

The Shades of Paradise

a novel

by

J. Alvin Read

The Shades of Paradise



The Shades of Paradise

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

February 1997

Beth Tierney peered through the window as more than thirty thousand feet below the Gulf Coast slipped behind and, for the first time in thirty-five years of life, she was beyond the continental limits of the United States. It was a little frightening: back there was her whole existence and she was leaving it, not on a two-week holiday, but really leaving it on a spur of the moment decision, after a lifetime of weighing carefully every choice. As a child, she excelled in school then continued on through graduate school to earn a Master's of Science. Later, she advanced to a prestigious position, invested wisely and participated in community activities, yet when a series of crises struck taking her parents and career, she found that what remained was a dry, empty nothingness. For all those years of effort, sacrifice and planning there should have been something more that remained, something of meaning that would endure through the worst of times, to buoy her with purpose and direction, but there wasn't. When put to the test, the sum of all she had been and done resulted in a failed attempt at life. She needed out – and this was it: her brand new beginning.

Through all of her four and one half years of graduate school, Vermont had felt like a foreign place. She had constantly encountered people whose speech was so strange as to be practically unintelligible and with food and customs fascinatingly different from Wisconsin's. But Costa Rica wasn't prim and proper New England: it was a totally foreign, sizzling-hot Latin culture, her new world and where she would finally begin to live – in a place so different from home it seemed anything was possible. Beth didn't want to miss any of it. She wanted to see it all and do it all: improve her Spanish, learn how to dance the meringue, the salsa – all those hip-swaying sexy dances – eat spicy foods and tour the country from one end to the other.

According to information she'd downloaded from the Internet, Costa Ricans were friendly, not at all like New England where everyone seemed to delight in giving misleading directions to strangers. And down there too, somewhere below all that blinding white puffiness, situated on 'her beach' in the tiny Caribbean pueblo of Chautita, would be *Cabañas Arrecifes*, her own little treasure unearthed by exploring every Costa Rican WEB site she could find. She pulled the *Cabañas Arrecifes* brochure from her bag and smoothed it flat across her knees, marveling at its tranquil beauty, not to mention her good fortune for finding it. It seemed too exotic, too intensely beautiful to be more than fantasy, yet there it was, photographed in living color. She pictured herself in each scene. There she would be, lounging in a hammock slung between palms while turquoise water lapped the white sand, or perhaps in the other picture, seated at the bamboo beachfront bar sipping a cocktail and chatting with the smiling waiter. Or she could be snuggled into bed inside one of the thatched cabanas with the breaking surf lulling her to sleep. The center photograph, the largest, was of smiling tourists bathing on the white-sand beach with a colorful sailboat plying the water behind. "That's me," she whispered. "No more high heels or business suits for you, Lady Tierney. You're moving to Bikini-town."

Outside, amazing things were happening: in the engines the liquefied, then refined remains of solar energy collected by a forest millions of years ago were converting into heat, then kinetic energy, at such a rate as to hurl them through the air at six hundred-fifty miles per hour. Wow! She could just envision and, at odd moments when they passed through a wisp of cloud, actually see the air divide as the wing, driven at such immense speed, cut through it to create at its upper surface a void that literally sucked the tremendous weight of the aircraft to over thirty thousand feet above the ground – five miles, wow!

A voice among the muted babble in the rows behind reminded her of her singular regret over walking out on life: Mrs. Leonard. Dear old Mrs. Leonard was a true, dear and steadfast friend and neighbor and the only person to remain loyal through all the trouble. As a child, Beth and her friends feared the old woman and were banned from her yard. Even bent at the waist, head buried deep among flowers, she could still somehow sense the presence of any trespasser. It was a mystical talent that earned her the nickname, 'the seeing butt'. Time did its thing and turned that all about. She grew up and, next door, the seeing butt became like one of the family. She taught Beth and her mother secrets of gardening that resulted in a fragrant band of flowers encircling their yard – from which mischievous children were banned. There were piano lessons, each Tuesday and Thursday for six continuous years in which Beth learned that the old woman had an ear for more than simply children in her garden and in her teenage years, when parental opinions were viewed with suspicion, she would listen with an understanding ear and offered sage advice. And now, she was Beth's only friend.

Her seat suddenly dropped away like the floor of an elevator, sparking a tiny flash of terror that a chime for the fasten seat belts sign, an accompanying change in engine pitch and a reassuringly smiling stewardess combined to alleviate. Pressing her nose to the window, Beth squinted into the brilliance. Regardless of the speed, they seemed to drift, gradually settling into a cavernous ravine between towering mountains of feathery-white billowing vapor whose size dwarfed the airplane to a mere speck. Sunlight glared, then glared again like flashbulbs igniting before her eyes as the plane sliced through fringes of cloud; then all was gray and the world of space and objects was lost to a nether world where relative speed was non-existent, an in-between place devoid of features, with no up, down, here nor there. How good it would be to emerge and find that the previous year hadn't happened. All right then, but where then might she find herself? Would it still be today with all memory of the previous year erased, or would it be a year earlier, before it all began? It was an interesting question, but one thing was certain: she wouldn't be on a plane to Costa Rica. She'd be back in her office in Green Bay, still deluding herself that Mr. Andreesen secretly adored her and considered her work indispensable.

Finally on the ground and settled in for the long bus ride to the Caribbean coast, Beth reclined her seat and sighed comfortably. She wondered at the strange system of streets without names, buildings without addresses and whether she would ever be able to understand Spanish spoken so rapidly. If she couldn't speak with anyone, how would she get along? And how was she to find things even if she did understand, like bus terminals for example, if there were no addresses or street names? Locations, Erika had explained were identified by citing directions from the closest landmark and she knew none of them. The fact was she was a little frightened. Maybe she wouldn't be able to function in this strange Latin culture, but going back would be giving in and she couldn't do that. There certainly was nothing compelling back in The States: no career, no retirement program, no friends except Mrs. Leonard, and not a house either – sold that. The old neighborhood had lost that familiar home feeling that had always made everywhere else seem wrong. She had no parents, no husband, no children, no life – nothing, nothing at all. No, scared she could handle: she was staying.

It seemed inconceivable that, just over a year earlier, she had been snug in a comfortable life: a fat cat, on top of the world with a well-calculated life's course plotted. How quickly a life can crumble away! The first blow came on January fourteenth more than a year ago when, like a house of cards in a tempest, her career blew away. Even the weather had been awful. For nine straight days, an Arctic storm had straddled the border between Alaska and Canada's Northwest Territories, refusing to move. It pulled the jet stream south in a deep arc across the face of North America. Driven before it, a massive volume of subzero Arctic air moved unmercifully southward, becoming stationary over the Midwestern States. Temperatures dropped to record lows, day after endless day. Beth had begun to wonder if it might not be the dawning of a new ice age. The morning of the fourteenth, a biting north wind bore down upon the city. It whistled in quick, cold, and nasty from the north,

across the frozen bay. Around the buildings of downtown, the stiff wind swirled, creating confusing eddies that lifted glistening blizzards from snow banks, blinding pedestrians, and snatching away hats. In the narrow canyons of avenues, the bitter air channeled again gathering speed as it resumed its southbound rush.

She should have turned around and gone back to bed when she opened the garage door and the neighbor's dog didn't come out to bark. Every living thing with half a brain was hidden away from a razor sharp wind whose bite was capable of freezing flesh beneath fur and overcoats alike. Half of the office staff wouldn't be in, but she was intrepid even when her car just groaned, draining power from a frozen battery. She valiantly pounded the steering wheel and said the magic words: "start, damn you, start," and her mother's hand-me-down caught. Innocently unaware of what awaited, she blew a column of frozen breath towards the windshield in grateful relief.

It was early that summer that H.G. Andreesen Consulting relocated to the center section of the converted strip mall, yet the promised conversion remained a far off dream. Mr. Andreesen was now on his third contractor and although the upstairs offices were completed, moving the hammering and sawing to the first floor hadn't improved things much. And just then, during the worst cold snap of the year, the door to the parking lot was solidly barricaded requiring a long, frozen walk around the block. Every morning of the interminable cold snap with temperatures defiantly remaining well below zero and with a stiff breeze from the bay, Beth pulled her mittens on, snuggled a wool cap tightly over her head, and climbed from the car for the frigid walk. The morning of the fourteenth was no different. After trudging the icy length of the alley, she came to the short slice of side street and Lum's Chinese restaurant, with its pagoda-like roof, green and red paint and a golden dragon at the door, the first milestone of her daily trek. Around the next corner, the first store in the block-long strip was Vincent's Hardware, above which the owner lived with his family, a fact appreciated for not having to wallow through foot-deep snow. Each morning, astride his little tractor, Mr. Vincent would clear freshly fallen snow from the sidewalk along the entire length of the strip.

Adjoining the hardware was South Bay Luncheonette with neon signs adding shimmering highlights of red and green to twisting rivulets of condensation descending its bay windows. Outside, as she approached the frequently opened glass door, the frigid gusts laced with snow carried the inviting scents of brewing coffee, ham and eggs. By then, she was shivering inside her coat with her chin already trembling, a sure sign her teeth were about to chatter. She did the only sensible thing and followed her nose to sanctuary, joining other harried commuters stomping snow from their shoes while waiting for take-outs. The place was alive. Busy kitchen sounds mingled with the steady drone of conversations punctuated with laughter, and always in the background Green Bay's all news radio station. A satisfying feeling of security came from being a member of the busy throng passing through the doors of South Bay, which drove the wheels of Green Bay's commerce. The other satisfying feeling came from central heat.

Vista Travel, which occupied a space the width of a door and window, appeared tiny and lost sandwiched between the luncheonette and its larger and more prestigious neighbor, Beth's office. A week earlier, the routine of her morning trudge around the block changed when a poster portraying a Costa Rican beach she simply couldn't pass without staring at, appeared on an easel in their window. It was a sweeping panorama of a pristine, white sand beach, with aquamarine water and an out of focus frond hanging in the foreground. Words other than 'Costa Rica' in large blue lettering across the bottom were unnecessary. The image of serenity manifest that held her spell-bound said it all.

The morning of the fourteenth found her, once again, in the subzero wind enjoying a before-work pause gazing dreamily at the poster as coffee steamed from its cradle of double-insulated mittens. She easily imagined herself there: rays of a tropical sun warming her skin as an onshore breeze gently lifted her hair. Real coconut oil would melt lusciously into her

skin, making it supple and shiny while baking to a toasty tan. Of course, there would be a good book to read and, possibly even, a piña colada served in a coconut and made with real pineapple. Somehow the captivating poster and, interestingly enough, the bitter cold too combined to bring the sensations of the beach almost close enough that regardless of below-zero wind biting her nose, beneath her overcoat, she was basking in the sun.

Leaving the Caribbean, she crunched her way over the last twenty yards of brittle morning moisture and pushed through the new revolving doors into the offices of H.G. Andreesen Consulting. The lobby, with its high ceiling and wide reception area, was designed to impress, make a positive statement for H.G. Andreesen. With the entire front wall of glass and the many white outlined rectangles of smudged, gray, yet unpainted, sheet rock for walls, it wasn't much for lasting impressions. She strode across the lobby, to the women's room below the stairs. "Good morning, Miss Tierney," Rebecca Norton, the new administrative assistant said. Her voice was strained, containing a cutting edge of false politeness that caused Beth to turn and look in wonder at the boldness of this young snit. "You should know there are some government officials waiting for you in your office." Again, the haughty tone. Startled, she stared curiously at the young woman. She knew she wasn't very well liked by fellow employees who generally considered her to be a mousy, workaholic whose bitching about details that mattered little or not at all to government inspectors. Beth received invitations to social events only when not doing so would be socially uncomfortable, like to the office Christmas party. She knew and accepted the situation; no problem. Unpopularity was okay, but outright rudeness wasn't.

"The government people can wait for a minute, thank you, Ms. Norton," Beth retorted and returned to her closet. She pulled off her camel hair overcoat, boots and woolen leggings then turned to study her reflection, nodding, satisfied with her confident professional presentation, although her dead straight hair that bent like a folding ruler when she lifted it was a disappointment. She could just as easily have inherited her father's slight wave, but it was what it was, so she kept it blunt cut above the shoulders for easy maintenance: and straight across the back – simple. Her only attempt at style was to allow it to curve slightly longer at the sides of her jaw, which compensated for a narrow face. Business suits were meticulously chosen, invariably leaning towards brown with the skirts cut to a half inch above the knee with an off-white blouse and black Pilgrim tie. As much a part of her apparel as her clothes was her suede briefcase, laden with papers. It had been a gift from her father, presented in honor of her master's in geology that, regardless of how old or battered it became, was a pride to carry. A sudden heart attack claimed his life five years earlier while he was yet in his prime and she only thirty. His loss was a crushing blow, but her pain was nothing as compared with her mother's. Then, a scant two years later, she was taken from her too, in a death more attributable to broken heart than to anything medically specific. Watching her mother waste away had been agonizing. Each day, through her very pores another small bit of her soul would slip away until she was but a ghost peering from the deeply recessed eyes of a skeletal body. Beth tried every day to reach her, to offer some small amount of cheer, but death was inevitable, and a welcome relief for both when it came.

