cradled her hips in one arm and pushed her further back on the bed. When she reached between his legs, his cock filled her fist. He crawled over her, his weight on one arm while with the other hand he again skillfully worked between her legs. She stroked him slowly, holding him tight, and a low moan broke free from him. It was the first sound he'd made since they'd left the limo. He pushed her legs apart and lowered his hips to enter her.

Samantha wound one leg in his and pressed her hands against his chest. In one quick, strong motion she flipped Roswell onto his back. She heard him chuckle in the dark. She glared down at and right through him. She splayed one hand open on his chest, over his heart, and dug in her nails. With the other hand she seized him again and took him into her, working him all the way in with slow, winding motions of her hips. He dug

his fingers into her waist and groaned. Twice he tried to rise off the bed and twice she pushed him back down hard.

“Keep still,” she whispered, “or I’ll stop.”

She kept her motions slow, torturing them both, running the fingers of her free hand over their connection, touching him as she rose and exposed him, touching herself as she took him back in, savoring the slickness of them both. When she came she shattered, the skin over his chest tearing beneath her nails.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Why, Mr. Roswell, you are positively aglow this morning,” Martin said.

Roswell dropped into the booth across from him. The truth was, though back in his full suit, Roswell looked every bit a man running on three hours sleep after a very active evening.

Martin had been at the Idletime Bistro for an hour, since six, having slept little the night before himself. The goddamn beach was driving him crazy. There were bugs everywhere, in the house, buzzing in his ears. And he suspected the bartenders had several of their less reputable, liquor-crazed cohorts creeping around the mansion grounds at night, watching him. This was nothing new, but he wanted to be sure before he brought it up to Roswell. At least he’d been able to find an American newspaper, even if it was the *New York Times*. He waved at the waitress for another mimosa.

“I have interesting news this morning,” Roswell said. “I dare say you’ll be thrilled.”

“Well, then,” Martin said, folding his newspaper and glaring hatefully at the waitress, “out with it.”

“I fucked the Taylor woman last night.”

“What?!” Martin slapped the table, nearly toppling his fresh cocktail. “You fucked her? Last night?” Every head in the restaurant turned. Martin stood and stared back into every face.

“Martin, calm down,” Roswell said.

Martin glared around the room once more and sat. A young waitress brought Roswell a mimosa and disappeared.

“God, you’re quick,” Martin said. He cocked his head in the direction of the departed waitress. “You gonna fuck her before we leave?” He sipped from his drink and laughed. “You dirty bastard, why didn’t you tell me you were that far along? When do we get the pictures?”

“Pictures?” Roswell huffed. “Please.”

“Please what?” Martin asked. “There were supposed to be pictures. What’s the point without the fucking pictures?”

Roswell shook his head. “That was your idea,” he said. “We don’t need pictures, she’ll tell him herself.”

Martin sat back and crossed his arms. “Why in the hell would she ever do that?”

“Because she’s that type,” Roswell said. “Please, Martin, don’t talk to me like I’ve never done this before. I promise you she’ll tell him. This isn’t normal behavior for her; once she gets over the excitement her conscience will kick in. She’ll have to tell him. The weak ones can’t help themselves.”

Martin looked out the window. Across the street a young couple stood, arms around each other, waiting at a bus stop. He imagined the woman telling the man, “Know that new guy at work you really hate? Guess what? I’m fucking him.” Martin’s image of the man’s reaction amused him to no end. He thought of Jack, imagined Jack’s reaction to the fruits of Samantha’s nagging conscience. The thought of missing it, missing the moment the hammer came down, was too much for him.

“I still need the pictures,” Martin said. “I want to walk them right into that bar and wave them in Donovan’s face. His face, David, I need to see his face when it hits him.”

Roswell sighed. “Then buy binoculars.” He looked around for a server; he was starving. “Pictures mean hiring out, Martin. That needs to be kept to minimum. So you’ll miss the moment when he hits the reef. I promise you’ll still have a great view while he founders and sinks.”

“All right,” Martin said. “We’ll wait for her to do it. But you better not disappoint me on this, David.”

Roswell smiled and sipped his drink. “Have I thus far?”

“Can’t say that you have,” Martin said, laughing.

“Okay. Have you made any progress with what I gave you last week?”

“The wheels are already in motion,” Martin said, “Money talks around the world.”

“What’s the time frame?” Roswell asked.

Michaels laughed. “David, you’ll have time to stick it to Taylor again, I’m sure. Don’t worry.”

“Well, I’ll probably have to,” Roswell said. “It’ll probably take another time or two before she’s twisted tight enough to snap.” He shrugged. The waitress finally came over and took his order. “I can help things along if we’re in a hurry.”

“You are a true soldier, David,” Martin said. “Anything for the good of the cause. I want to hear more about last night. How *did* you do it?”

Roswell drained his mimosa. “Come on, Martin. You make it sound like she was a challenge.”

* * *

Samantha woke up sweating. She had just enough time to open her eyes and exhale before the headache, and the memories, hit. Roswell was gone, and she was glad for it. Waves of remorse, confusion and nausea crashed all at once as she labored to reassemble the night before. Her eyes found the blurry red numbers on her alarm clock. One in the afternoon. Jack would be wondering where she was. Jack. A few hours ago, she had fucked David Roswell silly in this warm and messy bed, and now she was overdue at Jack's house. There was no reconciling those two facts at that moment, and she didn't even try. There was no not going to Jack's. He'd want to know why, and Samantha was afraid she'd tell him.

Naked, she wandered into the kitchen and poured a glass of cold water. She drank it down and poured another. There was a note on her kitchen table. Before her eyes could read it her imagination wrote it for her:

Dear Samantha,

Missed you. Came by late last night. Seems you came too.

Good-bye and fuck you.

Jack.

Her hands shaking, Samantha picked up the note. It was from Roswell. He thanked her for a wonderful evening and explained that he had an early meeting and did not want to wake her.

In a kitchen drawer, Samantha found a red Bic light that Jack had left behind one night. She touched the flame to a bottom corner of the note, held it over the empty sink

and watched the paper burn. She dropped the last flaming corner into the sink and ran the water until the last of the ashes swirled down the drain.

She wandered the apartment, sipping her water. Other than the soreness between her legs and the sickness in her chest there was no sign of David Roswell. Facing him again was going to be interesting. That was a concern, but not anything as immediate as the one waiting for her on the coast, blissfully unaware and probably snoozing in his hammock. Waiting for her. Samantha gulped down the rest of her water, set the empty glass on the kitchen counter and stumbled into the bathroom for a shower.

She stood for a long time under the hot water, thinking about her reaction to the note on the table. There was no way Jack could know about last night, she thought, lathering her body with bath gel. No way he could know unless she gave it away. As long as she kept it packed tight in a small, separate corner of her mind, as long as she kept it in the apartment, she wouldn't give it away. But the more she thought about it, trying to simplify the situation into a manageable pieces, the more complicated the situation became. Number one complication, she had really enjoyed it. There was no denying that. Complications two and three followed close behind. She knew she could get away with both having done it and with doing it again.

Doing it again? My God, Samantha, what are you thinking? Where did this come from? Only hours ago, she had stepped into that limo with very different plans. Plans, she thought, or excuses to allow herself into that limousine and out into that night? Had she lied to herself all along? And now she was in a position where she had to lie to Jack. Hell, lie to Jack again, she admitted. Whatever her real plans for Friday night had been, they had never been about work.

“Well,” she said aloud as she rinsed her skin, “there’s no undoing last night.”

What was important right now was protecting Jack, both from what she felt and what she’d done, until she made up her mind about Roswell. She’d played fast and loose with the rules last night, but in the light of day, she’d cheated on Jack. That was the only way he’d ever see it. There was no need for him to get hurt by this. That much was preventable. There was no need for him to ever know. And he wouldn’t ever know if she didn’t tell him. Because he trusted her. David could tell Jack about it himself, and Jack would never believe it as long as she denied it. Samantha knew this trust that walled Jack off from the truth was also a window for her to do what she wanted. Anything she wanted. Like fucking Roswell again. And again. God, she thought, as she shaved her legs, why do I keep coming back to that, to doing it again?

Because you want to, it’s that simple, she told herself. What she was going to do about that, she didn’t know. And what, exactly, did she want from David Roswell? It wasn’t just sex. That she was sure of. Her relationship with Jack hardly left her deprived in that department. He was a wonderful lover. The best she’d had. But there was something to David, not just in bed, but just in his presence, that struck and rang something deep inside her, some need she had forgotten she had, or maybe never even knew was there. She decided she would not leave the shower until she had put a name to it. It wasn’t physical, wasn’t emotional, but it was a need. There was a need in her that David both conjured and promised to fulfill. David, in his fine suits and long cars, with his wealth and his knowledge and experience and confidence. Lost in thought beneath the water, she cut herself.

Dabbing at the cut with her fingertip, as the water washed away the blood, it hit her. Power. Roswell exuded power. And arousing him, awakening a need in him, and then in bed, controlling him, made her feel that power, feel it like the burn of sunlight emerging from behind the clouds. Now she could see the through line. From her office, to their lunches, to her apartment and finally to her bed, with her mind, her work and finally with her body, she had drawn him to her and finally conquered him. She thought of him beneath her, seemingly at her mercy, gripping her hips and urging her, with his voice and his body, to quicken her pace. She thought of her knowing refusal. She wanted to be there again, now. She could, she thought. If she just stepped out of the shower and picked up the phone.

But what about Jack? Was she really letting go of him? Is that what her feelings for Roswell meant? In the past few days, she realized, her relationship with Jack had changed before her eyes, and she had nothing to stop it. But Thursday night on the boardwalk, she'd seen the same electric fear in his eyes that she'd felt in her spine at the realization that they'd come to a breaking point. She could've pulled the trigger then, but she didn't. She reached for him instead, and she knew it was because she didn't want to lose him. Not yet. Not ever? But was that even her choice anymore? Had she made her choice when she took David to bed?

She turned off the hot water and forced herself to stand beneath the chilling stream. No. Don't think of that, of him. Not today. Today was for Jack. She closed her eyes tight and forced her thoughts of David down the drain with the icy water pouring off her skin.

* * *

When Samantha climbed from her Jeep, Jack's house was quiet. She entered through the kitchen door and then peeked into the bedroom. Empty. The stereo was silent. She walked out onto the porch. When he wasn't in his hammock, the panic that had hit her in her kitchen returned. He knew. He knew and was up at the Lone Palm, telling everyone. Then she saw him, walking out of the water, beach towel slung over his shoulder, denim shorts dripping wet. She felt foolish, then humiliated and then was glad he was too far away to see anything her face gave away. Jack waved and smiled. She waved and smiled back, sitting on the porch steps and trying to clear her head. Suddenly, she found herself thrilled and relieved at his approach. It seemed he took forever to get to her.

"Hey you," Jack said, bending forward to kiss her.

Samantha reached out and took him in her arms. He laughed and dropped to his knees to better return her embrace. His skin was still cool from the ocean. She kissed his shoulder and tasted salt. Finally, he stood.

"One extra night without me and look what happens," he said. He tossed the towel over the porch railing and sat beside her. He drew a cigarette from his pack on the porch and lit it. Then, at Samantha's request, he lit one for her. "You feeling okay?" he asked.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," she said, looking at her feet.

Jack studied her profile. He knew a hangover when he saw one. "Not to worry," he said. "We never did set a time. We never do." He paused. He didn't want to push. "You need a couple of aspirin? Up late last night?"

Samantha's stomach flipped over. He couldn't know. There was no way. Her eyes flicked up to his face; he suspected something. She dropped her eyes again, thinking of

spitting it out right there, the whole night before. But then she remembered and made the connection she'd read in Jack's face. She had told him she was working late with David. And now here she was, hours overdue and sporting a king-hell hangover. It shamed her, but she was grateful for the original lie. "David and I went out after our meeting last night. Out late. I got way too hammered and couldn't get out of bed," Samantha said. She finally looked up at him. "I'm sorry."

Jack raised his cigarette to his mouth with one hand and settled the other on her knee. "It's all right, Sam," he said, squeezing, "don't worry. No big deal."

"Yeah," she said, smiling weakly at him. "We've still got a lot of weekend left."

Her smile troubled him. "Roswell behave himself?" Jack asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped.

"Whoa," Jack said, raising his hands. "You said you were under the table. I'm just making sure he was a gentleman about it." He crushed out his smoke. "Humor me on this."

"He was a perfect gentlemen," Samantha said. "He's really a perfectly nice guy." He's not the one, she thought, you need to be worrying about. She sucked on her cigarette and tried to banish her thoughts.

"That's good news, I guess," Jack said. He had been halfway hoping that Roswell would turn into a pumpkin or get hit by a car or at least act like the asshole Jack knew he was. No dice. Ah well. He was her boss. It was for the best that they got along, right?

"You two get anywhere last night," Jack asked, "about moving the shops?"

Samantha sighed. "Can we talk about this later?" she asked. "I know I promised we'd talk today but I'm starving so bad I'm shaking." She held up her quivering hand to prove her point. "Take me to the Palm and buy me lunch first?"

"Of course," Jack said, standing. "We'll get a good deal. I know the owner."

The Lone Palm was packed. Looking around from the door, Jack noticed the crowd was larger, and tipsier, than usual for the early afternoon. Must be making up for lost time after the rain. In the middle of it all sat the guy in the white shirt, looking pathetic and lonely, stuffed into a corner table by the jukebox as people danced and laughed around him. Jack decided it was time to welcome the newest regular into the fold. He had a reputation for hospitality to protect.

Samantha distracted him by running her hand up into his curls. "I'm gonna get a bloody Mary," she said. "Meet me upstairs?"

Jack nodded. "I'll see what's going on in the kitchen."

Samantha shook her head. "Nothing but a burger for me," she said. "Nothing's going to fix me up but a little hair of the dog and some red meat."

"Nothing?" Jack asked, running his hand over her ass.

She swatted his hand away playfully and kissed his cheek. "I might be open to negotiations after lunch," she said.

Jack was watching her walk when Harry appeared at his shoulder.

"We got a lull," Harry said, "let's go outside." He lit a smoke. "Woody called this morning."

Jack followed Harry out to the boardwalk railing. Lunch would have to wait.

“Dig this,” Harry said, leaning back against the railing. “This cop, a detective Gianelli, picked Woody up at the airport. Took him bar-hopping all night, then back to his houseboat to show him...”

“Is this gonna get disgusting?” asked Jack.

“Not in the way you’re thinking,” Harry said. “You sicko.”

Jack laughed and lit a cigarette. He didn’t care what kind of ‘perfect gentleman’ Roswell made himself out to be in front of Samantha. “So then what’s the punch line?” he asked.

“He brought Woody back to show him this file he has on Martin and Roswell. Years of shit.” Harry stubbed out his smoke and lit another. “Seems Martin never did a damn thing in Hollywood, that’s all bullshit. He ran a so-called consulting firm. Woody says there’s no hard proof but that Gianelli thinks it was a front for corporate espionage. Computers, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals. Stealing information and selling it to competitors, some of them outside the States, for the highest bid. Made himself millions.” Harry shrugged. “The feds have even sniffed around them once or twice, but nothing ever came of it.”

“So that’s what he was doing here on his little vacations,” Jack said. “Meeting clients.”

“Maybe,” Harry said. “Maybe just lying low. But that stuff isn’t the weird part. Seems Martin also had a daughter. A daughter named Lisa who spent half her life in a mental institution way north in Marin County. And there’s absolutely no trace of her mother.”

“Half her life?”

Harry nodded. “She’s dead. Not long before Martin moved into the Monroe House, the state police plucked Lisa off the bottom of a pond right outside the compound.”

“That poor girl,” Jack whispered.

“It was declared a suicide. Her pockets were full of rocks and everything. She was a pretty fucked up kid and nobody was surprised she checked out. But the whole thing sent shockwaves through the institution. This was a super hush-hush joint, super tight security; more of a holding pen for family freak shows than a real medical facility. Only the truly filthy rich can get a bed there. It’s a place built to keep secrets. Nobody could figure how she got out. She’d been nearly catatonic for years, and heavily medicated.”

“Martin must’ve gone after those people with both barrels,” Jack said.

“Not at all,” Harry said. “Woody told me that all he wanted was the whole thing squashed and the hospital was only too happy to oblige. No investigation at the hospital, practically shoved the cops out the door.”

“Now that sounds shady,” Jack said.

“No,” Harry said, wagging a finger in the air, “this is shady. Couple weeks after Lisa dies her doctor dies. The cops find him belly up in his own bathtub with a needle in his arm.”

“Jesus.”

“Accidental overdose,” Harry said, “or suicide. Seems the doctor and Lisa were doing the nasty. And the other doctors at the institution confirmed the dead guy had a drug problem. But he was young, they said, on his way up. They wanted to deal with him in-house.”

“So Martin did the doctor,” Jack said, “for revenge.”

“That’s what Gianelli told Woody,” Harry said, shaking his head. “But Woody’s skeptical and I think I am too. Says Gianelli’s a pretty strange bird in his own right. Absolutely fixated on nailing Martin and Roswell. Maybe too much, Woody says. Got himself suspended from the LAPD for trying to nail both deaths to Roswell and Martin.

“Our boys are trouble, but I don’t think they’re killers,” Harry said, “even the kind who hire out. It’s a bizarre coincidence, but a junkie is a junkie, and they catch the bus all the time. And this is California we’re talking about. It’s only a weird day when nothing weird happens.”

Jack scratched the stubble on his chin, unsure of what to think. So, Harry was saying Martin and Roswell were either murderous conspirators or they were victims of unfortunate accidents, depending on whether or not you believed a renegade cop. All this new information only seemed to be muddying the waters.

“If the cops and the hospital turned their heads,” Jack said, “what are they doing here?”

“The gossip rags didn’t,” Harry said, “at least until Roswell sued the fuck out of them. Put one out of business. Hard for me to picture Martin running from that kind of stuff, though.”

“Unless he really was torn up about his daughter,” Jack said. “He is human, after all. I mean, gossip is one thing; knowing your dead daughter’s face is on the newsstands every morning is another. All that shit would make me wanna blow town too.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, Woody said he had a few more people to talk to. He’ll call in a couple of days. I guess we just sit on this for a while.”

“I’m wondering how much of this,” Jack said, “I should take to Sam?”

“None of it,” Harry said. “Not after the other night. You two smooth things out first, and we wait to see what else Woody learns, if anything. Then you can decide if there’s anything worth telling.”

“All right,” Jack said. “I’ll wait.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the bar. “I gotta get back in. Sam’s waiting on me.” But he didn’t move. “You know, she was out boozing all night with Roswell last night. That was her big business meeting.” Jack shoved his hands in his pockets and turned face the ocean. “I sure wish we could make him and Martin disappear.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be happy about her running the streets with him either,” Harry said, “but for right now, you gotta stay cool.” He set his hand on Jack’s shoulder, leaning close to him. “I know you’re burning to hurt these guys, Jack, but don’t lose control of yourself. We shut them down and they haven’t made a move since. Let’s not provoke them.”

Jack found Samantha at a corner table, in the shade of a pink umbrella, her empty glass still in front of her. She said nothing as he set the plates down and went to get her a Coke. The hint of playfulness she’d shown him only a short while ago was gone. Samantha barely responded as Jack tried to make small talk and plans for the evening. He felt foolish even speaking, knowing that whatever he said only pointed to the things they weren’t talking about, the things that had risen between them. Across the table, with Samantha behind her sunglasses and focused on her meal, Jack felt like a sailor searching for a familiar coastline that had disappeared behind a mysterious fog. He knew the

distance, the contours, the safe harbors and the reefs by memory, but suddenly cast blind he found he couldn't trust his instincts. Then, when he stood and gathered their dirty dishes, Samantha reached for his hand.

"Leave those," she said, perching her sunglasses in her hair. "Sit. Please."

Jack set everything down and sat, sliding his chair closer to her. She looked pale.

"I'm sorry I'm such a mess today," she said. "I know it's not fair but I'm just so hung over. I feel like I've ruined our day."

"No, not at all," Jack said.

"Listen, I don't want to talk about the shops," she said, "or David, or about anything like that. We each know where the other stands already." She set her hands on his thighs. "It's been a long week." She leaned forward and kissed him. "Let's just be us this weekend, okay? Everything else will work itself out."

"That sounds real good to me," Jack said, making no effort to hide the relief in his voice. Take it, he thought. She shined him a light through the fog. Take it and run with it. "Sounds wonderful."

Samantha kissed him again and they stood. "I'm gonna go back to your place and take a nap," she said. "Just give me an hour and I promise I won't be nearly such a bitch when I wake up."

"Deal," Jack said. "I'll bring some lobsters back, and we can throw them on the grill. Then maybe a little fishing?"

"Naked," Samantha said. "Let's do everything naked."

Jack pulled her close to him. "An hour suddenly seems like a real long time."

“That was the deal,” Samantha said, nuzzling his neck. “One hour, and then you come wake me up whatever way you see fit.”

“Then get outta here,” Jack said, “and let’s get the clock ticking.”

Samantha kissed him one more time then with a wave, headed down the stairs.

Jack was at the waitress’ station, pouring a bucket of ice into the well and counting the minutes until his hour was up when he heard his name. He looked up to see a tall man with olive-skin and unruly hair leaning over the bar. His white shirt was badly wrinkled and he listed like he was drunk. It was Catherine Jane’s new admirer. Jack realized he had never seen the man’s face. He wasn’t much better informed now, since a huge pair of wrap-around sunglasses hid most of it.

Jack stood, wiping his hands on his shorts. “What can I do for you?”

“Jack Donovan, right? You own this place?”

“I do, me and Harry,” Jack said, extending his hand. “And you are?”

“Sorry. Jimmy Spencer, pleased to meet you.”

“Welcome to the island, Jimmy,” said Jack.

Jimmy flashed a mirthless, vacant smile. “Thanks,” he said. “I love how everybody says that around here.” He leaned on the bar. “The waitress tells me you’re a sailor. I’m interested in doing some, and I was hoping you could help me out.”

One of the waitresses nudged Jimmy aside and slapped an order on the bar. Jack read the ticket and began mixing a tequila sunrise.

“That’s Harry’s deal,” Jack said. “He’s the sailor. Look, you’re a little in the way here. Come down the bar and I’ll introduce you.”

Jimmy followed Jack down the bar and squeezed in through the crowd to shake hands with Harry.

“What can I help you with?” Harry asked, plucking beers from the cooler and popping the caps. He passed three Buds into waiting hands and handed Coronas to Jimmy and Jack. “Got a boat?”

When Jimmy reached for his wallet, Jack waved him off. Jimmy raised his bottle in thanks and drank. He took off his glasses and set them on the bar.

“No boat, not yet,” he said. “But I’m alone for the first time in years, and I’ve come into some money.” Jimmy palmed the back of his neck and dropped his eyes. “My wife passed not long ago, after a long illness. I came here for a little rest, and it seems I’ve fallen in love with those white boats out on the water. I don’t know a damn thing about sailing, but it seems like something I should be doing right now.” He looked up and tried to smile. “Sun, salt, exercise, some quiet time to think and look around.

“I hear that,” Harry said, nodding. “I definitely hear that. What’re you looking for?”

Another refugee, Jack thought while mixing rum punches. The wrinkled clothes, the wayward hair, the bad sunburn on his arms and forehead; the guy was an obvious mess. Obviously didn’t know the first thing about island life. Poor guy. Probably some computer jockey from the Midwest who heard salvation in a Jimmy Buffett tune. Jack smiled to himself. Not all that different from me, he thought, not that I would know what losing a wife felt like. Couldn’t imagine. Walking the edge of losing Samantha was bad enough. He grabbed another beer and headed for the door.

Navajo stopped him on the way out. “What’s the story?” he asked Jack.

“Seems harmless,” Jack said, lighting a cigarette. “Poor bastard just lost his wife. Now he’s here, trying to get over that.”

Navajo stuck his pen and puzzle in the back pocket of his jeans. “He looks the part. Messy. Lost. All over the prettiest waitress in a beach bar. Lot of people think that’s a real cure. But I don’t know if there’s any getting over that,” he said, scratching the tattoo on his bicep. “My momma’s not an unhappy person anymore, but I don’t think she ever ‘got over’ when Pop flipped his motorcycle.”

“Well, let’s try and help him out,” Jack said. He stood on his toes and looked around the bar for Catherine Jane. “She wouldn’t tell Harry and me if he did, but he hasn’t given Catherine Jane any real trouble, has he?”

“You think he’d be in here now?” Navajo said, laughing. He pulled his puzzle out and filled in an answer. “Isn’t that what you guys pay me for?”

Jack laughed. Over at the bar, the sailing clinic was in full swing. Harry was diagramming something on a cocktail napkin as Jimmy stood on the rungs of his barstool taking it in. The crowd thinned as the people headed back to the beach after lunch. Tony was in control of things. Jack was eager to take his leave.

“Tell Harry I’ll be back later, much later,” Jack said, “if at all. Tell him I went to smooth a few things over.”

“No problem,” Navajo said with a wink. “Mahalo, boss.”

As Jack strolled the boardwalk, groups of giddy tourists ambled past him, arms laden with plastic bags full of T-shirts, stuffed parrots and rubber sharks – trinkets gathered for the poor unfortunates back home. Those poor souls who were at this very moment bored stiff at the office, or sitting in two hours traffic only ten miles from home

while their vacationing friends and family were freshly sunburned and standing in front of a mirror with foam lobsters on their heads; waddling through the afternoon throwing away long saved money and savoring the seemingly eternal evening before them, an evening full of seafood, steel drums, cocktails and dancing.

Jack stopped briefly to chat with both Carlos and Marta. Business was going well for the both of them. He said nothing of what he'd learned from Samantha; they talked of the weather and crowds. As Carlos again implored Marta to offer free shipping back to the States, Jack reminded himself that he had not abandoned them, had not betrayed them, only promised to be patient before rising in their defense. He reminded himself he'd gained a secret weapon in Woody's phone call. The more bad news he bore about Martin and Roswell, the less likely Carlos and Marta were to sell out to them. He'd gained an advantage over Samantha without breaking his promise, and felt a little guilty about it.

At the end of the boardwalk, Jack stopped at Sonja's shop to buy a bunch of flowers. Her half dozen great-great granddaughters ran about the shop chasing each other with water pistols. From her beach chair, she smiled coyly as she asked Jack about his pretty lady friend from the city. Jack laughed and said Samantha was just fine. Sonja took his hand when she handed him his change.

"A smart man would be puttin' roots down with that girl and be in a hurry to do it, too. A copper head girl like dat, she don' wait forever, no," she said, tucking a gray curl behind her ear. "I know. Use ta be one myself, me. I tol' my young man, Louis, he need to quit climbin' trees like a monkey and pick a coconut like a man. Dat was seventy years

ago.” She winked at Jack. “An’ the sun still rise in the mornin’ for him. Don’ think that happen widout me.”

Jack thanked Sonja for her advice and then bent down to kiss her cheek. Seventy years, he thought. Sonja and Louis had been married more than twice as long as he’d been alive. He couldn’t begin to imagine what they had seen together in those years. “You are a treasure, Miss Sonja,” he said.

When he got home, Jack stripped and climbed into bed with Samantha. He brushed her spine with the flowers until her eyes fluttered open and she raised her head to be kissed. As he kissed her, she pulled him closer to her. Jack pulled the sheet from between them and tossed it onto the floor. Samantha pulled back from his kiss and touched an index finger to his lips.

“Take me to the ocean,” she said.

When he stood she reached her hands out to him and he helped her out of bed. She pushed him onto the bed then bolted from the bedroom, through the house and out the door. Samantha was fast, and Jack didn’t catch her until they hit the water.

When they were knee-deep he got his arms around her waist, but she squirmed free, took two bounding steps and dove beneath the waves. Jack could see her as she moved underwater, taking long, wide strokes. He strode after her, the deepening water warm against his bare skin. She finally surfaced, the water just below her shoulders and, turning to face him, beckoned him with an outstretched arm and a curled finger. Jack swam out to her and kissed her bare belly underwater before he broke the surface. He barely had time to breathe before Samantha locked her mouth onto his. She draped her arms over his shoulders and wrapped her legs tightly around his waist. Jack locked his

forearms under her thighs and lifted her onto him. She gasped against his mouth as he entered her. She dug her chin into his shoulder and groaned.

As Jack stroked her, awkwardly at first and then settling into the rhythm of the current, Samantha let go of his shoulders and lay back into the sea. With Jack's grip on her keeping them connected, she let her arms float away from her as the sea lapped at her face, only her mouth and nose above the surface. Jack quickened his motions and Samantha could feel her orgasm building in time with his, the silence of the sea enveloping her. In her head, she urged him on, ready for it, begging him to come, desperate to be awash, to be flooded, from without and within. Wash it away, wash it away, she chanted within as he came, wash me away, her own orgasm igniting as his ended. As she came, she rose up from the ocean, clutching at him, collapsing against his chest, gasping and shuddering as if saved from drowning.

From the deck of the Monroe House, Martin watched Jack and Samantha make love in the sea. He had been watching the bungalow all day, waiting for signs of trouble in paradise. He'd been heartened when Samantha returned to the bungalow alone, then dismayed when a short while later Jack appeared clutching a fistful of purple and yellow flowers. He sipped his Scotch and soda, swirling the liquid in his mouth before swallowing. The couple he was watching stride toward the beach didn't seem to him to be a couple in trouble and Martin again found himself questioning Roswell's wisdom. What if David had lied to him about Samantha's conscience? Simply so he could go on fucking her indefinitely, or at least until he got bored with her. No. David always delivered in the end, even if he took a little for himself along the way.

Martin watched Jack and Samantha walk hand in hand up the beach. He grew pleased Jack remained oblivious. It was better Samantha had told him nothing; an affair was infinitely more damaging than a one-night stand. That really would be truly beautiful. The waiting was perhaps even more fun, even more rich than watching Donovan go to pieces would be. This knowing what was going to happen and being able to watch that idiot wander around unaware that his whole world, the entirety of his stupid little schoolboy dream, was about to blow apart.

Martin flashed back to the day with the check and the blender. He'd done a lot of that since that day, playing the scene over and over in his mind. In his imagination, he wrote a new ending, one that saw him pulling Jack down off that bar and pummeling him with his fists. Or one that had him catching Jack as he strolled out of the ocean and, hands around his neck, forcing him back down under the water. And holding him there until he floated to the surface, still.

He hated Jack's smugness, his naïve and idealistic ranting. Well, Martin thought, that was all about to be crushed out of him, like the green life juices of a beetle under a boot. Jack's own true love was going to break his heart. For sheer pleasure, nothing could beat that. Once Jack's spirit was broken, everything else would roll right along, like floodwaters through a busted dam. He'd take the house and for good measure the bar. And burn them both down. And build a Starbuck's amid the ashes of the Lone Palm. Maybe he'd let Jack work there.

Pacing his deck, brimming with anticipation, Martin longed for a handlebar mustache to twirl. His blood was thick with an erotic excitement that had nothing to do with his accidental voyeurism. He went back into the house to refresh his drink, damn

happy that he was Jack's next-door neighbor. What foresight he had shown in buying himself a front row seat to the best show in town.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As she made the bed Sunday morning, Samantha picked flower petals from the sheets and dropped them in her handbag as future reminders, future cautions to spread around her apartment. The flowers that she and Jack had not crushed in their passionate rolling and tumbling she dropped in a leftover rum bottle. Jack smiled at her from the couch when she set the bottle on the coffee table. They were on the beach by eleven and asleep in the sun by noon.

“I don’t know how you two stand it,” Harry yelled as he approached, rousing them both. “This strenuous life you lead.” He stopped, picked up a starfish and tossed into the sea. “Mattered to that one,” he said.

Jack heaved up on his elbows and squinted into the bright sunshine. “Well, well, well. Did ya get lost on the way here? You’re abnormally far from home.”

“I was all right,” Harry answered as he plopped down in the sand next to Jack. “Fortunately, it’s a straight shot here from the bar. Hey, Sam.”

Samantha shaded her eyes from the sun with her hand and grinned at Harry.

“Whadda you want?” asked Jack. “Can’t you see I’m trying to put the moves on this beautiful woman here?”