Beth found herself alone in the world. Earning, shortly after Mother's passing, a prestigious upstairs office renewed her focus. She assumed a new pride in herself for her abilities as a geologist. The pride didn't come so much from the prestige of the office or from having her very own south window to nurture African violets, or even filing cabinets that were hers alone. It was that the office and position of project engineer were symbolic of the respect she had earned for consistently surpassing expectations and planted her firmly on the highway to success. Each new project became her reason for being and consumed her totally. Career dedicated to H.G. Andreesen, she was comfortable in the knowledge that she was valued for that very carefully considered choice. She, in turn, was thrilled for the opportunity to be an active participant in cleaning up a tiny portion of the nation's groundwater mess. The term workaholic used behind her back didn't faze her; she acknowledged it.

Her accusers' lack of sophistication didn't allow them to appreciate her love of ecology or that she considered her work to be her entertainment. They all had spouses and family; she applied her devotion to career and the accuracy of her data. Since the bitter ending of her last relationship, more than three years earlier, she'd devoted herself entirely to career. Office popularity mattered not, what did was that her professional approach and quality of work were highly respected and appreciated by those who counted, particularly Herman Andreesen himself.

The government inspectors waiting upstairs would be there to review her data detailing the extent of contamination for a proposed cleanup site. Her figures were dead-on precise, as always, and she was confident the government inspectors were familiar enough with her work to already know the same. Nevertheless, it was a small but necessary step, and she was prepared to do it well and insure that H.G. Andreesen would be selected as the clean-up contractor. "Well, Miss Tierney, you thirty-five year old workaholic," she recalled saying to her mirrored image, "let's go convince our government bureaucrats just how desperately they need us." Slipping on heels and with a tiny adjustment to her skirt, she spun from the closet, closing it with a flick of the wrist.

Two wide staircases framed either side wall of the lobby. For those unable to climb, on the back wall beside the new marble faced reception desk, torn brown paper protectively covered the stainless steel doors of now operating elevators. Beth's office was in the middle of the easternmost of two green-carpeted corridors. Between the two, were the kitchen, conference rooms and storage closets. It was a good arrangement that afforded every second floor office a window. She climbed the east wall stairs, taking them with a light skip. Her sturdy, sensible, low heels clicked the count: thirty-one stairs, the last thirty-one steps of a safe, structured life.

Coming around the corner, she stopped short. Her office door was open and inside people were moving about. 'What's this,' she asked herself, 'who gave permission to whom to enter my office? Rebecca Norton, I'd bet!' Outside of her opened office, a man and a woman, fellow geologists at H.G. Andreesen, conferred in hushed tones. Slack jawed and staring in her direction, the whispered conversation abruptly ended and, as she approached, the eyes of both flicked nervously. Without returning a word to her offered greeting, both slipped quickly into their respective offices. There wasn't time to consider what it all meant.

"Ms Beth Tierney?" An unknown woman standing beside her desk fired at her in an accusatory tone.

"Yes, may I help you," she snapped before taking in the entire scene. Her cabinet had been broken open and a uniformed officer was intently scanning her files from the bottom drawer, reading project titles to another who transcribed the information onto a clipboard. The remainder of the drawers had been sealed shut. 'FBI, DO NOT OPEN' stickers formed X's over them. Her top desk drawer lay, bent and broken, on the desktop and beside it, her computer in pieces.

"Ms. Tierney, I am agent Paula Hobson with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," said the woman in the trim, navy blue suit with an ID hung from a light chain about her neck. Her outstretched hand offered a document as she spoke. "He," she said nodding to the man with the crowbar, "is my partner, agent Fred Rogers and this is a federal warrant to seize all of your files, personal and professional, paper and electronic. You will surrender your briefcase at this time, Ms. Tierney." Herman Andreesen, the founder of the firm, stood behind the agents, gulping and tugging at his tie, but saying nothing. Beth couldn't understand how he could just stand there while this was happening. She had always counted on him to be able to fix problems, and he had always come through, but now he avoided her attempts at eye contact. Wordlessly, she offered her briefcase to Agent Hobson. The other one, Rogers, she remembered, had frightening eyes that seemed to be his center about which the rest of him moved. They didn't waver from their focus on her, following every movement, while the rest of his body struggled to remove tightly fitting black gloves.

The following ninety days were a surrealistic dizzying spin through one nightmare after another. She had been named as one of the principal figures in billing fraud perpetuated by H.G. Andreesen Consulting against the US government in an FBI investigation of Super Fund contractors. The specific charges alleged that she conspired with Herman Andreesen to bill the government for work not performed. Beth was stunned to see her name listed as project manager for false projects, which apparently existed only on paper, but complete with data from projects she actually had supervised. Convincingly accurate forgeries of her signature and initials appeared in every appropriate location. The total fraud amounted to more than two million dollars. She was driven home in the caged rear seat of an FBI sedan followed by a caravan of two others and a white van boldly emblazoned with large, black FBI lettering. They pulled up in front of the house with emergency lights flashing and the whole neighborhood watched as she was escorted in, an FBI agent at either arm. Brandishing a search warrant, the agents ransacked everything like a wrecking crew marauding through the house, hauling off her computer and every one of her files – files capable of proving the charges to be groundless. She sat on the sofa by the front window, defeated, knowing that every gossip in the neighborhood was out there, witness to how old maid Beth Tierney brought shame to the proud memory of Ken and Angela.

Three months into the torture, a call came from chief investigator Rogers informing that she was no longer under investigation. She was to be escorted into the closed, former offices of H.G. Andreesen Consulting and permitted to recover personal possessions. She also appeared at the property clerk's office in the federal building, downtown to claim the remnants of her home computer and other property removed from the house. Official acknowledgment of her innocence made her feel better, but for only a short while. While the FBI informed her that she was no longer a suspect, they didn't bother to inform former friends, neighbors or other groundwater consulting firms. In the eyes of most, she carried the stigma of guilt and was viewed with suspicion as a criminal element, someone whispered about, avoided. Her letters of introduction and resumes submitted to consulting firms were returned unopened or with scathing comments attached. Anonymous messages, condemning her, appeared regularly in her e-mail, people she had known her entire life turned their faces from her, garbage was dumped in her driveway and Mrs. Leonard, her only loyal friend, told of a circulating petition, which demanded that Beth vacate her home. As large as is the United States, the community of groundwater geologists is small and the scandal, complete with Beth's name as a perpetrator, was common knowledge throughout. To her absolute dismay, came the realization that there was to be no restarting her career, not in Green Bay or any other city. She was unemployable.

She sobbed herself to sleep at night, feeling totally alone in a cold and hostile world. Of the secure life she had, there was nothing left. She was without family, friends, husband, children, and apparently without future either. The singular employment opportunity, the result of months of constant searching, was, ironically, with the federal government, evaluating clean-up proposals as an independent consultant. The work could all be done on-line; apparently they preferred her out of sight despite anti-discriminatory hiring regulations and all she could hope to earn would be but a tiny fraction of her former salary. Worse: the job was mundane, mindless paper shuffling requiring neither inspiration nor creativity.

Three AM found her unable to sleep, surfing the net, trailing thoughtlessly a link she created by joining the words: 'life, work, and where' as the root of a WEB search. To play the game, she simply clicked her mouse and page after page of sites appeared, related somehow via electronic reasoning to her three chosen words. Screen images flashed hypnotically to the idle tapping of her finger as her tormented mind sought escape from her dilemma. Another click and, on the screen before her, appeared the same Costa Rican beach scene she had seen in the window of Vista Travel. Her finger caressed the smooth, curving surface of the mouse delaying the next click while the beach and all of its glorious colors filled her eyes. Winter, the FBI, Green Bay, even the loss of career melted away and she was there, running, almost flying, towards the surf in a tiny red

bikini. She began toying with the thought of a two-week vacation, although not taking herself completely seriously, until her breath caught like a hiccup with the realization that Costa Rica could happen, and it didn't have to be for just two weeks either. There was not so much as one compelling reason to stay, so why not sell everything, take the stupid on-line consulting job and just GO? With a laptop, she could work anywhere on Earth, and in Costa Rica at least she wouldn't be vilified at every turn.

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWO

A cacophony of horns, brakes and roar of diesel engines announced their arrival at the Caribbean port city of Limon where the majority of passengers disembarked at the side of the road, finally allowing her a window seat. They were at the outskirts of the city, but it didn't look like much: mostly a collection of ancient clapboard buildings and unpaved side streets lined with humble homes. The throng walking and riding bicycle was comprised entirely of Black people without any evidence of the minority Ladinos, Native Americans and Whites she had read of. Ahead, the line of cars, trucks and buses inched along, while bicycle traffic threaded its way through at twice their speed, apparently frustrating drivers who fruitlessly blasted away at their horns. Adding to the bedlam, vendors walked beside the bus, hawking through the open windows cold drinks, ice cream, coconut candies, tamales wrapped in banana leaves and a multitude of other foods she intended to try.

The map showed Limon to be on the coast, but a glance down every street failed to provide even a glimpse of the sea. Then, approaching the tiny airport, she had her first breathtaking view of the Caribbean. There, stretching into the misty distance was a palm lined, sandy beach. It was beyond lovely; its beauty was so utterly heart stopping that she felt flush for it, but something was wrong – missing. It was people! There wasn't a soul to be seen. It was inconceivable! Where was everyone? The sun was shining, the surf gentle, the colors unimaginable; the sand should be covered with towels and umbrellas, yet it continued in that manner. For the next several hours they drove south, paralleling a coastline that was practically continuous beach backed by coconut palms and, with the exception of driftwood and an occasional dog, it was empty.

Dark was nearly upon them when the bus lurched over rocks and potholes and came to a stop opposite a cantina with a wide covered porch where several dogs lay like melted butter, an occasional tail flip their only sign of life: the heart of the tiny pueblo of Chauita. The streets were of pot-holed soil with the only traffic two cars parked half in the road. There were few people about: a pair of barefoot teenage girls giggling in conversation as they passed, several tourists in swimsuits seated on stools at the counter of a roadside stand where a sign promoted tropical fruit licuados, and an old man, bent under the weight of a wheelbarrow, making his way slowly through the ruts. The bus stop featured a bench at the side of the road with a rickety support of sticks to hold aloft a badly rusted roofing panel for protection from rain and sun. Looking eastward, she saw only a quiet lane with homes and bungalows to let, but no sign of the sea. She thought to walk the lane and find the Caribbean to dip her feet in before returning and sampling a fresh fruit licuado. While she pondered where to stash her bags, a dark muscular man approached.

"Señorita Tierney?" Between hand gestures and her limited Spanish, she understood that his name was Jesus and he was there to drive her to Cabañas Arrecifes. He loaded her bags in the back of a four-wheel-drive Mitsubishi then held open for her the passenger door.

"No, I walk – camino," she said embellishing her words with the motion of two fingers walking.

"No Señorita, no se puede. Esta muy lejos."

Lejos, lejos – ah yes, she remembered: far. 'It's very far,' he had said. But, it wasn't: she had the map right in her bag and it clearly showed Cabañas Arrecifes only four hundred meters, about the length of four blocks, from where they stood in the center of town. "Mire esto," Beth demanded, pulling a street map of Chauita from her briefcase. She pointed to the center of town then to the cabañas and the arrow between the two with '400 Meters' written upon it. One didn't need Spanish or

English to understand that. He took the map, seemingly fascinated, studied it closely, then insisted anew that she should ride with him. Slightly miffed at his single-mindedness, she climbed in only to be glad she did several minutes later when they pulled off of a dirt road through a bougainvillea shrouded entrance to a parking area where, barely visible at its depths, a small wooden sign hanging askance under a palm was the only identification. Cabañas Arrecifes, it said in faded red lettering. Looking at the sign, she had to admit that Jesus had been right; she never would have found her way and, even if she had, the sign would have been impossible to read in the descending dark.

Deciding on a quick tour of the grounds before total darkness, she set off for an opening in the parking lot's perimeter of shrubbery, leaving Jesus to tend to the bags. She found herself on a gravel trail bordered with varieties of flowering plants completely unknown to her. There were flowers from the delicate simplicity of two petals about a single stamen to chrysanthemum-like clusters, and orange and white beauties that could have been sculpted from wax. She continued along enjoying the scents, passing two well-separated cabañas on her right while on her left was a shrubbery-enclosed patio topped with a trellis grown over with hibiscus. Then, with the Caribbean in front, shimmering under a waxing moon, she found nestled among the palms like a fairy tale dream her cabaña: number three! It had bamboo walls with a thatch roof that also covered the open front patio. Flowering shrubs grew along one side and a stand of banana at the other. Screened windows with open shutters were to either side of the door, on the side walls and two others at the rear. The door was locked, but peeking through a window, she could see that the inside walls were finished and that the furnishings appeared as comfortable as they had in the brochure.