“You were asleep,” Harry said. “Subtle. I like it.”

Samantha laughed and settled back onto her towel.

“But anyway,” Harry said, “after you crash and burn and this gorgeous redhead runs off with some rich bronze stud, can you relieve me a little early this afternoon? That Spencer guy wants to pay me a hundred bucks an hour for sailing lessons. It’s a tragedy,

about his wife, but he's got piles of money, and if I can get him to give me some for sailing my boat, why not?"

Jack raised his eyebrows. "A hundred bucks an hour? You can barely sail yourself. You don't have a problem taking a widower's money to teach him something you can hardly do?"

"Hey, back off, hero," said Harry. "First of all, Spencer picked the figure. Second, you haven't been out on the boat with me for six months. I'm a regular fuckin' Ahab out there. I haven't been towed back to port in over a year."

"Harry," Jack said, "Ahab drowned and the *Pequod* sank."

Harry shrugged it off. "Only because of that goddamn whale. We don't get mixed up with any white whales, we'll be aces."

"It's your deal," Jack said. "Yeah, I'll come in early." He turned to Samantha. "Sam?"

"I've always got work to do," she said, "may as well get a head start on the week."

"You can bring it by the Palm, or do it here," Jack said.

"I didn't bring anything down with me." She shrugged and rolled over onto her stomach. "I may just say fuck it and throw a line in the water. Either way, Jack, do your friend a favor. Don't worry about me."

"There it is," Jack said. "The word from on high, fuck it. About three?"

"Perfect," said Harry. He stood and brushed the sand off his shorts. "Thanks, Captain. See you then." He wandered down to the water's edge and headed towards the bar, splashing in the shallows as he went.

Jack sent Tony home at five, then spent the following hours cursing himself when the dinner rush came late and he found himself, for the first time in two years, deep in the weeds behind his own bar. His humbling lasted until Harry burst through the door at the last light of sunset, like Clark Kent from a phone booth, fresh from a post-sail shower with his black hair gelled high, his blue cotton shirt unbuttoned to the waist and his desperately wrinkled khakis riding low on his hips. The bar stayed busy until after midnight, and it wasn't until two that Navajo finally guided the last four patrons to their cab in the parking lot. Catherine Jane had dismissed her floor partner at one and left shortly after Navajo, leaving the Lone Palm to the care of its proprietors.

Jack was behind the bar, mopping the floor as Harry sat on the other side, smoking a cigarette, nursing three fingers of rum. The evening's take was wrapped in stacks in front of him. He set his smoke in the ashtray and scribbled figures into a notebook.

Jack leaned the mop against the counter and poured himself a Jack Daniels over ice. "How'd we do tonight?" he asked.

Harry straightened on his stool and stretched. "We've had better weekends, but we did fine. Tonight helped make up for what we lost on Friday." He crossed out some figures, recalculated and scratched down the new numbers. "Yeah," he said, sticking his smoke in the corner of his mouth. "I tipped out the kitchen twenty bucks a head for saving your ass tonight but we still did well enough." He shoved the stacks of bills into a satchel and zipped it closed. "I'll have Catherine Jane take this to the bank in the morning."

Jack nodded then dragged the mop and bucket into the kitchen. He reappeared with half a dozen oysters on ice. “Shucked ‘em myself,” he said.

“And you still got all your fingers. Not bad,” Harry said. He uncapped the Tabasco. “There’s got to be some bad magic associated with eating oysters after midnight,” he said, dousing them with hot sauce.

Jack rapped his knuckles on the bar. “Thankfully, I’m not superstitious,” he said. He swallowed three oysters in quick succession then washed them down with the last of his whiskey.

Harry studied him, one eyebrow raised. “That can’t be good for you,” he said. He swallowed two oysters then knocked back the rest of his rum. “On the other hand, might be just what the doctor ordered.” He handed his glass for Jack to re-fill it. “You and Sam get anywhere this weekend?”

“Anywhere with what?” Jack asked.

Harry shrugged. “You ain’t in here weeping on my shoulder. I take that as a good sign.”

“I guess so,” Jack said. “It was a good weekend.”

“Listen to the guy,” he said, slapping the bar. “Two days ago you were twisted in knots over her, now everything’s melloooooooow.” He shook his head. “She must’ve sucked the chrome of it.”

“Jesus, Harry.”

“Jesus, what?”

“Kinda crass, don’tcha think? You kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“Crass?” Harry repeated, grinning. “All the sudden you got manners?”

“Show a little decency,” Jack said. “You’re taking about the woman I…” He stopped dead at Harry’s knowing smile.

“The woman you what?” Harry asked.

“The woman I spend a lot of time with,” Jack said.

Harry just shook his head and sipped his drink. “Coward.”

“Coward?”

“Just say it, Jack. Three little words,” Harry said. “Granted, they’re the most important words a man can say, other than ‘not guilty, your honor’, but they’re only one syllable each. You can practically spit them out.”

“This from a man who’s never said them himself,” Jack said.

Harry’s face clouded over. He raised his drink, pointing his index finger at Jack. “My fucking point exactly,” he said. He snatched the satchel of the bar. “I’m gonna put this upstairs and double check the parking lot.”

Jack swallowed another oyster as he watched Harry go and then lit a cigarette. What a dumb fucking conversation. It was dumb, Jack thought, because Harry was so obviously right. As were Sonja and Murphy and Catherine Jane and Navajo, who’d all told Jack the same thing as Harry several times in their own ways. Jack knew he was in love with Samantha; he’d found the words on the tip of tongue himself, numerous times, ready to leap, and he’d snatched them every time by the ankles and held them in. After making love, before she left the house, before they fell asleep, after they woke up. Sometimes, just when she smiled at him a certain way as she towed her hair after a swim. It was in the air between them so many times, when they talked, when they were silent.

They'd already told each other, Jack thought, in a hundred little ways. But he was old enough to know you had to say the words for those nuances and gestures to count. Because the smiles and the touches and the favors could be disavowed, spun, redefined in retrospect as simple kindnesses rendered because of a beneficent mood. Those little messages were all written in invisible ink, in the sand, without the words to make them indelible. It was the words. It was the words that locked those things into their true identities. It was only after the words were spoken that you couldn't put the genie back in the bottle.

But Jack was also old enough to know the risks of liberating the genie; once it was out it wasn't yours to control anymore. There was always a risk in being the one who went first, who closed their eyes and pulled the cork. You say it, and you lay immense power at the feet of that other person. You officially hand them your heart, and there's not much you can do after that but stand there and stare and hope they don't drop it. And there were people, and this Jack knew from experience, that would gladly accept your heart, not to hold, but to devour because of the power it gave them. There were people, and they didn't often come with telltale signs, that wanted to hold onto that power and no matter how they felt would not say those words back.

Relationships changed with that first 'I love you' and not in that 'now you can keep your shampoo in my shower' kind of way. Often, that first 'I love you' was the beginning of the end. As one person opened up, the other shut down, like opening the front door blows closed the back door. They might say it later on, or hedge their bets with something like 'I'm falling in love with you, too.' Or "I think I love you, too." But that moment of disparity, that hesitation at the trigger, even if it was only in what was said

and not what was truly felt, brought a cool wind into a relationship that never blew itself out. A late “I love you” takes a long time to be trusted. Even if the feeling is true, the words carried for a long time the tinny ring of charity.

As these thoughts raced through Jack’s mind, he realized one thing. Not one of them, not all of them together, was enough to deter him. Jack finally understood what Harry had been trying to tell him – not telling Samantha he loved her protected him from nothing but it might cost him everything. And should she slip through his fingers, only because he was afraid, he would regret it for the rest of his life. Maybe letting himself be governed by fear more than losing the girl.

Jack closed his eyes and pictured Samantha before him on the couch, in one of her gossamer dresses, her unruly red hair tumbling down over her shoulders, her golden arms still in her lap like those of a young girl waiting for a gift. “I love you, Samantha,” he said.

“Now all you have to do is say it when she can hear you,” Harry said. He smiled as Jack blinked at him. “That was good though, Captain. Very tender, very heartfelt.” He shuddered and dabbed at his eyes with his knuckle. “I’m moved, really.”

“Fuck you, Valentine,” Jack said. He laughed and poured them both a shot of rum.

Sunday night, there was one message on her answering machine when Samantha got back to her apartment, but she did not return the call. David. She wondered for a moment how much time he had spent thinking about their night together. His voice on the

machine betrayed nothing. He simply reminded her that tomorrow he was bringing Martin the official plans for Island Style.

Glass of wine in hand, Samantha again inspected the apartment. David had left nothing behind this time. She poured another glass and stripped the bed, burying the sheets in the bottom of her closet. When she finished remaking the bed, she stripped, cranked the air conditioner and slipped between the clean sheets, pulling them up to her chin and then over her head as she curled into a ball beneath them. The security and comfort she'd felt over the weekend dissipated into confusion and remorse. Despite the clean sheets, getting into bed felt like returning to the scene of a crime. The guilt she felt convinced her she'd been too cavalier with her feelings for Jack on Friday night. Giving up driving out to the coast for the next twenty years of weekends suddenly seemed like an awful lot to lose, even for David. And what, really, had David offered her? But even if she chose Jack, Friday night wouldn't just go away. Especially, she thought, since I'll be working with David for the indefinite future. Would the feelings that led to Friday night go away? If not, every time she was with Jack, she'd have something to hide.

But every relationship has its secrets, she thought, hunkered down in the darkness. Was there a difference between the secrets you brought in with you and the secrets that came to be during? There were things about Miami she had never told Jack and had never planned to tell him. The three month flirtation with her female roommate. The night they invited the roommate's boyfriend into bed. The six-month flirtation with cocaine that just so happened to coincide with that decision. The depression and the dropping out of law school that followed it. She didn't see the point? What purpose would be served? And

was it his business anyway? Her life before him, and her life since him was hers and hers alone. She alone owned those mistakes.

There were plenty of things, Samantha was sure, that Jack had never told her about New York. Grad school in the Village? With Harry as a partner in crime? C'mon. And why should he tell her? Those things, those adventures, mistakes, experiments, what ever you called them, they were Jack's.

There were things you did because you were dumb, or young, or both. There were moments when life just got away from you, when it shrugged off what you had planned for it and changed before your eyes. Was David simply one of those changes, Friday night just one of the moments you get stuck in and can't get out of? Samantha knew she had to decide, soon, what to do about Jack and David. Before she lost any more control of the situation and the decision was made for her.

She finally fell asleep, comforted but not entirely convinced anything would be any clearer in the morning.

Samantha was at her desk, unwrapping her turkey and cheese sandwich, when the phone rang. "Taylor, Sixth Floor," she said.

"Samantha, it's David. Are you very busy?"

Samantha stared at her lunch, her appetite gone. "Not really. What can I do for you?" she said.

"How are you feeling" he asked, "about Friday night?"

Samantha glanced around her office, as if it had suddenly filled with a watchful crowd. She blushed. "David, I'm at the office."

“I called you at home yesterday,” he said, “but you were...out.”

“Yes, I was out,” Samantha said, squeezing her forehead in her hand. “And now I’m at work.”

“Yes, you are,” David said, “and it’s hardly unusual for me to call you there. I don’t understand the hostility.” There was a pause. “I’m not calling to talk dirty to you.”

“But you’re not calling to talk about work,” Samantha said.

“That was not my intent, no,” David said. “Samantha, Friday night was...it was extraordinary.” There was a pause. “I’d tell you I was bewitched, if I believed in that sort of thing.”

Random images of Friday night leapt to fiery life in Samantha’s head. He had talked quite dirty to her then. Her mouth went dry, buzzing with the taste of his tongue, his skin. She blushed again, wickedly aroused. Again, she felt exposed, as if she were broadcasting the images in her head on the walls of her office.

“I’m not comfortable talking about that at the office,” Samantha said coolly. She couldn’t let him know how easily he had sent her back there. She struggled for something else to say.

“Understandable,” David said. “But in light of other circumstances, I do think it is important we talk. You and I both know that Friday was no drunken collision between kids.”

Samantha heard herself agree before she could stop herself. “That’s a good idea. We do need to talk.”

“Tonight? I can stop by.”

“No, no. Not tonight,” Samantha said. It was too soon. She needed at least one day and night alone without either of them. “Wednesday. We can have lunch.”

“Good idea,” David said. “My schedule is up in the air this week, but I should be able to get free for that. We’ll go to Lola’s. I’ll call you Wednesday morning.”

Samantha said nothing then realized he was waiting for her assent. “Sure. Yes. I’d like that,” she said.

“Be well,” David said, “and I’ll call you Wednesday morning.” After he hung up, Samantha stared at the phone for a long time. Had they just made another date? She shook her head, nearly laughing at herself and set the phone on her desk. No. They’d agreed to get together to discuss something that shouldn’t have happened and wouldn’t happen again. Or, at least she had.

Then, rubbing her eyes with her fingertips, Samantha sighed with relief that he had called and not stopped by the office. That truly would’ve been too much. Because, she admitted, if he had stopped by instead of calling I probably would’ve bent right over the desk for him. She picked up a pen and scratched the word “slut” on a post-it note. She half-smiled and then drew an arrow pointing toward herself. Then she crumpled the paper and the one underneath it. It wasn’t that bad. She wouldn’t bend over her desk for just anybody. Sick to her stomach, she tossed the crumpled papers, and her sandwich into the trash. No, she thought, not for just anybody, only for him.

She stood, stretched and walked to the window. Looking down, she realized she hadn’t even asked about her proposal, if David had taken the plans to Martin. And exactly when was it, she thought, that Jack had become “other circumstances”?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In the Tuesday morning sunshine, Harry stood shirtless on the roof of the Lone Palm, driving a nail through one end of a tape measure. He finished and walked to the edge of the roof, trailing a ribbon of yellow tin behind him.

“I couldn’t hear you,” he said.

“What the hell are you doing?” Jack asked again. “We gotta open up.”

“What’s it look like? I’m taking a measurement.”

“For what?”

“This roof is so bare,” Harry said. “We should put something up here. A big sign or something, so the sailboats and charter boats can see it. It’d be great for business.”

“Harry, business is great.”

“Yeah, I know.” Harry spread out his arms. He turned and waved them over the peaked roof. “But this is why you own a joint. So you can *do* shit with it.” Harry set his hands on his hips. “Captain, we’ve talked about this before.”

“I already told you,” Jack said. “We should hang a big pirate’s flag there.”

Harry shook his head. “You and your pirate flag. That’s why you’ve never amounted to anything. No imagination. Caribbean’s full of joints with pirate flags. You’ve got an advanced degree and a pirate flag is the best you can do?”

Jack shrugged. “It fits.”

“We could get a big inflatable shark, or a gorilla,” Harry said. “Remember those gas stations on Route 9? They had those big King Kong looking things when they were

having a special on Cokes.” He looked around again. “Or maybe a big ship’s mast, from a real ship wreck. Now *that’s* inspired thinking.”

Squinting into the sun, looking at Harry on the edge of the roof, Jack had his own revelation. “Just how stoned are you?” he asked.

“Not at all. Well, maybe a little,” Harry said. “But that’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Why don’t you come down from there before you get yourself killed?”

“Why don’t you come up here and help me and quit being such a pansy?” Harry answered. “That big sissy Navajo wouldn’t come out here either.”

Navajo poked his head out the door. “I know you guys hate to be interrupted during a business meeting,” he said, “but there’s some guy on the phone named Willis. He says it’s important.”

“Woody’s on the phone,” Jack said. “Get the hell down and come inside.”

Harry rolled the tape back into the cartridge, spent a moment trying to pull up the nail and then scrambled across the roof and climbed onto the deck. Jack pushed through the front door and picked the phone up off the bar.

“Woody,” he said, “good to hear from you.” Harry trotted across the room and leaned on the bar beside Jack. “What’s that music?” Jack asked. “Where are you?”

“Some strip joint outside the city,” Woody said. “I rented a back booth as an office. Jesus, do they have some wild women out here.”

Jack covered the receiver. “He’s still in L.A.,” he told Harry. “You still running around with that detective?”

“Bobby Gianelli? Oh yeah, this is too good a story let go of yet,” Woody said. “What a wingnut this guy is,” Woody said. “Lives on a houseboat, drinks like a fish. I’m gonna end up in the hospital. I oughta just send him to you guys.”

“So his information’s no good,” Jack said, shoulders sagging. He was glad he hadn’t told Samantha anything.

“I didn’t say that. I checked him out,” Woody said. “He was a real Wyatt Earp for a while, until his wife left him – about the same time this thing with Lisa and Vance hit the papers.”

“Connection?” Jack asked.

“Roswell was fucking Mrs. Gianelli,” Woody said, “during the whole investigation. She was spying on Bobby, giving info to Roswell, at least that’s what Bobby says. When Roswell cut her loose, which was right after Bobby found out and blew *all* his gaskets, the EMT’s had to talk her down from an overpass.”

“So Bobby’s a drunk cop with a vendetta,” Jack said.

“True enough,” Woody said. “But I’ve seen the file, and it’s got some serious shit in it, shit people usually call evidence. He keeps it in a safe under the floorboards of his boat.”

“Sounds paranoid,” Jack said.

“Hey, this is L.A. He’s probably not paranoid enough. He says higher ups on the force were out to get him, and I think he’s right. There was evidence of a break-in at Vance’s house, and Lisa’s death *had* to be an inside job – all of that was squashed by Bobby’s superiors, and they never told him why.”

“Jesus,” Jack said. He felt a sudden tightness in his throat and covered it with his hand. “What are you telling me?”

“I’m telling you to watch your back,” Woody said. “These two may be willing to wander further into the woods than we thought. I don’t think they’ll be kicking in your door and pumping you full of lead, but if things get any more weird down your way, I’d consider enlisting professional help, of the badged and armed kind. Stay out of their way.”

Jack thought of the surf shop, of Carlos and Marta. “That might be difficult.”

There was a long pause from Woody. “I’ll send you copies of Gianelli’s stuff. Look at it before you do anything you consider brave.”

“Gotcha,” Jack said. “Look, Woody, you’ve already gone above and beyond, don’t stay out there for us.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Woody said, “I don’t own a pair of eight hundred sunglasses; nobody in this town even knows I’m alive.” He laughed. “But they sure as hell will after I sell this story.” He hung up.

“Well?” Harry asked.

Jack hopped over the bar and pulled two beers from the cooler. Then he poured them each a shot of tequila.

“That bad,” Harry said, watching. They downed their shots. “He thinks they whacked the doctor,” Harry said, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth.

“And maybe the daughter, too,” Jack said. He lit a cigarette. “Or they were at least in on it.”

“Holy birds,” Harry said. “Whadda you think?”

“The cop is definitely unstable,” Jack said, “but Woody vouched for the info.” He sipped his beer. “I don’t know what to think.”

“That’s some serious shit,” Harry said. “Borders on the outlandish. I’ll give you the doctor; Martin had reason for that if what the cops said about Vance is true. But killing his own daughter? That’s psychopathic.” He lit a smoke and took a long drag. “You really think these guys are psychopaths?”

“I understand what you’re saying,” Jack said, “but think of the headlines we saw in the States. Middle America nobodys coming home from the office and strangling their whole families? Their kids shooting up schools?” He paused, but Harry said nothing. Jack shrugged. “Is it really that outlandish?”

Catherine Jane walked in, shouted hello and then stopped, frozen by the looks on her bosses’ faces. “What?” she said.

Jack and Harry looked at each other. Jack shook his head. “Nothing,” he said.

Catherine Jane frowned, started to say something then stopped. Harry watched her as she bounded up the spiral staircase to join Navajo on the deck.

“When do we start telling people about this?” Harry asked. “Secrets are no good around here.”

“Not yet,” Jack said. “Woody’s sending us some paperwork from Gianelli’s file.” He poured his untouched beer down the sink. “Let’s you and I look at that first,” he said, “then we decide what to do.”

“Samantha?” Harry asked.

“Soon,” Jack said. “Right now, we need to open up.”

* * *

Jack left the bar early that night, about eleven. Halfway home he hopped off the deserted boardwalk and walked to the water. He took off his sandals at the water's edge and waded until the cool incoming tide soaked the legs of his shorts. He smoked as he watched the moonlit ocean tumble around him. With each passing swell, his feet sunk deeper into the sand as the current swirled around his legs and back out to sea. The undertow, Jack thought. It could get you, even here. You swim in the same sea a hundred days in a row and one day, there it is. The undertow. The rip. He thought of a story a customer told him once. The guy had nearly drowned. He got caught in an undertow that swept him out to sea, and threatened to drag him under. This happened right in front of his wife. She had her nose in a book though, and didn't even notice, didn't even look up.

"It's a funny thing," the guy'd said, "I remember thinking, what a beautiful picture of her. I remember thinking that if I'm gonna go, well, at least my last sight was a beautiful picture of my wife."

"Obviously, you made it," Jack'd said.

"Someone came out and got me," the guy said with a shrug. "Some guy bringing his kayak down to the beach. I was a good swimmer, but I'd made a mistake. I fought it when it had me. Exhausted myself trying to swim against it instead swimming parallel to the beach. Do that, just hang on long enough, and you'll swim out of it. I knew that, but I panicked." The guy shrugged again and thanked Jack for the round. "I was just plain lucky."

Jack reached into the sea and wiped his wet hand down his face. Hang on long enough, he thought. Swim out of it. Out of what? That was the thing, Jack thought, I don't even know if I'm in any real trouble. He worried that calling Woody had been a

mistake. Was he just scaring himself by learning all this stuff, truth and rumor, about Martin and Roswell? Did he just want to be right about them *that* bad, in front of everybody, in front of Samantha? He lit another cigarette. But he *was* afraid. He could feel the rusty mechanism of fear turning awkwardly inside him. Afraid of what he knew, what he didn't know. Afraid of hiding it all, of revealing it. Afraid for Samantha and whom she was getting mixed up with. Afraid of Samantha.

He looked down the coast and could see the Monroe House silhouetted against the night sky, a stain of black shadow on the hill, blocking out the stars. Martin was in there somewhere. Everything had been so perfect, Jack thought, before you got here. I worked so hard. His hatred for Martin crawled through him like rats in the walls. You weren't invited, Jack thought. You don't belong. This place is too clean. You, with your greed and your conniving and your dirty lawyer and your dead daughters and their dead doctors. Get back aboard your pirate ship and pull anchor, Jack thought. There is no plunder for you here. I'll burn this place to the ground before I let you have an inch of it.

The car came for Samantha at one-thirty Wednesday afternoon. Samantha tried not to worry about what she would feel when she set eyes on David Roswell. A couple of days away from him had done nothing to cool her memories. This was a business lunch, she told herself as she climbed into the backseat. No torch-lit courtyards, no cocktail dresses and Cuban rum.

"Good time Friday night?" Evan asked as he pulled the car out into traffic.

Jesus. Evan. What had this kid been thinking while David was upstairs with her all night. "Yes," she said, defiantly. "Real good time."

“You looked tipsy when we got to your place,” Evan said, glancing at her in the rearview, “I was a little worried.”

Why is he pushing this? Samantha thought.

“Then Mr. Roswell called and said I could take off,” Evan went on. “Said he’d stay with you until you felt better and that he’d take a cab.”

Samantha blew out a sigh of relief and Evan must have seen her face.

“I apologize,” he said. “None of my business. Shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, no problem,” she said. She glanced out the window. They were headed across town, in the wrong direction, away from Old Town. “Evan? Where are we going?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Mr. Roswell asked if we could swing by his office. He was having computer trouble and thought you could help.” Evan looked at her again in the mirror. “If it’s a problem I can take you straight to Lola’s. He said he’d call you.”

“I must’ve been outside already,” Samantha said. “It’s no problem.”

Roswell’s office was a disappointment. It was small and spare. Samantha realized she had expected something opulent, even decadent. Something that looked like the command center of an empire. She smiled as she approached the receptionist’s desk.

What did you expect, she thought, the Bat Cave?

“Ms. Taylor?” queried Daisy.

“That’s me.”

“Go right in,” Daisy said. She rose from the desk and opened the door. “He’s expecting you.” She announced she was off to lunch then closed the door quietly behind Samantha.

“Computer trouble, I heard,” Samantha said.

Roswell looked at her with a glowing smile. His eyes glittered at her with an almost boyish glee. He wore another gray suit. Samantha had never known so many shades of gray existed. The jacket hung neatly on the back of his chair; his white shirt was crisply pressed and snug over his broad shoulders. He looked as good, as cool as he had when they met on Friday night. God, Samantha thought, he is fucking gorgeous.

“These things are the bane of my existence,” he said, turning and glaring at the screen in exaggerated frustration. “I’m better than most with them, but they always find a way to confound me at the most inopportune time.”

“Sounds like a used car,” Samantha said.

“I suppose,” Roswell said. He swiveled in his chair to face her and crossed an ankle over his knee. “Right now, I’m trying to pull up some of the figures from your proposal, to take to Martin tonight.”

Samantha frowned. “What happened on Monday?”

“I apologize,” Roswell said. “Martin and I met on Sunday and had a disagreement, about another matter entirely. I decided it was best to wait a while before discussing our business with him.”

“I wish you would have told me about this,” Samantha said, walking to the desk and resting her hand on the monitor. “I could’ve brought copies with me.”

Roswell looked up at her. “I called your office, but you had already left.” He rolled away from the desk and stood. “Please,” he said, holding the chair for her, “maybe you’ll have better luck.”

Samantha sat at the computer, pointing and clicking for several minutes but to no avail. She grew increasingly frustrated. At some point, Roswell had placed his hands on her shoulders. “I think,” Samantha said, her mouth dry, “you’ve got a few bugs loose in here. It’s the island. It just seems to play hell with things. Took us six months get everything working right over at...” She shuddered when his lips touched her ear.

“This is not why I brought you here,” Roswell said, “but you are irresistible, and I know neither one of us is prone to passing up golden opportunities.”

Samantha reached back and ran her fingers through his hair as he kissed her neck. This was not what she had wanted when she left her office, this time it truly wasn’t. They were supposed to go to lunch; they weren’t supposed to be alone together. When she felt his tongue on her neck, she instinctively pressed his head harder against her.

“Oh, David,” she said, hoarse, “I don’t know.”

His hands slid off her shoulders to the front of her blouse, where his fingers began loosening the buttons. Samantha squeezed her eyes shut tight. This wasn’t what she’d wanted when she left the office, but it was what she wanted now. She arched her back as he unfastened the front clasp of her bra. Her nipples hardened between his fingers, and the sensation struck her right between her legs. She shifted in her seat, and her skirt rode up.

“I haven’t begged for a woman in thirty years,” Roswell whispered against her ear. “But I will now, if that’s what it takes.”

It’s not going to take that at all, Samantha thought. Everything that shouldn’t happen has happened already. What was the point of turning back now? She dropped her blouse and bra to the floor. Friday night she had crossed a line that could never be

uncrossed. Unfixed a seal that could never be refastened. Once you cheated, did it matter after the first time? There was no way to put the genie back in the bottle.

She turned the chair around. Roswell took his face in her hands and bent to kiss her. Samantha bit his bottom lip and told him to stand up and stand still. Let's not kid around, she thought. This isn't a budding romance. This isn't about tenderness, and this isn't about intimacy. Roswell did as he was told, smiling down at her. She clawed open his belt and then his pants, which she yanked down to the tops of his boots. She raised his shirttails over his belly with one hand and seized him in the other. Roswell gasped in spite of himself when Samantha nearly swallowed him whole.

An hour later, her ass perched on the edge of his desk, her legs still wrapped around Roswell's hips, Samantha realized she was the only one naked. Roswell hadn't even taken off his tie. When they heard Daisy walk into the outer office, Roswell calmly stepped away from the desk, pulled up his pants and then walked over to lock the door.

"She's never walked in when the door was closed," he said, "but you can never be too careful."

He tucked in his shirt, adjusted his belt, and yanked his tie back into place. With the exception of the rumpled hair, you'd never know he had, moments before, fucked the naked and trembling woman on his desk. When he grinned at her, Samantha wanted to scratch those cold eyes out of his head.

She stood and ran her hands over her ass, looking behind her at the desk. How many times, she wondered, had he perched Daisy right there as well? Embarrassed to be naked in front of him, Samantha gathered her clothes from the office floor and

disappeared into the privacy of the bathroom. She locked the door behind her completely confused, tears beginning to tumble down her cheeks. There had been none of these emotions, none of this humiliation, after the first time. Why now? She stepped into her underwear and then her skirt. As she buttoned her blouse, she stared at her face in the mirror. She was lying to herself. Again. Of course she had been ashamed of herself, at least on Saturday morning.

Fool. What kind of fool had she seduced herself into becoming? She leaned on the sink and searched for the bottom of her eyes. She held that afternoon up against Friday night, resenting herself for hiding in sleep Friday night, for reasoning away the shame she felt Saturday morning. For letting Jack wash it away for her. How could she have convinced herself she could live like this? Using Jack while she let Roswell use her. Comforting herself, lying to herself with the idea that it didn't and wouldn't matter as long as Jack didn't know. She knew what she had done and even if Jack never learned the particulars, Samantha now understood that her betrayal would rise between them and cast a shadow, a stain on them that Jack would sense. He loved her. She blinked at the words. He loved her too much not to. He loved her. But even as she stood there, rolling those words around in her head, she could feel the wall unwinding between them already.

Roswell turned in his chair when Samantha walked out of the bathroom.
“Lunch?” he asked.

She said nothing as she walked past him shaking her head, not even looking at him. Not another look at him, not another word, not another moment with him. She was not going to let him see what he had done to her. Roswell stood and offered to walk

Samantha to the car when she opened the door but sat back down when she raised a hand in refusal. Roswell jumped as the door slammed closed behind her.

He smiled and adjusted his tie again. Well, so much for that, he thought. He knew he'd had her for the last time. It had happened faster than he had thought, than he had hoped even, but the wire of conscience had been tripped. He acknowledged a twinge of disappointment. It had been a long time since he had given over that much abandon to a woman. He had enjoyed this one more than most. That was satisfactory. Such affairs never lasted. It was, in fact, all just part of the plan.

Samantha fell into the back seat of the limo, ordered Evan to take her home and then rolled up the screen between them. Evan glanced back at the screen as he drove. Something was wrong. He had seen Daisy leave the building. Twice now, Roswell had maneuvered himself into being alone with Samantha. She had to be aware of that. And she was upset back there, real upset. Roswell was his boss, and paid him well, but Jack and Samantha, Evan thought, well, they were his friends. Jack had done him more favors than he could count, given his sister a job after her divorce, taken Evan back on at the Palm time and time again, no questions asked. Evan knew he couldn't confront Roswell one on one, but he could keep his eyes and ears open.

There was a message from Jack on her answering machine when Samantha got home. He had called Ellison, and they'd told him she was out to lunch with Roswell. He hoped things were going well. There was more to the message, but Samantha never got hear it because she smashed the machine on the bedroom floor. Jack's cheer and affection stung her to the core.

She had to tell him, she thought. She couldn't treat him like this. He trusted her and she was humiliating him. She would have to lie and lie and lie, about her thoughts, about her feelings, even if she never so much as spoke to Roswell again. Which was impossible as long as she worked at Ellison. If he pulled the plug on the surf shops, she would have to live with it. If he wanted to fire her, let him try. Roswell wasn't the only lawyer she knew. She couldn't quit, wouldn't. Not over this. Roswell had taken too much from her already. She had to tell. If she didn't, her shame and her lies would infect them and live in them forever. Or until, like a hidden cancer, it devoured and destroyed them from within. Samantha envisioned the slow, torturous decay of their relationship and her thoughts chilled and sickened her. She started to sweat.

If she told Jack, told him before he started asking questions, or worse, started hearing rumors, they might save things. And if it couldn't be saved, their relationship would end in a white hot flash, Jack's wounds cauterized by rage. Samantha held her face in her hands. It wasn't much of a choice, an end by ice or an end by fire. But she had forced herself, forced them into this corner. At least once since that day Roswell walked into her office, she thought, she could do the right thing by Jack. The rest was really up to him. God, never in his worst nightmares would he think she had cheated on him. The affair would crush him. Samantha pondered the real size of Jack's temper. It was a side of him she had only seen glimpses of.