Closer to the beach, enclosed behind by the arc of cabañas and shrubs, she located two other bamboo structures, also with low overhanging palm thatch, trimmed square above doors. A sign listing rental rates for snorkeling equipment, surfboards, and two small sailboats identified the first as the sports shop. The other, with its face open to the Caribbean, became the beachfront bar from the brochure and there before it, on a tiny patio under an awakening starry sky and washed over with a warm February breeze, was a cluster of tables, the gentle beat of reggae and a panorama of beach overhung with palm. In perfect animation of her daydreams, the bartender was busily preparing drinks for two couples on barstools, while a third sat at a table on the patio staring out to sea, arms intertwined, enraptured by it all. And, in that moment, an unacknowledged secret fear that the brochure was nothing more than a collection of retouched photos dissipated like dust before the wind and her spirits, her thankfulness and her hopes rose higher and higher. Cabañas Arrecifes was everything she had hoped for and more, so much more. She hugged her arms about herself, smiling and took a seat at an empty table to order her first all-natural fresh fruit piña colada.

A crowing rooster sounding as though it was perched on the headboard woke her early the following morning. Bed was a soothing cloud of enfolding comfort: rolling into its loving embrace for another forty winks would have been heavenly perfection, but Mr. Cock-a-doodle Rooster was an insistent taskmaster. Grudgingly, she allowed her eyes to open, but just a crack. And, what a sight they opened to: she had awoken in the belly of a dinosaur! Mosquito netting became visceral tissue enshrouding her. From high above where they joined a single pole that could be breastplate, bamboo ribs of the beast that had swallowed her whole descended about her. Even the rising sun conspired, tinting the entire scene in glowing pink. Sunrise over the Caribbean and she was missing it! She flew from bed, wiggled into the bikini and raced to the sand before another minute could pass.

Breakfast and several sipped cups of coffee later, Beth was ready to explore. Cabañas Arrecifes' main building presented an entirely different image from the gloomy shadow it had been at night. Located back from the beach near the gravel road, it was a beautiful building of white stucco with Spanish arches overhung with flowering bougainvillea and with its

entire ground floor open to the central patio it enveloped on three sides. Within, was the reception area, a parlor, bar and lounge, a kitchen emitting odors that whetted her appetite, a dining room and gift shop. The second floor appeared to be living area for Mrs. Cecilia, the delightfully friendly mistress over all, her husband Alberto, a fountain of information about the well-tended gardens and master at repairing anything, together with their two children, eleven-year-old Oscar and Wendy, the shy eight-year-old who tittered behind her hand when Beth attempted to speak with her. Mrs. Cecilia was a beautiful Black woman who painstakingly did her own and Wendy's hair in hundreds of braids with colorful beads woven in at the tips, wore delightfully interesting jewelry, and whose English was like a harmonious song.

Beth had selected the outdoor terrace, dappled in sunlight filtering through overhead bougainvillea and open to the cabañas through an overgrown arch, as her preferred breakfast area, as had the Dutch newlyweds and the Italians with four children who all ate in their swimsuits. Two American men she had noticed at the bar the night before were however, fully dressed and had their meal in the dining room. The one with white hair and tight Western clothing even wore his cowboy hat, a high, white suede one that, with his conversation, became animated.

She didn't believe the map would be necessary, but she grabbed it anyhow and set off to become acquainted with Chauita. Picking her way southward along Main Street over rocks and potholes, she was surprised at the twenty-degree temperature difference between beachfront and street and to discover the potholes filled with water and a mini-flood crossing the road. The day had dawned to clear blue skies with no hint of what must have been an overnight downpour. Bordering the street were the broad leaves of banana, several varieties of palm, shrubs and flowers whose perfumes turned February to August. From the large open window of an unpainted clapboard house, a young woman captured Beth's attention to expound the virtues of the cakes and cookies she offered for sale. She spoke with Mrs. Cecilia's beautifully accented Caribbean English in a lilting rhythm that was a delight to hear, but moved so slowly in putting Beth's selections in a sack and counting change that it made her wonder if she had forgotten she had a customer. Perhaps nothing moved too swiftly in Chauita where the heat bore down like a leaden weight, but the open warmth and laid back temperament of the townspeople she met invited conversation that more than made up for lack of motivation.

Before the week was out, Beth was familiar with Chauita's every lane and already feeling a part of the community for being stopped to chat as a familiar friend whenever she strolled into town. She had been virtually adopted by Margarita, a wizened old woman who ran a tiny store and whose passion was applying folk wisdom to the lives of all she met. Beth told her little, yet Margarita suggested she 'pluck chickens,' a sure cure, she contended for those who mourn their parents. She had the correct collection of pebbles and seeds to place before a candle and herb to produce a tea, which would combine their forces to reenergize her 'field,' weakened she said, by a betrayal. And at the entrance to the national park, where pristine beach and monkey filled jungle were protected from development, the guards accepted her as a local and she paid no fee. But Cabañas Arrecifes and the beach in front was where she spent most of her time and what she referred to as home. Alberto and Mrs. Cecilia accepted her into their family fold as one of their own and the title *jefe pequeño* that she assigned to Oscar, her new little boyfriend, was adopted even by them as his second name. He had earned it for knowing, as any 'little boss' should, virtually everything about Cabañas Arrecifes and for always being close at hand. He seemed intensely curious about her, staring in rapt fascination as she did the most mundane of things: copy columns of data from one page to another, light a candle or retie her hammock. When given a rake to clean the grounds, the area in front of her cabaña seemed to receive the majority of his attention. He was shy, usually not answering when spoken to, but his face lit with joy when Beth read the words Chicago Bulls from his favorite t-shirt. "Yeah, Cheecago Bulls," he responded enthusiastically, elaborately pantomiming a

hook shot to an imaginary basket atop her roof. His favorite pastime, however, seemed to be watching her eat as though she was some strange creature whose habits he wished to study.

Rounding the corner from the dining terrace to her cabaña one morning, Beth had a near collision with a woman skin-and-bones thin. She was caught short with her mouth open to offer apology when the woman sneered and shoved roughly against her with both hands before running off towards the beach. “Well, excuse the hell out of me!” she said to the woman’s disappearing image, then noticed her door ajar. She ran out to the beach after her, fearing that everything she had had been stolen, but the woman was swift and nothing remained of her but a small figure far down the beach. She returned to the room with a heavy heart dreading what she would find missing. Her pocketbook had been sitting right out in the open on the night table with everything in it: money, passport, credit cards, my God, what else? There was the wristwatch and the wedding ring from her mother in the little saucer next to the bathroom sink.

She was actually frightened to enter her own room; she approached feeling weak, her insides in turmoil. Upon going in, her first sight was the purse on her nightstand, just as she had left it. Opening it cautiously, she was washed through with relief to see that everything was there. A glance in the closet and around the room showed nothing amiss: her clock, clothes, shoes and books appeared perfectly in order. Maybe the woman hadn’t been in her room after all and Wendy, cleaning her room, had left the door open. Feeling meekly embarrassed for her suspicious mind, she entered the bathroom and was caught short. The woman had been there! The contents of her toiletries case lay scattered on the counter below the steamed-over mirror wiped clear in a small area over the sink. On the floor was a soaked towel amid watery footprints but, in the dish where they had been, the wristwatch and ring remained untouched. The woman had taken a shower, used her makeup and not stolen a thing. She knew she should count herself extremely fortunate, but what persisted was a creepy sense of violation.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THREE

A rumbling distant thunder shook the still air of dawn, contradicting the otherwise total serenity. Rising from their nighttime roost, a twelve-wing squadron of pelicans fell into formation above the palms. They swept out over the water to parallel the beach then, mimicking their leader, each in turn dove steeply. They descended effortlessly, perfectly in formation and settled into a file riding the updraft from the incline of an incoming swell. With wing tip feathers etching fine lines onto the satiny surface of turquoise water, their breakfast quest began, then suddenly, from three feet below, a shadowy figure surged upwards. Keening shrilly, the leader flapped its wings to lift sharply skyward, scattering the column in mad disarray.

Unaware of the turmoil, Beth burst through the surface in a watery eruption gasping for air. Her feet found the bottom and rising, she tossed her hair in a wide arc, enclosing herself in a ring of spray. The springy new feeling to her hair was wonderful and particularly noticeable when it was wet. She liked too the way the loose curls created accent that seemed to round her narrow face, and how, after a week under the Costa Rican sun, her usual mousy blond had lightened. A golden tan colored her skin, and her eyes, in the tropical sunlight, shimmered deep blue.

Before her, spread a beach of golden sand with coconut palms arching above. Towards either mist-shrouded horizon, as far as her eye could see, it was pristine save for driftwood sculptures carved by waves and wind into fantastic creatures. Little waders – sandpipers, she thought, remembering the name from a half forgotten book – scampered before the incoming rush of foam then, just as swiftly, reversed to poke with needle sharp beaks for hidden morsels. Their busy peeping seemed in perfect synchronization with the surf while far inland mountain peaks reflected the first pink rays of sunlight.

She was still new to it, yet felt kinship with the landscape more profoundly than with a lifetime among Wisconsin's hills and lakes. She loved it and everything new in her life, even including the swimsuit that had been so difficult to buy. She'd had a regular two-piece in mind when entering the Green Bay shop but, upon seeing the miniature strips of cloth it was made of, lost her nerve. Only the attendant's problems in locating any others in their boxed up summer collection led her to buy it and now, here she was, wearing the skimpy thing outdoors, on a beach far better than the one she had once only imagined. "This is Paradise! Paradise!" she shouted to the heavens, her head thrown back, arms spread to embrace it all.

Abruptly as a striking bolt of lightning, fear prickled her skin as, from the thick growth of jungle above the beach, someone shouted rude hooting noises. She froze, instincts screaming with chilling clarity: you are defenseless and virtually naked! Her eyes flashed to the left, then right: nothing. She was alone with a pervert on a deserted beach in a strange land! Which way to run? The trail back to the cabañas began high on the beach in the shade of the trees where her towel lay – and just where some degenerate lurked! She was trapped! A terrible sense of injustice welled hot tears up to her eyes.

In a tide of reversing emotion, anger took over – mouse-woman lost again. Beth Tierney wasn't going to let her morning be spoiled by some creep! She stomped up through the surf, arms swinging like pistons only to stop short at the discovery of fresh footprints crossing her own from when she had run to the surf. Two people had passed: their wavering trail continued along the beach, broken where the surf had erased its memory. So, there were two! That made it worse, much worse: trembling fear returned. She ran the short distance to her towel, grabbed it and wrapped it tightly around, tucking in the corners firmly. Scowling into the jungle, she stood with her legs spread, hands on hips and upper body swaying defiantly. "Show's over, assholes!" She shouted, drawing her makeshift robe closer in a tight angry tug. More loud hoots – but they came from above. What? Beth squinted into the deep shadow of overhead branches. A dark form moved, catching her eye,

then another: monkeys! Big ones! There must have been a dozen peering down at her. Fear washed away in a wave. Laughing at her foolishness, she played with the monkeys. Moving to one side, the bodies of the entire troop leaned perilously from their branches in the same direction then back again when she did. It was a dance with multiple grunting partners all of whom followed her lead.

Beth returned to her towel and the task of lathering on sunscreen while the troop of howlers, bored by her motionless sitting, staring off to the sunrise, lost interest and disappeared into the jungle. “My own beach,” Beth whispered, her gaze savoring the details of her surroundings. “Look at this beautiful place. A slice of heaven on Earth and today, it’s all mine to enjoy.” The panic caused by the monkeys convinced her that she still had a long way to go, but how much loosening up could she expect of herself after just a couple of weeks? What she really needed to do was to stop feeling sorry for herself. Grateful would be more appropriate. After all, the whole nasty mess had given her this opportunity to start life over, and not many people are as fortunate. This time she intended to do it right, without the mistakes of the past: the truth was that they all did her a favor, she just needed to chill out.

Far down the beach, two people jogged beside the low surf. She watched as they approached, appearing to grow larger. They weaved, following the shimmering remnants of waves slipping towards the sea on the nearly level beach, their feet splashing in an inch of water. When a wave surged onto the beach, they snaked towards the trees. Then, as it spread itself thin again, slowly returning to the sea, the joggers veered seaward again, maintaining their steady, splashing progress. “The footprints return,” she said aloud, “let’s see who these guys are, Robinson Crusoe and Friday perhaps.” Closer still, they came until she was able to see that it was two men, both barefoot with brown skin and dark hair. Each had an athletic body, but one had the build of a marathon runner and the other could be a heavyweight boxer. The thinner, leading as they banked up the sand towards her and slowed to a walk, wore a yellow cotton turtleneck pullover with sleeves removed, knee-length blue shorts and moved his narrow frame with quickness apart from the exercise.

“Good morning. You must be Miss Tierney,” he managed to say between pants. The man’s appearance was shocking. Scars covered his entire face. One, particularly visible from her vantage below, was an ugly mat of wrinkled flesh, burned black and pink below his chin and down his throat to disappear under the turtleneck. His nose was also wrong, it appeared to be made of two mismatched pieces. The upper and lower halves met off center at a deep scar that crossed the entire right side of his face, a dark line slanting below one eye. She smiled up to him, trying desperately to keep her reaction from being apparent. His hair was normal; that helped. It was dark, short and cut military style: she focused there. He stood erect in the sand, soldier-like, arms at his side, panting lightly. Meanwhile the bigger man behind remained bent at the waist, hands cupped over his knees, fighting for his breath.

“You’re right, my name is Beth Tierney. You have me at a disadvantage, though,” she acknowledged. No answer. His left ear, opposite the scar had an oversize hole pierced through it. Bright morning sunlight caught the hole perfectly, creating the effect of a huge diamond earring. She held her smile, trying not to notice. “How do you happen to know my name?” she asked more directly.

“My pardon, Miss Tierney. I’m your host, Truman Herrera. I own Cabañas Arrecifes.”

“Oh, but I thought Alberto and Mrs. Cecilia...”

“That’s okay, Miss, most people assume they are the owners. I prefer to remain in the background. People are put off by my scars,” he said laughing easily, “so, it’s better for business, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Under those scars, you have fine features: Italian, I’d say.

“Yes, on my mother’s side, you’re very good.”

“It’s your eyes and your nose. You have kind of a Roman nose, if it wasn’t – like that,” she finished lamely not knowing quite how to express herself without insult.

He laughed good-naturedly. “See what I mean? The gentleman with me is Jesus Calderón,” he said, gesturing grandly towards the muscle-bound man behind him. “Jesus is our security man, and very good at his job, actually.”

“Oh yes, we’ve already met. He was at the bus stop to meet me the night I arrived.”

“Chauita is a sweet little town. I can assure you, you’ll not have any problems here. Nevertheless, if you’d like to have Jesus escort you at any time during your stay, just ask. Unfortunately, however, he doesn’t speak any English,” he declared in a pure North American accent.

Truman had a sincere friendly expression that put Beth at ease and narrow cheeks like her own. The right one dimpled when he smiled, which he did often, so it was first present then gone again, making his conversation pleasant to watch as well as to hear and the scars no longer matter. “I can speak some Spanish,” she answered, “just not very well. I studied it in college, but I’ve never actually used it.”

“*Diga hola a la Señorita Tierney, Jesus.*” Truman said speaking slowly and enunciating carefully for her benefit.

“*Mucho gusto en conocerla, Señorita. Para servirle,*” Jesus replied, lifting himself erect and smiling broadly. He was handsome with a meaty face and wide, muscular neck. Bulging shoulders and arms enclosed a trim torso with visible abdominals. He had no tattoos or jewelry and wore his hair long in back to hang over his shoulders, but trimmed close at the sides and his black swimsuit was every bit as revealing as Beth’s bikini bottom.

“See? I understood what he said,” she proclaimed. “He said, ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss. I’m at your service,’ right?”

“One hundred percent.”

“*Tambien, tengo mucho gusto en conocerle de nuevo, Señor Jesus,* (And it’s a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Jesus),” she replied, twisting her tongue around the strange sounds.

“That’s very good, Miss Tierney,” Truman responded. “Your Spanish is excellent.”

“Not really.” A mid-air battle between a gull and frigate for a fish held their attention momentarily. “Come to think of it, I did have one problem,” she added, responding to the issue of security. “A girl broke into my room a couple of days ago, a very skinny girl – pretty. I think she just took a shower and might have stolen some makeup. I don’t know, but nothing else was missing: it was all quite weird. At any rate, now I’m keeping my room locked.”

Truman turned towards Jesus, still bent over behind him and spoke rapidly in Spanish. “I’m sorry about the incident,” he said, directing his words to her. “We know who this woman is. She’s a crack addict from down the beach. I’m sending Jesus to talk to her. You won’t be bothered again, Miss Tierney.”

“Please, call me Beth. Miss Tierney is too formal for me. It feels as though you’re speaking to another person. What did you say your name was?”

“Truman Herrera.”

“Have a seat, Truman Herrera. After running for so long, your legs must be tired.” He had thin lips framed between trimmed, black mustache and square jaw and straight black eyebrows. In the shadow below, equally dark eyes returned a gaze, captivating, for its capacity to switch from cheery sparkle to cold stare. He could be a very handsome man...

“Thank you, Beth,” he sighed settling into the sand beside her. “I try to stay in shape,” he continued. “When I’m here, I get out early every morning. Run maybe five or six K. It’s good for Jesus too. As you can see he doesn’t get enough

aerobic exercise.” Jesus looked quickly, curiously, at the mention of his name mixed into the strange sounds of English then, seeing he wasn’t wanted, returned his attention to the beach.

“Your English is excellent, Truman. I can’t even hear an accent. Have you lived in the United States?”

“Yes, I lived there for several years,” he replied with a touch of defensiveness. “How do you like our beach?” he quickly added.

“I love it here, Truman. I could easily stay forever, but I want to see the rest of the country too. I’m thinking of possibly spending a little time in San José, but then, I believe I’d like to come back. Cabañas Arrecifes is too perfect to leave for long. Right now though, I’m not going anywhere. This,” she said with a sweeping grin, “is for me.”

“I know how you feel. It suits me too.” Truman smiled shyly, his dimple growing deep. “That’s why I bought the place. It’s home now.”

“Now I remember you,” she said suddenly. “You were here the night I arrived. Have you just returned from somewhere?”

“Yes I have: from the near dead. I’ve been flat on my back with malaria. I caught it years ago and it still flares up now and then. Some people get it and it never bothers them again, but in my case, when it comes, it’s as bad as it was the first time.”

“I’m sorry. Are you all right now?”

“Oh yes, it’s gone now.”

“I notice that your cowboy friend isn’t with you. Doesn’t he like to run?”

His right eye began to twitch. “He’s not here,” Truman said, gaining his feet as he spoke, “and he won’t be coming back. If you’ll excuse me, Miss Tierney, I’m going to cool off with a swim.” There was an angry edge to his voice and her name had once again become ‘Miss Tierney’. He walked purposefully to the surf and was soon a small figure rising, then disappearing, behind swells.

“Well, I sure do have a special way with men,” she spoke aloud. “What did I do wrong this time, I wonder?”

Beth walked quickly to catch up with the large lead Jesus’ fast pace had afforded him. As she fell in beside, he began to speak, but too fast for her to follow, although she was able to understand that he was saying something about the woman who had broken into her room. She definitely heard something about the woman being a stupid prostitute and a crack addict. Then he said she lived in a box. A box? At least it sounded like *caja* and until Jesus pointed to a pair of feet protruding from a corrugated cardboard carton under the palms, she assumed it to be a local way of describing a shanty. “*Alli. La puta vive alli. Mira,* (There. The whore lives right there. Look),” he said. Beth did look and could hardly believe what her eyes were telling her. The young woman was, indeed, living in a box. It was a refrigerator box with a door cut in its side and laid over with palm branches. She looked like an abandoned puppy, skinny as a rail and glaring with malevolent eyes from her box. Her adversary, Jesus, stood like a mighty giant before the frail cardboard doorway, yelling down to the coiled wisp of a woman. She had a complexion of soft cocoa, wide, low cheekbones, deeply hollowed cheeks and a bone-thin body. Her full lips were drawn into a snarl over a gleaming set of perfectly matched teeth, and fiery eyes glowered from below thin eyebrows arched into a threatening V. At that moment, their fury was directed sideways and upwards, exposing a wide crescent of menacing white while bony shoulders were drawn together, readying to attack. Like a cat’s, her hips moved slowly easing her weight over her coiled legs. She wore iridescent-green spandex pants with a filmy peasant blouse, dirty and without color that plunged low over a flat chest. Peering inside the box around the woman, Beth saw a small pile of clothing folded to form a pillow, a

towel that served as a blanket and in the far corner, a stack of notebooks. Outside the raggedly cut doorway, were the ashes of a small fire and a solitary empty can reflecting sunlight.

The woman backed deeper into her box, frightened, but clearly prepared to defend herself. Reaching in, Jesus pulled the twisting, screaming woman out by her wrist. The shouting match that ensued was well beyond Beth's level of comprehension probably because it was primarily curses, not taught in college Spanish. She did, however, hear both make references to her and understood beyond any doubt from the simultaneous shouting that there was no meeting of the minds. Without warning, Jesus slapped the woman with such force that dust flew from close cut curls of dirty, dark brown hair, and she fell sideways into the sand. She was up again in an instant screaming more rapidly than ever and threw herself at him face on, only to be slapped to the ground again. "You pig!" Beth shrieked, diving into the fracas by pounding the side of Jesus' head with her fists. The woman, quick to seize the opening Beth's attack afforded her, sprang on him like a starved alley cat, clawing at his face and chest while Beth stepped through his legs, looped her foot around his ankle and threw herself against his chest, dropping him. Sitting in the sand, Jesus held out his hands palms out, defeated – big muscles and all. He crawled to his feet amid a withering verbal onslaught in two languages then quickly walked away, turning only once to shout what must have been a parting vulgarity. The box woman ran after him, hurling sand and insults. Conceding defeat, he smiled, dropped his upraised arms to his sides, turned and jogged away leaving Beth and the young woman squealing with glee and exchanging a triumphant high-five salute. Their broad victory smiles faded in the short moment it took to remember the reason for Beth's visit.

"I doan steal notheeng, lady. I keep notheeng," the box woman swore. Her dark eyes opened wide, white flashes of defiance in their corners. Thin, mobile eyebrows enunciated each word with fluid arches. Broad, skyward, pointing motions alternating with trembling hand gestures ignited her delivery with burning passion. "You go away from here, gringa!"

"I'm sorry about Jesus. I didn't know he would do anything to hurt you." Beth backed away one step from the frenzy of the skinny woman, vaguely indicating with her hands and eyes the figure of Jesus, retreating down the beach. She paused, readying to say something, but wasn't able to find her words. The woman, breathing heavily, waited nervously for her response. Finally, Beth broke the silence: "He... They said... you live here," she minced, indicating the box. "Do you have food to eat? I mean, are you hungry?" She pantomimed eating gestures, but the woman didn't reply, rather she glared at Beth with eyes that spoke for themselves, saying they hated this gringa. Abruptly, the box woman softened, shrugged and sat in the sand, raising a light puff of dust as she did. The eyes blinked coyly.

"You wan what, lady?" she asked.

"Breakfast," Beth stammered. "I'm going to breakfast at a restaurant in Chauita. Come with me. Please. I'll pay," she continued when the woman simply gaped at her from her seat in the sand. "Food," Beth finally said, not reading understanding in the woman's eyes. "Eat." More pantomime.

"You buy breakfast for Herminia? Why?" she asked. "Why you buy breakfast? What you wan, lady?"

"Okay," Beth retorted sharply. "I have to have a reason? All right. I want you to come with me so we can talk. Is that okay? Will you come to breakfast with me so we can talk, Herminia? Your name is Herminia, right? My name is Beth."

Herminia was ordered out of the restaurant the moment she stepped foot inside and remained flinching nervously outside while Beth returned for take-outs. Inside, the heavy-set woman who had done all the yelling sat perched on a stool behind the counter. She leaned conspiratorially over the cash register, glowering at the figure of Herminia pacing in the street. "That one is thief, child," the woman hissed. "You be careful 'roun her."

“Even a thief needs to eat,” Beth replied, miffed at the bitter and inhumane reception. Although angry, just below the surface the woman’s warning unsettled her. Uncertain as to her own feelings, she sat at a table waiting for the food, alone with her thoughts while, before the open doorway, Herminia paced, casting furtive glances to the shadows inside. The desperation written in those eyes was frightening. Breakfast would be eaten, she concluded, somewhere safe. When the food was ready, she cradled the two breakfasts in precarious balance against her body and went with Herminia to Chauita’s bus terminal to eat. They both sat on the bench under the rusting sheet of corrugated steel. She handed Herminia a breakfast plate, lay her own across her knees and began returning the change to her purse.

“Theese, for Herminia?” Herminia asked, stopping Beth’s hand in mid-movement. She answered Beth’s cold scowl with a wide smile. “Please lady, Herminia buy cigarette.” She sighed and surrendered the approximately one dollar and fifty cents value of change, immediately chiding herself for doing so. Jesus was likely right about her being a prostitute and probably about being a crack addict too. He hadn’t been right, however, about her being stupid. She spoke English, for one, which was more than could be claimed for him and, despite her constantly moving, nervous energy and apparently widely recognized history as a thief, Herminia had a sense of humor and speaking with her was fascinating and exciting too: in Green Bay, she would certainly have run from such a person.

* * *

Pausing at the entrance to the open-air bar in central Chauita, Beth was amazed at its very existence in this miniscule pueblo. A scant three blocks away, she had been sitting on the beach where the only sounds had been nature’s own. Reclined on the trunk of a palm that angled low over the beach before curving skyward, she had just watched the full moon rise over the Caribbean, entranced by the evening’s delicate spirituality. Revitalized and suddenly hungry for human contact, she had recalled the bar the box-woman, Herminia, had so vividly described. She had often seen it down the road from the bus stop, but in her observations, it appeared a sleepy-town bar with but a sprinkling of customers deep in its shadowy interior and simply assumed that was it for Chauita excitement and that the little town simply retired to its bedrooms at night. However, from Herminia’s vivid descriptions it sounded anything but sleepy-town and now, standing at its entrance, it literally clamored with life as a full two hundred fifty watts of amplified base thumped the night air to the beat of Bob Marley’s *Buffalo Soldier*. Rotating beams strobed through breaks in low hanging fronds, throwing pulsating spears of color through the night that, like a flashing lure trolled over the reef, attracted tourists and locals alike.