She stood and kicked through the wreckage of the machine then turned off the ringer. She couldn't talk to Jack, to anyone, tonight. She needed to think. She went into the kitchen, poured a large glass of red wine and gagged on it. Tears came. Jack would forgive her. He would let her explain and she would find a way. She would find a way to

explain to him what she herself barely understood. There had to be a way for them to get through this. The world was full of couples that had survived this very thing.

Samantha abandoned the wine in the kitchen and went back into the bedroom. She drew the blinds, turned the AC all the way up and fell into bed. Her body shook with the force of her sobs, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. This was only the beginning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Late Wednesday night Jack stomped up the porch stairs and flopped into his hammock. He sat up, peeled off his shirt and tossed it onto the porch. He lit a cigarette, took a deep drag and reclined, trying to relax. It was the third time that night he'd repeated that pattern. This time, he'd gotten as far as Martin's front door, even raised his hand to knock on it. But he hadn't. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Martin answered, other than lose control of himself. Some form of violent confrontation was pretty much a lock and whatever that resulted in, Jack feared, would come back on Samantha. No, he instructed himself, there would be no beating up Samantha's boss. Not yet, anyway. Not until he heard from her.

That was the problem, Jack decided. The coincidence. The fact that his girlfriend had gone incommunicado on the same day he'd gotten that phone call from Woody. A phone call about two 'coincidental' deaths that were looking less and less like they were accidental, never mind coincidental. It was just so unlike Samantha not to return his phone calls. Jack racked his brain trying to think of another time he had called one day and she had not called back until the next. He couldn't think of one but he was sure it had happened before. In six months? There was never a time she waited to return his call? Must've happened.

Jack sat up and swung his legs out of the hammock. For chrissakes, he thought, get a hold of yourself. If it wasn't for Woody's phone call, Samantha's lack of the same wouldn't mean a thing. That's what Harry had told him, and he knew Harry was right. Well, and then there was Roswell. She'd gotten as far as lunch with him, and then she'd

vanished. Jack got up and paced the porch. Vanished? Overdramatize much? He ran through the message he'd left on her machine, searching for something he might've said that pissed her off, that she'd misunderstood. *That* had happened before. That's why I hate those fucking things, Jack thought. But when he'd tried her again, he hadn't even gotten the machine. Nothing but ring after ring. She must've come home at some point to turn off the machine. Unless it was full. Did those things get full? He lit another cigarette. Enough.

It was time for a decision. Either he was going to totally overreact, go up to the bar, call Catherine Jane, get her out of bed and make her ride him into the city on the back of her bike – or he was going to give it up for the night and go to bed. As he crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray, Jack decided on a compromise. He went inside, yanked his fishing rod off the wall, pulled some bait from the fridge and headed down to the water. Fishing. That made everything seem better. Who went fishing if they were worried their girlfriend was involved with another man?

At eight o'clock, Jack awoke, sweating, in his hammock. He hadn't caught anything and he hadn't slept but four hours, but he had made it through the night without doing anything stupid. That was enough. He lit a smoke, stripped off his shorts and stumbled down to the water for a swim. As he floated on his back, the white and blue light of the seashore morning eased his mind. He could feel the night's worries scurrying back into the far corners of his mind. Good Lord, it's early, he thought. What do people do this time of day? Jack couldn't come up with an answer for other people, but he decided fucking with Harry would work for him.

Except for one, all the boardwalk shops were closed. Jan and Missy, the runaway Aussie hippie singers who owned the bait shop, nearly fell over when Jack walked in and ordered an espresso and a box of frozen shrimp. It took him several tries to convince them he was not still up on a bender.

“When are you two gonna let me book you for the Palm?” he asked, sipping his coffee. “You two would kill at happy hour.”

“Soon,” Jan said.

“As soon as we have enough songs,” said Missy.

Jack shook his head. He had heard them rehearsing in the back of the shop, Jan at the guitar, Missy plucking her upright bass. They were amazing.

“Answer me this then,” Jack said. “How is it two girls from Down Under can sing like Appalachian nightingales?”

The women shrugged at him. Jack shrugged back and returned to his walk.

There were people setting up on the beach already. Jack had heard there were folks who actually went out that early, but it was the first time he’d ever witnessed it for himself. There were half a dozen fishermen out, all, it seemed, having better luck than Jack enjoyed the night before. As he arrived at the Lone Palm, he froze at the sight of a tall, slender brunette jogging down the beach. She wore a black spandex body suit and running shoes, with socks. Her face glistened with sweat and her breathing was heavy. Jack couldn’t figure out where she had come from; it was several miles to the nearest hotel. Insanity. Great ass, legs to die for but insane, Jack thought. In her honor, he lit a cigarette.

Inside the bar, Jack flipped on the ceiling fans, brewed a pot of coffee and turned on the jukebox. He tossed his shrimp in the beer cooler and reached for the phone. There was one person he knew who would be up and at work this early.

“Taylor, Sixth Floor,” Samantha said when she answered.

“Hey, baby,” Jack said. “Good morning.”

“Jack? I had a feeling it was you, but then I looked at the clock.”

“I was worried when I didn’t hear from you last night,” Jack said.

“I’m sorry,” Samantha said. “I got a bad oyster at lunch or something. I couldn’t do a thing. I even turned off the machine and the phone.”

Jack went weak with relief and was embarrassed by it. “How you feelin’ now?”

“Not much better,” she said. “I think it’s still in my system.” She laughed weakly. “I might just move the computer into the bathroom for the day.”

“Gross,” Jack said.

“I know, very romantic,” Samantha said.

“Well, I’ve got some plans in the romance department,” Jack said. “Something special for this weekend.”

“Good, that makes me feel better,” she said. “Look, I’d better get going. I’m behind after yesterday. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Jack said.

Samantha hung up.

Jack clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The tip was itching. One more day, he thought. One more day and you can jump off all you want.

“What the fuck?” Harry said, walking in through the back door.

“I was up early,” Jack said, pouring Harry a cup of coffee.

“No shit,” Harry said. He smiled wryly as he took the coffee. “You get her?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Food poisoning.”

Harry laughed. “So you worried all night for nothing.”

Jack shrugged and lit a smoke.

“I wanna hear you say it,” Harry said.

“C’mon, Harry.”

“Say it.”

“I worried all night for nothing,” Jack said. “I should listen to Harry because he’s always right.”

Harry raised his mug to Jack and leaned his elbows on the bar. “Every time she goes out with this guy, she gets sick. That oughta tell her something.” Harry looked around the bar. “You know, Captain, I have a routine here. My whole morning is off kilter now because of you and your overactive imagination.”

“It’s good to break routines every now and again,” said Jack. “You know, Thoreau said...”

Harry cut him off. “No literature before noon,” he said.

Jack enjoyed the rest of the morning. He hauled ice from the machine in the kitchen and wiped down all the top-shelf bottles. The ones that served the staff and hardly anybody else. He signed for the beer kegs as Catherine Jane flipped chairs and Navajo set up the deck. He sat in on Harry’s morning meeting with the kitchen staff then cooked himself some eggs.

After rolling the last of the silverware, Catherine Jane walked behind the bar to make Harry his bloody Mary. “Shall I make two?” she asked.

“Excellent idea,” Jack replied, refilling his coffee. “Tell me one thing. Why do you do this for him every morning?”

“I like to,” Catherine Jane said. “I like Harry. Everybody needs a little TLC. I know you look out for him, Jack, but sometimes a guy needs more than that. It’s something special I can do for him, something nice he can count on every day.”

“You do have a sweet side,” Jack said with a smile.

“We all do,” she said. “And if you ever repeat anything I just said, you’ll be singing soprano for the rest of your life.”

The drinks were on the bar and Catherine Jane was putting ashtrays on the tables when Harry emerged from the kitchen. Harry picked up his drink. He sniffed it and took a big gulp.

“These are damn good,” Harry said. “They make my morning.” He noticed Jack hadn’t touched his drink. “Whatcha waiting for?”

“I watched her make them,” Jack said. “I’m a little intimidated.”

“Just go easy,” Harry said. “Savor it.”

Jack took two small sips. He could feel sweat beading under his eyes. “Wow, that is really fucking good.”

“Told you,” Harry said. He turned to Jack. “Now, about the roof.”

Friday morning, Jack was again up early. Harry was taking Spencer for a morning sailing lesson, and Jack opened the bar. He enjoyed it as much as he had on Thursday. At

three, Harry returned, and he and Tony took over the bar. Jack headed home to wait for Samantha, stopping at Sonja's shop for a fresh bunch of flowers.

Back at the bungalow, he replaced the dead flowers in the rum bottle and straightened up the living room. He made the bed and took a shower. After pulling on Samantha's favorite shirt, a subtle green one with orange hibiscus that she had bought for him, he put Jack Johnson on the stereo and stretched out in the hammock with *Huckleberry Finn*. He smiled as he thumbed through, looking for his page and thinking of how, the night before, he hadn't been able to read a word. What a difference a day makes, he thought.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jack tossed his book to the floor when he heard the Jeep crunching gravel behind his house. He held the kitchen door for Samantha, and she pecked him on the cheek as she passed. They chatted as Jack made margaritas. He gave Samantha her drink then led her by the hand to the couch. She sat and he remained standing, still holding her hand.

“Okay,” Jack began, “I’ve got some things I need to tell you, things we need to talk about.” He was so nervous he shook.

“I agree,” Samantha said. She slipped her hand out of Jack’s and smiled weakly at him. “Who goes first?”

Jack shrugged. “I will, I guess,” he said, sipping his drink then setting it on the table. “Two things. One I think you’ll really like, the other I’m not so sure.” He stopped again, disoriented by his nervousness.

“Go ahead,” Samantha said, hoping that whatever he said would somehow relieve her of her own confession. She set her margarita, untouched, on the table beside Jack’s.

“Well, I haven’t been entirely honest,” Jack said, “well, no, I’ve been completely dishonest with you about something. I guess.” Bad intro, he thought, shaking his head. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. It was awkward, standing over her as he talked, but he was too tense to sit. “You know I don’t like Martin, or Roswell, or what they have planned for this beach. I do understand though, why Roswell is important to you, why you want so much to work with him.”

“You’ve been real good about that,” Samantha said, “I’ve been meaning to tell you that.”

“Thanks,” Jack said. “And I haven’t gone to Carlos and Marta about anything. But Harry and I have been doing some checking up on Martin and Roswell.” He paused, trying to read a reaction in her face, but it was blank. “We’ve hired someone, an old friend of ours, to research their backgrounds, find out what was up with them before they moved here.”

Samantha blinked at him. This certainly wasn’t what she had expected, this apparent cloak and dagger from her boyfriend. She was impressed, and curious and fearful about what they had found.

“It was wrong of me to go behind your back on this,” Jack said. “We were careful, but there’s always the chance this could have gotten you in trouble at work, you know, if Martin had found out somehow.” He sat on the coffee table. “I was really hoping nothing would come of it, that I was just being paranoid. But we found out some things. Surprising things.” He stopped, waiting to see how she was taking things so far, wondering how much more he should say, how much she would believe.

Samantha hung her head and said nothing. Had he found out about her and Roswell somehow? Had he known all along? She was ashamed of the thought but knew she’d be relieved if he had. “What do you know?” she asked. “What have you found out?”

“Well, we’re still waiting for confirmation on the specifics,” Jack began, “but Martin and Roswell both had trouble with the law, from the feds on down to the LAPD.”

Samantha was shocked. “For what?”

“An awful lot,” Jack said. “From their business dealings, which have nothing to do with Hollywood, to, uh, well, to Martin’s daughter.”

“His daughter?”

Jack nodded. “And the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death.”

Samantha shook her head. “I don’t know, Jack. I mean, everyone bends the rules on their way up but murder? That’s what you’re talking about, isn’t it? Murder?”

Jack shrugged. “Could be.”

This is too much, Samantha thought. Too much. But why would Jack lie? He believed what he was telling her, that she was sure of, wherever he got these crazy notions from. “I can’t believe that,” Samantha said. “I can’t see it.”

Jack wasn’t surprised. “I’ve got some things coming in the mail. You can look at them yourself.” Her face remained skeptical. He sipped his drink. “Look, we can talk about them later,” Jack said. “There’s nothing we can do about them tonight, anyway. Tonight, I want you to understand me. I’m not gonna say I did it for you.” He stood. “I did it for me. I thought maybe I could get something to use against them. Maybe something to prove to you I was right about them. I want you to understand, Sam. I’m not sorry I did what I did, but I’m sorry I kept it from you. But no more of that, I want you to know what I know, whether you choose to believe it or not.”

Samantha looked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. Baby, she thought, you know nothing. He had no idea. He was still trying to save her from something that had already swallowed her. “It’s okay, Jack,” she said. “I understand.” She tried blinking away the water in her eyes, but it escaped down her cheeks. “You said,” she stopped and swallowed, “you said there was something else.”

The tears and the fracture in her voice worried Jack. He hadn’t anticipated so strong a reaction. I should have, he thought. He knew how much her career meant to her,

and he'd just pretty much told her that she worked for murderers. He was pushing her again to choose sides. It was what he wanted, he admitted. Maybe he was yet again pushing with his forthcoming declaration. But she had to know. If she was going to make decisions, she deserved all the facts. And it was a fact that he loved her. He slid the coffee table aside and knelt before her.

"There is something else," he said, "that I've learned that you need to know. All that's been going on lately has really gotten me thinking, about my life here. About our life here. Especially since there are things now that have started to come between us, Roswell, the shops."

She wouldn't look at him. He took one of her hands in both of his. Don't touch me, she thought. Please, don't touch me.

"I love my life here," Jack said, "I've loved it since Harry and I first stumbled off that plane, and it's only gotten better since. It's a life most people only dream of ever having, where I live, what I do, the friends I've made. I thought that when we finally got the Palm off the ground and I was able to build this house that I'd caught every lucky break there was. That it was criminal to be as happy as I was, that it was impossible to be happier. Then you walked across that beach outside and into my life. That day was the luckiest day of all." He laughed and shook his head, as if realizing for the first time how lucky he had been. "I mean, I didn't even have to get out of my hammock."

He inched closer to her, bending a little, searching for her eyes. She kept them hidden from him. "But I'm not a naïve little schoolboy either; I don't always have my head in the clouds. I know luck brought us together, put me on that porch that afternoon you were on that beach, but we were smart enough to take advantage of the break. To

make things work. What we have is so wonderful, Samantha. You've brought more to my life, more joy, more peace, more fun...more love than I thought I would ever know.

"I have to tell you, I want to tell you," Jack said, "that I love you. I'm in love with you, Samantha."

"Oh, Jack," Samantha whispered. She would've preferred that he'd shot her. It felt like he had. Both barrels, point blank, right in the chest. How else could she explain the hole that had blown open inside her, the cold wind whipping through her? She leapt from her seat and stumbled away from him to the window, leaving him staring at his hands.

She hated herself. This should be the greatest moment of their relationship. Now, because of her, it was to be the worst. A voice in the back of her mind screamed at her to turn and say she loved him. Say that, and only that. It's not like it wasn't true. She stared at the window, trying to see the ocean through the reflection of her face. Protect him from the pain, the voice said. Save him, save the both of you. She looked at her eyes reflected in the glass, unable to see past them. No, she thought. I tried that already, tried hiding behind those lies, those twisted words. It's too late. She winced as she envisioned her last encounter with Roswell. She'd protected nothing, saved nothing. All she'd done was make things worse. How can I love him, she thought, how can he love me, if I've always got to save him from me?

As if they were two other people, frozen in time, Samantha watched the both of them reflected in the glass, her by the window in her white dress, her arms crossed; him standing in the center of the room, in his open Aloha shirt and cut-off shorts, his hands in his pockets. Her heart broke for both of them. She knew she was watching their last

moment as a couple. She wished she had looked at him while he spoke to her from his knees, memorized the lines of his face. Then she turned to him and vomited up the words.

“I fucked Roswell.”

Jack’s eyebrows bunched low on his forehead. He crossed his arms then dropped them to his sides. “You what?” His hands jumped up to his chest, as if remembering something he’d lost sat in his shirt pocket. “Wait. Fucked Roswell? How?”

“Jesus, Jack, how do you think?”

“You pulled out of the deal,” he said weakly, disbelieving his own words. He fought to physically swallow his doubt. There was nothing else she could mean. “You pulled the plug on the shops.”

Samantha covered her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but her jaw shook too hard for her to make words. She ground her teeth instead. Believe it, Jack. Just believe it. Don’t make us die slow.

“What other way is there?” Jack asked, straining for calm. Why was she *this* upset? He snatched his cigarettes from the coffee table, shook one out then tossed the pack back on the table. He considered Samantha over the flame of his lighter. Had she found out about Roswell and Martin? Had she known even before him and not told him? That’d be a hell of a thing, he thought, almost funny, if they’d both known the same things all along. And now she’d finally told someone. Her conscience had gotten the better of her and she’d ratted them out. That had to be it.

“What other way is there for you to fuck Roswell?” Jack asked, surprised at the volume of his voice. His own answer had to be right. The only other alternative was

obscene. “You already knew everything I told you. Right? And you called someone. Someone called you. You dropped a dime.”

“No, I didn’t call anyone. I didn’t know.” She covered her mouth, trying to still her lips. Stop it, Jack, she thought. Stop doing this to us. Don’t make me be crueler than I’ve already been. “Jack, don’t. Please.”

Jack’s cigarette trembled as he brought it to his mouth. Why as she being like this? His stomach wrenched, clutching at the smoke he inhaled. Why was she fighting him? “Then tell me, Samantha. Say it. What other way is there?”

“Jack, I don’t, I can’t...”

“Say it!”

“Don’t yell at me!”

“Then tell me the fucking truth!”

“I fucked him, Jack!” she screamed at him, clutching at her dress. “With my body! In my bed, in his office! Is this what you want to hear?”

Jack pushed the heels of hands into his eyes. “Stop,” he said.

“Enough?” Samantha asked, hoarse now, no longer able to yell. “You want positions, too?”

“Stop!” Jack yelled, clenching his fists at his ears. He took two steps toward her and then turned his back, kicking over the coffee table. The rum bottle and margarita glasses flew into the kitchen and smashed all three at once on the floor. He choked down his heart, tried to steady his breathing. He shook his head, his nails digging into his scalp. “This isn’t happening,” he said.

“It is, Jack,” Samantha said. “It did. I’m so sorry.” She waited for him to turn to her. He didn’t. “Let me explain.”

“Explain? What the fuck is there to explain?”

“I didn’t plan it. I didn’t want it to happen. It just did.”

He turned to her, laughing. “Don’t insult me like that. We’re not sixteen. Shit like this doesn’t just happen. It certainly doesn’t just happen over and over.”

“It wasn’t over and over,” Samantha said, eager to give him anything she could. His laugh was cruel, but he was speaking to her. “You don’t understand.”

“You’re goddamn right I don’t understand,” he yelled, his voice cracking on the last word. “How could you do this to me? What did I do?”

“Nothing,” Samantha whispered, but Jack couldn’t hear. The pain was sweeping him away from her again.

“You know what? There is no explaining this,” he said. “Gimme a fucking break. It just happened?”

“It’s complicated,” Samantha started, but Jack cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“Now it’s complicated. I thought it just happened. You know what? It’s not complicated at all, Sam. You met him, you wanted to fuck him, so you did. What else is there? Anything else is just bullshit you made up in your own head.” He paced in circles, his arms in the air. “Fuck. Why are you even telling me this? You could’ve kept right on fucking him for all I knew. You had me fooled.”

“Because I wanted to clean this out of our lives,” she said, “because I couldn’t stand how I felt. It’s been killing me, and I knew it would kill us, this secret, even if I never saw him again.”

He stopped pacing and looked at her, completely still. For a moment, she thought she had him.

“Because I love...”

Jack pointed a finger at her. “Don’t you fucking dare. Don’t you fucking *dare* say that to me!” He rushed toward her, around the couch, his finger still raised, his eyes locked on her face. “You don’t have the right; you gave it away.”

“*Please* listen to me,” Samantha said, backing away from him toward the window, afraid of him, of his eyes. “After all our time together, can’t you let me explain, let me make it up to you? This doesn’t have to cost us everything. Please.”

Jack stopped, inches from her. Her eyes were huge and wet, beautiful. Green. Green like the broad leaves of the palms in the hills. Green like the sunlight through the curled heart of an ocean wave. A long, rebellious curl of her red hair, streaked blonde by sun and salt, dangled at the corner of her left eye. Last night, minutes ago, Jack thought, I would’ve wrapped that curl around my finger, set it softly behind her ear. Now, now I’m sick at the thought of touching her. Of having ever touched her.

“You tried to walk a wire,” Jack said, “and you fell.” He stepped back from her. “I won’t catch you. I don’t know you. You’re a liar and a cheat and a thief. Get out of my house.” He glanced out the window then looked back at her. “Get out of my house and don’t ever come back.”

Jack looked away again as Samantha walked passed him, brushing his shoulder with hers. He heard the creak of the back door and then the silence of her waiting in the doorway. He raised the window and leaned on the sill, staring out at the black ocean. He jumped when the door slammed shut. The Jeep threw a racket of stones against the

bungalow. When he was sure she was gone, Jack walked to the back door and locked it, dropping the hook through the eye.

His hands shook uncontrollably as he poured the tequila, a huge shot in a short glass. He swallowed the liquor and gagged. He poured another shot but couldn't lift the glass. With both hands he leaned on the counter, trying to remember how to breathe. His lungs were dry and hard. They refused to open and Jack thought he might suffocate right there in his kitchen. He pushed himself free of the counter and forced down the second shot. He gagged again, wiped his hand across his mouth and then began to breathe. Slowly, he crossed into the living room, found his cigarettes and lit one.

His heart beat wildly, its hysterical pounding filling his ears. Where was he? What had just happened? He knew. He knew and the newborn memory became an amorphous, dripping, living thing spreading through his body. Crawling beneath his skin, slithering between his ribs, curling around the bones in his hands. It billowed around his heart like black ink in clear water.

Jack returned to the bottle, lifting it to his lips and drinking, not knowing or caring if he was drowning or feeding the wet thing inside him. He slammed the half-empty bottle down on the counter. Through the kitchen window, he could see the black silhouette of the ancient Monroe House rising high on its hill. A light burned somewhere on the top floor, in a back room, a dim golden eye among the shadows. He headed for the door. If it took until dawn, he would pound at the mouth of the cave until the dragon came out.

Two hours later, a sheriff's deputy deposited Jack at the front door of the Lone Palm.

"Hey, Captain," Navajo said as Jack stumbled through the door. "You all right?"

"Harry?" Jack asked.

"Behind the bar," Navajo said. He stood and gently took Jack by the arm. "Why don't you wait here, I'll go get him."

Jack pulled free and headed for the bar. Harry had just finished a story and the crowd at the bar was applauding. Jack pushed between a couple and shouted Harry's name.

"Hey, Cap...Jesus."

"Upstairs," Jack shouted. Without waiting for an answer, he shoved his way through the crowd.

Harry grabbed Tony's elbow. "Take over," he said. He hopped the bar and rushed up the stairs. Jack was standing in a corner, elbows on the railing.

"Jesus, Jack," Harry said as he approached, "what the hell happened?"

"Clear the deck, Harry. Please."

Harry turned and realized every table was full. Everyone was staring at them. "I apologize folks, but we have a small crisis here. Nothing unsafe, but we have to ask you to take your drinks and head downstairs. Next round is on me."

A young man in a TKE T-shirt stood and protested. His four friends stood in solidarity.

"Don't make me get the Hawaiian," Harry said.

Silently, the deck cleared. Jack and Harry sat at the nearest table. They lit cigarettes.

“Well?” Harry asked.

Jack sagged in his chair, his hands on his knees. “Samantha’s been fucking Roswell.”

Harry dropped his head between his knees and then sat back up. “Jesus fucking Christ.” He took a long drag from his smoke. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Jack looked at him, his mouth open as if to say something. Harry watched Jack’s face burn red with humiliation, watched him straining against the tears. He knew he was watching his friend’s heart shatter right in front of him. He could think of nothing to say.

Catherine Jane came bursting onto the roof. “What’s the big idea of sending everyone downstairs? Tony’s drowning. It’s fucking Friday night.”

Jack looked up at her, started to apologize then looked away, trying to hide his face.

“That bitch,” Catherine Jane said.

Harry stood and walked over to her. “You have no idea,” he said. “I’ll explain it later. Bring me a bottle of Jack Daniels, two glasses, and do what you can for Tony.” He looked at Jack over his shoulder. “Fuck that. Bring the whiskey, pay off the band and clear the place out. We’re shutting it down for the night.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Catherine Jane said, nodding.

She reappeared with the bottle and glasses minutes later, meeting Harry at the top of the stairs. The place would be empty soon. Navajo was onstage overseeing everything and no one was complaining. Her girls were doing their numbers. Navajo and Tony had

asked to stay, Catherine Jane said, and she wanted to as well. Harry agreed and said that he and Jack would be down shortly. He returned to the table and poured three fingers of whiskey into the glasses. In unison, they drank.

“What happened to your hand?” Harry asked, lighting a cigarette.

Jack examined his swollen hand. “Martin wouldn’t let me in.”

“Probably a good idea,” Harry said. “You blame him for Samantha?”

Jack shrugged. “He brought Roswell here.” He tried to smile. “Martin was closest at the time.”

Harry said nothing, pouring them another drink though Jack already listed. Harry looked at the whiskey bottle, feeling trapped in a scene from an old war movie. He was the medic, tending to the soldier so badly blown apart there was nothing to do but numb him to the pain.

“I blame everyone,” Jack said. “Him, Roswell, Samantha.” He lifted his drink and stared into it. “Me. I shoulda seen this coming.”

“How?”

Jack shrugged again. “I dunno. I just, I just don’t wanna believe she could do this.”

“But she did,” Harry said.

Jack sipped his drink. “Aye. She did.”

“She told you this tonight?” Harry asked.

Jack nodded.

“Ouch,” Harry said. “That’s fucking brutal. I don’t know what to say.”

“Me neither,” Jack said. “I just told her to get out.”

“For good, I hope.”

“For good,” Jack said, nodding. He snapped his fingers. “That’s it, she’s gone. Maybe I called her some names first.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. That fucking cunt, he thought. He wanted to go to New Amsterdam and take a few shots of his own at Samantha. And Roswell, that motherfucker was gonna get his, too.

Jack sipped his whiskey. “What am I gonna do about this, Harry?”

“Nothing. Nothing right now,” Harry said, saying it as much for himself as for Jack. “Tonight, you stay here at your bar, with your friends, and we stay up all night, crank the jukebox and get very, very drunk.” He stood. “Let’s get you down those stairs before they become a real hazard.”

A light rain started to fall. Jack had not moved.

“You know, Harry,” he said, “there’s always a last time you make love to someone. Wouldn’t it be nice if you could tell when that was? So you could bask in it a little while longer before it’s gone.”

As Harry had decreed, the friends stayed at the bar and drank together. Harry and Catherine Jane pumped money into the jukebox, and Tony pumped Jack Daniels into his boss. Navajo nursed a rum, his hand resting always on Jack’s shoulder. The conversation drifted away from Samantha and back to her, and what she had done, intermittently. Finally, half way through the bottle, she was left behind for the night. Jack and Harry told all the old stories about their early days of sharing the apartment and putting the bar

together. The others laughed as if the stories had never been told before. Harry wished Murphy was there.

By sunrise, Jack struggled to keep his head off the bar, and Harry decided it was time to put him to bed. In the middle of the good-byes, Jack assured everyone he was not going to be sick and stumbled off to the bathroom.

When Jack was out of earshot, Harry gathered the others around him. "Under no circumstances," he said, making eye contact with them one at a time, "does that bitch set foot in the bar. I don't care if she's got bleeding Jesus with her and they're beggin' for Band-Aids. You take no calls from her, no messages, nothing. She's done. Shut out." He stood and crossed his arms. "Understood?"

The group nodded their assent as Jack wove his way back to the bar.

"I have had it," he said.

"Then let's put you down for the night," Harry said.

He gave his keys to Catherine Jane and asked her to lock up. She agreed as she, Tony and Navajo began cleaning up the dirty glasses and empty bottles. As the sun broke over the hills, Harry all but carried Jack up the stairs. Jack was asleep before he hit the couch. Harry got a clean sheet from the closet and laid it over Jack.

In his bedroom, Harry drew the shades, stripped down to his boxers and sat on the edge of his bed for one last cigarette. Smoking, he tried to formulate a plan for the morning. He'd ministered Jack through heartache before; Jack had a tendency toward it. It was Jack's way. He loved hard. Harry recollected the aftermath of one girl from New York in particular. But even she hadn't gone this far. And they were older now, Harry

thought, and perhaps less emotionally elastic than they'd been when they were younger. The heart is a muscle, after all, and muscles tighten with age.

He lit a second smoke off the first and turned his left arm on his knee, studying the bannered tattoo on the inside of his forearm. A harp. Irish. Years ago, there'd been a name across that banner. An Irish name. Do know a few things about this heartache business myself, he thought. And her, well, she'd gone about as far as a woman could go. He covered the tattoo with his hand and stared at his feet through the smoke rising from his lips. He and Jack had made it through a lot. Through the Irish girl, through the girl in New York. Through plenty that had nothing to do with women. They'd make it through this. Harry crushed out his smoke and fell back across the bed. Just don't ask how.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Samantha was still awake when the day broke over the city. An empty wine glass sat next to an empty bottle on her nightstand. Finally, as the clock hit seven, the numbness of emotional exhaustion settled into her bones and she thought that soon she could sleep. Her eyes ached, and she wiped them again though they had been dry for hours. She had cried all the way home from the coast, tears of sadness, remorse and fury. But when she unlocked her front door, the tears were gone, at least for the night. She had spent the night trying to set everything that had happened in the past few weeks out in front of her, to arrange her thoughts in their proper place, like the cards in a game of solitaire. There had to be sense, if not logic then at least order, in there somewhere. As she had struggled, she'd turned often to the phone, if only to look at it. There was no one to call.

Jack's reaction had terrified her, both the fury in the beginning and the coldness at the end. What had she expected? She had expected he would be hurt, of course, he would yell, he would curse but at the end of the night she would fall into his arms and he would forgive her. She had expected that by sunrise they would be asleep in each other's arms. She had been, she thought with a rueful smile, deluded yet again. Is there no end, she thought, no end to the lies I will tell myself. She pulled off her dress and tossed it on the bed then carried the empties into the kitchen.

She sat at the table, staring at the coffee pot. Sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window, warming the tops of her feet. Maybe she would just stay up. In spite of its disastrous end, she still didn't want to let go of the day, though she couldn't imagine

why. Because maybe the phone would ring? Maybe it would, but it wouldn't be Jack. Because maybe when they had woken up that morning she and Jack had loved each other. She studied the sunlight pooling on the kitchen floor. No, she didn't want to let go of the day, but what did that matter? It was already gone.

"It was beautiful. I wish you could've been here for it."

"Martin, have you any idea of the time?" Roswell swung his legs out of the bed and onto the floor. He looked at the clock. Seven.

"I can't help it, I could barely sleep. I waited as long as I could stand it."

"I'm assuming," Roswell said, "that Samantha made her trip to the confessional last night."

Martin laughed. "There was a confession," he said, "but I don't think there was much forgiveness."

"Are you sure?"

"David, that asshole Donovan spent two hours banging on my door last night, hollering about how he knew everything." Martin stopped to laugh again. "He stabbed my front door with a filet knife."

"Be grateful he doesn't own a gun," Roswell said.

"Me? What about you? I wish he did own a gun," Martin said. He paused. "Maybe I can loan him one of mine. We can have an old-fashioned duel. High noon, pistols at twenty paces out on Ocean Avenue." He paused again, sighed. "Wish I'd thought of that last night. As it was, I finally had to call the sheriff to cart him off."

"To jail?"

“Who cares?” Martin asked. “Have you heard from the woman?”

“No, and I don’t expect I will.” Roswell stood and pulled on his robe. “Let’s see how everything settles, I don’t want to underestimate Jack again. He may be weak enough to forgive her.”

“Nonsense,” Martin said. “If there’s one thing he has, it’s pride.”

“We’ll see. Everything else moving along?”

“Smoothly, even,” Martin said.

“Good,” Roswell said.

When Harry woke up he could hear music through the floor of his apartment. He pulled on a wrinkled pair of khakis and the same shirt as the night before. After finding his sneakers, he went to find Jack.

The Captain sat at the bar, cigarette burned down to the filter in his knuckles, half a screwdriver in a pint glass before him. He was lost in thought and didn’t register Harry’s presence until Harry sat beside him. Harry picked up the drink and smelled it. There wasn’t much OJ in there.

“First of all,” Harry said, “stop fucking with my mornings.” He put Jack’s drink back in front of him. “And second, you get one more day of this, and then we start putting this bullshit behind us.”

Jack nodded. “I woke up this morning and wasn’t ready to feel it.”

Harry set his hand on Jack’s shoulder. “And you never will be, but you have to feel it anyway. There’s no sense destroying yourself running from it. She’s not worth it.”

Jack nodded and lit another cigarette as Harry walked around the bar to make coffee. The last of Jack's songs, an old John Lee Hooker number that was only voice, harmonica and National Steel faded out on the jukebox. For a few long minutes there was no sound save the brewing of the coffee. When it was finished, Harry poured two cups and handed one to Jack. Jack slid his drink aside and set the steaming mug in front of him. He dropped the charred filter of his last cigarette in the ashtray and lit another.

"I don't know what to do," Jack said. "She should suffer for this, hurt like I'm hurting. I want to see it, so I know for sure. She can't be allowed to walk away from this without scars. I'm so pissed off I can't see straight."

"I understand that," Harry said. "I'm sure she is suffering over this. She told you, didn't she? I'm sure she's suffering plenty. You don't really think she's skipping off to the honeymoon suite with Roswell, do you?"

Jack shook his head. "I guess not. It's just I keep seeing her running to him." He threw his hands in the air. "I don't know. Now I think maybe I should never have thrown her out, chased her away. I feel like I did exactly what they both wanted, what he wanted, that I threw her out of my life right into his. I feel like I let myself be fooled and used all over again."

"C'mon, Jack," Harry said. "You really think she went running to him? She said she fucked him, not that she loved him." Harry lit a smoke. "World of difference."

Jack shrugged. "After last night, anything seems possible."

"You're only torturing yourself, trying to figure this out," Harry said. "That it doesn't make any sense is part of why it hurts so bad."

“You got that right,” Jack said, “I feel like I’m gonna burst if I don’t beat the shit out somebody.” He looked at Harry. “I know where that fucker’s office is.”

Harry shook his head. “I thought of rolling that cocksucker myself, but that’s no cure,” he said, lifting Jack’s drink, “any more than this is.” He poured the drink down the drain. “Look, you got stung. There’s nothing to do about that. It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. I’m not saying you should just forget it, but there’s no sense spreading the poison around, no sense chasing the spider that did it. Even if you squash him, you’re still stung, you dig?”

Jack nodded. He rubbed his face in his hands. The vodka was already wearing off and its leaving drained him. He was glad for the coffee in front of him. It was getting close to opening time. Catherine Jane and Navajo would be arriving soon. “I haven’t lost everything,” he said.

“Exactly,” Harry said. “Everything you had before Sam came along, you still have. Don’t let what she did take you away from it. This place needs both its bosses. I need a partner, not a martyr. What you need to do now is figure out how to be stung and still keep your shit together.” Harry smiled. “And to stay away from Martin’s house.”

Jack stood and stretched. Keep your shit together. Harry made it all sound so simple. Jack knew his friend well enough to know Harry understood the huge difference between simple and easy. Jack was surprised at how much better he felt, better, he thought, than he should. He knew it wouldn’t last, that something would set him off eventually. A question, a song, a tall, tanned, redhead walking into the bar. But it was enough, this spike in his spirit, to get him moving again, and Jack knew as long as he kept moving he wouldn’t drown.

Harry nodded his head toward the front door. “Ready to go to work?”

Jack stretched again and reached for his coffee. “What the hell else am I gonna do?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Samantha got to work early Monday morning but by nine had accomplished nothing. She sipped her cold tea and again stared at the phone. She took a deep breath and reached for it, punching in the numbers with her thumb. The more the phone on the other end rang, the tougher it became to wait for an answer. Finally, there was a hello.

“Catherine Jane? This is Samantha.”

Catherine Jane said nothing.

“I just wanna know how Jack is doing,” Samantha said into the void. “He was so upset.”

“He’s fine.”

“What’s he been doing?”

“Working. Staying at Harry’s.”

“I’m glad he’s okay,” Samantha said. “I was worried.”

“You’re so worried about Jack,” Catherine Jane said, “maybe you shouldn’t have fucked your boss.”

Samantha’s throat clenched shut.

“You shouldn’t be calling me,” Catherine Jane said.

“Jesus, Catherine Jane, I thought we were friends.”

“You’re right,” Catherine Jane said. “We *were* friends. But not anymore.” She sighed into the phone. “We were all friends: you, me, Jack, Harry, Navajo. When you betrayed Jack you betrayed us all.”

“I didn’t...I didn’t think of it that way,” Samantha said.

“That, Samantha, is what scares me and hurts me the most.”

When Catherine Jane hung up, Samantha set the phone down. She laid her palm against her burning cheek, feeling like Catherine Jane had slapped her. It was what she had expected, though. The bill for what she had done was coming due. She knew this would happen once the truth was out. Well, at least she had what she wanted. She found out Jack was surviving.

Samantha turned on her computer and checked her e-mail. There, among the usual departmental communications, was a message direct from Martin. “Area of Opportunity” read the title. The surf shops, she thought. Finally, the green light. She opened the message. It would be just what she needed, a big project to lose herself in. Halfway through the letter, she realized it had nothing to do with the surf shops, and her heart sank. She tapped her fingers on the mouse, anger boiling inside her.

There was trouble in the Caymans, the letter said. Martin had just fired the general manager, and he needed Samantha to personally oversee the training and hiring of a new one. The responsibility was huge, it was Ellison’s flagship store, and Martin was confident that Samantha would not betray his faith in her abilities. Betray. He had actually used that word. She pictured David and Martin cackling together as they composed the letter. They knew. They knew already. She thought of what Jack had told her about them, and it all seemed a lot more believable. She was convinced they’d fired the Cayman’s GM simply to create an excuse to get her off St. Anne. They must’ve figured out she’d make some unwelcome noise if they just fired her.

Samantha ran her nails through her hair, sickness blooming in her stomach. Of course they knew that. David had known everything she was going to do all along. He

knew what Samantha was going to do before she did. He knew she would snap up his bullshit about the surf shops, lap up every lie from him like a dog at a water bowl. He knew she would betray Jack, knew she would tell him, knew Jack would leave her when she did. She closed the e-mail and leaned back in her chair. And he knew she would cling to her job like never before once Jack was gone. That she would go to the Caymans, or anywhere else they sent her because her job was all she had left. She snatched up her purse and ran for the elevator. There was one thing she had to do before she left.

When she got to Jack's place, the house was empty. She climbed back into the Jeep and made the short jump up Ocean Avenue to the Lone Palm.

Remembering Catherine Jane's admonishments, Samantha expected nothing more than the chance to relay her warning to someone, even if it wasn't Jack. Navajo appeared out back, carrying a trash bag to the dumpster, as she crossed the parking lot. He stepped into her path and set the bag down beside him.

"I'm sorry, Sam, but you're not supposed to be here," he said. "I can't let you in."

"Navajo, please. I have to talk to Jack. Five minutes."

"No," he said. "Harry said you can't come in, and he and Jack make the rules."

He shrugged. "Not a bad rule, far as I'm concerned."

Samantha rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. This freeze-out was so ridiculous, so adolescent, she couldn't believe it hurt her like it did.

"This is important," she said. "It doesn't have anything to do with Jack and me. Can you get Harry out here, at least?" God, did she really want that? "Maybe I'll just tell you and you can tell them."

“Wait here,” Navajo said, “and I’ll go tell Harry you’re here. No promises.”

Samantha nodded. She jumped when Harry burst through the back door.

“You’ve got some nerve coming here,” he said as he marched toward her.

“I need to tell you something,” she said stupidly.

“This oughta be good.”

“I’m leaving the island, tomorrow,” she said. “Indefinitely.” It came out like a threat. This wasn’t going as planned. The hatred in Harry’s face, the contempt in his voice made her skin crawl and so rattled her brain she could barely think, never mind speak. This is five minutes out of your whole life, she thought, say your piece and get the hell out of Dodge.

“On business,” she said. “To the Caymans.”

“Bye.”

“I could be gone for weeks.”

“Send a postcard,” Harry said. He was growing impatient. “What is your fucking point?”

“They used me, Harry,” Samantha said. “They used me to hurt Jack. I’m worried this is only the beginning, that they have worse planned.”

Harry cast a glance over his shoulder at the bar. “Oh, I see,” he said, turning back to her. “It’s not your fault, you were caught in some sinister conspiracy, forced to fuck Roswell against your will. You were drugged the whole time. Is that it?” He laughed.

“That’s the best you can do?”

“That’s not what I mean,” Samantha said. “I know what happened is my fault. But I think it’s part of something larger. Something designed to hurt Jack.” She paused. “Hurt

him worse.” She watched Harry’s face. Something glimmered in his eyes. “I know about the research; you’ve got suspicions of your own.”

“You let us,” Harry said, “Jack’s friends, the people who care about him, worry about that. You had your chance and you fucked it up. Royally. Literally.”

Samantha put her hand to her chest. “I care about him, Harry. I love him.”

Harry laughed. “You got a funny way of showing it. I don’t think you’ve got the slightest idea what you’re talking about. Maybe they did use you, but that’s not what matters here. Jack adored you, loved you and you fucked someone else – when you knew what it would mean to Jack. Maybe they did use you, but you, Samantha, you could’ve stopped them. If only you’d kept those pretty legs together and honored how Jack felt about you. Conspiracies or not, Jack loved you and you broke his heart.”

“It’s not that simple,” Samantha said. “It’s not.”

Harry leaned toward her. “It really, really is, Sam, but I don’t know if you’ll ever see that. All the right answers are the simple ones. People just confuse themselves along the way.”

Samantha started to protest, but Harry cut her off.

“No. You shut up and listen,” Harry said. “I’m gonna do you a favor, because my best friend still cares about you. I’m gonna shed some light on a few things for you.

“Love, loyalty, friendship – these things are a gift, not a right. They’re an opportunity and a responsibility. They’re unconditional. You don’t get to leave them behind, circle around them when they get a little inconvenient.

“I know even you don’t understand what happened between you and Roswell. Here’s what you need to understand. This guy came waltzing into your life, the mystique,

the clothes, the war stories, the car. All of the sudden everything you thought you ever wanted to be, everything that's gonna fill that hole inside you, is living and breathing right there in front of you. And it drove you so crazy being that close you had to reach out and touch it. Once you touched it, you had to hold it, then own it. Because then you could pull all the power out of it and right into you. Because dear old Roswell, he held all the secrets, all the shortcuts. It's the same reason people want to fuck movie stars, and rock stars, and athletes.

“But here's what you missed, what the whole lot of your sad-star fucking fraternity miss. Here's why you can't understand why you're still the same lonely nobody you were before blowing the band in the back of the bus. All the sex in the world won't make you one of them. There's no secret doorway. A guy like Roswell? You can give it up to him a thousand times and you're still not anywhere near him. He's always laughing at you from across the room no matter what he's doing with his cock. Now that he's gotten his jollies you're out the door with nothing but the mess you made to keep you company.”

Samantha stood there staring.

“Look me in the eyes and tell me I'm wrong,” Harry said.

She couldn't. “That doesn't mean I don't love Jack,” Samantha said. “Whether you're right or wrong, it doesn't mean I don't love him. I got confused, I admit that. Confused about what I wanted. I made a mistake.”

“Fucking that asshole was the least of your mistakes,” Harry said. “I believe you love Jack, or at least that you believe it. I know you can love someone and things can still

get fucked up. I been there. But knowing that you love someone and knowing *how* to love someone are two different things. You have yet to master the art of the how.

“Sure, you care for Jack. You were a good partner for him, when things were easy. And here’s where the how comes in. You met Roswell. You got the hots for him. So what? It happens. It’s no crime. You feel what you feel. It’s what you do that matters. You’re standing here telling me how you feel. And I’m telling you how you feel ain’t worth shit unless you do the right things.”

“You saw us together,” Samantha said. “I did plenty that was right.”

Harry stared at her for a long time. “So why’d you stop?”

“Because...” Samantha said. Because David had something I wanted. Thought I wanted. Thought I could get? “Enough, Valentine. Enough!” she snapped. “I’ve taken too much grief from you already. You with your theories and stories. You don’t know half of what you think you do.”

Harry smiled. “If I wasn’t right, you wouldn’t be so angry.”

“You’re wrong, Harry. All wrong.” She knew he wasn’t, but that wasn’t for him to know. Samantha couldn’t decide whether to smack Harry or spit in his face. She did neither and turned to walk away. Harry grabbed her by the wrist. Samantha wheeled around and kicked him in the shins as hard as she could. “Don’t touch me! Ever!”

Harry limped in a circle, trying to walk it off. Samantha took a couple of steps away and then turned back to Harry. “What you saw was real,” she said. “What I feel for Jack is real.”

“Be careful in the Caymans,” Harry said. “Be careful who you trust. Very careful. Good friend of mine? Jack Donovan? He trusted the girl he loved and look what happened to him.”

After Samantha drove away, Harry’s shoulders slumped with the true weight of his wisdom. He knew he was right amount Samantha. Knew she would think about what he had said. Knew there was probably more to come from Roswell and Martin. And he knew he hadn’t seen the last of Samantha. Harry would never tell her, and Jack didn’t even know it yet, but the Captain would probably forgive her. Why? Because he loved her and after the anger and humiliation had subsided, no matter how long it took, the love would be what mattered in the end. That was Jack’s way, and Harry couldn’t decide if his friend was the bravest or dumbest man he knew.

Jack watched most of the exchange from the deck. Harry hadn’t said why he’d suddenly needed to run out into the parking lot but Navajo’s lone, furtive glance at Jack had given everything away. Jack had grinned and shrugged in response, as if sadly amused by the circumstances. But his gut had been churning. That she was so close terrified him and that fact, combined with his friends’ innate knowledge of it humiliated him. He loved his friends for their adamancy in protecting him, and he hated himself for needing, and wanting, their protection.

Though still scared and sick, he had laughed when Samantha kicked Harry. But Jack had caught only meaningless, random snippets of the conversation that set her off. It didn’t matter; Jack knew the content. It was strange, watching his newly minted ex and his long-time best friend go at it, unnerving even, watching two people he knew loved him so at odds with one another.

Jack took the opportunity to observe Samantha from a safe distance, as if he were invisible even, to simply see her for the first time since Friday night. He knew it was slightly cowardly of him, and that he was picking at a scar that hadn't even scabbed over yet, but he couldn't resist testing himself. He didn't scream at her or to her, or run back inside, or throw himself off the deck, so he gave himself a passing grade. Jack was quietly grateful to Harry for standing up for him, and proud of Samantha for taking on Harry's temper and only striking him once. Still, as Jack watched her climb into the Jeep and drive away he felt no desire to call her back to him; he was not sorry to see her go, did not wish that he had talked to her. Ultimately, the whole scene depressed him, not the loss of her as much as what Jack felt was the utter stupidity of the circumstance. They loved each other, they both knew it, and they were as surely divided as if the entire Atlantic yawned between them. It was so dumb, and avoidable, that Jack could hardly stand it.

"What did she want?" Jack asked when he heard Harry walking toward him.

"She had a message for you," Harry said.

"Oh, do tell."

"She says Martin and Roswell used her to hurt you," Harry said, "and she's afraid they might still be up to no good."

Jack shrugged. "So they played me just like they played Gianelli in L.A. Payback, I guess, for that little show with the blender. She have any ideas what might be next?"

"She didn't say," Harry answered, "but I think she would've if she did."

"So, lots of good her coming out here did us," Jack said. "What do you think?"

Harry shrugged.

“The whole freakin’ coast knows about me and Martin,” Jack continued. “They can’t touch me, or the bar, or the house, without bringing a pile of trouble and attention on themselves.” He stopped and lit a cigarette. “Knowing what we know, that’s the last thing they want. I figure it’s over. I got him, now he got me. We’re even. Think about it, Har. We’re nothing to them.” Jack walked to the opposite railing and looked out over the ocean. Harry followed. “I’m done letting those two go to my head,” Jack said. “There’s no sinister conspiracy afoot. This ain’t been nothing but a bar fight that went on far too long.”

“Samantha’s leaving, Jack,” Harry said.

“Leaving?” Jack asked, turning to Harry.

Harry nodded. “She’s leaving St. Anne. Temporarily, she said.”

“For where?” Jack asked.

“The Caymans, something for work,” Harry said. “Tomorrow.”

“Good,” Jack lied. He crossed his arms and turned his gaze back to the sea. In fact, her leaving St. Anne bothered him a great deal. Out of his life was one thing, out of his reach was entirely another.

Samantha called Martin from the car to tell him she would take the assignment. He didn’t answer so she left a message on his voice mail. While she packed, Evan appeared at her door with an envelope he said was from Martin. He had chartered her a flight to the Caymans and booked her a suite at one of the finer hotels. The instructions didn’t say with whom she was flying. They said only that Evan would be by to pick her up in the morning. Samantha read her instructions twice then tore them up. She booked a

spot on the ferry to St. Thomas. From there, she would take another ferry over to the Caymans, where she would arrange for her own damn accommodations, and if Roswell and Martin didn't like it that was too bad. If they needed to reach her, and Samantha doubted they would, they had her e-mail or could call her at the store.

Her travel arrangements finalized, Samantha poured a shot of vodka over ice and collapsed on her couch. She swirled the liquor in her glass and sipped. She thought of Jack, wondered how he was taking the news of her going. She wished she could tell him that she believed him about Martin and David, wished she could tell him how frightened she was. He would tell her not to go. Or maybe insist on going with her. She wished Jack knew how much she missed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY –ONE

The day after Samantha left, Jack turned his focus to the business of living alone. Like his island after a surprise winter storm, damage was patiently assessed and the clearing away of the wreckage began. Jack knew it would be some time before the rebuilding started. One thing at a time, he told himself. Even the moon returns to full in stages, even the tides are slow to turn. Before he did anything else, he needed to reclaim his territory.

There was more to clearing the house of Samantha than taking her pictures off the nightstand. Jack expected this but the depth to which she had woven her way into his home surprised him, and only sharpened the already jagged edges of the loss he felt. For three weeks, the corners and closets and shelves of his bungalow felt like a minefield.

One bleary-eyed morning he accidentally washed his hair with her shampoo, returning to the shower an hour later when he finally realized why her scent followed him around the house. When he reached for his coffee, he knocked her mint tea off the cupboard shelf. One of her new bathing suits bled blue all over a load of his laundry. When he went to bed on freshly washed sheets, her perfume still lingered in his pillows. Each small discovery froze his breath in his chest as if a passing ghost had pressed its dead hand on his heart. Then he would sigh, or shake, or smile and carry the talisman to the trash.

Then, having finally gone a week without a surprise, Jack discovered he missed them. He realized he now had nothing left to contend with but the worst of it all, the ghost ship of her absence. The empty side of the bed, the gaping space beside him at the

beach, the dusty fishing pole hanging on the wall. The thoughts in his head, small things about his life and his day that never found voice because she wasn't there to listen; like a school of tiny, silver fish captured in a bucket, they darted about his head when he went to bed at night. The stillness of some mornings, when he watched the dolphins from porch, seemed a whirlpool that held him at its edges.

It was the mornings and the late nights that were the worst. The days were easier. He sailed with Harry and on a few occasions with Spencer. He took up snorkeling, with an eye toward his scuba license. He hiked almost daily through the hills behind his house, often with Navajo, sometimes with Catherine Jane. Murphy offered him flying lessons. Some nights he fished the surf until the sun came up. Many nights he slept in his hammock. Jack felt his life moving much like it did in the early days, yet somehow it felt familiar and completely different at the same time.

One Saturday afternoon, a rowdy bachelorette party from one of the hotels climbed onstage, dancing in their bikinis to *Paradise by the Dashboard Light*. Harry was charmed and sent them a round of drinks from him and Jack. The girls waved as the waitress set the drinks at their tables. Harry smiled and waved back. He stuck his elbow into Jack's ribs. Jack looked up from his reading and waved. One of the girls, brown and lithe in her pink bikini, sun streaks in her brown hair, blew a kiss toward the bar.

"There's a potential remedy for you," Harry said. "Cute, available, and from someplace very far away she has to go back to."

Jack laughed. "Whatever. I thought we'd programmed the jukebox not to play that song."

“Well, we did,” Harry said. “But they asked so nicely. We have to look out for the best interests of our customers.” He peered over Jack’s shoulder at the brochure on the bar. “Planning a vacation, Captain?”

Jack smiled and opened three Coronas, one for him and two for the couple at the end of the bar. He walked the beers down to them and returned to Harry. “Yeah, Harry.” He tilted his beer bottle toward the stage. “I need to get away from it all.” He folded the brochure and hand it to Harry. “Shark fishing. It’s time to go after some really big fish.”

A waitress barked out an order. Harry filled three glasses with ice, set them on the bar and reached for the rum. “Sounds like a plan. We’ll bring Navajo. We can reel them up to the boat, and he can jump over the side and finish them off. Snap their spines with his bare hands. We’ll get really drunk first and put ourselves in close proximity to half-ton killing machines.”

“See,” said Jack. “I knew you’d be into it.”

Harry set the rum drinks at the waitress station. “I’m glad to see your sense of adventure is returning,” he said, handing Jack the brochure. “Make the call. We’ll kill like champions. I’m gonna adventure my way over to the stage and make sure those young ladies don’t spill anything on the equipment.”

As Harry had predicted, Jack got his offer from Sarah, the girl in the pink bikini. Not long after midnight, the group returned to the Palm for a nightcap. After Jack had joined her in a shot of Patron, Sarah passed him a matchbook with the name of her hotel and the room number. Jack listened to her explain how she didn’t normally do these things but she hardly *ever* got to go on a vacation like this. And he was *too* cute, and she had been thinking about him *all* night. When the bride-to-be called Sarah back to the

group, to join them in limbo lessons from Harry, she squeezed Jack's wrist and leaned over the bar to kiss his cheek. As she walked away and eyed him demurely over her shoulder, Jack winked at her and dropped the matchbook into the trash.

As he watched Sarah dance, Jack mapped out the true course of the evening should he take her offer. They would travel back to the hotel in a crowded and noisy cab, a six-pack in tow. Then the quick and sloppy sex, if she didn't pass out or get sick first. At some point, probably close to dawn, after hours of staring at the ceiling, it'd be too late to call a cab. He'd have to walk two miles or more, finishing off the six-pack, along the coast just to find the comfort of his hammock. The walk home didn't sound half-bad, but he wasn't up to the preceding events. Hadn't been, he realized, for a couple of years now. There was no sense going back to something that already failed to work.

At close to three, Harry announced to the girls that their shuttle back to the hotel had arrived. He reminded them to tell everyone that they did not get their disintegrating plastic leis at the Lone Palm. And that it wasn't at the Lone Palm that they drank shots from techni-colored plastic sharks. This was important; he had a reputation to protect. Jack heard the girls giggle. Harry insisted each girl peck him on the cheek as they filed out the door. After the last one had sashayed out of the bar, Harry locked the door behind them.

"Really, it's the fuckin' *Caribbean*," he announced to no one in particular, "who gives out leis?"

"It's the aloha spirit," Navajo said, coming down the spiral stairs. "It's everywhere, man."

The band was gone, the kitchen staff long gone. The waitresses sat together at the tables they had worked all night, sharing cigarettes and an adding machine as they totaled their sales. About a dozen locals lingered, in groups of two and threes.

They drank quietly and for free after the girls were off the floor. They owned the boardwalk shops or crewed the charter fishing boats. Some worked at the hotels, cooking in the restaurants, tending the gardens, cleaning the rooms and the pools. When they were done working all day or all night or both to provide for the people who had come to St. Anne to get away from it all they came to the Lone Palm - to get away from all the getting away from it all. Jack and Harry often kept the bar open late just for them, long after the tourists had emptied out, and never closed until the last off them had left.

“What was Sarah’s story?” Harry asked as he settled on a barstool.

“The usual,” Jack said.

“And the number?”

“Trashed it,” Jack said, handing Harry a rum on the rocks.

“The usual,” Harry said, shrugging. “If you’re not ready, you’re not ready. But you can’t sit in dry dock forever, Captain. Keep that in mind.”

“Duly noted,” Jack said, smiling. “But I don’t really feel like one-night-standing my way across the sea of despair.”

“Sea of despair,” Harry repeated, laughing. “Cute. Look, I’m not advocating banging trophy-hunting chippies as a cure-all, but, well, plain and simple, you might feel better if you got laid. Have a little fun with some single female looking for same.”

Jack made himself a tequila sunrise and lit a smoke. “One of these days,” he said, “I’m sure I’ll do just that. But right now, I’m coasting along pretty well.” He lifted his glass to Harry. “And I feel pretty good.”

Harry clinked his glass against Jack’s. “That’s all that really matters.”

Before Harry could get the glass to his lips, Catherine Jane snatched it from his hand. She walked around the bar and topped off the rum with grapefruit juice. Then she handed it back to Harry. “Vitamin C, Valentine,” she said, then disappeared into the kitchen.

“She thinks I oughta take better care of myself,” Harry explained. “We had this conversation the other day. I’ll be thirty-four before the summer’s out. I need to learn, she says, that the four food groups are not liquor, cigarettes, oysters and aspirin.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Well, of course not. You left out coffee.”

“And a bloody Mary does not count as a salad,” said Harry.

Jack shook his head. “I must say I’m skeptical of your lady love’s opinions. I’d double-check her research, verify her sources. We’ve made it this far and are both the picture of health.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Harry said. “Our case histories speak for themselves.” He lit a cigarette.

“Any luck on that front?” Jack asked.

Harry watched Catherine Jane as she pushed through the kitchen doors and rejoined her girls. “Who knows? I’ve stopped looking at the scoreboard, and I’m trying to concentrate on throwing my best pitches.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t know. Sounded good though. Ask me again in the morning, I’ll have thought of something more coherent by then.”

They both laughed, and Navajo laughed with them as he sat at the bar.

“Did you understand any of that bullshit?” Jack asked him.

“Didn’t even hear it,” Navajo said, “I just like to laugh. What’s this I hear about shark fishing?”

“You want in?” Jack asked.

“No doubt,” Navajo said. “We used to go after some big fish off the Kona Coast but I’ve never tied into a shark before. Could be fun.”

“Awright, hero,” Jack said, unfolding the brochure, “here’s what we’re looking at.”

Jack, Harry and Navajo spent the next half hour extolling the manly virtues of shark fishing. They decided that shark fishing was, of course, the manliest of all manly activities. Tequila was consumed, chased with lemons for Vitamin C. The man-song was sung in off-key baritones, followed by the doffing of shirts, the flexing of muscles and a strange, vaguely Celtic, tribal dance that involved the stomping of feet and the swinging of elbows. They toasted Tony and decided he must join their excursion.

The girls laughed and pointed, and Catherine Jane asked what had inspired the good-spirited silliness. Jack told her of their manly plans. When Catherine Jane asked if the girls were invited on the little “ego trip” Harry scoffed with manly disdain. She snatched the brochure from Navajo and ran back to her girls. Ten minutes later, she floated the prospect of a wager. A tournament of sorts. The girls would cover the bar when the boys went fishing and the following week the boys would do the same.

Whoever landed the biggest shark won: same boat, same captain, photographic evidence required.

Harry and Catherine Jane spit in their palms, shook hands, and the bet was on. The two sides argued until four in the morning about who exactly would do what for whom depending on which side emerged victorious. Such matters unresolved, negotiations adjourned for another last round of shots and risqué late night dancing. The last of the local customers joined in for a session of Lone Palm Limbo, which involved painfully loud reggae music, the drinking of expensive tequila from cheap shoes, disrobing, and small, contained explosions.

Everything ended quietly, after Harry's requisite, insincere encouragement of an orgy, with the celebrants moving upstairs in various stages of drunkenness and undress to watch the sunrise over the hills. It was full daylight when Harry locked up the bar and everyone headed for home. Jack was all smiles as he staggered down the beach. This was a better walk than the one he'd be making had he accepted Sarah's offer. This was still a better life than he ever thought he'd get to live.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Wake up!” Catherine Jane screamed over the roar of her motorcycle. “Wake the fuck up!”

Jack tumbled out of the hammock and onto the porch, hitting the planks with a thud. “Jesus! What the hell is going on?” He staggered to his feet and pulled on his shirt.

“Get on!”

Jack obeyed. He hid his face in Catherine Jane’s leather jacketed shoulder as they tore up Ocean Avenue. His hangover kicked in, and it was all he could do not to puke. As the bike slowed and made a wide turn into the Lone Palm parking lot, Jack lifted his head. Catherine Jane parked, and they hopped off the bike. She eased the bike onto its kickstand as Jack stumbled forward, his mouth hanging open. The parking lot was full of cop cars: green and white sheriff’s Jeeps, blue and gray cruisers from the island’s state police, unmarked black sedans with their blue sirens still whirling on their dashboards. One word popped into Jack’s head. Harry.

A tall, broad, coal-colored man in a dark suit, most of his face hidden behind pilot’s glasses, strode toward Jack. His sweating, bald head gleamed in the sun. He wore a badge on his belt, and when the breeze blew his jacket open, Jack saw the silver sidearm holstered against his ribs.

He raised his arm and pointed at Jack and Catherine Jane. “Who the fuck is this?” he shouted. The tall man with the gold badge stopped six inches from Jack’s face. Jack could smell his breath, a distasteful bouquet of spearmint gum and cheap coffee. “And you are?” he asked Jack.

“Jack. I own this place. Who are you? What the hell is going on here?”

“Special Investigator John Asbury. Chief officer of St. Anne’s Customs and Special Services.” Asbury reared back on his heels and chewed his gum. “You’re going out of business, that’s what’s going on.”

“Michaels,” Jack whispered, shaking his head.

“Jack Michaels? That’s not what I heard.” Asbury eyed Catherine Jane over Jack’s shoulder. “Step away from the bike, lady.”

Catherine Jane sat on her bike, smiled at Asbury and pushed her shades up into her hair with her middle finger.

“No, no,” said Jack. “My last name is Donovan. Michaels is the reason you’re here.”

Asbury flipped open a notebook. “Donovan,” he said. “So it is.” He seized Jack by the left arm. “Come with me, Donovan. I’ll show you why we’re here.”

There were cops all over the Lone Palm, swarming like blue and green flies on a carcass. They were trashing the place. The front door had been forced open and dangled from broken hinges. Everything from behind the bar sat on top of it, or was smashed on the floor in front of it. The floorboards of the stage had been ripped up. Jack didn’t even want to see, to think about, the kitchen. The whole room reeked of spilled liquor. White cocktail napkins blew about in the breeze from the ceiling fans.

There in the midst of what Jack would later call “a complete fucking disaster” stood Harry, clad in only a pair of red and white boxer shorts. He was handcuffed to a cabinet behind the bar.

“Harry,” Jack said, heading for the bar, “what the hell is going on?”

“Don’t you talk to him!” snapped Asbury. He grabbed Jack by the arm and led him toward what was left of the stage, where the cops had pushed together tables and established command central.

“Fucked if I know,” Harry yelled.

Asbury turned. “You shut up!”

“Fuck you!” shouted Harry. “Fucking fascist.”

Asbury rushed over to the bar. “Don’t you think you’ve got enough problems, Valentine? The smart thing to do would be to keep your big mouth shut.” Asbury smiled. “But then again, you don’t seem to be a very smart man.”

Harry laughed. He couldn’t do anything else. “Whatever, cannonball. When I beat this bullshit, we’re gonna put the gun and the badge in a drawer, and I’m gonna bust you up.”

“Keep digging, Valentine,” Asbury said. “You’re running out of daylight as it is. In twenty-four hours, you’ll be begging for mercy. First class mail doesn’t get due process down here.” He turned to Jack, who had sidled up to his shoulder. “Get back! Back to the stage.”