She wore a beige ankle-length skirt (a borderline item almost given to Goodwill with the rest of her ‘brown stuff’) and above, for color, an orange shirt unbuttoned and tied in front. Moving to a table against the open-air front window from where the entire bar was visible, she settled in to watch the action. A large red, yellow and green flag with a clenched fist surrounded by barbed wire in its center almost completely covered the wall behind the bar and from the center of the big room, a varnished tree trunk rose thirty feet to support the conical roof. At two tables in the back, tourist couples were having candlelit dinners with the tables around them covered with drinks, but void of people. Their occupants were in front on the dance floor, bodies gyrating and arms swaying above bouncing heads under the rotating lights while at the bar, dozens of simultaneous conversations were shouted above the music or whispered in ears. She listened to two locals engaged in a heated argument whose meaningless jousting switched from Spanish to English mid-sentence without missing an insult. A young man with dreadlocks bouncing came in from the street and approached her table.

“Wa’s hap’nin, Mama?” he shouted into her face over the music. “You looking for sumpin special?” She shook her head and watched as he returned to the street to join a companion in the shadow of a tree. With each tourist that passed, one or

the other would emerge from under the tree to join the newcomer, chatting away as though they were old chums. Surprisingly, some seemed to be seeking the hustlers rather than the other way around. They were selling drugs! It was a pretty exciting discovery and she thrilled to watch the brief meetings with stealthy exchanges and rapid departures.

A tightly pressed throng surrounded a long table across the dance floor. They seemed intent and quietly focused for long minutes, but then would erupt with boisterous laughter, moans and shouts, only to become silent and intent again. She strained for a peek, but was unable to see beyond the milling bodies on the dance floor and at the table. Sliding from her seat, she wove her way through the dancers for a closer look and snickered when seated at the head of the table, she saw Truman. Formal, Mr. Truman was dressed in a crisp white shirt over the customary turtleneck (black), playing poker with about ten others seated around the table. He looked comfortably relaxed, yet commanding and dignified while the others seemed tormented with every decision of bet or get out. There didn't seem to be much value placed on the 'poker face' Americans consider pivotal strategy. They were animated and loud enough to give the sound system a run for its money. Bets were slapped down with theatrical flourish. The audience observed silence during play, but the players were having plenty of loud fun. When a hand was finished and the lucky winner scooped up his prize, of all the spectators, only Jesus remained stonily calm. He stood as a sculpture behind Truman; only his eyes shifting, taking in every movement. She watched a few minutes then, bored with poker, strolled away, sidestepping across the dance floor towards her table.

Truman suddenly was at her side.

"I haven't seen you here before, Beth," he shouted in her ear.

Yelling over her shoulder in answer, she replied: "This is my first time in town at night," then stopped to allow a couple to dance by. "Do you come here often to play poker with your friends?" she asked.

"Sure, when I'm... Hey, this is no place to talk!" he said. "What do you say we grab a beer and go to the beach?"

"Good idea!" she shouted back, wincing from a stepped-on toe. "Let me see if I can find my waitress."

"Don't worry about her, just head for the door. Jesus will pay the bill and bring out the beer," he called over the top of two dancing heads, pointing to the door and Jesus.

"Are you sure?" she yelled above the din.

"My treat," Truman shouted, passing a few bills and shouting instructions to Jesus. Beth glared fierce defiance at Jesus as she passed him, but said nothing. "Jesus tells me you beat him up," Truman taunted in the relative quiet outside, a teasing smile playing the corner of his mouth. "I hired him as my bodyguard because he has black belts in a few of those martial arts."

"Bodyguard? You need a bodyguard? So why did you tell me this is a quiet little town?"

"It is, it's peaceful. It... It's just me," he said laughing self-consciously. "At any rate, knocking him on his butt is very impressive, I dare say. You must be one tough lady."

"Don't joke," she snapped. "I hope you gave it to that big gorilla. He's a coward and a brute for hitting that skinny little woman. She's so light that you could lift her with a feather. I should punch him again, right now. You're an asshole, Jesus!" she yelled, showing her fist when he feigned lack of comprehension.

"I put him on notice. His job is on the line," Truman vowed, holding up two fingers in a cub scout salute. "He's on his very best behavior, I promise."

* * *

Strange, Beth thought, settling cross-legged into her nook on the ox-bow palm, how quiet is the beach! The only sounds were breaking waves and an occasional rattle of fronds in the slight breeze. The birds, such a noisy lot in daylight, were silent, all tucked into their wings in sleep, and the bar music couldn't be heard. Truman found his spot in the sand, chosen for the easily defined dark island of moon shadow cast by a tree and settled himself comfortably. The air, moving lightly across her skin, carried faintly the odors of seaweed and fish. Beth looked to the moon, higher now, risen to a position almost overhead, and bathed her face in its soft glow.

"You've been here at least two weeks now," Truman said from his shadow. "How is it that this is your first night in town?"

"Well, evenings, after dinner, I usually walk on the beach, then watching the stars I get sleepy and it's early to bed. The routine is so pleasant that I never gave a second thought to coming into town. Besides, I didn't think there was much of anything happening." She observed him as she spoke, noting that in the deep shadow, his scars were hardly noticeable. What could have happened to this man, she wondered. He was charming and smiled so easily, yet he could quickly become tense and withdrawn. "That way I'm up in time to see the sunrise," she mumbled, looking out to sea, away from him, to keep her mind on the conversation. "Every sunrise is different, you know. All spectacular."

"I need to apologize," he continued. "I'm afraid I was rather rude this morning on the beach." She turned towards him: was he reading her mind? He was difficult to make out in his shadow, just a vague blur. "That man you saw with me, the one with Western clothes... well, he's someone I haven't seen for a very long time." He gestured graphically, attempting with his hands to instill gravity to his words. "I became upset that you assumed he and I were friends and I apologize for that. I know I over-reacted and I don't want you to think it was because of anything you did.

"Don't worry about it, Truman. You needn't apologize. I understand perfectly: I'd be just as upset if, for example, someone mistook my ex-boss for a close, personal friend. Is this guy someone you used to know well, like I did my ex-boss?"

"No, I hardly knew him, but he is definitely not someone I want anyone thinking is my friend. He is a man with an extremely vile reputation." It had been a mistake to ask: he began squirming uncomfortably. "So, where are you from?" he asked in a tone that coaxed response. So, he wanted to avoid mention of the cowboy; had he perhaps something to do with Truman's scars. "With that accent, you have to be from somewhere in The States. The West Coast, right?"

"Well, it's the States all right," she replied. Her smile grew and eyes flashed sideways, taking him in. "It's not the West Coast though, it's the Midwest; Green Bay, Wisconsin, a mighty cold place this time of year. Have you ever been there?"

"No, I can't say that I have. What do you do there?"

"Not do, Truman – did. I'm a groundwater geologist and used to work for a firm that located and eliminated sources of contamination to keep water safe for drinking, but these days I'm an independent consultant and do my work through the Internet. You've probably seen me out on the dining room patio with a pile of papers and my computer. Well, that's me in my new office."

"Now, that's what I'd call an enviable job, free to go wherever you choose. How did you manage to work your way into such a great position?"

"Enviable job? I didn't think anyone else would ever see it that way, but you might say I jumped at the opportunity when it came along. And you? You said you had been in the U.S., but not Wisconsin. What part have you visited?"

"I spent time in the state of Georgia a number of years ago. I loved it there. Yours is such a beautiful country with everything so clean and well organized, you know what I mean? Even the poorest of people live very rich compared to us.

And your highways! People here in Central America can't even imagine roads of such quality! In my opinion, that President Eisenhower of yours ought to be canonized as the patron saint of travel for your Interstate highway system."

"That's funny, I wouldn't think of highways as a tourist attraction. What does Costa Rica have of interest that isn't likely to appear in the guide books?"

"Actually, I don't know Costa Rica so very well. I was born and raised in Jinotega, Nicaragua, a little town high in the mountains."

"Nicaragua? No, I know almost nothing about your country. Where exactly is Jinotega?"

"It is an old town in the northeast of Nicaragua and not at all like anything in the US. There certainly are no Interstate highways, for example. In fact, the very best roads in Jinotega are just simple cobblestone lanes that are looked upon with envy by other towns in the region. Does that begin to give you an idea why people from Central America couldn't even begin to imagine your Green Bay?"

"Jinotega... I like the name. What's it like there?"

"It's just thirteen degrees from the equator, but because of the altitude it gets chilly," he answered. "At night, a jacket is necessary and, in rainy season when it's perpetually covered over by clouds, it's really cold."

"Yes, but cold is a relative term. It can't be anything like Wisconsin," she challenged. "Imagine air so frigid it hurts any uncovered skin and lakes frozen so solid that people drive cars out on them. That's cold, and that's what it's like in Wisconsin even as we speak. You know, far-away places have always intrigued me, but I've spent my entire life studying or working because, somehow, that always seemed more important. All I've seen of the world is Wisconsin and a little bit of New England where I attended university. Believe it or not, this is my first time out of the country, so why not be my tour guide and tell me a little about Jinotega, okay?"

No answer.

She sat quietly allowing him time to gather his thoughts then, still not receiving a reply, she said: "Hey there, Truman, are you still with me? What are you thinking about so deeply?"

"Nothing. Really, nothing," he offered.

"I've found," she answered, "that if you put your thoughts into words for another person and listen to how you express yourself, you are often surprised that your own description is different from how you thought it might be."

"My thoughts into words? That is not so easy as it sounds. I have so many rushing together at just the mention of Jinotega – you can't imagine – but all right..." Truman cleared his throat, preparing himself, overdoing the melodrama in her opinion. He dug into the sand and tossed handfuls onto his feet, the act somehow releasing memories. "Let's see..." His words dragged thoughtfully. "This isn't easy because the war changed – oh not just Jinotega, but everything, and so completely, too. It's as though I remember two distinctly different Jinotegas."

"Oh yes! The war in Nicaragua, of course. You were at war. I'm so sorry, I should have remembered. Listen, you don't have to do this if it's difficult. Would you like to know about the Green Bay Packers?"

"No, no, it's alright; put my thoughts into words, like you said. I don't know that I've ever talked with anyone about Jinotega. This could be interesting. I was trying just now to think of how I could avoid mention of the war and just tell you how Jinotega was before, the way I would like to remember it, but I don't think I can avoid the trouble completely. Ah, but you'll see." He let go, allowing long protected memories find their way to words. "All right, I have to start somewhere, right? I'll try to tell you how I remember it in 1968. That was the year I left Jinotega with my cousin to attend the University of Managua."

Beth snuggled deeper into her nook, hugging knees to breast. “Go on Truman, I’m listening.” Staring off across the rippling line of moonlight dancing over the water, she relaxed, waiting for Truman’s words to create an image.

A deep sigh came from his shadowy figure. “When you say, ‘tell me about Jinotega,’ the first thing that comes to mind is of running barefoot with my cousin Raul, but we were growing up in a country spiraling its way to civil war. As I think back, I see so many events signaling what was to come, but then, no one was noticing. At the time, that was just the way things were. Okay, let me see if I can get 1968 right. I remember...”

* * *

There weren’t many cars or trucks on the streets of Jinotega, Nicaragua in 1968. Most walked to where they were going or hitched a ride on a wagon drawn by horse or oxen. Many farmers and the rich rode horseback while ox carts with thick wooden wheels painted brilliantly in reds, oranges and yellows, hot Latin colors, carried the heavy cargoes. The few cars that did appear were enough of a novelty to draw stares and troops of running boys. Although Jinotega was the provincial capital, it was but a quiet, mountain farm-town whose citizens were tillers of the rich volcanic soil. It was a community proud of its reputation as the best in all of Nicaragua for produce and dairy products.