Asbury led Jack to a table, where they sat. Jack lit a cigarette. “What is this, Asbury? Why are you wrecking my place?”

“I’m having a hard time believing the shocked schoolboy act,” Asbury said, rocking back in his chair. “Really, Teach, I had no idea my notes were in my lap.”

Jack just stared. He thought of the files from California. Was Asbury after them? Did Martin have him on the take? “I’m still lost,” Jack said.

“You mean to tell me,” Asbury said, “you had no idea Valentine was supplementing his income, this bar’s income, with a little side business.”

“Sailing lessons?” Jack asked. “You’re arresting Harry over sailing lessons?”

“Sailing less...? What the fuck?” Asbury slapped the table so hard Jack jumped. “Cocaine! Over one hundred kilos of it!” He took a deep breath and leaned across the table at Jack. “That’s what we found on Valentine’s boat this morning.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack asked.

Asbury leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “At dawn, a team of my agents boarded the Sandpiper and seized one hundred and six kilos of cocaine.” He stopped. The shock contorting Jack’s face was so severe that for a split second, half a split second, he thought maybe Jack really did have no idea. Or maybe Jack was a hell of an actor.

“Harry Valentine owns the Sandpiper,” Asbury continued, “which was never properly documented or registered by the way, I wonder why. So unless he does a fucking miraculous job of explaining how the drugs got on his mystery boat, without his knowledge or his consent, Harry Valentine goes to jail for the rest of his life.” Asbury shrugged. “With you being Valentine’s business partner, I don’t know, call me crazy, I thought that might make you a suspect, too.”

Jack rubbed his hands on his thighs. “Listen, Asbury. I have no idea where that coke came from, and I promise you, neither does Harry. And, by the way, I’m still waiting to see a warrant for this rape job on my bar.” Jack stood and extended his hands. “If you’re going to take me in, then let’s get it on. Either way, you’re not getting shit from me until I talk to an attorney.”

“You’re not back in the grand ol’ U.S. of A.,” Asbury said, folding a new stick of gum into his mouth. “You and your asshole pal keep forgetting that. What makes you think I *need* a warrant? What makes you think you’re entitled to a lawyer? If I shot Valentine right now, I’d probably get a medal and a raise.” Asbury stood. “Rape job? You don’t know how many breaks you’ve caught already this morning. I could’ve had you handcuffed and on a plane an hour ago if I wanted.” He wagged a finger at Jack. “You may be a local, boy, but you ain’t a native.”

Asbury walked around the table, put his arm around Jack and led him off into the corner. “But I’m a fair guy,” he said. “It’s a nice day, and I’ve got a noon tee time. Right now, I have no real need to bust you, yet. Valentine is so dirty I’m gonna have to hose out my car after I take him in. If you’re dirty, too, I’ll be back for you before dinner. I have six o’clock reservations.”

Jack and Asbury walked back out into the parking lot, Jack blinking in the sunlight. He knew he was sweating alcohol, and his stomach flopped over sick again.

“I’ll be back to see you, Donovan,” Asbury said, tucking his business card into Jack’s shirt pocket. “You better be where I can find you.” He nodded toward Catherine Jane, who still sat motionless on her bike. “Tell the broad on the bike she’d be real cute if she wasn’t trying so hard to be a man.”

“Tell her yourself,” Jack said. That’d slow up the investigation at least, while Asbury recovered in the hospital.

“All right, people,” Asbury shouted. “If there was anything more to find here, we would’ve found it. Get Valentine some clothes and put him in my car. Let’s get out of here.” He turned to Jack. “The smell of this place is making me sick.”

Jack leaned against the Palm as two uniformed officers dragged Harry past him.

“Fuck these assholes,” Harry said to Jack. “I’ll be back by happy hour.”

Jack watched the officers stuff Harry in the car and toss some balled-up clothes in after him. One by one, Asbury in the lead, the cars circled around the lot and headed, single file, up Ocean Avenue. Neither Jack nor Catherine Jane moved until the last car was long out of sight.

“You all right, Jack?” Catherine Jane asked as she approached him.

Jack looked at her. “What the fuck just happened here?”

“The law just busted this place up and took Harry away in cuffs. I wouldn’t believe it either, if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. That big cop tell you what this was about?”

“Cocaine,” Jack said. “The Sandpiper was full of it this morning.”

Catherine Jane just stared.

“It’s Martin,” Jack said. “It has to be.” He lit a cigarette. “How’d you end up in this?”

“Harry heard the cars from upstairs,” Catherine Jane said. “He called me and told me to go check on you. I was on the phone with him when they kicked his door in. He’s not doing himself any favors by mouthing off.” She began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Jack asked.

She made a telephone receiver with her thumb and forefinger. “When the cops come busting in, somebody, I think it was Asbury, asks Harry who he’s talking to. Harry says, totally deadpan, ‘your wife, she left her panties here.’” Catherine Jane shook her head. “I mean, they’re kicking down his door, probably have their guns out, and he’s

standing there in his drawers – scratching his johnson and cracking wise. Nothing fazes him.”

Jack didn’t laugh. “Harry’s in fuckin’ trouble, Catherine Jane.”

Catherine Jane paused, chastened by Jack’s words. “So what’re we gonna do?”

“We get him out of it,” Jack said. He put his arm across her shoulders and walked her back to the bike. “Go home. I need you to call everyone, give ‘em the day off.”

“What should I tell them?” Catherine Jane asked.

“Tell them the truth,” Jack said. “And tell Tony and Navajo to meet us back here in the morning.”

Catherine Jane straddled her bike. “What’re you gonna do?”

“Put my place back together.”

“You’re gonna need help with that,” Catherine Jane said. “I ain’t working today.”

Jack raised his hands. “Whatever I don’t get done today, you guys can help me with tomorrow. But I need today to get my head together.”

Catherine Jane leaned over and gave Jack a long hug. “Keep yer head about you, sailor,” she said. “Stay away from Martin.”

Jack nodded. “I promise, at least for now.”

Catherine Jane started her bike and took off.

Jack walked into the Palm and headed for the bar. He dug into a cabinet. Under the design plans that had transformed the place from Trader John’s into the Lone Palm, Jack found what he was looking for. It was a plastic sign he and Harry had bought when they first arrived but had never used. Jack hung the sign on the front door and shoved it shut as best he could. The sign said, “Closed.”

Back at the bar, Jack opened a beer, lit a cigarette, and surveyed the damage. It would take more than one day's work to fix the place up. He sighed a long plume of blue smoke. He didn't feel up to taking the mess on right then, didn't feel up to anything but going home and crawling into bed. Still, another side of him argued, this is *your* place. The busted bottles and pools of liquor couldn't be allowed to remain overnight. The smell would take weeks to get rid of.

Fueled by two Coronas and a pot of coffee, Jack worked the rest of the morning and the entire afternoon: sweating, sweeping, mopping, bagging, and hauling. He ignored the shadowy heads that peeked around the door and the tentative voices that echoed into the room. He ignored the phone. By sunset he was shining, wiping and re-stocking. The bar and the kitchen at least were restored to their own acceptable version of disorder. Close enough, Jack finally thought, leaning the broom against the wall. He walked into the kitchen, made himself a sandwich and carried it upstairs.

He felt relieved to be outside. He breathed deep of the clean and cool night air. Sandwich devoured, he took his beer and cigarette to the railing and let his eyes rest on the ocean. The last flares of another sun melted into the horizon. Not long now, Jack thought, before the moon peeks over the hills. This was always one of the busiest times at the Lone Palm, the sunset happy hour. But the bar was silent below him; Harry's apartment was silent and empty behind him. Jack closed his eyes and pictured the darkening interior of his bungalow. Inland, in New Amsterdam, Samantha's apartment was also empty. All was quiet.

Jack settled his forehead on his crossed forearms and stared down at the deck, ugly pictures in his head. Her apartment. The last person Samantha had made love to in

her bed was Roswell and not him. Hell, Roswell was the last person she had made love to period. These thoughts were not new, and Jack winced at the visuals that accompanied them. He tried to shove them away. This has to stop, he thought. I'm sick of every other thing I think about leading me back to Sam and Roswell together. And me just wanting to lie down on the floor and stop breathing. He thought of Harry, stewing in a jail cell. I don't have time to stop breathing anymore.

What a run they'd had together, he and Harry. What a dream. A dream that glittered at the edges of dulled imaginations every time another frustrated soul got berated by their boss, or stuck in traffic, or the bills added up. Every time a spouse came home smelling like another lover, the car was stolen, and the trains ran late. Jack knew he and Harry had made a life out of a dream that lived in thousands of heads, the heads of people just like them, people they had known, worked with, played with, loved. Wish I could do that. Jack and Harry had heard it over and over again after they announced their plans. But nobody ever did it, except for he and Harry. All the rest stayed behind and kept dreaming. Maybe they'd come visit one day on vacation, they'd said. If they could get the time off, if they could get the money together.

But this is no vacation, Jack thought. There's no return ticket looming over this trip. This is real. Every day is one in an endless string of days in paradise. Sure, it wasn't all perfect, the bar took work and money and patience. All three, everyday. But Jack was willing to give all that was required and more for what he got in return. Waking to the rustle of palm trees every morning, falling asleep to the murmur of the surf every night, and a thousand things in between. Samantha.

And now, Jack thought, now Samantha was gone. Harry was in jail. The Lone Palm was suddenly on life support. No amount of bribery would keep the place in business if Harry got convicted. Jack knew he could still end up in jail himself at worst and that he was looking at being deported at best. The ship was springing leaks at every turn, and Martin had to be laughing himself stupid over it all. My life's turning to shit right before my eyes, Jack thought, and I haven't done a thing to stop it. How did I let this happen? Was the dream so fragile that one man could wreck it on a matter of weeks? With money and malice and few phone calls? On a vengeful whim? Jack searched for his original mistake. The one that had left room for a man like Martin Michaels to slip into the dream and turn it into a nightmare.

Perhaps, Jack thought, he had allowed the enormity of his accomplishment to convince him his life was indestructible. Or maybe it was nothing that deep. Had he merely been naïve enough to think his winning streak would go on forever simply because he wished it to? Naïve, Jack thought, or delusional, or recklessly optimistic. Maybe plain crazy to think I could run away from people like Martin, who was so much the sum total of all I hated about life in America, the marauding greed, the selfishness of voracious egos, the unchecked desire not only to have but to take, the willful, prideful ignorance of the word *enough*.

These people are part of life in the world, Jack thought, anywhere. When did I forget that? Their dark fingerprints are all over it. They wait, breathing, counting our heartbeats in the shadows while we prance in the sun, thinking, pretending, dreaming we're safe. They bide their time - like theft, like death, like heartbreak. And there is no escape, only the pauses between the sweep of their claws. Maybe there truly is no place

to live a life of your own choosing. No quiet corners on this round earth. Maybe there truly is no place to hide.

That night, Jack tossed in his hammock, trapped in that in-between space that is neither sleeping nor waking. He did dream. Giant thunderheads the breadth of mountains and the color of coal smoke rolled in from the horizon, belching jagged tendrils of lightning. From the clouds emerged a huge, raven galleon, bearing down on the beach in front of his home. Jack stood on his porch, paralyzed.

The ghost ship sliced the midnight sea with a terrifying, funereal majesty and breathless speed; its prow swathed in a rolling fog and its ragged, yellow sails swollen by an icy wind. A skeleton crew dressed in rags lined the rails, singing and calling Jack's name. Rusty cutlasses gripped tight in bony fingers waved above their cracked and pitted skulls. Their stench rode the chill wind ahead of them and polluted the beach.

Above it all, atop the ship's highest mast, huge and menacing against a bruised, electric sky, Jack recognized the sinister and mocking smile of the skull and crossbones, snapping against the wind in poisonous glory.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next morning, the foursome did their best to right the Lone Palm. At noon, Catherine Jane headed upstairs to re-assemble Harry's apartment. While Catherine Jane worked, Jack, Tony and Navajo struggled for two hours to rebuild the stage, to no avail. Finally, Jack threw his hammer down and announced he'd hire somebody to come in and do the work. He mixed a batch of rum punch, and the three retired to a table. Letting Asbury leave any mark at all on his place bothered him, but Jack took comfort in the fact he'd be able to open the place for happy hour. The bar, at least. Half the kitchen staff had quit when they'd heard about Harry's predicament. Like rats from a sinking ship, Jack thought, though he knew they acted out of practicality and not disloyalty. Three had already called about a reference. Jack promised each of them a good one.

"I can't believe it," Tony said, breaking the silence by voicing the consensus. "It's too surreal."

"Believe it, Dali," snapped Catherine Jane, dropping into an empty chair. She took a cigarette from Jack and lit it, turning her head away from the men as she exhaled, hiding her face.

Jack realized he'd never seen her smoke. He hoped the other guys wouldn't be dumb enough to bring it up. Harry's trouble had hit her hard, harder than she wanted anyone to know. Having nothing to do but clean up the mess, Jack knew, was only making it worse for her.

"You had any luck getting Harry a lawyer?" Catherine Jane asked.

Jack shook his head. “Anybody we can afford that’s still interested after I mention Customs and Special Services hangs up as soon as I say the word drugs.”

“Bail?” Navajo asked.

“Nobody but family can post bail,” Jack said, “until he’s been in over seventy-two hours.”

He scanned the solemn faces at the table. His compatriots cast furtive glances back at him, fake grins on their lips, questions in their eyes. Or they stared into their drinks, scratched at invisible stains on the tabletop. They were waiting, Jack realized. Waiting for him to tell them what to do. All of the sudden he was in charge of everything: rescuing Harry, saving the business, sustaining the beaten people in front of him, his friends. Navajo went first.

“You say Harry is innocent, and we believe you,” he said. “But you can’t argue with how bad the situation looks. What are we gonna do?”

Jack, his face blank, turned to Navajo. He recalled his sunset thoughts of the day before, of the claws that had raked through their lives. Inevitable or not, he thought, there’s no reason lie down and die.

Tony went next. “They’re going to be asking us questions soon. What are we going to say?”

He looked at Tony, turning his head in slow motion. It felt light, almost unattached to his neck. Jack turned to Catherine Jane. She just stared at him, boring into him with her huge eyes. When that claw sweeps back through, Jack decided, I’m cutting it off. And then? Well, then I’ll steal back what I can and we’ll see what happens from there. He leaned forward over the table. The others leaned closer to him.

“One thing you don’t do is lie,” Jack said. “You’ll be asked some obscure and seemingly irrelevant questions. These bastards are going to lead you all over the place, try to confuse you, get you to contradict yourself. Tell the truth. They catch you in one lie and your credibility is shot. You don’t remember something, say so. Don’t try to think of what would sound good. And listen carefully to the questions. Don’t volunteer information.”

“So if they ask me if I ever saw Harry with dope, I say yes?” Tony asked.

Jack nodded.

“And if they ask me about when Harry was out there alone?” Tony said. “About the times he disappeared?”

“Just tell them the truth,” Jack said.

Tony shook his head. “All right, Captain. If that’s what you think is best.”

Jack lifted his glass to his lips. It froze there. He slammed the glass on the table and glared at Tony. “What did you just ask me?”

Tony raised his hands defensively. “I was just clarifying about how much of the truth you wanted us to tell,” he said. “Harry spent most of his time out on that boat alone.”

“Except for lately,” Jack said, moving his eyes over the faces around him. “Lately he’s been out there with...”

“Jimmy Spencer!” Catherine Jane yelled. “That motherfucker!”

Jack nodded his head. “He’s our connection here. If he’s not in on this then I’ll shutter this place and open a McDonald’s in Alaska.” He stood. “Think about it. He’s

here alone, out of nowhere, practically on Martin's heels, money falling out of his pockets."

"Martin's money," Navajo said.

Jack rapped his knuckles twice on the table and pointed at Navajo. "Bingo, big man. Spencer is our answer. We gotta find him."

Catherine Jane slumped in her chair. "He's gotta be long gone by now."

"Maybe, maybe not," Jack said. "But we're gonna look." He jogged to the bar and reached for the phone. "First thing we do is call Asbury."

"That prick gonna move on this?" Catherine Jane asked.

Jack shrugged. He plucked Asbury's business card from his pocket. The call, the information probably wouldn't amount to anything. The investigator was already convinced he had his man. But something tugged at Jack's brain as he dialed the numbers. Why wasn't he in jail, too? Why hadn't there been any cops at his house? Asbury knew Jack and Harry were partners. It didn't make sense. Unless, Jack thought, unless Asbury wasn't as convinced as he made out to be.

"Donovan," Asbury said. "Ready to confess? I can't imagine another reason you'd disturb my golf game."

"If you want to know where those drugs came from," Jack said, "find a guy named Jimmy Spencer. Ask him about Martin Michaels and someone named David Roswell."

As Jack described Spencer and what he believed was the connection among the three men, Asbury feigned disinterest, actually yawning loudly into the phone. But he listened.

“I’ll tell you something, Jack,” he finally said. “Sounds to me like you’re picking names out of a hat and trying to hang everything on some other poor slob. Ever heard of a red herring?”

“Would it hurt to look for this guy?” Jack asked. “Send a couple agents to his hotel? You had no shortage of help when it came time to trash my place.” He waited for a response. None came and he decided to push. “I think you’re looking for the easy way out here, Asbury. I don’t think you give two shits about the truth.”

“I’d be insulted, Donovan, if I gave two shits what you thought,” Asbury said. “Valentine’s boat was full of cocaine. *That’s* the truth.”

“Name’s Jimmy Spencer,” Jack said. “He’s staying at the Flamingo, about five miles north up Ocean Avenue from my place. I hope you lose your balls in the water hazard.”

Jack hung up, thinking about what he hadn’t told Asbury. No point in mentioning the offer on the house. Or the blender incident. Or Roswell and Samantha. No, none of that. The info on Spencer had to look like a lead, not like revenge. At Jack’s nod, Catherine Jane, already at the door, took off for the Flamingo. I’ll use Asbury, Jack thought, but I won’t count on him. Not yet. Even if Asbury did send his people, she would get there first. I want us to have first crack at what that prick knows, Jack thought. He couldn’t imagine Asbury had anybody at his disposal more persuasive than Catherine Jane.

Asbury backed away from the tenth green, cell phone at his ear. “Yeah, that’s right, the Flamingo Hotel. A Jimmy, or James Spencer...No, I don’t think so either, but do me a favor and do what I ask you to do. Call me back as soon as you’re done.”

He watched his golfing partner miss a nine-foot birdie putt. This new lead wasn’t going anywhere. He could feel it. But still. He reached into his back pocket for his note pad. Spencer, Michaels and Roswell. Valentine had mentioned those same names during the initial interrogation. Asbury grinned and shook his head. Valentine. That guy was turning into a major pain in the ass. Balls the size of church bells. They’d leaned hard on him, and he’d given up nothing but those three names. He had alibis. A clean record. He was a local hero. Canvassing the boardwalk had established that. Still, the coast was an insular community. The locals would stonewall anyone going after one of their own, at least at first.

Asbury sighed as his partner missed a three-foot putt for par. This case was threatening to get complicated. He’d been right to figure leaving Jack at large would lead him somewhere. It just wasn’t leading him where he’d expected. Nothing to do but see where the day takes us, he thought. Asbury strolled to the edge of the green and directed his ball into the hole with one smooth stroke.

When Catherine Jane spied the skinny, pasty-faced kid at the reservations desk of the Flamingo Hotel, she knew he was an easy mark. Beside her bike, she pulled her arms inside her shirt and took off her bra. After stuffing the bra in her pocket, she knotted the T-shirt beneath her breasts and promenaded across the lobby, wearing her best vacant stare and adding a little extra swing to her stride.

She touched her hand to her mouth as she crossed the room, pretending to be awestruck by the opulence of the hotel, which was decorated with fake ferns, plastic vases of plastic flowers and sky-blue leather couches. She guessed the atrocious green carpet was supposed to match the sea. Snaring the wide eyes of the clerk with her own, Catherine Jane wiggled and bounced to the counter.

“Excuse me, baby doll,” she purred. “Could you help me?”

“S-S-Sure, miss.”

Catherine Jane raised up on her toes and leaned over the counter, pressing her breasts against the imitation wood. “I’m supposed to meet somebody here,” she whispered. “My, uh, uncle.” She smiled as if the lie was sudden genius. “But, silly me, I can’t remember what room he told me. Duh.”

“What’s his name?” asked the clerk, his eyes straining to see down her shirt.

“Jimmy Spencer. Kinda tall, thin, curly hair. Real sexy.” She covered her mouth with her fingertips. “In a favorite uncle kind of way.”

“I don’t remember anyone like that,” the clerk said, “but I’ll check the guest list for you, though.”

Catherine Jane furrowed her brow. “Are you allowed to do that?” she asked, hinting at the huge scandal that might ensue.

The clerk puffed out his chest. “If I need to,” he said. “For you.”

“I would be real grateful,” Catherine Jane said.

The clerk disengaged his eyes from her chest and turned to the computer screen. After punching a few keys, he shook his head. “I’m sorry, miss. There’s no one by that name registered here. There was, but he’s gone. Checked out yesterday.”

Catherine Jane stamped her heel. “For fuck’s sake,” she yelled. The clerk blanched. She recovered herself. “I don’t see how I could’ve missed him. He said Sunday.”

“Miss,” the clerk said, blushing, “today is Monday.”

Catherine Jane shrugged. “I told you I was silly.” She turned on her heel and headed for the door.

Outside, she straddled her bike and pulled the knot from her shirt. Despite the heat, she pulled on her leather. All that for nothing. What a waste of a quality performance. She started the bike and headed back to the Lone Palm. Jack was going to be very disappointed.

Monday evening, Martin sat in the back of his limousine, telephone cradled between his shoulder and cheek, pulling on a pair of black leather gloves. He’d had to drive all over the city to find a pair of gloves on this stewpot of an island. Now he was an hour behind schedule. Evan sat in the front seat, the screen up and the intercom on, equally unnerved by spying on Martin, the conversation he was overhearing and the sketchy neighborhood they were in, right before dark, outside the Tree Frog Motel.

“Yes, David, right now,” Martin said. “Yes, I have all the money with me. Don’t talk to me like I’m a moron. You don’t have to do everything... Yes, I’ll call as soon as I’m done.”

Martin hung up the phone, looked at the gun in his lap and then studied his gloved hands. “Don’t walk in with them on, you old fool.” He knocked on the screen. Evan rolled it down. “I’ll only be a few minutes, may as well keep the engine running.”

Jimmy Spencer looked at the clock when he heard the knock at his door. Finally. He breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't been looking forward to chasing Martin down for the money. Weren't a lot of guys who would work for Martin anymore, not like the old days when they'd line up around the corner for even the lowest level gigs. Guess that's why Martin offered double the pay out as soon as Spencer mentioned a sky-high price he'd pulled out of thin air. You kinda lived on Roloids when working for Martin these days, but he did pay, and he paid well. Besides, who didn't want to work in the tropics. And Martin hadn't even asked him to kill anyone. Martin knocked again. "Come in," Spencer yelled.

"Good to see you, Jimmy," Martin said, easing the door closed behind him.

"Good work. Fast, considering the out of the way locale."

Jimmy closed his suitcase and snapped it shut. He sat on the bed. "I've worked these islands before. It was years ago, but nothing around here ever changes." He shrugged. "Nobody ever asks questions."

"Things worked out okay with Van Owen?" Martin asked.

"Hell, yes," Jimmy said, laughing. "Shit is that guy hooked up. Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados. Into everything. Guns, drugs, jewels, documents, the works. He overcharged us for the coke, but I figured we were in a hurry so fuck it. How'd you ever find that guy?"

"Old friend of David's," Martin said. "Never met the man myself." He stepped closer to Spencer. "So there's no trail, nothing that leads back to me?"

"Nothin'," Spencer said, emphasizing with a sweep of his hand. "Van Owen headed off to the Middle East, and I'm on my way to the airport." Spencer stood and

rubbed his hands together. “Speaking of, not to be rude, but can I get paid? I don’t wanna miss my flight.”

Martin reached behind his back. “I have something for you right here, Jimmy. Thanks for years of faithful service.” He drew the pistol and fired two quick shots into Jimmy’s chest, destroying Jimmy’s heart while it was still skipping from the sight of the gun. Even with the silencer, the shots were disturbing loud.

Martin stood over Jimmy and watched him die. It took, by Martin’s count, two gurgles and half a gasp. Take that Roswell, Martin thought. Just pay Spencer and get him off the island, Roswell had said. Martin had agreed but knew all along Spencer was a dead man. Even away from the island, he was a living, breathing connection to this business with Valentine. I just can’t have that, Martin thought. Who could? Fuck Roswell.

When had it happened, Martin wondered, that I gave up wiping my own ass without Roswell’s permission? There was a day when he worked for me and not the other way around. “Ruth,” Martin whispered. It had started with her and the divorce. That was when he’d first hired Roswell, to do something about the goddamn divorce. And so he had. Take this million, Martin had told David, and make that bitch go away. And just like that she was gone. And Martin never asked. About Ruth, about the money. Now, fifteen years later his daughter was dead, too, and Roswell was running his life, running him around this forgotten swamp of an island playing games with a man he should’ve shot and tossed to the sharks the day he met him. He sighed. Well, they were too far in it to get out now, and besides, things were going their way. But this was the last of it, Martin vowed. Soon, he would cut Roswell back down to size.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Martin tucked the gun into the back of his pants. God, he felt better than he had in years. He smiled. He'd told Roswell he needed to kill something. Martin stared down at Spencer and wondered why it always felt so good to shoot things. It was the economy of a bullet, the finality of it, the *ultimateness* of it, he decided. Less than an instant it took, he thought, to do the irrevocable. Even Roswell couldn't undo a couple of well-placed bullets.

After Spencer had done nothing but drain blood for three minutes, Martin took Jimmy's watch, wallet and passport. He searched the suitcase. Nothing revealing. He picked up Jimmy's plane ticket off the bed and tucked it in an outside jacket pocket. That was when he felt the gloves. God damn it. He pulled them on. He grabbed a T-shirt from the suitcase and wiped down everywhere he had touched. He turned on the TV and set the air-conditioner on high. As he left the room, Martin hung the 'do not disturb' sign on the doorknob. The longer it took them to find their John Doe, the longer he would remain John Doe.

Back in the car, he called Roswell. "Done," Martin said. "Meet me at your office." Hanging up, Martin decided it was best to keep Spencer's demise to himself. Roswell would only whine about it. Who was he to answer to Roswell, anyway? Roswell worked for him. He knocked on the screen. "Evan, Mr. Roswell's office."

Jack stirred the bowl of conch stew cooling on the bar in front of him. Navajo stood his post by the door. Tony had gone home and Catherine Jane was cleaning ashtrays, trying to busy-work away her disappointment at not finding Spencer. Jack had not been surprised but he was dismayed nonetheless. He jumped when the phone rang.

“Donovan? Asbury here. No dice, champ. No trace of any Jimmy Spencer at the Flamingo, or anywhere else on the coast. Seems he vanished into thin air just yesterday. Convenient for you, that’s he not around to deny your accusations.”

“What about Michaels and Roswell?” Jack asked.

“I don’t see the point of bringing them in here so they can tell me they’ve never heard of Jimmy Spencer,” Asbury said. “Make your staff available to me tomorrow, though I get the feeling I already know what I’m gonna hear. It’ll be easier than bringing them out to New Amsterdam one by one.”

Jack consented. “Bail?” he asked.

“It’ll be set by tomorrow afternoon,” Asbury said. “I were you, I’d make sure he stays on the island. We’ll be watching.”

Jack set the phone down. He was trying to be optimistic. They’d get Harry back tomorrow, next day at the latest. And he was innocent, there had to be a way to prove it. He called Catherine Jane and Navajo over to tell them the latest developments, or, to be more specific, the lack thereof.

Roswell was at his desk when Martin walked in. “No problems, I trust.”

“None whatsoever,” Martin said.

“Ever heard of Special Investigator John Asbury?” Roswell asked.

Martin shook his head.

“He’s the guy who arrested Valentine,” Roswell said. “He wants to see us in his office tomorrow morning.”

“So?” Martin said. “We knew this would probably happen.”

“Listen carefully, Martin,” Roswell said. “When we go in, let me do the talking. All of it.” He paused. “Agreed?”

Martin shrugged. “Whatever you say. You’re the lawyer here.”

“I’m going to assume Asbury’s uncovered the poor state of your neighborly relations with Jack,” Roswell went on. “That’s not a problem, being a bad neighbor. Being an aggressive business man, doesn’t make you a criminal. First chance I get, I’m going to mention Samantha. That should explain Jack’s desire to stick his problems on us and totally discredit him with Asbury.”

“You make it all sound so simple,” Martin said.

“It is,” David said. He wanted to add “as long as you don’t fuck it up” but refrained. Martin was nicely calm. He needed to stay that way.

“Speaking of Samantha,” Martin said. “You reached her yet?”

Roswell shrugged. “She’s showing up at work, though she won’t take my calls.” He smiled. “Let her have her little tantrum.”

“What if Asbury wants to talk to her?” Martin asked.

“I’ll be there,” Roswell said. “I’ll make sure of it. She’s worthless to him anyway.”

“So then there’s only Evan,” Martin said.

“I’ve already set it up. I talked to the pilot this morning.” Roswell checked his watch. “As we speak, Evan’s packing for a fine vacation on Barbados. An extended vacation. Sand, sunshine, money, girls. The works. Valentine’ll be breaking rocks for three weeks before Evan even considers coming back.”

Martin stood and stretched. The gun poked into the small of his back. He liked the feel of it. Soon as he got home, he was taking it into the jungle. If he had his way, there would be a bird left to greet the dawn. “If I need anything else from you, David, I’ll let you know. Leave me alone unless you hear from me.”

Roswell eyed Martin suspiciously. “Whatever you think is best, Martin.”

Jack sent Catherine Jane and Navajo home early. There was no sense keeping them there. Somehow, word of the drugs and the arrest must have reached the hotels. Business was practically non-existent all night. But he’d open the bar again tomorrow. After he went to the bank and took out a loan against the Palm to make Harry’s sure to be astronomical bail. If business didn’t pick back up, Jack knew he and his bar would be in dire financial straits. He was playing right into Martin’s hands. So be it, Jack thought. Leaving Harry in jail was not an option.

He poured three fingers of Jack Daniels over ice. He lit a cigarette and tried to think around the dead ends. If there was no way to clear Harry by staying within the law, then he’d go outside it. He had no problem with that. But even with these expanded horizons, Jack’s imagination was empty. His frustration reminded him of how often he’d relied on Harry for the answers. He was embarrassed. Harry needed him and his mind was blank.

When the phone rang, Jack thought twice about not answering it. He’d had enough bad news for one day. But he picked up.

“Hey, hey, Jack,” Woody shouted into the phone. “What’s going on in paradise?”

“Where are you?”

“California, at my office. We’re having a going away party.”

Jack heard feminine giggles and loud music. Eighties hair metal, to be exact.

“They got some wild women in California,” Woody said. “I’ll be in Vegas tomorrow.” He shoed away someone named Bambi.

“Get somewhere quiet,” Jack said. “I’ve got a lot of news for you. All of it bad.”

Jack waited while Woody borrowed a cell phone and called him back from the parking lot. When they were re-connected, Jack rushed through the story.

“Holy shit, Jack, I’m so sorry,” Woody said at the end. “I promised I’d help you, and I’m out here cruising tits and ass while these guys are stomping all over your nuts. I feel like a real asshole.”

“Everything happened so fast,” Jack said. “We were all caught by surprise.”

“Hold on one second,” said Woody.

After half a minute, a thick, deep voice spoke into the phone. “Jack? Bobby Gianelli. LAPD. Woody tells me you had a run in with Jimmy Spencer.”

“Yeah, we certainly did. You know him?”

Gianelli laughed. “Yeah, I know that cocksucker. He’s a good friend of your neighbor’s, that pigeon-fucker Michaels. We got us a history, the three of us. Sit tight, Woody and I’ll be there ASAP.”

Jack was stunned. Woody came back on the line.

“Gianelli’s foaming at the mouth already,” Woody said, “I think he’s gonna have spasms. We’ll get Harry sprung and get Michaels’ and Roswell’s nuts in a vice. Book us some rooms for, say, Thursday.”

“Done,” Jack said. “I appreciate this.”

“Hey, I’m gonna leave you guys swingin’ in the breeze?” Woody said. “Hang tight, desperado. The cavalry is coming.”

Jack hung up. He sipped his drink, not feeling quite as optimistic as his friend. Pretty rag-tag cavalry. An out of work reporter and an obsessive, unstable police detective with a huge personal vendetta. He hoped Gianelli didn’t want to sit around and trade Roswell fucked my woman stories. Jack clenched his fists. No, this was good. Woody and Bobby were traveling a long way to help him out. He should be grateful. Maybe Gianelli was just the kind of wild card that could stir things up. Maybe we’ll get somewhere. Who knows where, though? Spencer’s a ghost. Maybe Gianelli had something in this file that would turn Asbury around. Anything at all was more than Jack had right now, which was complete knowledge of the truth and no way to prove any of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“So what you got lined up on Barbados?” yelled Murphy over the engines of the seaplane. He wore a black denim shirt and faded blue jeans. He was barefoot. Huge sunglasses hid his eyes and a tattered New York Mets ball cap covered his silver hair. Evan was a little nervous.

“Vacation,” he said. “A bonus from work.”

“Nice bonus,” Murphy said. He glanced at Evan. “No offense, son, but you look at little young to be an executive.” He glanced again. “I know you from somewhere?”

Evan looked out the window. It was a spectacular morning. There was no land visible. The sea was a dark green and he could see the long, white wake of a miniscule boat. He looked back over at the pilot. Murphy looked familiar, but Evan couldn't place him. “I'm not really an executive. I'm more of a, well, a transportation specialist.”

“Whatever you say, kid,” Murphy said, laughing. He stuck an unlit cigar in the corner of his mouth. “You want a cigar, Mr. Specialist? I got Cubans.”

“No thanks.”

Murphy reached behind the seat and produced a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon from a small cooler. “You want a beer?”

“Uh, no thanks.”

“You sure? This stuff is tough to get down here,” Murphy said. “Good ol' cheap American beer.”

Evan watched Murphy take a long pull from the can then nestle it between his legs.

“Great race track on Barbados,” Murphy said. “You play the ponies?”

“No, not really,” answered Evan. “I’m not a gambler.”

“Hell, you got in this plane,” Murphy shouted, laughing around the cigar. Evan looked like he might vomit. “Relax, kid. That was a joke.” Murphy shook his head.

“Well, shit, I hope you like gettin’ laid. A man’s gotta have his vices to stay sane. I like the horses, when I ain’t fuckin’ or flyin’. I got a grand-nephew back in New York that can pick four outta five races just by the colors of their silks. Kid’s a freak. Don’t know where that gene came from.”

“I’m amazed at how many New Yorkers there are on these islands,” Evan said. “I know two guys out on the coast from New York.”

“At any given time, there’s eight million of us,” Murphy said, “we’re everywhere.” He clapped his hands. “That’s where I know you from! You’re talking about Jack and Harry. Own a freaky little joint called the Lone Palm.”

“Yeah,” Evan said, “I washed dishes there on and off for a long time. You know those guys?”

“Know them? I *made* those rat bastards. Jack was a student of mine at NYU. Taught him everything he knows. And that bar? I bloody found it for them. There wouldn’t *be* a Lone Palm if it wasn’t for Happy Murphy.” Murphy lit his cigar with a silver Zippo. “Goddamn fucking shame, what’s going on over there.”

“What happened?” Evan asked, pictures suddenly lining up in his head: Samantha upset in the limo leaving Roswell’s office, her silent in the back of the car when he took her to the ferry, Michaels at the Tree Frog, going in empty handed and coming out with a

ratty suitcase. He felt a quiver in his gut that had nothing to do with fear of flying.

“Something went wrong,” he said.

“Sure as shit did,” Murphy said. “You obviously haven’t been over there in a while.” Evan shook his head. He hadn’t. “Harry’s in the slammer on some bullshit drug charges, a total fucking set up. Jack and Samantha split up. She was running around on him with some guy from Ellison. Some creep named Roswell.”

Evan hung his head. God, was he dumb. Murphy caught the sick, despondent look on the kid’s face. “Sucks, doesn’t it,” Murphy said.

“I know Roswell,” Evan said. “I work for him.”

Murphy’s head snapped around at the confession. “Well, then,” he said, teeth clenched around the cigar. “You’re gonna tell me everything fucking thing you’ve seen and heard since you took that job. I got plenty of gas in this plane.”

Jack and Asbury stood on the boardwalk outside the Lone Palm. The lawman wore a black suit, with a blue shirt and a black tie. Like he was coming to the coast for a fucking funeral, Jack thought.

“Stellar job prepping your troops, Jack,” Asbury said. “Gotta give you credit on that. The same stories, airtight, over and over. You’d think Valentine was the moral compass of this whole island.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Jack said, “but all they did was tell the truth.”

“I don’t like to think about that,” Asbury said. “Makes my job more difficult.” His cell phone rang. “Asbury. Really? They knew nothing? I’m shocked...what?...Now that truly is interesting. Really? That good looking?...No, we got nothing out here. Get the rat

cage ready for Valentine.” Asbury slipped the phone into his pocket. He slapped Jack on the shoulder. “I’m kidding about the rat cage.”

“That was about Michaels and Roswell, wasn’t it?” Jack asked. “I thought you weren’t bringing them in.”

“Mood swing,” Asbury said. “I’m unpredictable that way. Your boys? They knew nothing about any Spencer. No surprise there. And you and Martin haven’t played nice in the sandbox like good little fellas. No surprise there either, I guess.” He inched closer to Jack. “But guess what we did find out.” Jack set his jaw, braced himself. “So this Roswell was nailing your old lady,” Asbury said.

Jack said nothing. Asbury waited a long time for him to speak, but Jack held his silence, staring out over the ocean.

“Odd how you failed to mention that,” Asbury said. “Hell, they tell me he’s a good looking guy, like makes Pierce Brosnan look horse-faced good-looking.”

Jack’s eyes finally dropped to his feet. For a second, Asbury caught himself feeling sorry for the man. He shook it off.

“Don’t look so hurt, Jack, you’re no better than the rest of us. My ex-wife worked her way through half the starting line up of a college rugby team before I wised up. Told me she was playing Canasta with her girlfriends every Wednesday. Go figure. They’re better, smarter, stronger and hornier than we are. We’ll never figure them out. I say this to you because it’s true. And because, in spite of myself, I’m starting to like you.”

“That’s very sweet,” Jack said. “I wish I could say the feeling is mutual. What the hell does the implosion of my love life have to do with Harry’s situation?”

“You know the answer to that, Jack. Revenge. I don’t blame you, but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna let you lay all this on Roswell. What was her name?”

“Samantha,” Jack said.

“Pretty name,” Asbury said, folding a stick of gum into his mouth. “Sexy. Lots of breath in it. But didn’t anybody ever tell you not to trust a woman with more than two syllables in her name? Amys, Annes, even Lucys and Doreens. You can trust them. But Samanthas? Jennifers? Run screaming.”

“What was your wife’s name, Agent Asbury?” Jack asked.

“Stephanie Lynn. Four. I was doomed.” Asbury turned and leaned back against the boardwalk railing. “I’m gonna do something I don’t normally do, Jack.”

“Tell the truth?” Jack said. “Shoot straight with a guy whose life is circling the drain?”

Asbury laughed. “Good one. No, I’m not about to start doing that. My job is difficult enough as it is.” He paused. “Well, maybe a little.” He tilted his chin at the Lone Palm. “You have a great gig here, Jack. Nice place. You have good people who respect you working in it. Maybe I’m starting to see Valentine as a one hit wonder. A guy who got sloppy, or greedy, or trusted the wrong people. Don’t think I’m not interested in who made the phone call that tipped us off. Maybe Valentine was just looking for one big score. To put some money into the place. Maybe build himself a nice little hideaway like the one you’ve got. I can’t dig the tactics but I can understand the motivation.” He looked at Jack. “It’s always the small timers that take the fall.”

Jack just kept staring and shook his head. Asbury blew out his cheeks in frustration.

“Can you see that?” Asbury asked. “Can you work with that? Think you could give us a name or two? Get your buddy to give us a name? We could trim a big chunk of his sentence.” Asbury waited. “Let you stay on the island, keep the bar open. All those nice people who work for you could keep their jobs.” Asbury waited again. “Two years. Two years and Valentine’s back behind the bar with you, instead of staring through steel bars ‘til he’s dead.” Asbury peeled off his jacket and hung it over the railing. “You can make that happen for him, Jack.”

Jack pulled his smokes from his shirt pocket and shook one out. He offered it to Asbury, who declined with an angry wave of his hand. Jack shrugged and lit his cigarette.

“They don’t like drug smugglers in these parts,” Asbury said. “At all. Bad for tourism, crime scares people away. And they’re learning to love tourism on this island.”

“I’ve already given you the names you need,” Jack finally said. “You’re trying to deal for what you’ve already got.”

“You know where these drugs go?” Asbury asked. “Into the hands of people turning over their rent money, their grocery money. Into the hands of kids handing over their milk money. That makes me sick, Jack. I don’t see Valentine that way, but I’m not gonna be the judge at his trial. After a certain point, I can’t make any more decisions on this case.” Asbury chewed the inside of his lip. “Every day that point gets closer. You hearing me, Jack?”

“I’m hearing you,” Jack said. “I’m hearing you asking me to do your job. I can’t help you any more than I already have. Your story is touching. Very Lone Ranger. But Harry isn’t a drug smuggler, not long term, not short term, not just once.”

Asbury sighed and stood up straight. He dropped his hands into his pockets and stared down at his shoes.

“I’m not surprised at your answer,” he said. “Disappointed but not surprised. I’d admire your loyalty if you weren’t being so stupid. Maybe one day, when you visit Harry in jail, you can tell him about all the good your loyalty did him.”

“If that’s all you’ve got to say, Asbury, I’d rather we called it a day,” Jack said. “I have to bail my friend out of a cell he shouldn’t be in.”

Asbury walked away and left Jack leaning on the railing, his unbuttoned Aloha shirt fluttering in the morning wind.

At twelve-thirty, Asbury called the Lone Palm. Bail had been set. At fifty grand.

Sitting on the hood of Tony’s long, yellow convertible, cabs and bike messengers zipping past, Tony and Catherine Jane split a cup of coffee while waiting for Jack outside the bank. They had handed Jack a check for three grand before he walked in, close to the sum total, Jack figured, of what those two and Navajo had in their own savings accounts. He took it without a word, knowing there was no point in protest. Any way they could, they were going to share the weight of these days with Jack.

Ninety minutes after he walked in, as Catherine Jane swirled the last of the cold, grainy coffee in the cheap paper cup, Jack walked out of the bank, a yellow envelope under his arm and gave them a brief thumbs up. They drove to the jail in silence.

Jack went into the station alone to post Harry’s bail. Parting with the money proved much quicker than getting it. Jack and Harry were embracing on the steps outside the police station in twenty minutes. When Harry climbed into the back seat, Catherine

Jane awarded him a loud, wet kiss on the cheek and threw one of her legs over his. She stroked the back of his head as the car mounted the entrance ramp leading to Ocean Avenue.

“I’d of known you’d treat me like this,” Harry said to her, “I’d have gotten busted years ago.” She handed him a Thermos. He unscrewed the cap and sniffed. “Well, how about that!” He swallowed three large mouthfuls of bloody Mary, red liquid running down his chin. He wiped it with his hand and licked his fingers. He patted Catherine Jane’s thigh. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re very welcome,” she said, “but don’t get used to it.”

“The day you stop breaking my balls,” Harry said, “is the day I know you don’t love me anymore.”

Jack sat in the front passenger seat, his eyes flitting back and forth between the road and the pair in the back seat, silently urging Tony to drive faster, fearing some invisible force would whisk Harry away before they got to the beach.

Jack hadn’t said much since Tony set the car in motion. He knew Harry’d throw up a brave front for all of them, joke and laugh off his trouble. Already he was doing it, clowning in the back seat, acting like they’d just picked him up at the airport. But Jack knew Harry was too smart not to fully realize the danger he was in. He knew that the moment Asbury snapped the cuffs on him, Harry started planning his way out. Jack turned in his seat. Harry sat smiling, with the Thermos between his legs and his arm hung loosely across Catherine Jane’s shoulders. He needed a shower and a shave. There was a purple bruise beneath his left eye. But the same old, defiant light shined in Harry’s eyes.

Despite the wear and tear of two days in police custody, his edge was still sharp. Jack smiled back and turned around.

They would beat this. Harry carried himself like a brawler, but inside he was a warrior; Jack had seen it before. Together, he and Harry were more than a match for Michaels and Roswell. That's all this came down to, really. A battle of brains and endurance. Even if all Woody and Bobby bought them was time, if they only got Asbury to hesitate a few days; that would be enough.

Back at the Lone Palm, Navajo was waiting for them. His bear hug greeting left Harry short of breath. Behind the bar, Harry hung a big, hand-lettered sign that read "Don't Ask." It was still only early afternoon. They could open in plenty of time for the sunset happy hour. Jack made a batch of rum punch. Harry made everyone shrimp sandwiches and they ate on the deck, in the shade of a blue umbrella.

"Jack told me about you guys throwing in for the bail," Harry said. "I appreciate it, and you'll get that money back. I promise you." Harry was told not to worry about it. He turned to Jack. "So when do the dynamic duo arrive?"

"Tomorrow," Jack said.

"You think Asbury will talk to them?" Tony asked.

"Yeah, I do," Jack said. "I've been thinking about it. He'll listen to another cop. And he's played tough guy about it, but he's listened to us. He looked for Spencer. He questioned Martin and Roswell. He's at least poked at anything we've thrown at him. He'll poke at this, too." He topped off his rum punch and lit a smoke. "Asbury's got a

conscience, if he's not a thousand percent sure Harry's guilty, he'll keep looking for answers."

"He seemed pretty sure to me," Harry said, fingering the bruise under his eye.

The table went silent.

"We can do this," Jack said.

Harry smiled and raised his glass. "Damn right, Captain. Fuck 'em all and the horses they rode in on."

With the weekend coming, there was a fresh round of tourists let loose on the island, and business picked up again that night. Whether they came because of ignorance or curiosity, Jack couldn't discern. He didn't much care. He had no interest in the local rumor mill. Right now, the Palm needed every dollar she could lure into her coffers. More importantly, Jack knew, Harry's return and the bigger crowd led them all toward a sense of normalcy they desperately needed.

After they closed, Jack sat at the bar, counting the evening's take. As Harry watched, sipping a Corona, Jack called in the Friday morning liquor deliveries and fiddled with the following week's floor schedule. When Jack crumpled a fifth draft of the schedule and tossed it over his shoulder, Harry popped open a Corona and set it front of Jack. Leaning back on his bar stool, Jack took a long drink.

"How're you holding up?" Harry asked.

"Seems like I should be asking you that," Jack said.

"We both know where I'm at," Harry said. "Talked to Sam?"

Jack shook his head. “Nah. I mean, she’d want to know about all this, but why involve her in it? What could she do?” He lit a smoke. “Not that I could reach her any way.”

“She still on the Caymans?”

Jack shrugged. “I guess.” He wiped his hand down his face. “You’d think I’d miss her less as time went on, but it just gets worse. Shouldn’t it be the opposite?”

“You’re still in withdrawal,” Harry said. “Give yourself time to adjust. It’ll continue to suck then one day, you’ll realize you’ve been feeling lighter for a while.” He tapped his bottle against Jack’s. “C’mon. You been here before. You don’t need me to tell you these things.”

“Fuck it,” Jack said, blowing out his breath. “Like I’ve got time for that. Right now what matters is keeping you outta jail.”

Harry looked away and sipped his beer. “Yeah, that’s a concern of mine as well. Asbury told me you gave him a run for his money. He drop that ‘one hit wonder’ shit on you, too?” Jack nodded. “Like that asshole could catch me if I *was* running drugs,” Harry said. His eyes wandered over the empty bar. “Like I would do that to you, or this place.”

“What’s on your mind, Harry?”

Harry leaned his elbows on the bar. “Follow me outside,” he said.

One the beach, Jack lit two cigarettes and handed one to Harry. The air was cool and the breeze was strong. The sea, rising and falling like a sleeper’s breathing, glittered at them as they approached it across the sand.

“I’m sure the place is bugged,” Harry finally said. He took a long drag and exhaled. “I can’t believe we have to worry about that shit in our place.”

“I think I know what this is about,” Jack said, “but I want to hear it from you.” He shared Harry’s lament, but he wished his friend would get to the point. Then they could get on with the business of dealing with it.

“Partner, I know you practically bankrupted us to get me out of the stir,” Harry began. “A strong move, the right move. What I would’ve done.” He looked at Jack. “Not that you surprise me. I never doubted you’d go to the mat for me, you and the others.”

“We’re just getting started,” Jack said.

“That’s what we need to talk about,” Harry said. “We need to face reality here, Captain. The law found my boat loaded with drugs, and I don’t have any explanation for it.”

“You and I both know what really happened,” Jack said. “And we’re getting to Asbury.”

“Even if you’re right about Asbury, Jack, his hands are tied,” Harry said. “He’s got to do something with me now. He’s gotta explain where that coke came from, and I’m his only explanation. What’s he gonna do? Go to his boss and say ‘All I have is proof to the contrary, but I think Valentine’s an okay guy, let’s cut him loose?’”

“There’s Gianelli’s file,” Jack said.

“Jack, Gianelli’s file could prove Roswell killed Kennedy, Marilyn and Elvis and that Martin was the twentieth hijacker, but it won’t do us a bit of good,” Harry said.

“What’s it going to say about my case? Dick. Nada. Nothing. And that’s all that’s gonna matter to Asbury.”

Jack sipped his beer and stared out at the waves. He drew on his cigarette, watching the ember glow and burn down to the filter. “Gianelli knows who Spencer is.”

Harry threw his cigarette down in the sand. "Jack, there is no Spencer. Forget Spencer. Stop arguing with me, and let me say what I have to say."

"How can you just give up, Harry?" Jack asked. "How can you just..."

"Just what?" Harry shouted. "Run?" He stared at Jack. Jack stared back. "Go ahead, you can say it," Harry said. "Yes. I'm running. You're damn right I'm running. It's what's best for everybody." He lit a new smoke. "I'm going to see Happy Murphy in the morning."

"Jesus, Harry."

Harry shrugged. "This can't be a surprise. What would you do?"

Jack looked at Harry for a long time. "The same thing," he said.

"I'm not going to jail," Harry said. "And it's best for you and the bar. With me gone, you'll lose my bail money, but Asbury'll probably forget about all this. I'm his whole case. He knows he'll get nothing out of you, that he's got nothing on you. If I go away, this whole thing goes away. You'll be able to stay here, keep the bar." Harry took a long drag and exhaled at the stars. "It sucks but it's the only way."

"How're you gonna live?" Jack asked. "Asbury's locked up all your money." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I don't know if I've got anything left."

"You've done enough," Harry said. "I'll find a way. Long as Murphy drops me within a few miles of a bar, I can do the rest."

Jack rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. "Everything's disappearing," he said.

He and Harry stood silent for a long time then they turned and headed back towards the bar. On the boardwalk, Jack stopped. Harry stopped with him.

“Go see Murphy in the morning,” Jack said. “But after that, gimme a couple of days. Woody and Gianelli will be here tomorrow. Give us a couple of days to make something happen. It’ll take Doc that long to get something together anyway.”

Harry nodded. “Okay, Jack. Okay. I guess I owe you at least that.”

Jack drummed his fingers on the front door of the Lone Palm. “Bugs, cops, drugs, jail,” he said. He looked over his shoulder at Harry. “Where’d our life go?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As Catherine Jane rode him across the island and out to Happy Murphy's place Harry reeled off dirty jokes about finally getting his long awaited ride. She failed to respond, only turning to glance at him once or twice over her shoulder, her eyes hidden by dark wraparound sunglasses. Mostly, she concentrated on guiding the bike, especially when they left the smooth pavement of Ocean Avenue for the dirt and gravel roads that skirted the southern edge of the rain forest and led them east to the flat, dry field surrounding St. Peter's Bay.

Catherine Jane slowed the bike as they neared the low dunes marking where the field ended and the beach began. At the end of a long, wooden dock, Happy Murphy's seaplane glimmered in the sun. Murphy was spread-eagle, naked, on one of the wings. He appeared to be fast asleep. Harry hailed him as he and Catherine Jane crossed the dunes, but Murphy didn't stir. At a discreet distance from the plane, Catherine Jane stopped, grinning, as Harry continued yelling and walked out onto the dock. Murphy finally stirred. Catherine Jane watched as the men talked, Harry tilting his head toward her. Murphy, shading his eyes from the sun, looked over at her, waved, and reached for his jeans and baseball cap. He pulled them on and hopped down onto the dock, landing with a loud thump. The men shook hands. Catherine Jane turned and walked back to her bike.

She stripped off her leather and tossed it across the handlebars. After fishing a paperback out of her saddlebag, she settled in the grass beside the bike, her head propped up in the palm of her hand, and tried to read, trying not to think. Harry hadn't explained why he needed the ride, and she hadn't asked. She didn't have to. It wasn't hard to figure

out; Harry was leaving. She understood why. She understood the plans being made did not include her, in order to protect her when Asbury came looking. It made sense. She understood the entire situation completely but hated it nonetheless. Tossing the book aside, she rolled onto her back, laced her fingers behind her head, and closed her eyes, imagining all the things she could do or say to persuade Harry to stay. She knew she would not do or say any of them. It simply wouldn't be fair.

Arm around Harry's shoulder, Murphy led the younger man across the beach and into the shade of the banana trees that surrounded the office. Murphy shook open two lawn chairs and, reaching into a cooler, produced two cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon. He handed one to Harry, drank from the other, and both men sat, facing each other. Harry turned the can in his hand, dropped his eyes to his feet and fumbled for a beginning.

"I know what you're here to ask me." Murphy said. He paused and drank from his beer. "It's a big favor. I could lose my business."

Harry sat back in his chair and stared off through the banana trees. "I have to get off the island, Murph. No way I'm going to jail. Yes, what I'm asking is highly illegal, but I need to ask it anyway. You're my best shot. Can you help me out?"

Murphy pulled a cigar from his back pocket, unwrapped it and bit off the end. He stuck the cigar in his mouth but didn't light it, his gaze fixed on Harry's face. "Me and you and Jack," he said, finally, "we go back a ways. We had good times, and hard times, in New York; we've had good times here. The three of us, we got a history together. There's no one else on this island I can say that about. I'd hate to see you go."

“I’m not happy about leaving, either,” Harry said. “I know it’s the end of a lot of good things, and I hate being the one who makes things different around here. But what are my choices? I don’t have any. And this isn’t just me running away. What about Jack? You know him, Murph. He’ll get himself in all kinds of trouble, bad trouble, trying to get me out of this mess. He’s already doing it.” Harry paused and lit a cigarette. “He’ll lose everything.”

“Jack always did struggle with the difference between the way things are,” Murphy said, “and the way he thinks they ought to be.” Lighting his cigar, Murphy smiled. “One of my favorite things about him. He’s never been afraid to fight the good fight.”

“I know what you’re thinking,” Harry said. “I ought to have more faith in him. That if he says we can find a way out of this, I should believe him.”

Murphy shrugged. “I’m not saying anything. You’re saying it fine on your own.”

Harry sighed, exasperated. “Yeah, I admit it, I feel guilty for running. But I don’t have any *time*, Murph. They could call me into court any day. Next time I go in a cell, I’m never coming out.” He crushed out his cigarette and took a long drink from his beer. “And Asbury’s no fool. He’ll find out soon enough about you and your plane. When that happens, I won’t be able to get anywhere near you.”

“What did Jack say about all this?” Murphy asked.

“He understands,” Harry said. “Agrees.” He shrugged. “He only asked for a couple of days to get something together.”

“Well, then,” Murphy said, “give him that. I’ll spend the next couple days making some calls. I got friends on all kinds of islands, people I trust. I can find you someplace

anonymous and safe.” He smiled. “Asbury may or may not be a fool, but there’s no way he’s half as smart as I am.

“It’s not a mission I’m looking forward to, but if it has to happen, I’ll take care of you, Valentine. Anything goes wrong in the next couple days, if you can get here before the law, I can get us airborne in forty-five seconds.”

Harry stood. “Thanks, Murph. I appreciate it.”

“Glad you came out here,” Murphy said, standing, “saved me a trip over your way. I was getting sick of waiting for Jack to return my calls.”

“We’re pretty sure the bar is bugged,” Harry said, “figure that includes the phone, too.”

“Damn shame, that,” Murphy said. “Well then, you pass this along to Jack. I had a conversation the other day with a friend of yours. Evan Keen. Remember him?”

“Sure.”

“He’s been working these past few weeks for Martin,” Murphy said, “driving those two around in their big cars. I flew him over to Barbados. They sent him on vacation.”

Harry smiled. “What’s he know?”

“Doesn’t seem like much,” Murphy said, “but maybe enough to make Martin nervous enough to want him out of sight for a couple weeks.” He stepped close to Harry and stuck a finger in his chest. “You tell Jack about this. Today. Tell him he needs Evan, I know where to find him.”

“I will,” Harry said.

As Harry turned to walk away, Murphy grabbed him by the arm. “One more thing,” Murphy said, nodding his head toward Catherine Jane. “Show that girl some respect. Talk to her.” He took the cigar from his mouth. “If it comes to that, say good-bye like a man. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

Harry nodded and started to say something to Murphy, but the roar of the motorcycle drowned out his words.

Jack and Harry stood ankle deep in the ocean out in front of Jack’s house late that afternoon. Jack had taken Murphy’s message with only a nod and grin, patting Harry on the back. It made Harry nervous. The more Jack believed things would work out, the harder it would hit all of them when, if, they didn’t.

“So Doc’s gonna get you outta here,” Jack said.

Harry shrugged. “He says he’s got friends, that there are places for me to go.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “Keep my head down. Work on fishing boats and stay out from behind the bar for a while. I tend to attract attention that way.” He shrugged. “I mean, who knows how hard Asbury’s gonna look, anyway? I’ll lay low a month or two, maybe three. Then I figure Australia. I thought about Ireland, but I don’t think I could hack the weather.”

Jack wiped at the foam collecting around his ankles. “Seems appropriate. Australia started as a penal colony.”

“Yeah, I always liked Aussies anyway,” Harry said. “They’re like Americans without all the hang-ups.”

“Gonna make up an alias?” asked Jack.

“Maybe. Might be fun.”

“Got one in mind?”

Harry smiled. “Jimmy Spencer has a nice ring to it.”

“Holy shit! Look at what washed up on shore over there!”

Jack and Harry turned in unison toward the voice. A tall, narrow man in a bright pink shirt and lemon yellow pants strode toward them across the beach. He held a white Panama hat on his head with one hand and stepped through the sand as if he feared it would suddenly open beneath him.

“Woody!” Jack shouted. “I can’t believe you found the right island.”

Woody staggered to the edge of the water and stopped dead like the waves were made of acid. “Ha, ha, wise ass,” he said. “Took me three tries but I found it. Nice hotel you got us in, schmuck. You call that a pool?” Woody squinted at Harry. “Valentine, you silly bastard, what did you get yourself into?”

Harry laughed. “Whadda ya say, Woodrow? Good to see you. Thanks for coming out here.”

“Hey, what the fuck, right? It’s on your tab, anyways. Let’s get some cocktails.”

Woody turned and nodded up the beach at a short, brawny man standing on Jack’s porch. He wore a tight black T-shirt and black shorts. His gold watch glinted in the sun as he gripped the porch railing.

“That’s Gianelli,” Woody said as they walked up the beach. “Prepare yourselves for weirdness. He’s off in some super spy world in his head. Said he could smell Michaels in the air soon as we got off the plane. He keeps talking about eating Roswell’s

heart while the guy is still alive to watch it.” Woody looked over his shoulder at Jack and Harry. “I’m glad he’s on our side.” They stepped up onto the porch. “Bobby Gianelli, meet Jack Donovan and Harry Valentine.”

Gianelli tapped his fist twice against his heart and then once against Jack’s. Lovely, Jack thought. Must be my induction into the Roswell brotherhood. Gianelli then looked around Jack at the Monroe House. “So that’s where the bastard’s been holed up?” he asked. He walked to the end of the deck, pulled a digital camera from his pocket and began taking pictures.

“That’s it,” Jack said, glancing at the others. Harry stifled a laugh, and Woody shrugged. “Doesn’t seem to do much up there. Roswell lives in the city.”

“You’d hardly know anybody was in there,” Gianelli said. “No deck furniture, shades drawn over all the windows. Nothing personal about the place at all. Probably about as lived in as a movie set inside.” He looked at the others, shaking his head. “Typical Martin Michaels. Buy it and waste it.” He turned to Jack. “From what Woody’s told me though, I bet there’s wall space reserved for your head in there, pal.”

“Take it easy, Bobby,” Woody said. “This isn’t that kind of party.”

“Tell that to the doctor,” said Gianelli, dropping the camera in his pocket. “It’s always that kind of party for those two. Somebody should’ve punched their ticket a long time ago.”

Jack and Harry looked at each other.

“Don’t let him get you excited,” Woody said. “He talks like that all the time.”

Jack leaned against the railing. “So. The file.”

“Took me a long time getting it together,” Gianelli said, “but I’ll bury them with it eventually. It’s inevitable. I’m gonna drive the wheels of justice right over them. Then I’m gonna back up. I am the retribution that awaits them.”

“See?” said Woody. “What’d I tell you?”

“Please continue,” Harry said.

“I was the chief investigating officer in Lisa Michaels’ death,” said Gianelli. “I’d just been transferred into homicide from vice and I guess nobody thought to fill me in on the program. I kept trying to interview witnesses, look at records, you know, investigate things.” Everyone nodded. “But nobody wanted any investigating done. Not Michaels, not the department brass, not the institution. I kept getting stonewalled and then I got yanked off the case, threatened with insubordination charges. I smelled the stink on the whole thing right away.”

“We know all this,” Jack said.

“Well, what you don’t know,” Gianelli said, “and what nobody else knows I know, is what was going on in that institution before Lisa died.” He looked at the others. “I knew they were gonna take the case away from me, so before it was official I spent a quiet afternoon out at the institution. Just me and the file cabinets.” He shrugged. “I knew I couldn’t use that stuff in court, but it had the truth in it and was headed for the shredder.” Gianelli again crossed the porch toward the Monroe House. He set his sunglasses on the top of his head and stared up at the mansion. “Lot of good it did the doctor. That was my fault. I should’ve seen that coming, but I was so caught up in fighting off my own colleagues,” he looked over his shoulder at Jack, “and worrying about where my wife was, I never thought twice about him.”

“And he was the key,” Jack said. “There was no doctor-patient romance going on, was there?”

Gianelli shook his head. “Hell no. She’d been catatonic for fifteen years. Fried on shock therapy and massive doses of all the wrong meds. And Vance was a good guy, one of the best in the business, awards all over his walls. He fought to get her meds adjusted, as much as the other doctors would let him. He went to see her, talked to her, almost everyday. Half the time he had to sneak into her room. I’ve got copies of pages and pages of his notes. And she was coming around. First just making facial expressions, gestures. Then came trying to talk, trying to answer questions. The more progress he made, the more the other doctors loaded his schedule with other patients, sent him to conferences. But Vance kept at it, devoted hours of his personal time to Lisa’s case.”

“Why?” Harry asked. “Why her?”

“Because she was the worst case in the institution and that’s how Vance was,” Gianelli said. “Not that the guy was a straight up saint. He knew what success with Lisa could do for his career. But she mattered to him, mostly, because the more progress he made with her, the worse her stories got.”

“Stories about what?” Jack asked.

“Her mother,” Gianelli said. “That’s where Vance was convinced the case was heading. So he started poking around into her records, into her past. Fifteen years ago, when the mother vanished, and I don’t mean left, I mean flat-out disappeared, Lisa tried to kill herself. That’s how she ended up institutionalized. Michaels put her in under a false name, but Vance started trying to trace the checks, started trying to find out about when she first came in.