Among the many farms of the long valley there existed but two tractors, owned by the province’s two wealthiest families. They had come into their hands over the others as a result of influence with the government in Managua, which oversaw the donations from the US AID farm program, President Samosa’s showpiece. Ironically, via a Spanish language acronym for The Institute for the Well Being of Poor Farmers, the aid, which further enriched wealthy landowners and froze out the poor, was named *INVIERNO*, the Spanish word for winter. The other farms of Jinotega Valley, owned by the poor, were worked using shared teams of oxen managed by a bare bones budget local farmers’ cooperative that attempted to secure for the *campesinos* the highest possible price for crops while purchasing seed and fertilizer as low as possible. However, try as they might to avoid it, foreclosures on small farms were a common event with bank credit a near impossibility for small farmers. When it was available, the interest rates charged on those few high-risk loans converted them into instruments of doom, impossible to repay. Lucrative government and export contracts for crops were awarded only to rich farms with the right power connections in Managua. To many of the *campesinos* in those years, the offers from those two families for their land seemed a better choice than competing. Displaced families swelled the poor barrio south of Jinotega known as *Las Latas* (the tin cans), so called for the corrugated steel used to build the shacks. By 1968 *Las Latas*, where plank footbridges crossed open-sewer ditches between shacks and street, was Jinotega’s fastest growing community. It was a neighborhood of dirt streets, without electricity or running water, a neighborhood of barefoot children in tattered rags, hunger, alcoholism and hopelessness. For Truman, his cousin Raul and most of the town folk however, none of this touched their lives. The quiet streets of central Jinotega where the boys had grown and played were the only world they knew. Everything that had shaped their lives was contained within the mountain ridges visible from the center of town. (*Las Latas* remained conveniently out of sight). They were just two young men soon to be leaving for their university studies in Managua with their minds occupied by thoughts of how best to impress the young women about town. They, the same as everyone else in town, knew next to nothing about the world beyond their valley. Leaving for Managua was tantamount to a trip to the moon, elevating them to the level of celebrities in the eyes of Jinotega’s girls.

The buildings lining the cobbled streets of central Jinotega are built flush to the edge of narrow stone sidewalks. Thick plank doors, ten to fifteen feet in height and arched at the top, open abruptly along stucco walls, continuous from one corner to the next where changes in color are the only division of one building from the next. Steep stone steps at each

entrance extend slightly onto the sidewalk. At cross streets, building corners are cut diagonally with canopied double doors open to bars or stores within, and walls are of three feet thick adobe, wider still at the bottom and covered over with smooth stucco painted white or light pastel. Large windows through the walls are sealed at night against the chill mountain air with heavy wooden shutters matching the doors. Inside, the rooms are big, with twenty foot high ceilings and glossily waxed ceramic floors. Kitchens are always at the rear, open to an enclosed garden, where smoke from wood stoves escapes to mingle with the odors of baking bread, rich stews and the sweetness of flowers. Over the years, Truman and cousin Raul had sampled the cooking from most of the kitchens of Jinotega. As a result of that experience, they knew which offered the best food and when. Jinotega was a place where a strange face was seldom seen, life followed a steady, predictable peacefulness and doors were seldom locked.

Truman and Raul were first cousins, playmates as well as constant companions from birth, born but one week apart and who had grown up in homes joined by a common wall. Several generations earlier a door had been cut through the wall, uniting the families already joined by blood. As teenagers, they became so good at fast footwork handling of a soccer ball that, for the years they were on the school team, Jinotega was the unbeatable champion of the region. By 1968, however, football was kid's stuff. Now they were men, soon to leave for Managua and a sight to be seen together. They were out to claim the world and as many women as possible along the way. Raul spoke with a baritone, masculine voice that girls swooned over. Truman, constantly at his side, appeared short, but he wasn't; by Nicaraguan standards, he was tall – tall, narrow and darkly handsome. It didn't matter to them what the cost, they'd pay on time, but only the best clothes rode on the backs of those two. They wore tailor-made western boots and tight fitting jeans, American made Levi's, of course. With the girls, they worked as a team as well as they had in football, being seen in town with only the prettiest or the richest.

Beth broke her stare from the Caribbean and with it, her trance. Turning to face Truman, she stretched, suddenly realizing how stiff her back and legs had become. The moon was higher and brighter, bathing her in its light and under it, hers was the face of a woman from an old black and white movie, a face of deep shadows with softened edges, aglow in a moonbeam. "It sounds like a beautiful place to be a child, Truman, and in no way comparable to Green Bay."

"Raul and I were so innocent then," he said speaking as though he hadn't heard a word. Beth saw his head turned, however, watching her intently as he spoke: he needed to continue and seemed to be seeking permission – she remained quiet. The pile of sand from Truman's tossing had grown, covering both feet now. She watched as he pensively tossed another handful, back-boarding it from his leg. A moving light played across the shadows, illuminating his scars. Beth searched for the source of light and found it when a wave flashed moonlight from its mirror-like face. Memories were continuing to flood his thoughts. She had coaxed open a locked door, releasing an avalanche: apparently, he had many other thoughts in need of expression. His eyes locked to her stare and he continued. "It was the beginning of the end of the world as we knew it and there wasn't anyone in Jinotega who saw it coming, but Raul and I sure learned quickly enough when we got to Managua."

"Why, what happened there?"

"Plenty, but are you sure you want to hear this stuff. Maybe you find it boring."

"Not at all. I'm fascinated, truly, I am. Please continue."

University brought changes the boys couldn't have dreamed of during their idyllic Jinotega childhood, changes that tore them apart as cousins, then tore apart the very fabric of their country. The social discontent that had for years festered among the country's poor exploded on campus igniting the fiery passions of youth. Students clogged lecture halls to hear impassioned speeches from labor leaders and anti-government protest organizers who had proudly assigned themselves the

name Sandinistas. It was a name derived from a martyred revolutionary hero of a century earlier, Augusto Sandino whose near success at agrarian reform against impossible odds had again found its hour. Protests on campus eventually spilled onto the streets of Managua as student rallies, strikes and marches drew larger and larger crowds until the streets about the university were impassable to traffic. Police were called with the result that campesinos by the thousands descended on the capital where their frustration and anger had, through the young, found voice. Campus walls were covered with posters and slogans and the discos and casinos frequented by students became meeting places, either for supporters of the protesters or for those agreeing with the government. There was no middle ground. It became a choice of one camp or the other in the country's headlong dash towards self-destruction.

"So," Truman said, jerking his feet free of their sand mountain prison. "What do you think? Would you rather that you went to school in Managua?" He was out of the shadow now, the moon beyond its peak. He looked somehow more relaxed as though talking about his homeland and its problems had lightened his burden.

"Holy cow, Truman, what a story! It gave me goose bumps. I find it hard to imagine living through something like that. So then, I guess the war started and you must have been in that too. Isn't that how you got all those scars?"

"I guess I do look like I've been through a war," he said, sighing again. "I'm afraid you assumed correctly. Yes, I fought in the war."

"It's so horrible, you make me feel like crying." Silence reigned for the next several moments. There was nothing more to be said. Sharing the silence smoothed with the sound of gentle surf eased them from images of such intensity. She could see his tension melting as his shoulders relaxed. "Truman," she called quietly, without turning towards him.

"Humm? Yes, what is it?"

"May I ask you a personal question?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Which side did you fight on?"

He exploded with rollicking laughter, embarrassing her. His laughs subsided and his gaze found her eyes. He laughed again, infecting her with giggles. "I was a Contra, Beth," he said, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. "Do you know why us Contras were fighting?"

"I have a confession: I knew there was a war going on in Nicaragua, but for me it was just another news item of mankind's ugliness and I really didn't pay very much attention. It wasn't just Nicaragua, though, was it? I think I remember El Salvador and Guatemala fighting too, but now that I know you were involved, I'm going to research the war on the Internet."

"Well, you're right: all of Central America was affected, but the conflicts were for the most part separate. So you know nothing about the Contras?"

"No, only that, the government was communist, right? And the Contras, that was you, were fighting a guerrilla war against them with our support. So far, so good?"

"So far, so good. Go on, this is interesting."

"Alright, so then later, there was this big hullabaloo in Congress regarding the Iran-Contra Affair. That's you again. For a year, it seems, or maybe more, those televised Congressional Hearings went on and on with Oliver North and all those guys. It's embarrassing to say, but that is about it for the extent of my knowledge."

“Don’t concern yourself about it, Beth. If you are going to know next to nothing about something, you couldn’t have picked a better topic. Discussing war is very unpleasant for such a beautiful evening. Why don’t we talk about you? What is there to know about Beth’s world?”

“Beth’s world? There’s really nothing to know, I’m afraid.” She was suddenly embarrassed about her mouse-woman existence and fall from grace, wondering if she could bring herself to tell him. No, she decided, no reason to get into that, then realized there was nothing else: all she had ever done was to be mouse-woman. “My entire life can be summarized simply by telling you it has been uneventful and methodical. There you go, that’s the quick tour of Beth’s world: a most boring place.” Too bad, that wouldn’t suffice to satisfy his curiosity. He continued studying her expectantly. “All right Truman,” she said, “you asked for it, but no sleeping permitted in the audience: I grew up an only child to loving but overprotective parents. First, I was a Brownie, then a Girl Scout: my big girlhood adventures. Do you know what those are?”

“I don’t know about Brownies, but Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, yes I know.”

“Brownies are the same thing only for younger girls. Joining wasn’t my decision; my parents signed me up. They were like that with me always: right up to the end of their lives they were directly involved in all of my educational and career decisions. Anyway, Brownies and Girl Scouts was a way they approved of for me to enjoy supervised outings with friends. The months of summers I spent with my mother on my grandparent’s dairy farm and on weekends, my father joined us. I fell madly in love when I was there – with my grandfather’s horse. She was my truest and most trusted friend; knew all my secrets, you see. Riding or grooming that old mare, I would be talking to her, telling her everything.

“Through high school except for a few girl friends I studied with, I was pretty much a loner. I did my under-graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the state capital and while there I became passionate about ecology. I remember thinking that my life might have meaning if my work, in some small way, resulted in something good for the planet. They were the idealistic dreams of youth, I know, but that’s how I felt. Anyhow, Vermont has an excellent geology department, so I applied and studied there for my Masters.

“Later, following my father’s advice, I worked for several different outfits to gain experience and build my resume before settling in with a home-town agency. Working in Green Bay, I lived with my parents and was able to save most of my salary. Then, after my parents passed away, this opportunity came along and I jumped at it. Now here I am. I’m talking too much, but anyhow, that’s it for my story. I told you it would be dull.”

“I don’t think your life is a dull story at all, Beth. For me it’s fascinating when I hear the underlying story of the stability and wealth people in the United States live with and accept as normal. The odd part for me is the unawareness of how uniquely special and pampered are your lives. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not faulting you or your country: it’s something more akin to envy or awe. At any rate, it’s good to have you here with us in Costa Rica. I hope you find everything to your liking at Cabañas Arrecifes,” Truman said, his grin and dimple clearly visible in the moonlight.

“Oh I do, everything’s wonderful! Cabañas Arrecifes is like a dream come true and Alberto and Cecilia couldn’t be kinder. The bartender, all right, is a little grumpy sometimes, but I’m getting used to him and maybe even a bit fond of his surliness. Do you live here all the time?”

“Yes, this is my home. The second floor is my apartment.”

“Your apartment? I thought Alberto and Cecilia lived up there with the kids.”

“No, it’s mine. They have rooms behind the kitchen.”

“I see... What happened that you became so badly scarred?” The question was far too forward. She pulled her hand over her mouth, but it had already slipped out.

“That was a long time ago, Beth. A very long time...” He pursed his lips, swallowing dryly.

Oh no, now what had she done? She watched him wipe a finger over a twitch tickling the corner of his eye. “I’m sorry, Truman,” she said. “That was inappropriate of me and none of my business. But, it was the war, wasn’t it?” Another blunder.

“Yes, it was the war,” he droned through clenched teeth. Sucking in a long breath, he released it in a hiss, thin streams of air between his teeth. “You make me remember too many things: things I haven’t thought about in years. It’s late; I should go,” and he was on his feet. Walking. She joined him, falling in step at his side, embarrassed and forcing herself into silence.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FOUR

Mornings acquired a familiar rhythm that began each day as the first light of predawn drew the curtain on dreams, stirring Beth awake. In her bikini and a towel over her shoulder, she would walk barefoot through sand still chilly from the night. Then, nature's latest rendition of sunrise would hold her mesmerized until the strengthening solar rays felt warm upon her skin when she would run to the surf and dive headlong into a breaker. Following the morning swim came breakfast on the patio with a leisurely sipped second coffee enjoyed while browsing the national newspaper, *La Nación*. Finally ready for work, her breakfast plate would be replaced by the laptop, files removed from her briefcase lain in columns across the table and she would settle in for several hours on the computer. It was a routine well worth adhering to, but this morning the thought of the young woman in a box with nothing to eat gnawed at her conscience through sunrise reverie. The gaunt face and skeletal shoulders of the woman mingled with haunting memories of her cousin Evelyn who bore an uncanny likeness to the passionate Latin woman. The resemblance went way beyond the moody eyes and radiant smile, it extended deeply into their personal lives. Evelyn had sold her body and let drugs ruin her life too – end it, actually – something Beth could and should have prevented, and of course, hadn't. It was a phone call she couldn't forget.

"It's Evelyn, Beth; I need to talk to you, please. I'm sorry about everything. Can I come over?" Her voice carried tones of panic and the tremor of suppressed tears.

So what did Beth do? Offer compassion, understanding, help? How well she remembered that she hadn't. She pretended not to notice her desperation; vengeance is what she had wanted and she wanted it to hurt. "You know, some of us are trying to make something of our lives, Evelyn. We don't want to run around with a bunch of losers or sell ourselves to dirty old men. We have minds and if you'll excuse me, I'm going to use mine: I have homework." How smug she had felt, slamming the telephone into its cradle – justice!