“His mistake was trusting his co-workers, talking up all the progress he was making, asking questions – pushing his luck, basically. Word got back to Michaels that Vance was looking for answers.” Gianelli shook his head. “And I think Vance wanted it that way. I don’t think he thought for a minute he’d end up dead, and it seems from his notes that he never did prove Michaels was her father. He just wanted someone to own up to being the girl’s father.” Gianelli shrugged. His voice was weary. “Who would think someone would rather kill her than claim her?”

“The guy killed his own daughter,” Harry said after a while. “That’s what you’re saying. Martin Michaels murdered his own daughter.”

Gianelli nodded. “To keep secret the fact that he killed his wife, Ruth.”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Harry said. “You can prove this?”

Gianelli hesitated a long time. “No. I can’t. Not in court, not in front of a judge. But Ruth vanished right in the middle of a real messy divorce. She was going to clean him out.” He shrugged. “She had him by the balls, was all set to drag his financial records into court. Martin was dead in the water, until he hired himself a new lawyer. One David Roswell. Martin said he settled, he had signed divorce papers, forged probably, that said his wife dropped everything for a lump sum of one million in cash.”

“You wouldn’t have to pay me a million to never see Martin again,” Jack said.

“You’d take a million when you had a clear line on ten?” Gianelli asked. “You’d leave your daughter to grow up alone with that guy? You wouldn’t take her with you, wherever you went?”

Jack shrugged.

“Didn’t think so,” Gianelli said. “I think Lisa knew what happened to her mother. I think that’s what Vance was on the verge of finding out.”

“Is it possible,” Harry asked, “that Martin isn’t responsible for these deaths?”

“No,” Gianelli said. He shook his head. “I know more about these two than anyone, dead or alive. Martin may not have pulled the proverbial trigger, but he’s responsible.”

“And people protected him?” Jack asked. “After you told them what you knew?”

“Not people,” Gianelli said. “Roswell.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Jack said.

“Not him,” Woody said, “the other guy.”

Gianelli snorted at the joke. “I might believe that, too. There’s plenty more to those two other than that sickness with Lisa and Ruth. There’s money laundering, extortion, corporate espionage. I’ve got bits and pieces of all of it. It’s all circumstantial, but there’s just too fucking much of it to ignore.”

“But with Lisa and Vance dead and nobody asking questions, Martin and Roswell are in the clear,” Jack said. “What the hell are they doing here?”

For the first time, Gianelli smiled. “Because Michaels started to crack. This thing with Lisa? All kinds of shit popped up in the papers, the storefront rags, anyway, about her and Ruth. Those tabloid people? They don’t give a fuck about proof. Papparazzi swarmed on him like rats on roadkill. They crept his house at night. I heard he shot a guy from the *Enquirer* right in the ass. One of his security guards teargassed a TV crew, and Michaels bought him a convertible Benz for it.” Gianelli started laughing. “I heard it got a lot worse than that, though. Rumors said he was hearing voices, not sleeping for

days at a time. Think about it, Martin let Roswell erase his family. Even a man like Martin can't live with that forever. Roswell had to get him out of there before he broke in half and sank the both of them."

"Great," Jack said. "So now we got him." He lit a cigarette. "How do I fit into all of this?"

"He needs you," Gianelli said. "He needs someone to hate, someone to take the blame for the voices in his head. He needs to beat up on people, to take from people, the more painful the loss, the better. He needs to watch things die. It's what gets him out of bed in the morning. It's who he is, at least who he's become. He's the guy who keeps a piranha just so he can feed it live goldfish."

Jack exhaled a long plume of smoke. "Goldfish are dumb," he said, "and they don't live very long. I don't like being the goldfish."

"Yeah, me either," said Harry. "No offense, detective, but I still don't see what that file of horror stories does for me."

"Jimmy Spencer is in that file," Gianelli said. "Look, Michaels and Roswell are out of their element here. They're disconnected from their network. That's the reason they had to import Spencer to begin with. And now that they're in this deep with you guys, they can't get out. There's a chance, however small, that they've left a hole somewhere. If they did, I'll find it. I'll talk to Asbury, put some ideas in his head, get him thinking in other directions."

Harry looked down at his feet. He wiggled his toes in his sneakers. "If it's all the same to you guys, I'll keep my travel plans intact."

Jack turned to say something then thought better of it after a glare from Harry. He'd gotten his few days. It was up to him now. Pushing Harry wasn't going to help matters any. Everyone jumped when Woody slapped his hands together.

"Enough gloom and doom," Woody said. "I'm fucking parched. Take me up to the Lone Clam and buy me a fucking beer for chrissakes."

"Lone Palm," Jack said. "It's the Lone Palm."

Tony handed Jack a slip of paper when they walked in. It was a message to call Asbury, as soon as possible. Jack walked behind the bar, set a beer in front of Woody and grabbed the phone.

"Donovan, old pal, good to hear your voice," Asbury said. "Strangest thing just happened. There's a John Doe in the city morgue, and lo and behold, he seems to bear quite a resemblance to your pal Jimmy Spencer. Call me crazy, but I think you and I need to talk about that. Today."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

An hour later, Jack and his entourage showed up at Asbury's office. Gianelli brought his file, after burying one copy behind Jack's house and securing the other in a safety deposit box at the hotel. Asbury's office was at the end of a labyrinth of anonymous cubicles inhabited by the lesser agents and investigators Jack referred to as "Asbury's demonic minions."

The Special Agent himself inhabited a bonafide office, one with three actual walls, but it was no more personal than the beige metal and smoked fiberglass cubicles. A lone plant wilted on the windowsill, more gray than green and a cluttered bulletin board hung on the wall behind a more cluttered desk. A dented green file cabinet sat in one corner, a stained coffee pot perched on top of it. As proof positive of his unique sense of humor, Asbury had a hand-lettered sign taped to his office door: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

An attractive brunette in a black skirt and pearl blouse balanced on the lone bare corner of Asbury's desk, her legs crossed, holstered gun protruding from her hip. As she leaned toward Asbury, a gold badge on a chain dangled in the air. The others lined behind him, Jack rapped his knuckles on the glass of the open door. Without altering her posture, the brunette turned her head.

"Jack Donovan. And friends," Asbury said. "This is the gentleman I was just telling you about, Agent Emerson." He smiled at her. "Would you please excuse us?"

Emerson eased off the desk and excused herself past the enraptured crowd in the doorway.

“Don’t grow ‘em like that where I’m from,” Gianelli said.

“Good to see you’re keeping busy,” Jack said, approaching the desk. “I remember her from that wonderful morning at the Lone Palm. How many syllables?”

“Her name is Elizabeth,” Asbury said, “but she goes by Beth. It’s a tough call.” He waved his hand at the men behind Jack. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Well, let’s see,” Jack said, crossing his arms and stroking his chin, “you remember Mr. Harry Valentine, co-proprietor of the Lone Palm Café.”

The men nodded to each other.

“How’s the eye?” asked Asbury.

“Fuck you,” Harry said.

“Well, now that you guys are reacquainted,” Jack said, “this tall gentleman is Mr. Woodrow Willis, lately of the New York Post and currently a free-lance journalist based out of New York City and Los Angeles. The serious looking gentleman to his left is Detective Robert Gianelli, of the Los Angeles Police Department. They have some information pertinent to your investigation involving Mr. Valentine.”

“Oh, do they now?” said Asbury, looking them all over. Woody was a carousel in hot pink pants, and a lemon and teal striped shirt. His blond hair stood straight up on his head. Gianelli, in all black and gold-rimmed pilot glasses, hair plastered solid by pounds of gel, looked more like a knee-breaker for a shylock than a cop. Jack and Harry wore their standard uniforms, Jack in a tropical explosion of a shirt and cut-off shorts, Harry in terminally wrinkled khakis and a white T-shirt. Asbury couldn’t be sure they had worn shoes to his office. He wondered what he was about to get himself into.

“Well, Jack,” he said, “breaking out the big guns, I see. What kind of information are we talking about? And by the way, it’s five years for meddling in a CSS investigation.”

“Some background information about Roswell and Michaels,” answered Jack, “and Detective Gianelli here has some experience with the elusive Mr. James Spencer, lately of the Sandpiper.”

“Intriguing,” Asbury said with a yawn. He stood. “Take a trip to the morgue with me, fellow crime fighters, and let’s see if we can figure out just how late Spencer really is.”

At the morgue, when the lab tech threw back the sheet, Jack, Harry and Gianelli immediately recognized the cold, bloated corpse of James Spencer. Woody covered his mouth and mumbled on his way out the door. Asbury noticed both Jack and Harry turned gray. He couldn’t tell, however, if that was because of the cadaver and its attendant stench, or because they were looking at the dead body of Harry’s best chance to stay free. Gianelli had no reaction.

“Is that him?” Asbury asked.

“That’s Spencer,” Gianelli said. “Last time I saw him was in Los Angeles. He and I talked about a homicide, one I was thinking he had committed.” Gianelli took off his shades and peered down into Spencer’s face. “Never did stick him for it, though. It went down as an accidental overdose. But he and I had crossed paths several times before that.”

“Over what?” asked Asbury.

“He was a mid-level operator, a bag and occasional button man for Martin Michaels and David Roswell. Whenever we looked at them, we always ended up looking at him first.”

“I’m assuming there’s more detail in that file,” Asbury said.

Gianelli smiled at him. He reached into the file and produced a large, black and white photograph. “Spencer,” he said, “in profile. Took it myself.”

Asbury took the photo and looked at it. It was Spencer, all right. This, Asbury thought, is a perfectly clear picture of a nice clean case turning to dog shit before my very eyes. He looked at Harry, knowing he could ignore the photo and have Valentine sentenced by noon the next day. But Asbury knew he wouldn’t go that route. Not now. He and Jack had talked about Spencer, and now here he was on a slab, which meant somebody must’ve killed him. Asbury decided he would like to know who that was. He led Jack and the rest into the lobby, where they found Woody.

“Gianelli, you come with me,” Asbury said. “Let’s sit down in the cafeteria and take a look at this file. You three, find something to do, but do it in the neighborhood. Especially you, Valentine.”

Asbury and Gianelli strode down the hall, their shoes clicking in time on the tile. Jack put his hands in his pockets and gave Harry a hopeful smile. Harry stared at his ratty sneakers and fought against the rising hope in his heart.

“This place gives me the creeps,” said Woody. “Let’s get the fuck out of here, let Batman and Robin do their thing, and grab us a cup of coffee.”

Jack, Harry and Woody settled for a while at the coffee shop across the street from the hospital. They sat at a small outside table. Jack and Harry chain smoked over steaming bowls of Kona served black while Woody nursed an iced coffee and grumbled about the heat. He wondered aloud how Jack and Harry could drink hot coffee through such a steam bath of an afternoon. Neither Jack nor Harry paid any attention. Jack stubbed out his fifth consecutive cigarette and turned to the others.

“How do you think it’s going in there?” he asked.

“Who the hell knows?” Woody said. “Should go fine, as long as Gianelli doesn’t pop a spring.”

“Think he will?” asked Harry.

“There’s no telling, really,” said Woody. “I figure by the time they get through the file, Asbury will either offer him a job or have him fitted for a straightjacket.” He swirled his coffee in its plastic cup. “This thing with Michaels and Roswell is deeply personal to him. Goes way beyond what happened with Roswell and his wife.”

“They have that affect on people,” Jack said. “They like to hit where it hurts.”

“For all his cynicism,” Woody said, “Bobby has trouble getting his mind around the fact that the worse they behave, the more invulnerable they get.” He shrugged. “He was a rising star in the LAPD before all this, one of their best young investigators. I think he hates himself a little bit for letting those two do what they did to him, ruining his marriage, derailing his career.”

Harry stood suddenly, bumping the table, his metal chair scraping against the concrete sidewalk. “I’m going in for a refill. Anyone else?”

Jack handed his mug over to Harry. Woody shook his head. “This coffee sucks. I haven’t had a decent cup of coffee since I left New York.”

“Suit yourself,” Harry said and he disappeared into the shop.

Woody jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “What’s Valentine’s problem?”

“Suspense, I guess,” said Jack. “No matter how this plays out, the rest of us get a choice about what to do next. He doesn’t.” Jack lit a cigarette. “And he hasn’t said anything, but I know he wonders how much of this is his own fault, how much of this he *let* Martin and Roswell do to him.”

“Yeah,” Woody said, “they have that effect on people.”

Harry returned with the refills and the trio bantered about nothing until Gianelli and Asbury emerged, side by side but not speaking, from the front doors of the hospital. Jack and Woody jumped up from the table and jogged across the street. Harry took his time, polishing off his coffee, setting the mug back on the table and sauntering across the street, hands in his pockets, the last of his cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

On the hospital steps, Gianelli and Asbury only nodded a greeting to Jack and Woody. Gianelli’s face was blank, his file tucked under his arm. Asbury’s brow furrowed over his sunglasses, and he set his jaw as he watched Harry step up onto the sidewalk. Jack turned from Asbury to Harry and noticed his friend and the special agent wore the exact same expression. It made him nervous. He watched Harry flick his cigarette away and heard him crack his knuckles as he ascended the stairs. Asbury waited until Harry caught up before he spoke.

“Those two,” he said, “it offends me that they live on this island. That they even breathe the air feels like thievery.” He focused his gaze on Harry. “But that does not make them suspects in this case. Even with Spencer, all we’ve got is three bad reputations. There’s no proof Spencer has done anything on this island except die.”

Jack protested but Asbury raised a hand and silenced him.

“I can see what you proposed as a possibility,” Asbury said. “These two certainly seem capable of a set-up like that. Real estate deals and bar fights don’t seem like sufficient motivation,” he looked at Jack and then at Harry and then grinned, “though you two can grate on one’s nerves.”

“But,” Harry said.

“But,” Asbury said, “as an island official prosecuting a case, I’m restricted to evidence. And all the evidence still points to you, Valentine.”

“So nothing’s changed,” Harry said.

“In legal terms? I’m afraid not,” Asbury said. “You don’t look as guilty as you used to, but my hands are tied.”

“Can’t you bring Roswell and Michaels back in?” Jack asked. “With what you know, you could rattle their cage some, maybe get something out of them.”

“Michaels could crack,” Ginaelli said. “He always was a little unstable.” He nodded at Asbury. “I’d bet John here could peel the skin off him. But we’ll never get anywhere with Roswell around.”

Jack and Harry looked at Asbury. He shrugged. “Bobby’s right. Roswell is a great white shark of a lawyer. He’d eat my whole department alive if we went after him with what we’ve got. Making accusations based on a scenario constructed by the defendant?

I'd be laughed all the way down to beach patrol. He and Michaels would be spending my department's pension fund on some other island and Harry would still be in jail."

Jack spat on the sidewalk and started to pace. "Sounds like a shortage of spine to me."

"It's common sense," Asbury said. He smeared the spit under his shoe. "And that's a misdemeanor, Jack. Fifty-dollar fine."

Jack spat again, missing Asbury's shoe by less than an inch. The two men glared at each other. Asbury finally broke, blowing out a long sigh and glancing at his watch.

"Day after tomorrow," he said, "Valentine's due to be arraigned. Tomorrow morning, I'll ask the judge for more time." He looked around at the men. "He'll give me a week at most." He glanced at his watch again. "I've got a tee time to make. Detective Gianelli? Would you fill these gentlemen in on the rest of our situation?"

Gianelli nodded and Asbury turned and walked back into the hospital. Jack cursed under his breath. "I wonder if these golf dates are with Roswell," he said.

"He needs the gun," Gianelli announced. "They pulled the bullets from the body to run tests on them. If we can get the gun, get a ballistics match, we might have something." He looked at Jack. "And there's no way Asbury's dirty. I'd bet my life on it."

"We're betting mine on it," Harry said. He laughed and lit a cigarette. "Get the gun? Gimmie a break. It's gotta be at the bottom of the ocean by now. We've got a better chance of getting a confession. Roswell holds Martin's hand for everything. Why wouldn't he have it? Why would Martin be the triggerman, anyway? I think Roswell did Spencer."

“No way,” Gianelli said. “If he’d done Spencer, we wouldn’t be having this conversation ‘cause we’d never have found the body. Roswell’s too neat. It had to be Martin.”

“He’s still got the gun,” Jack said, “I heard him off in the jungle with it the other night.”

“He’s got *a* gun,” Harry said, shaking his head. “You guys really think he’s still got the one he used on Spencer?”

“We’ve got nothing to lose by looking,” Woody said with a shrug.

“That’s right,” Gianelli said. “We found Spencer. Look, they’re making mistakes. We’re making up ground. Asbury’s dying to hang this on Michaels; he *knows* he did it. We just have to hand him something he can take to court.”

“Us?” Jack said. “He’s the freaking cop here, he’s the one with a whole office at his disposal.”

“And what’s his reason to ask Martin for the gun? Roswell gets the slightest whiff that Asbury’s onto them,” Gianelli said, “how long you think they’ll linger on this island? Then where are we?”

“All right,” Jack said. “We’ll find the gun.” He looked at Harry. “We’ll find it. We start looking tonight.” He grabbed Gianelli by the arm. “You, Bobby, are in charge of getting us into that house.”

Asbury passed the cubicles at the CSS office, waving at Emerson to follow him when he passed her desk. Asbury poured a cup of hours-old coffee, fell into his chair and

threw his heels up onto the windowsill. Emerson entered soon after and closed the door quietly behind her. She poured her own coffee and settled on a corner of the desk.

“They got to you, didn’t they,” she said.

Asbury stared out the window at the city. “Enough to keep me thinking we probably have the wrong guy.” He sighed. “Just once, before I retire, I’d like one simple, open and shut case.”

Emerson laughed. “You are so full of shit, boss,” she said. “You love this stuff. You’re a born detective. Those guys have no idea how lucky they are to have you on this case.”

Asbury slurped his coffee and kept his gaze fixed on New Amsterdam’s modest skyline. “I went after Valentine too hard too fast. He just seemed so, so...guilty. I can’t cut him loose now without a damn good reason. I should’ve known it was too easy from the beginning.” He shook his head, finally turning to face Emerson. “We’ve been suckered; I’ve been suckered by Roswell and Michaels. We’re being used to do their dirty work.” He swallowed the rest of his coffee and set his mug on his desk. “It’s absolutely infuriating.”

“So what’s the next move?” Emerson asked.

Asbury shrugged. “Who knows? Those guys are in *way* over their heads. I wonder if it’s not too late to do anything at all.”

“You think of anything,” Emerson said, “anything at all, you let me know. I’ll do what I can to help.” She got up to leave.

“Stay a minute, Beth,” Asbury said.

She stopped at the door, her hand on the knob. “What’s on your mind?” she asked, over her shoulder.

“Lots of money around,” Asbury said. “The guys who have it are very interested in the outcome of this case.” He unwrapped a stick of gum and folded it into his mouth. “Lewis bought a new car. Stowe put in for two weeks vacation. Rodriguez has been crawling up my ass to be my right hand man on this case.” He paused and stared at her back. “You catch the way I’ve drifted?”

Emerson finally turned. “The two others I don’t know about, but Rodriguez has been bucking for a promotion for over a year. This is the biggest case we’ve had since he got here.” She shrugged.

“He’s a nice guy,” Asbury said, “but not much of a cop. Puts him at the top of my list.”

“He’s got a family,” Emerson said.

Asbury shrugged.

“What do you want me to do?” Emerson asked.

“Keep your eyes and ears open,” Asbury said. “Not just Rodriguez, with everybody. Anything, anyone, looks suspicious to you, let me know.”

“You want me to birddog our own people?” Emerson said.

“It’s an order,” Asbury said. “I’m the boss, I’ll take the heat.”

“I hope you’re wrong about this, John,”

Asbury stared at her for a long time. “I do, too.”

Jack served the margaritas and settled into his hammock. High, heavy clouds stretched over the beach, dulling the sunlight and trapping the heat. There was no breeze and the ocean was like glass. Woody and Gianelli sat on the steps and Harry, smoking a cigarette, wandered about in the sand and beach grass before the house.

“Where do we start?” Jack asked.

“Alarm system?” Gianelli asked.

Jack laughed. “Out here? Who’d answer it?”

“Cooks? Maids?” Gianelli asked.

“I’ve never seen anyone but Martin anywhere near that house,” Jack said.

“Okay, then,” Gianelli said, dropping a small leather pouch on the step in front of him. He unzipped it and, one by one, removed and inspected a number of small silver tools.

“Second career as a dentist?” Woody asked.

Gianelli didn’t respond. Woody sipped his drink. He thought it was funny.

“Standard issue B&E kit,” said Harry. “Breaking and entering.”

“Who goes?” asked Gianelli.

“I’ll go,” said Harry. “I’ve done enough standing around. Besides, how much more trouble can I get in?”

“We all go,” said Woody. “It’s a big house, the more people looking, the quicker we get done.”

“Bobby and I go,” said Jack, “and that’s it. The more people in the house, the better our chances of getting caught, or telegraphing we were there.”

Gianelli nodded. "Good plan. You're thinking like a detective, I'm impressed. We can go tonight?"

"Every night, at some point or other, that limo comes for him," Jack said. "I don't know where he goes, or what he does. Dinner, maybe, up at the hotels. Maybe he's got a girl stashed somewhere." He shrugged. "Problem is, you never know when he's coming home."

"You've been in the house?" Gianelli asked.

Jack shook his head. "Never."

"This is bullshit. I want in," Harry said. "There's no way I'm standing around while you guys take the risks."

"Can't happen," Jack said, shaking his head. "What if we get caught? What if you leave fingerprints? We can't take the slightest chance of you being connected to this. We already have a big enough mess to clean up."

Harry stared at Jack for a long time. "I'm gonna try real hard not to take that personal."

"Shouldn't be too hard," Jack said, "since it wasn't meant that way. Tables were turned, you'd be doing it for me." Harry nodded. "I promised I'd make something happen if you stuck around," Jack said, "and that's what I'm doing." He lit a smoke.

Harry looked away and lit a cigarette. "All right, Captain, we'll play it your way."

* * *

Martin sat in the chair before Roswell's desk. Then he stood again and walked to the door. He shoved his hands in his pockets and turned face to Roswell. The news of Gianelli's arrival disturbed him. Anger cramped Martin's face; that was not a name he

had ever anticipated hearing again. “I guess he didn’t self-destruct as completely as you thought,” he said. “How the hell’d he find us here?”

“Some friend of Valentine and Donovan’s dug him up,” Roswell said. “It’s a minor matter, but I thought you’d want to know. We must assume Asbury is now well acquainted with our history.”

“How long has this been going on? How did you not get this out of Taylor?”

“Who knows if Samantha was involved?” Roswell said. “Don’t panic, Martin. That would be the worst reaction right now. Gianelli never uncovered anything substantial about us; he’s here with a pocket full of rumors.”

Martin strode to the desk. “What am I paying you for, David? This is just the kind of situation you’re not supposed to let happen.” He leaned forward on the desk, his weight on his palms. “Everything we buried in California was supposed to stay buried there.”

Roswell rocked back in his chair. “They still are.”

Martin sat, covering his mouth with his hand. He slid his hand to his throat. “Fix me a drink, David.”

“I don’t keep liquor in the office,” Roswell said.

Martin rubbed his hands on the armrests, trying to kill the itching in his palms. “You’re of less use to me every minute I’m here,” he said. “In this office. On this island.”

“Then fire me,” Roswell said coolly, staring Martin down.

“I’m thinking about it,” Martin said, averting his eyes, staring down at the carpet. Do it. Who needs him? I let him make me this way, Martin thought, weak, dependent. And what’s it gotten me? Misery. Persecution. Exile. Let him go, let the bastard bleed

someone else for a change, let him vanish. Martin raised his eyes, opening his mouth to speak.

“Think about this,” Roswell said, eyebrows raised in anticipation. “Someone found Spencer shot dead in a hotel room. Valentine and Donovan made the ID. Asbury was there. They know you did it. Asbury knows you did it.” He paused and leaned forward in his chair. “I know you did it.” He shrugged. “I know everything you’ve ever done.”

Martin clenched his hands into fists. He chewed on his tongue, his stomach burning. Roswell was right. I can’t afford it, Martin thought. He stared at Roswell. Look at what he’s done as an ally. Do I want him as an enemy?

Roswell waited for Martin to speak. Martin said nothing, pouting like a recalcitrant child. “Am I fired?” Roswell asked.

Martin shook his head. He was trapped. “So what do we do?”

Roswell reached into his jacket and produced a cigar. “Asbury will probably be back around,” he said, lighting the cigar, “but we’ll know when beforehand. He asks about Spencer, we shrug. Never heard of him. If he asks for Evan, we shrug. Kid took a vacation. If he asks for Samantha, we bring her back. She knows nothing anyway. She would probably only do us good.”

Martin stood. “I’ll think about what you said.” He walked for the door.

Roswell sighed. “Just toss the fucking gun in the ocean.”

Martin stopped in the doorway, holding the door open with one shaking hand. “I may still need it,” he said.

“Killing Jack now would destroy us for sure,” Roswell said.

“What makes you think,” said Martin, “that I’m talking about Jack?” He walked out, slamming the door behind him.

Roswell splayed his hands on his desk, staring down at his fingers. Martin was getting harder and harder to manage. It was getting less and less worth the effort. Bring me the gun, Martin. One shot and I’ll put both of us out of our misery.

Asbury double-checked to make sure his office door was locked and played the tape Rodriguez had given him one more time. Nothing changed; that was Emerson’s voice. She was briefing Roswell about the investigation. He popped the tape out of the recorder and tossed it on his desk. Ever since his promotion, he’d dreaded a moment like this, though he knew it was inevitable. His people were only human, humans who were overworked and underpaid.

Asbury stared at the tape, wondering if he had done this to himself, done this to Emerson, by ordering Michaels and Roswell into the office, introducing them to his staff, letting them find a vulnerability. They had played him at every turn, firing him up to go after Valentine, helping him help them find an exploitable connection in his office. He shook his head. No, Emerson should’ve resisted, should’ve been stronger. The responsibility was hers.

But why then, Asbury asked himself, had Beth been the first person he’d suspected when that file first sparked worries of betrayal in his mind? Why did I not cut her out of the case? Why did I not get to her before they did? Because, he admitted, I knew that if she turned I could use her to get them. And now that she had turned, Asbury knew he would use her. It was good, smart police work. Asbury picked up the tape and

slipped it into his pocket, disgusted. He couldn't decide what made him sicker, that he had divided his staff against itself to expose the mole, deceiving Emerson outright in the process, setting her up to fall, or that the strategy had worked. I wonder, he thought, if I'm really any better than the people I'm chasing?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

As Woody and Gianelli carried the stereo speakers onto the porch, Jack dropped the speaker wire out the window. “Okay,” Jack said, turning to Harry, “you see anything funny while we’re in there, you crank this bitch. I mean crank it.” He squatted in front of the stereo. “This here is the volume; I’ll set up the CD before we go.”

Harry stood over him, tapping a CD case against his thigh. “I think I can figure it out, how to work the stereo we used to have in our old apartment.”

Jack looked up. “Okay, sure. Right. Sorry.” He stood. Harry handed him the CD.

“Buffett’s Greatest,” Jack said.

“I’m thinking *Fins*,” Harry said. “Big intro, appropriate subject matter.” He smiled. “Sharks that can swim on the land.”

“Good choice,” Jack said.

Woody and Gianelli came in from the porch, the screen door slamming behind them. Gianelli turned and kicked the door. “Get that fixed, Jack,” he said, “plays hell with a guy’s nerves.”

“Never,” Jack said.

Gianelli sighed. He checked his watch. “It’s your house. We almost ready? He’s been gone twenty-three minutes already.” He offered Jack a small canister of black face paint. “Sure you don’t want some?”

Jack declined. “But I sure wish I had a shirt like that,” he said.

Gianelli pulled his Batman T-shirt away from his chest, staring down at the bright yellow logo. It was the only color on him. Everything else was black, down to the gloves and watch cap. “What? Hey, don’t mock the Dark Knight.”

Laughing, Jack tied a black bandana over his hair and pulled on the gloves he’d borrowed from the detective. His feet were bare. “Holy inadmissible evidence, Caped Crusader. Let’s get this over with.”

Harry and Woody, margaritas in hand, watched from the porch as Jack and Bobby climbed up the hill and faded into the darkness.

The front door of the Monroe House opened when Jack turned the knob, leaving Gianelli shaking his head as he put his tools away. Inside, they conferred in whispers and divided the house in half. Jack took the second floor and Gianelli the first. As Jack eased open a drawer in Martin’s desk, flashlight in his mouth, he paused once, listening for the detective. There wasn’t a sound from downstairs. The guy was good, Jack thought, you had to give him that.

Gianelli stood in the middle of the barren kitchen. No gun. In fact, it seemed Martin didn’t use his kitchen at all. Dust had collected on the countertops and the cabinets were bare. Nothing in the fridge, nothing but ice in the freezer. Gianelli knew he had to be extra careful, resisting the urge to leave Martin a cryptic message in the countertop dust. A well-lived in house was a lot easier to search without leaving a trail. He jumped when he heard a thump from upstairs. Jack. Bumping into something. Gianelli shook his head and moved down the hall to the bathroom. The toilet tank was always a favorite spot.

Jack shined his flashlight one more time around Martin's office. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He'd been through the desk and the closet twice, sure he'd find a secret compartment, a lockbox, something. He'd found nothing. The other four rooms he'd searched upstairs were barren, no furniture, closets empty and dusty. Frustrated and certain he was leaving a neon lit trail all over the upstairs, Jack headed down the hall to the bedroom, the last room to search. All right, he thought, crossing the threshold, extra slow and extra careful. Martin was in here every day. He'd notice anything out of place. The gun is in here, Jack thought. If it's not, either there is no gun or Martin Michaels is smarter than me. Neither option was acceptable. Jack kicked over the metal wastebasket as he approached the bed.

Gianelli left the bathroom and headed down the hall to the living room. As he passed the beam of his flashlight around the room he smiled. Exactly the same. Exactly the same set-up as the house in L.A. Must've shipped every last piece of furniture down. Must've cost a fortune to do it. Gianelli sat in the huge leather armchair and palmed the large globe beside him. The globe was an imitation antique, a reproduction of the world in the days of the British Empire. Sea monsters spouted water and swallowed sailing ships. He slid back the northern hemisphere, revealing four glasses and half-full crystal decanter. Gianelli pulled the stopper and raised the decanter to his lips. Yup. MacClellan. Twenty-year old, if I'm not mistaken. Michaels was a sadistic animal, but he's always had fine taste in liquor.

Upstairs, in Martin's bedroom, Jack pulled open the doors of a large wardrobe. His jaw dropped. Guns. Easily a dozen of them, rifles, pistols. Boxes of bullets sat neatly stacked in the bottom of the wardrobe. Paydirt. Jack sighed with relief. He leaned in with

his flashlight to get a better look at the pistols. There, a nine-millimeter. He reached for it then hesitated. Right beside the first was a second, and beside that was a third. Fuck. There were half a dozen identical guns hanging there. Goddamn. Which one was it? He chewed the inside of his cheek, thinking. He decided to run downstairs and find Gianelli. A detective would know what to look for. Then he heard the cowbell and drums.

He ran to the window and pulled back the shades. Headlights cruised their way down Ocean Avenue. Shit. He looked back at the wardrobe. There won't be another chance. He heard Gianelli shout his name. Jack ran back to the wardrobe. Gianelli was barreling up the stairs. Jack stripped off his shirt and began piling the guns on it. He was waddling for the window, cradling the bundle of guns when Gianelli burst into the room.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Gianelli hissed.

“I got it,” Jack said. He held up the bundle. “It's one of these.” Headlights threw shadows across the room. The limo had turned off Ocean Avenue, down toward the house.

Gianelli peered around the shade. “Gimmie that,” he said. He took the bundle from Jack and dumped the guns on the bed. Gianelli dropped the clips from each gun, counting the bullets, praying Martin hadn't reloaded.

“Toss them out the window,” Jack said. “We can do that later.”

Gianelli ignored him. Finally. The fourth gun was two bullets short. He handed it to Jack and collected the other guns. He peeked around the shade. “We're right over his head. Wait 'til he's in.”