Evelyn died later that night of a drug overdose... Now down the beach there was this woman, Herminia whose eyes harbored a hurt and lonely soul cowering behind a ferocious exterior exactly as Evelyn had. It was uncanny and so unfair: Was she to be forever reminded of her? There was deep suffering within this wisp of a woman and not a soul alive who cared enough to offer relief. Evelyn had also been without anyone to turn to, with the exception of a cousin who was to hang up on her at her moment of greatest need.

Enough was enough: a beautiful morning was going down the tubes with so many depressing thoughts. Beth was off to lighten her mood by making sure the young woman ate. For a person living in a box, a person who has passed beyond caring, seeking only an easy glide from this world, the last thing they might expect to be awakened to is room service. The police, a sniffing dog, even a pervert would be quite normal, but breakfast, hot on a serving tray, was the stuff of fanciful dreams. Herminia snatched the tray from Beth's grip and began wolfing the food, not sure what next to expect from this strange woman. Her eyes flashed questioningly at Beth while food disappeared between finger-licking smacks. Beth could read the woman's question in her eyes: First, this gringa jumps in to rescue me from the security guard, then comes a free meal, now breakfast. Wasn't this the person whose room she had broken into? "Why you geeve me theese?" she asked, hovering over the food like a lioness. "You wan something from Herminia?"

"I just wanted you to have something to eat, Herminia. I was worried about you. But I don't understand, why are you living here? Don't you have a family somewhere that cares about you?" Beth sat on her towel, in the sand beside Herminia's

box. Her favorite white cotton shirt provided protection from the sun. Open buttons revealed the red bikini. The sun, low over the Caribbean, slanted its warming rays on to them under the palms. Except for the birds, they were alone on a long expanse of wide beach. A concerned wrinkle formed on Beth's forehead as she pondered the starved woman's choices. She strained to imagine the despair that had brought Herminia to such hopelessness. Herminia looked up from her plate and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"You know notheeng, huh? I am addic. You unnerstan? Nobody wan addic; addic is thief." Herminia moaned the words, shaking her head in disbelief at Beth's lack of comprehension. She tried again. "My mother, she tell Herminia, 'Go away – no come back.' I unnerstan, then I come to beach. Now I leeve here, hokay? Sorry I go in your room, lady. What your name, again?" Barefoot and in ragged jeans, many sizes too large, tied at the waist by a frayed, blue rope, she spoke proudly and defiantly as though Beth's attempts at kindness were demeaning. Faded lettering on her ancient tee-shirt molded over bones proclaimed: "I pigged out on Fisherman's Wharf." She cocked her head and raised a solitary eyebrow with her question.

"My name is Beth, Beth Tierney. The dark intensity of the woman's eyes found her own for a moment's contact then returned to the food, eating as though she hadn't seen food in weeks – she probably hadn't, not much anyhow. "How long have you been living here, Herminia?" she asked.

"You remember my name," Herminia questioned, talking around her food. "I leeve here three months now."

"But why, Herminia? Why are you living this way?" Beth waved an open hand at Herminia's nothingness. "You don't have any clothes or food or anything."

"I am addic, crack addic. The crack addic he theenk only for crack, every day more. At feenish he no wash, no eat – then he die. Everything, I sell everything, for crack. Look at me, lady: I am dirty; I no have clothes; also, I am too skinny, so now, I no work. Ees the men: they no like Herminia no more. Other day in your room, I take shower and use your makeup so Herminia can make date at bar." Her eyes flashed sideways and a humorous smile exposed perfect teeth. "I am theenking maybe some very drunk man, he geeve Herminia money. Then Herminia buy food. Theese is what I theenk, but I lie." The smile melted. "Even to me, I lie. The money she is for crack." She shrugged and looked far out to sea where a ship seemed poised on the horizon. "Only God, he forgive me," she said smiling again, her eyebrows arched high on her forehead.

"But, you'll die, living this way. Don't you know you can't stay here?" Beth pleaded.

"Si, I know; soon, Herminia, she die. Everbody tell me same ting. Many friends from street already dead. She ees very bad, theese crack. You no can unnerstan." Herminia gave up; she returned to her food, talking simultaneously. "Theese food she ees very good. God bless you, Beth Tierney."

* * *

"Beth, oh good; I'm so pleased to have caught up with you. May I have a moment of your time, please?" Truman leaned through the window of his big Mitsubishi four-wheeler, straining his neck that he might direct his words to her alone, a difficult task because she was huddled in the rectangle of shade of Chauita's 'bus station,' receiving the latest gossip from two elderly local women. Talking with these women was pure culture exposure and she didn't want to miss a bit of it! He could wait.

"Sure Truman, later, okay! I'll catch up with you back at the hotel." He sat there with the motor running, filling the air with exhaust stink, not moving except to lean further from the window. Another inch and he would spill out onto the ground. "Truman, please, I'm kind of busy at the moment."

Truman tapped on his horn. “Beth, Beth. Could you come over here, please?” His schoolboy enthusiasm was charming, but annoying. She excused herself and found him in the car with two couples from Holland. They were on their way on this particular full-moon eve to sign up at the National Park as observers of sea turtles laying their eggs. Of course she wanted to go along.

Dawn was not far off when the tourists had been returned to their rooms and she and Truman sat in rocking chairs in his little retreat from the world: a private patio, built out over the dining room. A protective barrier of potted plants shielded them from the sea breeze and any probing eyes on the beach while above, the stars assumed their proper places in the heavens. For Truman, they represented comforting order and stability. He amazed her with his knowledge of the constellations and planets, running to his room at one point for binoculars so she could see with her own eyes several of Jupiter’s moons. It was a breathtaking and sobering sight for its majesty of perfection and the realization of the unfathomably vast distances and our insignificance. The moon, with her own mountains and crater ridges clearly visible through the glasses held her spellbound as it slipped behind an earthly peak. Beth spoke of her real love affair, the one with Mother Earth: how the harmonious yet fragile balance of all the elements of nature combine to create the tiny biosphere where we all live, and how endangered species like the sea turtles are powerful indicators of the damage we’ve already done to it. Initially, in undergraduate studies, she said with a laugh, she found earth sciences to be drudgery because the extent of destruction seemed to indicate an impending end to all life, making it all seem so pointless. However, in the year she took off from studies before graduate school, she became involved with an environmental group dedicated to cleaning up the horribly polluted Fox River. She helped trace sources of pollution and recruited other volunteers to clean long sections of shore front and, in just one year, saw real results for their efforts. That experience convinced her that with a career in groundwater geology, the fruits of her labor could be not only ecologically sound, but drinkable. With that dream in mind, the normally grueling graduate regimen of chemistry, geology and environmental sciences transformed themselves into a fascinating trail of discovery leading to an intimacy with the planet itself. “And you?” she asked. “What did you do after college?”

“I went back to Jinotega, but just for a few months, because while there the opportunity to study in the United States came along.”

“Jinotega...” She tried to imagine it, high in the mountains of Nicaragua. How different from flat, dull and frozen Green Bay. “You said that Jinotega changed so greatly that it seems like two different places. Had the transformation already taken place when you returned from college?”

“Well, it was starting, but there was much more to come.”

“Would you tell me about it, please? Your town has been on my mind ever since you first described it.”

The Jinotega he and Raul returned to after graduation in 1972 wasn’t quite the same sleepy backwater town, removed from the world’s problems, they had left four years earlier, he explained. Military patrols covered over Sandinista political slogans with a fresh coat of paint on one wall or another almost every day. Farmer’s groups protested at the entrances of the big estates (including that of his fiancée’s parents) and the police, who were called out to break them up, occasionally got rough: too rough. Skulls were cracked and arms broken by police batons and there were people, who after being arrested, hadn’t been heard from again.

Sandinista party membership became a criminal act, forcing meetings underground and binding them into a secret fraternity. In the midst of this, the town tried to ignore the problems and continue its quiet provincial life. Central park's evening crowd enjoyed the nightly music from the central gazebo the same as it had for the one hundred thirteen years since its construction. Housewives shared gossip and old men played checkers at the park benches while tight groups of young men circled the park clockwise admiring the giggling young women circling counterclockwise, all under the watchful eye of the entire town. Crops were planted, babies were born, and young men married their sweethearts.

John Hall, Truman's professor friend from Managua, offered to put his name on a list of young officers being sent to study in the United States if he would join the *Guardia Nacional*. Everything would be paid for, plus he would earn a salary, and when he came back he would be a captain. It was an officers' training program that offered a choice of several fields of study beyond the minimum military requirements. He would even be given a free apartment with private bathroom, hot running water, kitchen, everything: he was going!

Truman suspected Raul might be involved with some of the trouble the FSLN, *Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional*, was stirring up in Jinotega; his father-in-law after all was a commissioner. Truman knew in his heart the government would soon eliminate the Sandinista Party and prayed that, until then, Raul would be able to keep himself out of trouble. However, in his current state of political confusion, he knew Raul would never be able to understand that where he was going and what he was about to do was for the good of Nicaragua. He just couldn't bring himself to tell the truth. What he told him, one night when they were sharing a drink in town, was that he was going to the University of Georgia to study for a master's in Business Administration and, for the remainder of that night, politics didn't exist. It was old times again. They walked arm in arm between cantinas singing Beatles songs. The high walls echoed their voices and footsteps on the cobblestones. There words formed trails of vapor that the crisp, high mountain air swirled into the night and swept away. A month later on March 8, 1972, Truman left for the US. It would be twelve years before he would see Raul again.

* * *

"Hello Beth, where are you off to?" Truman's turtleneck was bright orange and with it, he wore white, knee-length shorts.

"Hi, Truman!" Beth was jubilant. It was another day of brilliant, sun drenched colors that began with a sunrise that tinted the entire eastern half of the sky and radiated a fan of pink beams that crossed overhead to disappear behind the mountains. A gentle tropical breeze blew in from the Caribbean. She wore her white bikini, woven sandals and a wide brimmed straw hat to match, and in her hand was clutched a large paper sack: Herminia couldn't be allowed to go hungry on such a glorious day. "I'm taking some food down the beach to Herminia. Want to tag along?"

"Who?" He had listened in astonishment when she told of Herminia's addiction and disregard for her own well-being, knowingly choosing crack over food, family, and life itself, just staring at her, stunned that she actually felt compassion for the woman who broke into her room. When he'd warned that the woman could be dangerous, she giggled at his gravity. Beth replied that despite her addiction she thought the woman appeared to have a lot going for herself in intelligence and various talents. 'Smoking crack was her own choice,' he'd said shaking his head in disbelief, 'as was becoming a prostitute, thief and danger to the community.' 'I don't agree,' she had countered. 'I think the fault lies with the bastards who get rich selling it.' Apparently, he disagreed with that too, because he had seemed even more upset. He backed away from the wall of the beachfront bar, rising to the tips of his toes to see the progress of two men climbing among the exposed bamboo rafters replacing thatch. He wanted desperately to supervise, but the men knew their work better than he and his shouted instructions

were ignored completely. He glanced between Beth and the workers. Suddenly, his expression changed – for the worse. She was sure of the reason: he'd realized he was about to join a mission of mercy for a person he'd rather be booting out of town.

“Okay, sure, sure I'll go along. I can see I'm not needed here,” he said, surprising her. “Maybe that new friend of yours knows what became of my bartender.” Coconuts, falling from sixty feet above, rather than dropping into the sand, ricocheted from a tree trunk to crash through the roof of the bar like out-of-control missiles, he explained as he walked steadily along the beach.

Beth, at his side, spun pirouettes in the sand with the sack held high above her head. “And then, what happened,” she questioned, finishing a spin to face him.

With a frightful noise, the coconuts impacted among the shelves in an explosion of falling thatch and shattering glasses and bottles.

“And then?”

“And then, the disagreeable German bartender, overpaid because he spoke four languages, became terrified out of his skin. Customers in the bar stated that, after blanching and appearing on the verge of passing out, he seemed to acquire superhuman strength and leapt over the bar in a single Olympic vault. With tremendous force, he shoved people aside, ran down the beach and hadn't been heard from since.” Enjoying the elaboration he added to his story, Truman, infected with Beth's high spirits, began walking with a light carefree springiness. It did her heart good to see the change: he had been so very frustrated with the workers. She had come to like him very much, he was kind and generous and his patience with her seemed unlimited. The lessons he had been giving her with the small multicolored sailboat hadn't been going well. It seemed that she did everything she had been shown and exactly the same as he, yet she couldn't control the boat at anything but a slow, straight course. Through all the failed lessons, which would have driven many men to angry frustration, he remained calm and patiently instructive, continuing to refer to the lessons as fun. Then came the day when she conquered the balance between tiller and sail and the days after were spent skittering over the light chop between reef and shore. She thrilled then to sailing, laughing in delight as she strained to maintain control, offering more and more sail to the wind. For real speed, Truman taught her how to hook toes and lean far over the waves giving the little boat more leverage against the wind, teetering at the edge of keeling over as they took wing across the water and she would fly upside-down, inches above the water, arms waving and whooping with joy.