“Wait? Jesus, let’s go,” Jack said. Gianelli was carefully putting the guns back in the wardrobe. Jack pulled on his shirt and tucked the gun in the back of his shorts. It slid right through his pant leg and thumped on the floor.

Gianelli ran over, picked up the gun and slipped it into the back of his jeans. He glared at Jack, shaking his head. They heard the front door close. Gianelli slid the window open, sticking his head out. Too far to jump. He looked up. They could make the roof. He stepped out onto the sill, reaching for the top of the frame. With one arm he pulled himself up. When his shoulders came even with the top of the window frame Gianelli turned his arm, set his weight on his palm and shoved his body higher. He grabbed the eaves with his other arm and heaved himself onto the roof. On his stomach, leaning over the edge of the roof, he watched Jack step out onto the ledge. Jack looked down.

“Up here,” Gianelli hissed.

Jack grabbed the top of the window frame, his fingers cramping immediately as he pulled himself up. Gianelli grabbed the back of Jack’s shirt in a fist, trying to curl Jack onto the roof. Jack threw an arm up, his legs kicking the air sixty feet above the ground. His first grab found Gianelli’s face. The second found a grip on the eaves. Gianelli grabbed Jack’s wrist and pulled him onto the roof. “The window,” Gianelli said.

“Motherfucker,” Jack said, sliding halfway off the roof as Gianelli gripped his wrists. Jack found the top of the window with his foot and pushed it closed. Gianelli hauled him back onto the roof. Jack rolled over on his back, gasping for breath. Neither moved for several long moments. Light spilled out of Martin’s office. Then they heard him throw the window open.

“Motherfucking sweathouse, hotbox of a two-bit island,” he said.

Harry cut the stereo then he and Woody ran to the foot of the hill.

“Where the hell are they?” asked Woody.

“I don’t fucking know. I don’t see them either,” Harry said. “We gotta go up there.”

Woody grabbed Harry’s arm. “Wait.” He pointed. Two silhouettes stood out in the moonlight. “There they are. On the roof.”

Harry spat in the sand. “Good Christ.” He squinted at the figures, sure his eyes were playing tricks on him. One of shadows appeared to be dancing.

“You think they got it?” Woody asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said, lighting a cigarette. “I think they do.”

Asbury and Emerson sat in the living room of her apartment. Emerson sat in a corner of the beige sofa, her elbows resting on her drawn-up knees. The novel she’d been reading when Asbury showed up was splayed open on the sofa beside her. Asbury sat across the room in a matching wing backed chair, a mug of cold coffee in one hand a tape recorder in the other.

“No, I didn’t fuck him,” Emerson said. “You know I didn’t. You’re being cruel.”

Asbury sipped his coffee, looking away from her. “Seems to be a pattern, Beth. If I wanted to be cruel, I’d have asked that question when the rest of the team was here.”

“The rest of the team?”

Asbury nodded. “Stowe and his people are on their way over to tap your phone. Here’s the deal I’m offering that you’re going to accept. You’re going to get us something solid on Roswell and Michaels, and I’m going to let you resign. Provided whatever bribe you took ends up at a charity.” He stared at her. “Right now I’m the only one who knows you’re dirty. I can keep it that way.”

“You’ve already got me on tape with Roswell,” Emerson said. “What more do you want?”

Asbury waved his hand. “I’ve got insinuation and code words,” he said. “I want the silver bullet.”

In the half-light before dawn, Jack and Gianelli dropped off the roof and onto the deck. They crept through one of the empty rooms, down the hall, down the stairs, out the front door and, on cramped legs, waddled down the hill. Harry watched from the porch steps. They looked ridiculous. It could not have been more obvious what they’d been up to as they bumbled down the hillside, looking around them as if there’d be any place to hide if someone discovered them. Harry shouted into the house to wake Woody.

“Oh, baby,” Jack yelled as he approached the porch, “we got it.”

Harry and Woody met them at the steps.

Gianelli pulled the gun from his waistband. He dangled it from his index finger by the trigger guard. “There you go, Valentine. One murder weapon. Anything else we can do for you?”

By noon, Jack was alone in the house. Gianelli and Woody had retired to the Flamingo. Harry had gone home for a couple hours sleep before opening the bar. But before that, he was calling Catherine Jane and sending her out to the bungalow. She'd be there momentarily. Jack sipped his coffee, smiling over his mug at the brown paper bag on the kitchen counter. Would Martin notice it was gone? Would he figure out who took it? Jack knew it was best if Martin didn't notice the gun was gone. But still, God, he wanted Martin to know. Wanted to taunt him with it. When he heard the roar of her bike, Jack grabbed the bag off the counter and headed out the side door to meet Catherine Jane.

She took the bag from him without a word, though she couldn't stop smiling. She laughed out loud when Jack bowed before her.

"Godspeed, young warrior princess," Jack said. "The fate of the empire now rests on your capable shoulders."

She laughed again. "Must be a hell of a place, the world you live in, Jack."

Jack shrugged. "It's never boring, I'll say that much."

Catherine Jane roared away up Ocean Avenue. Jack walked through the house and out onto the porch. His eyes burned from lack of sleep. He looked up at the Monroe House. C'mon, Martin. Notice. Come ask me about it. I'm waiting.

Martin froze in mid-pace, in the middle of Roswell's living room. He pointed at Roswell with the hand that held the glass filled with vodka. "You have it. I know you do. Admit it." He gulped his drink. "What? This is supposed to teach me some kind of lesson?"

On the couch, wrapped in a silk robe, Roswell sipped his cappuccino. “No, Martin, I don’t have the gun. Nor do I know where it is.”

“Call Emerson,” Martin said. “Find out if they know anything new.”

Roswell sighed, setting his cup gently on the table. He was distracted from Martin’s latest crisis by the sounds of Daisy in the shower. “Why? She’d have called me if anything came to light, especially about a murder weapon you so wisely kept in your house, only to lose.”

“Fuck you!” Martin yelled. “Fuck you! I didn’t lose it, it was taken, stolen.” He gulped his drink again. “You need to find it. You badly need to find that gun, for both our sakes.”

Roswell raised his hands. “You’re probably right. Donovan and Valentine probably took it from you.” He stood. “Right out from under your nose. Calm down and wait it out. If they took it, you’ll get an offer.”

“Donovan and Valen-? They wouldn’t dare.” Martin resumed his pacing. “Calm down, wait, calm down, wait. That’s all you ever fucking tell me. You call Emerson right now, in front of me, and ask her what’s going on.”

Roswell sipped again, looking away from Martin, trying to keep the calm center that had sustained him through innumerable moments like this one. It was difficult, more difficult than ever. “Whatever for?” Roswell asked. “How would they know the gun is gone? How would they have it?”

Martin swallowed the last of his drink. “Because you gave it to them.” He clenched the glass in his fist. “Because you’re setting me up. Emerson’s not working for us, she’s working for you.”

“Martin, that is preposterous. For God’s sake, refrain from drinking vodka before noon.”

“Preposterous?” Martin yelled. “I’m not stupid. You’re setting me up.” He stepped over the coffee table and leaned into Roswell’s face. “You better rethink this plan, David, because if I go down, I’m taking you with me. I’ll drag you under like a safe around your neck. I know as much about you as you know about me.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Roswell said, standing, backing Martin off. “Martin, you’re insane, completely irrational.”

Martin dropped his glass to the floor and grabbed the front of Roswell’s robe in both fists. “You better fix this, David. I swear, you better fix this.”

Roswell shoved Martin back, sending him stumbling, knocking over the coffee table. He waited while Martin collected himself. It had never gone this far, gotten this bad. Martin had threatened a thousand times, but had never laid a hand on him. Roswell wished he did have the gun, so he could shoot Martin and be done with it, all of it.

“If you’d done what I fucking told you with that gun, done what I’d told you about Spencer, there’d be nothing to fix,” Roswell shouted. “I’ve had it, Martin! I’ve had it with you ignoring my advice and crying to me to clean up the mess you made because you cannot control yourself.”

Never once, in twenty years, had Roswell so much as raised his voice to Martin Michaels. He took the abuse, did the work and enjoyed the benefits – the women that the work put in his path, the money, the violence, outwitting and humiliating every threat, every pursuer. But now, now he was marooned on this ridiculous island in this stupid

situation with this stupid man he couldn't control anymore. Martin started to speak, but Roswell cut him off.

"I don't want to hear a word about money," Roswell shouted. "I'm the one who kept Ruth from taking the first few million you stole. I'm the one who's kept you out of jail long enough to steal millions more. Everything you have you owe to me."

Martin stared at Roswell for a long time. "I'll cut your fucking throat, David. You mention her again and I'll cut your fucking throat."

Roswell stared back, fighting for control of himself. Martin meant every word; he was ticking like a bomb. Roswell couldn't let him go off. Not here, not now. Martin turned and walked out the door slamming it behind him.

"What the hell?" Daisy asked walking into the living room, towel around her head, her naked body still damp from the shower.

"Nothing that concerns you," Roswell answered. How much had she heard? He ran his eyes over her, feeling his cock stiffen under his robe. Such a pretty, little, dirty thing. A shame, really, what had to happen. "Get rid of that towel and get back in bed."

Asbury returned from lunch to find Emerson waiting for him in his office. Beside her on the desk sat a brown paper bag. She held it up so Asbury could read the writing on the side. "Big, Bad Special Agent John Asbury, Stalwart Defender of Goodness and Rightness," it read in black marker, followed by the address of his office.

"This arrived while you were out," Emerson said. "Rodriguez told me a pretty young lady in a leather jacket dropped it off. Said she'd found it in a Dumpster. She also told Rodriguez she'd be back to kill him if you didn't get it." She set the bag on the desk.

“I didn’t open it, but I have a feeling I know what’s in there. Michaels called not long ago, asking about a piece of property that belonged to him.” Asbury’s eyebrows jumped.

“Asked me if we had it,” Emerson continued. “Said I’d know it when I saw it.”

Asbury scratched his chin. “And you said?”

“Said I’d keep an eye out,” Emerson said with a shrug. She looked at the floor.

“The conversation’s on tape.”

“Anything actionable?”

“Nothing,” Emerson said. “But he sounds real upset. And this is the first time he’s called me himself.” She got up and poured two cups of coffee, handing one to Asbury. “I think he’s cracking. Stowe agrees.”

Asbury smiled and opened the bag. “Those sons-of-bitches,” he said. “There’s a note.” He pulled a piece of paper from the bag and chuckled as he read it.

“Read it to me,” Emerson said. “I could use a laugh.”

“Okay, okay,” Asbury replied and he read the note aloud.

Dear Special Agent Ass-bury,

Please accept this gift as a way of making your day brighter and your job easier. You work too hard. Take a vacation, work on your golf game. I hear it sucks.

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Your friend and ally in justice and fair play,

Elvis Aaron Presley

They laughed again as Asbury folded the note and dropped it in the top drawer of his desk. Asbury dumped the gun on the desk. Picking up the pistol in his handkerchief, he dropped the clip onto his desk.

“Two rounds fired,” he said. “Beth, want to guess where those bullets went?”

“Spencer’s chest?”

“Triple bonus points for you,” Asbury said.

“What’re you going to do?” Emerson asked.

“Standard procedure for a found weapon,” Asbury said. “Take it to the lab downstairs, check the ballistics against any matches on DOA’s.” He dropped the gun back in the bag. “Roswell and Michaels are not to hear a word of this, Beth. Understood?”

She nodded. “Understood.”

He picked up the bag and his coffee. “Follow me out of the office. I’m not comfortable with you being alone in here.”

Jack and Harry were behind the bar, explaining Prairie Fires to Bobby and Woody when Asbury walked in, not long after sundown.

“Look who’s here!” shouted Jack. Bobby and Woody grabbed their beers and headed for the jukebox. After lighting a cigarette, Harry folded his arms on leaned back on the liquor shelf. When Asbury sat, Jack served two Red Stripes to the couple down the bar then walked over the shake Asbury’s hand. “Cocktail? We make the best margaritas in the Caribbean. On the house.”

“I’ll take a rain check,” Asbury said. “I’m here on business. Strangest thing happened in my office today. A bag with a gun in it was waiting on my desk after lunch.”

“Really? Good thing a bag with a gun in it ended it up on your desk,” Jack said, “with you being a cop and all.” He sighed. “I feel better knowing the island is that little bit safer now.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about that gun, would you, Jack?” He turned. “How about your two friends over there, the ones trying to play songs on the juke without putting money in it?”

“I sure don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout no gun, sheriff,” Jack said. “As for those two, you can ask ‘em, but I doubt they know anything, either.”

“I figured as much,” Asbury said. “Can I ask you one more question?”

“Go right ahead,” Jack said. “We here at the Lone Palm pride ourselves on being good citizens of our beloved island.”

“Where were the four of you last night?” Asbury asked.

Jack laughed. “Here, all night,” he said.

Asbury shook his head. “And you can prove this.”

Harry leaned over and turned off the music. “Hey, folks,” he shouted. “Where were we last night, me and Jack, Woody and Bobby?”

“Here,” answered a chorus, “all night.”

Harry turned the music back on and resumed his position. Asbury looked around the bar, nodding his head. “That’s what I figured, but I had to ask,” he said.

“Of course you did,” Jack said. “Sure I can’t get you a drink?”

“Maybe next time,” Asbury said.

“Well, that’s good,” said Jack. “Means we’ll be seeing you again.”

Asbury stood. “I’d say that’s a safe bet. You a big Elvis fan, Jack?”

“Nah, he’s overrated,” Jack said. “And those people who think he’s still alive are just plain crazy.”

Asbury started for the door then turned. “Bugs have been off since yesterday,” he said. “Just so you know.” He nodded at Harry. “Valentine, you can exhale.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and said nothing. He walked over to the service window and pulled a pitcher of beer for Catherine Jane. Jack watched Asbury walk out the door then turned to Harry, who had a wide grin on his face. And Jack had an idea. He mixed and served three mai-tais, made change and then reached for the phone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Late Saturday morning Jack sat on his steps, nursing a second cup of coffee and a cigarette. Finally, he saw Martin emerge from the Monroe House and begin his descent down the hill. Jack went inside, topped off his coffee and pulled on Martin's favorite Aloha shirt.

"Martin. To what do I owe the honor?" Jack said. "Coffee?" He smiled.
"Margarita?"

"Cut the bullshit, Donovan," Martin said. He tossed a crumpled sheet of paper onto the porch. "You asked for this meeting. What do you want?"

"I'll probably have oysters, like I always do," Jack said. "Maybe some of that conch stew. Join me?"

Martin clenched his jaw and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're completely crazy, you know that? Think I couldn't kill you right now? Or tonight, or tomorrow and be half a world away before your body was cold. Despite everything, you have no concept of the danger you're in." He stepped closer to the porch. "Thus far, Donovan, I've been gentle."

Jack shrugged. "I take it that's a no, I mean, about lunch. You asked what I wanted."

"The note said you had the gun," Martin shouted. "That's what the note said. What do you want for the gun?"

"What gun?" asked Jack. "What note?"

Martin pointed at the crumpled paper in the sand. “That note. The one about the gun you stole from my house,” Martin said. “Give me the gun, send your crazy friends home. Keep the house.” He relaxed, resetting his shoulders. Jack knew Martin was changing tactics, and Jack was impressed with the ease of it, like a man-o-war catching a new wind. “What’s it to me, this little house?”

Jack shrugged. He leaned forward, picked up the paper then set it aflame with his lighter. “You’ve put me through an awful lot trying to get this little house,” he said.

“And you’ve fought me to a draw,” Martin said. “I can respect that. You’ve earned a little something for it. A million and keep the house? Two?” Jack said nothing and Martin shifted in the breeze again. “Valentine could sure use some help. I’m in touch with a person of influence in Asbury’s office.”

“So am I,” Jack said. “Often.”

Martin reddened and clenched his fists. “This is an opportunity, Jack. An opportunity that I’m giving you to make all your troubles go away. A chance to keep what you have. You know I have the power to do it.”

“I understand that you’re trying to threaten me,” Jack said, “but yet, it sounds like begging. In fact, you seem...desperate.” He scratched his chin. “What was that about power again?”

“Two million, in the bank by Monday,” Martin said. “How much is enough? Name your price. There has to be a number.”

Jack waved at the ocean. Martin turned and saw a blond, shirtless young man walking up the beach. He squinted at the figure, he looked familiar, but Martin couldn’t place him.

“You picked a good day to stop by,” Jack said. “That’s an old friend of yours. You remember Evan Keen. He picked up Spencer for you at the airport. He drove you to the Tree Frog Motel, too. You remember that place. That’s where you blew Spencer away.”

Martin froze. Evan pulled a towel off the porch railing and slapped Martin between the shoulder blades.

“Hey, boss. Barbados was great,” Evan said. “Thanks a lot.”

“I made a new pot of coffee, Ev,” Jack said. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks, but I gotta run,” Evan said. “There’s this cop that wants to talk to me.” He disappeared into the house.

Jack smiled at Martin. He rested his forearms on his knees. Martin started twitching, as if he would either explode or strangle Jack right there on the porch.

“Martin, you stupid fuck,” Jack said. “Evan washed dishes at the Lone Palm for two years before he went to work for you. Happy Murphy and I have been friends for over ten years. You missed a little bit in your research. I’ve got too many friends on this island to be pushed around by the likes of you.”

Martin leapt at Jack, seizing his shirt and pulling him up off the steps. Jack shoved Martin away, sending him stumbling back across the sand,

“I’ll smash you, you little bastard,” Martin said. “What’s happened so far is nothing. So you found me out? Big fucking deal. This shit happens all around the world every minute of every day. It’s nothing that can’t happen to you. Your life is a fantasy, a farce. Nobody’s safe. The clock’s been ticking on you since you set foot on this island. If I don’t get you, somebody else will. Disney, Pepsi, Warner Brothers. What’s the

difference? Deal or get swallowed, it's the way of the modern world. It's evolution. It's inevitable." Martin wiped his hand across his mouth, started to walk away from the house then doubled back. "You know what? Keep the gun. Fuck it. Even if they make the match to Spencer's body there's no using a stolen gun in court. Nobody saw me shoot him." He slid his hand through his sweaty hair. "No murder weapon, no murder. I can't buy a judge around here? Here? On Bumblefuck Island? And Valentine's gonna take the fall for all those drugs, anyway. Whether they come after me for Spencer or not, nothing changes. You know why, Jack? Because nobody fucking cares. That's how the world does fucking business. I'm not the freak here, Jack, I'm the norm, I'm the way of the world. Long after you've crashed and burned, I'll still be doing business from the penthouse."

He stormed off again, making it almost to the bottom of the hill when he turned and ran back to the bungalow. Jack never moved from the steps.

Martin spat in the sand, panting. "Give me a number, Jack. I know there is one. You take the money and we both win. Join the twenty-first century before it eats you alive. The whole world and everyone in it is for sale; Eden's been paved for parking spaces, Jack. There is no such thing as paradise anymore."

"Wait, I know this," Jack said. "This is where you tell me you're my father, right?" He sat back down on the steps of his porch. Martin rolled his shoulders, took a step toward Jack. He stopped when Jack stood again, a head taller on the steps. Jack looked down at Martin. "Now get off my fucking property," Jack said, "before I break your fucking neck."

Martin spat on the porch. "Fuck you and your stupid little house. Neither of you will last the night." He turned and walked away.

Jack picked up his coffee, sipped it, and sat down. Sun-dappled, blue-green waves crested in snowy foam and tumbled to the shore. Same as they had for a billion years. He heard the rustle of the twin palms behind the house. The same breeze fluttered through his Aloha shirt. He lit a cigarette then knocked twice on the steps. “Did you get it?”

On the deck of the Lone Palm, at a table sheltered from the tropical sun by a pink umbrella, Asbury dropped his headset to his shoulders. “Yeah, Jack,” he said, “I got it.”

He clicked off the recorder and smiled across the desk. Harry leaned on the railing, unlit cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth and a sweaty bottle of cold Corona beer dangling from the fingers of his left hand. His black hair and white T-shirt rippled in the breeze. Asbury nodded. Harry flicked open his silver Zippo and lit his cigarette.

“Well?” Jack said, throwing open his arms as he burst onto the deck. “Am I fucking genius or what?”

“You motherfucker!” Harry yelled, striding across the deck and wrapping Jack in a massive bear hug. Woody and Gianelli sprang from their seats and applauded.

“Now you stay out of trouble, son,” Jack said. “The Captain won’t always be here to bail you out.” Harry laughed, stepped back, and poured his beer over Jack’s head.

Catherine Jane ran onto the porch. “Tell me you got him!”

“We got him!” Jack and Harry yelled.

Catherine Jane shot across the deck and threw herself into Harry’s arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist and kissed him hard on the mouth. For three minutes. When she finally came up for air, Harry gently set her down.

“That didn’t mean anything,” Catherine Jane said. “I was overcome.”

Tony peeked around the doorway. “You got him?”

“We got him,” Jack and Harry said.

Tony shook Asbury’s hand. Navajo appeared on the deck. “Yes,” they shouted again. Navajo bent at the waist and pumped his fist. “Fucking outstanding,” he said.

“Tony, if you would,” Jack said, “margaritas for everyone.”

“Absolutely,” Tony said and he disappeared down the stairs with Navajo following close behind.

Lewis and Stowe started packing the equipment and Asbury began his good-byes.

“C’mon, Asbury, one round,” Jack said.

Asbury pointed south down the beach. “Some of us have work to do.”

“On me,” Gianelli said.

“One round,” Harry said, “on me.”

Asbury looked around at his people. He arched an eyebrow at Stowe.

Stowe shook his head. “No Roswell yet,” he said. “Give Michaels a couple of hours to find him for us. We got eyes on him, he won’t get away.”

Asbury shrugged, pulled off his tie and sat down. “I’ll catch up to you guys later,” he said. He opened his cell-phone, called in his orders then took a big sip of his drink. “We’re gonna get Roswell, too,” he said. He looked at Jack. “Don’t you worry about that.” He shook his head. “Man, I thought you’d get something, but not what you got. Goddamn silver bullet.”

“The gun?” Woody asked.

“Bullets matched,” Asbury said. “We could’ve used it to sweat him, but it would’ve been virtually useless in court. But with that tape? And Evan? Michaels is fucking done.” He sipped his drink. “You get tired of the good life, Jack, gimme a call. You sure know how to lean on a guy.” He pushed away from the table and stood. “No hard feelings about the eye, Valentine?”

“I still say we should get in the ring,” Harry said, “but you can drink in my bar anytime.”

“Should be some big doings down your way this afternoon, Jack,” Asbury said. “I’d hate for you to miss it.”

“You and your folks drop by,” Jack said, “wouldn’t be right without you.”

“We’ll be in the neighborhood,” Asbury said, “but we’ll be busy.” He waved from the doorway. “Stay out of trouble.”

“Not a bad guy,” Jack said.

“I knew he was stand-up,” Gianelli said. “I said it all along.”

Jack rubbed his hands together. “All right, folks. I don’t want to miss the big show. Let’s move this party to my house.”

CHAPTER THE LAST

The crowd of drunk people stretched from Jack's house to the water. Once word got out, they came from the hills and surrounding beaches like an army, anyone who'd ever bent an elbow, told a tale, or shared a kiss at the Lone Palm. They brought coolers full of ice, wheelbarrows full of beer. Inner tubes. Fireworks. Flags. Then, as the sun reigned high over the afternoon, police cars, blue and red lights flashing, raced down Ocean Avenue and descended upon the Monroe House.

The crowd cheered as Michaels scurried across his deck, clad only in silk pajama bottoms, shouting into the cell-phone at his ear. They grabbed up their towels and waved them in the air. Watching from the deck, with Harry and Murphy standing beside him, Jack feared the crowd might rush up the hill like a rouge wave. It didn't. Nobody wanted to leave the party, and another cheer erupted when Michaels hurled his phone at the crowd and disappeared into the house.

Moments later, the front door of the Monroe House flew open and two uniformed officers emerged. One held the door open. The other continued on and opened the back door of a patrol car.

Harry sipped his beer and rested an elbow on Jack's shoulder. "And now," he said, "the moment of truth."

The crowd went berserk when Asbury led Martin out of the house, gripping the cuffs that held Martin's hands. Catherine Jane leaned over the porch railing with her camera and snapped pictures as Asbury put a hand on Martin's head and pushed him into

the car. After slamming the door, Asbury turned and waved. Cheers began again as, single file, the cars turned onto Ocean Avenue and headed for New Amsterdam.

Jack was motionless, surprised at how quickly the man that had so nearly wrecked his life was removed from it. It was really all over.

“If that wasn’t a thing of beauty,” Murphy said, “then tell me what is.”

“That,” Jack said, pointing to the crowd.

Monday morning, Jack was leaning on the bar, swirling his spoon in a bowl of shrimp bisque. Clouds promised rain and business was slow. Harry napped in his apartment, Navajo sat at a table, going over a crossword puzzle with Catherine Jane. Jack looked up when he heard the door creak. Asbury walked in.

“Hey, didn’t expect to see you back here so soon,” Jack said.

“That was quite a party you threw.”

“We missed you, Asbury,” Jack said. “You’re a popular guy around here these days.”

Asbury sat at the bar and accepted the coffee Jack offered. “I have bad news for you,” he said.

“Roswell?”

“Gone.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Jack asked.

“We fell on his office and his apartment at the same time,” Asbury said. “Right when we came for Michaels. We’re still looking for his secretary, but we can’t find her, either.”

“Martin was on the phone when you guys rolled up,” Jack said. “Maybe he got the word out in time.”

“I doubt it,” Asbury said. “Roswell’s office was cleaned out when we got there, like no one had ever been there. The apartment was barren. Roswell cut his boss loose and blew town a couple days ago. We’ll never see that guy again; he’s a ghost.”

Jack shrugged. “Oh well.”

“Off the record, Jack, I wanted you to have a shot at that guy, after what happened with your girlfriend.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, Asbury. Sometime, somewhere, he’ll get his,” Jack said. “I’d like to be the guy who delivers it, but – what can you do?”

“Nothing, I guess,” Asbury said. “Well, I wanted you to hear it from me. Tell Valentine he can find his boat back where he left it by the end of the week. A bit lighter, of course.” He and Jack shook hands. “You did a fine job, Captain Jack. Let me ask you, where did that come from, the song?”

“Nah. Harry said it once and it just stuck,” Jack said. “Sorry, no elaborate answer behind that one.”

“Fine with me,” Asbury said, saluting. “Well, it fits. I hope it’s smooth sailing from here on out.”

Jack returned the salute. “Keep your head about you, sailor. You need a break from law and order, come see us. You can sail with my crew anytime.”

Asbury smiled and walked out of the bar.

“What was that about?” asked Harry, shutting the back door behind him.

“Your boat’ll be back at the marina by Friday,” Jack said, “and Roswell got away.”

Harry shook his head as he sat at the bar. “I can’t say that’s shocking news, Captain.”

“So it goes,” Jack said. “He’ll get his.”

“Damn right,” Harry said. “He’s gotta have the worst karma on the planet. He’ll get what’s coming to him and when he does, he’ll get it good.” He lit a cigarette. “Trust me. I know these things.”

When the red Jeep parked behind the bungalow two weeks later, Jack was fast asleep in his hammock. Samantha stood, holding the screen door open with one hand, watching him breathe. She couldn’t believe it had taken her this long to get here. But it had taken her this long to decide, decide if she should go to him, or leave him to the life he had re-assembled without her. That was the easiest, safest route. Sharing the same small piece of geography wouldn’t necessarily put them in each other’s paths.

Samantha would move through her world in New Amsterdam, busier than ever, holding the company together while the island government hunted up another buyer. She’d have her friends at the office, her vague but lofty goals, her handsome, incomplete lovers. Jack would glide through his world on the coast, his bar, his friends, his dalliances with pretty woman from far away who would never know him. They were different enough to be safe from each other forever.

But she still loved him. And that was what had brought her to that doorway again. She loved him tremendously, entirely, and though she knew she could live well without

him, maybe even be happy, it wouldn't be the happiness she had known with him. It would be a life without ecstasy, and she would not accept it, not without one more try. For all the danger inherent in the effort, if there was a shot at life with Jack, she was not willing to surrender it, not to her own fear.

Catching the screen door behind her, Samantha gently called Jack's name. He rubbed his eyes before he opened them, then blinked several times as if clearing away the lingering remnants of a dream.

"Hello, Jack," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm alive," he said.

"I was real happy to hear about Harry," she said. "It's incredible what you did for him."

Jack stretched and yawned and blinked some more. "I missed you," he said.

He sat up, rocking the hammock with his motion. It was not what he had wanted to say, not what he had planned to say when this moment came, as he knew it would. He couldn't remember a thing he'd planned, rehearsed in his head. Something wry and halfway cruel, he was sure. He reached for his anger and it fell through his fingers. Well, it was true. He had missed her like crazy.

"I've missed you, too," she said. "More than I can tell you."

Jack reached down for his shirt. He plucked a smoke from the pocket and lit it. He sighed a long plume of smoke.

"Take a walk with me," Samantha said, "just a walk."

"I can do that," he said, pushing out of the hammock.

Their steps fell in time as they walked to the water. On impulse, he reached for her hand, holding it before he knew he had reached.

“I’m running the whole show, keeping it all afloat,” Samantha said. “The trade commission’s not sure what to do, but they don’t want the business going under. The Ellison family will probably buy us back.”

“I hope it all works out for you,” Jack said, wading out into the water, letting go of her hand. “I’m sure it will.”

Samantha followed him, staying beside him, the rocking water soaking her white dress to her knees. “That’s not what I came here to talk to you about.”

Jack stepped away from her, turned to face her. “Talk.”

He squinted at her, waiting, then looked down to their reflections on the shallow sea. There she was before him, so unspeakably beautiful, appearing so much the girl he had always known. The girl with the amber ponytail, swim fins dangling from her fingertips, denim shorts riding low on her hips. The girl, sometimes, waking in the middle of the night, he still reached for across the empty bed. The girl who he swore he could still hear, when all was quiet in the house, whisper his name with a smile in her voice. He looked up again when he heard her draw breath to speak.

“I came here to tell you I’m sorry,” she said. “I came here to tell you I love you, and I’m sorry for what I did. For what I did to you, to me, to us, to our lives. I made a terrible mistake. I want us to try again.” She swept a lock of hair behind her ear. “Will you?”

Well. There you go. Simple question, really. Yes was the easy answer. It was his first impulse. Yes was easy, with her. But did that make it the right answer? What about

after? When they were a couple again, when life was life again. What about the first time she forgot to call, broke a date for work? What then? Jack exhaled heavily. Was she up to this? Was he?

He let his dark eyes linger on her face. The ache of waiting for an answer began to show. Her green eyes were wide, her cheeks pale and tight to the bone. Her mouth, his favorite in the world, was a taut, colorless line. She had the nerve to come here, he thought. Had the nerve to walk back into my house. Had the nerve to break it all down into one simple question. Will you? He could think of only one way to answer all the questions, hers and his.

Jack laid his hand on her cheek, and her skin warmed beneath his palm. He leaned forward and kissed her. He could hear the water swirl around her as she leaned into him. The glow of this reunion in the sea would not last; the tide would not carry them home. But it was a place to start. Jack pulled his face away.

“Welcome home,” he said.

Samantha wrapped him tighter in her arms; Jack smoothed her dancing hair with his hand. The tropical sun warmed their skin. The waves washed over them and the sea held them softly in its rhythm.

VITA

Born in Brooklyn in 1969, Bill Loehfelm grew up in Staten Island, NY. He graduated from the University of Scranton in 1991 with a degree in communications. In the spring of 1992, he moved to the Jersey Shore, continuing to teach high school English in New York while residing in the beach town of Sea Bright.

In August of 1997, he moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, where he taught until the end of the 2000 school year. Winter of 2002, he enrolled in the English graduate program at the University of New Orleans, graduating with an MA in English in May 2005.

In 2002 and 2003, Thompson-Gale published Loehfelm's first two books, both biographies of terrorist leader Osama bin Laden. In addition to extensive freelance work as a music journalist specializing in rock and blues, Loehfelm has also published several short stories in literary journals throughout the South.