Herminia didn't see them approach: she wasn't seeing much of anything. They found her below a palm, lost in drug-induced thought. In the sand beside her, lay her metallic tube used for smoking with both ends blackened, a scattering of spent matches and bits of aluminum foil. She was emaciated, yet the sack of food interested her not in the least. Peeking in the bag, she smiled radiantly and as the gracious hostess, offered it to them. Talkative, she seemed to feel it necessary to explain that with sufficient crack, she could sit immobile for an entire day or even two, without a thought for food, and less for physical activity. It was when she was fourteen and began to work in a San José brothel that she was introduced to it. (Evelyn's age the summer on the farm when Beth first saw illegal drugs. Now here was Herminia, with those same eyes following her to an early grave.) The owner of the club where she began her professional career supplied the drug to perk up girls for working the long late night hours. The fact was, he wouldn't allow any to work in his club who wasn't a user – and buying from him.

English was a burden for Herminia that was unnecessary when she spoke with Truman. A lengthy conversation in Spanish, at times heated and others broken with laughter, began and Beth contented herself with leafing through Herminia's journals. Hers was a tiny script that filled hundreds of pages, but Beth understood little beyond mention of herself as 'the

gringa loca', but the writing captivated her, nevertheless. It seemed so improbable that a person in her position would take pen in hand and fill volumes, but she had.

"You see," Beth said on the return walk. "It's like I said. The monster that pushed coke on Herminia when she was fourteen is, in my judgment, far more responsible for her addiction than she. How I'd like to get my hands around *his* neck!"

"Maybe," he said, "but I know enough about addicts to tell you that, as far as they are concerned, nothing is ever their fault. Yet she is, like you said, entertaining and intelligent, although I'd be very careful around her if I were you."

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIVE

The months passed and with them, so too went the rainy season. No longer at noon would dark clouds begin to form above the mountains and sweep with amazing speed across the coastal plain to dump a waterfall of rain on the coast. Beth missed lying afternoons in her hammock watching water drip from the fronds of her roof and the awesome shows of lightning bolts passing from cloud to cloud above the sea but, with it over, there was more time to play in the sunshine. One sunny noon, Truman proclaimed that, because of the sun's high angle, it was a perfect time for snorkeling. She was at first a bit annoyed when after only one half of an hour he suddenly proclaimed that it was time to quit. She could easily have floated above the magnificence of the coral for the rest of the day. It was his misshapen nose allowing water to enter his mask; she was sure of it. She was also sure that a plastic surgeon could realign it and probably do a lot to minimize the scars. Why he didn't do it, she was dying to ask but dared not. Any mention of the war sent him off into a deep funk. Another semi-annoying thing was Truman's strange relationship with children. He was one day playful and another grumpy, complaining of their noise. He had recently created an incident with Alberto and Cecilia over Oscar that seethed for days. Following his father's instructions, the boy in his favorite Chicago Bull's tee shirt, had taken machete to the shrubs, trimming back new growth. Truman was understandably startled when he descended from his apartment and emerged to the sight of a sweeping blade clipping off twigs beside his door, but his reaction was entirely out of line. He shouted like a madman, admonishing the boy never, never to come near his door again, then read Alberto the riot act that if he was incapable of doing his own work, Truman would find someone who could. Apologies were later offered but, in the minds of all, the memory lingered, and Truman had since been walking around withdrawn and sullen.

It was the following Wednesday morning, the day after Truman left on another business trip that Beth's briefcase went missing. She was reviewing pages of data with notes and sketches of a contaminated water table in Missouri covering her favorite table in the patio dining area, trying to accomplish enough to call it a day by noon. Remarkably and, in retrospect, regrettably, the work had been fascinating, capturing her entire attention. It had been almost like old times as she extracted an almost intuitive sense of the geology from test wells and core sample data, conceptualizing the delicately balanced and interrelated dynamics affecting water movement through the various materials. There was strong correlation with another project she had recently studied. She reached for the file in her briefcase on the other chair – but there was nothing there. She stood beside the table, staring at the floor around the chair and behind where she had been sitting, frantic with worry. The memory of setting it on that chair was correct, she was sure of that. Had she taken it with her to the bathroom? No, she couldn't remember anything like that.

Herminia! It had to be... A short earlier, she had glanced up from her work to see Herminia slip in from the beach as she often did to watch her work. She hadn't looked good, Beth remembered, nervous to the point of jittery. She had been offered breakfast, but refused and, when Beth returned from a trip to the washroom, she was gone. Beth quickly suppressed the thought as prejudicial and twice searched the bathroom, her cabaña, the dining room and even checked out on the beach. With the sun sinking behind the mountains, she set off with a heavy heart to see if perhaps Herminia had returned to her box. Walking along the shore, she reviewed what she would say if she was there. Herminia was normally volatile and, from what Beth had glimpsed that morning, she was more on edge than ever. If she hoped to recover her property, she would have to be tactful. Her musings came to a sudden end when a curious object washing in the surf became recognizable as a large section of

cardboard. She ran towards the pulpy mass and as she drew close recognized from the bold lettering, *Atlas Conjelador*, that it was the remains of Herminia's box. The sand under the palm where it had been was littered with Herminia's meager possessions. A sea breeze flipped pages of a journal lying open and others were scattered where they had been thrown into the bushes. Tee shirts, tattered panties and shorts protruded from the sand or tangled themselves into the undergrowth with the debris of Herminia's home. Where the box had been upended, someone with heavy-soled boots had crushed a mixture of pencils and toiletries into the sand: Jesus had exacted his long-awaited revenge and Herminia's life had spun another revolution in its downward spiral. Despite repeated attempts to locate her, Herminia and her briefcase were irretrievably gone.

* * *

Beth eyed Truman warily from behind the bougainvillea. Something was up with him. The thing is she couldn't figure out what it might be. It seemed he was trying to impress upon her that he was a thoughtful, generous guy. Yet, if it was a show for her benefit, what then was he doing over there, unaware of her presence, speaking encouragingly to a work crew instead of his usual nitpicking and cursing?

Noticing her emerging from the bush, he smiled that crazy, Truman-only grin of his. "Hey Truman. Working hard?" she asked, sauntering up beside him.

"No, not me but these guys are working their tails off. I promised them double pay if they can have this concrete deck ready and cured well enough for painting tomorrow and it looks like they have the situation under control." Turning, he called to the foreman, "Okay, stack that stuff over there then take your guys down to the bar and have a couple beers. On the house! And thank you all."

Alright, Truman, I get it; you're a super good guy and a generous boss. Okay? Now you can go back to being normal."
"What?"

"Come on; you know what. You're going around flashing that wacky smile at everyone. Then you suddenly give Alberto, Cecilia and both kids a three week paid vacation they hadn't been expecting. Just like that. No grumbling about people who don't do their jobs properly. Instead, 'Have a good time and don't worry about anything here'. And now here you are giving away free beer and double pay. So, what is it?"

"What's up with me is in large part you. I..."

"Me? So, I'm responsible for your behavior?"

"No, no, not at all. I'm totally responsible and really regret how I've been acting lately. I've spent a lot of time while I was away thinking about myself. That incident with Alberto's boy opened my eyes to the fact that I've not been myself for the whole while that you've been here. There has . . .

"Oscar. His name is Oscar."

"Yeah, Oscar. Sorry. Let's see. Okay, I bought this place because I needed a peaceful place where I could recuperate from the wreck the war made of me. And its been good. I have many regrets, of course, but I have feet whole, healthy and comfortable here. That is until a man I knew from back then showed up. I've been kind of an uptight asshole ever since. And he arrived about the same time as you so what you've been seeing isn't really normal me. At least I hope so."

"Are you talking about that cowboy guy?"

"Yes him, but he's no guy, he's the worst there is. As far as bad goes he's done it all and more. I've always had bad memories lingering around the fringes of my mind ready to jump out and put me in a mood but it has bothered me less and less over the years. Now, having seen him, that fringy stuff has moved to the forefront. Its been messing me up. I suppose that's why I was so hard on the boy, Oscar, and with everyone else as well; especially you. You're a wonderful person, always kind

and considerate to others and you don't deserve me being such a gloomy crab. I spent a lot of time alone while I was away reflecting on myself and how to deal with my past in a self-supportive way that isn't a burden to others. What I'm doing is trying to more like you."

"Truman, you give me way too much credit. I'm just a screw-up exiled from Green Bay. You need a better role model. Try Mother Teresa. So what is this concrete slab supposed to be?"

"Can't you see? Its going to be a basketball court. The poles, backboards and nets and all the other gear will all be here and installed before they get back. I'm having it made as a birthday present for Oscar." Truman grinned, puffed his chest while encircling her with his arm. "It's beautiful Lucia," he said, "and the least I could do to make up for how I was with the boy, don't you agree?"

'Lucia'? Her smile vanished, but rather than destroy his buoyant good mood, she refrained from saying anything other than to agree that the court was splendid and Oscar a deserving child.

* * *

"Truman, look, it's her!" Beth was standing at the water's edge, adjusting the binders on a pair of water skis. Truman looked up from tinkering with the outboard motor. It was Herminia all right: she stood a short distance down the beach, holding a paper bag cradled in her arms, staring in their direction.

"Let me take care of this, Beth," he said, casting a tool into the boat and beginning to wade ashore.

"No, Truman. She's here to see me, this is something between us," she said and set off towards Herminia. Halfway to her, she looked back to see him standing with her skis, watching intently. She continued.

"I save papers for you, Beth. Here." Her face wore a look of deep sadness and began crying as she held the bag out. "Herminia ees very, very sorry: ees bad woman."

Looking in, Beth saw that it contained the stolen files. "I don't need any of this," she said angrily. "I've replaced it all. Where's my damn briefcase, Herminia? That was a gift from my father and I want it back!"

"Ees gone. I sell it."

"You sold it?"

"Si."

"How much? How much did you get for my parents memory, damn you?" She couldn't control her hands from trembling. They were cold and she too was crying, her chin wrinkling and bobbing.

"Tres mil."

"Three thousand colons? That's all? That's all you think it was worth?"

"Very bad. Herminia is very bad, Beth. Maybe man sell it back. You geeve Herminia cuatro mil and I try, hokay?"

"Four thousand colons? Give you four thousand colons? Do I look like a fool? Is that what you think I am because I was good to you, Herminia?"

"No, Beth," she replied between whimpers. "You are only friend for Herminia. If man say no, I come back with money." She crossed herself, kissing her thumb. A compromise was reached whereby Beth would accompany her and remarkably, half of an hour later, the beloved briefcase was again in her hands.

Herminia accompanied her as she returned to Cabañas Arrecifes swearing up and down that she was finished with crack. Not only was she going to quit, but she pledged to clean herself up, get a job and return Beth's money, "soon".

"Sure Herminia, sure and Herman Andreesen is out of jail and wants to give me back my job, right?"

That stopped Herminia dead in her tracks. “What? You lose your job because Herminia take your papers?”

“No Herminia, I still have my job. All I’m trying to say is that the way to fight addiction is not to say that you will never touch the stuff again, but to do it one day at a time. You don’t worry about tomorrow, you just work at keeping yourself clean today.”

“Si, si, Herminia already know. Four days, no smoke.”

Beth studied her face. She didn’t look any better except that perhaps the whites of her eyes were clearer. There was sincerity in her expression, but she dared not trust that: she suspected her to be possibly a better actor even than her father. “So you expect me to believe that your life has changed and now you’re trustworthy? Guess what? I don’t. Surprised? But, I’ll tell you what: if you want me to believe you, come by tomorrow morning for breakfast. If you’ve been smoking, I’ll be able to tell, so don’t bother to come; I won’t want to see you.”

Much to her surprise, Herminia did appear for breakfast the following morning and the next and every morning thereafter, clear-eyed and calm until Beth came to expect her. Poor Truman didn’t know what to make of it. His exasperation with Beth regarding Herminia was close to driving the man mad. Once, it reached such a level as to leave him stuttering. He’d been trying to convince her that no good was going to come of helping this woman and she’d responded that he owed it to Herminia to order Jesus to replace her box.

If his head was able to spin like a top, it would have. “I... No, I mean... What, I owe her? You mean, for a thief? Beth...” He couldn’t go on: he was about to burst a blood vessel and the more he sputtered the more impossible it became for Beth to stop snickering.

Since Jesus, in his capacity as security man, had destroyed the box, her reasoning went, ultimately, Truman was the guilty person. The honorable thing to do was repair the damage.

“Guilt, me? My fault? You have it all backwards, Beth. What about her being a thief? Doesn’t that count for something?”

“It counts for a lot, Truman; she knows that. She has a lot to make up for and a long way to go. Let’s face it: her life is a wreck, but she can salvage it. There is hope. But, what chance does she have if she doesn’t so much as have a place to live? Come on Truman, destroying someone’s home, regardless of the motivation, is terrible. This is your chance to right a wrong and help Jesus in the bargain by having him accept responsibility. Besides, you have those boxes from the basketball equipment that he can put together and maybe even make something better than what she had.”

Jesus did fashion another box-home, albeit reluctantly. Throughout, a mini-drama played out between Jesus and Herminia. At several points, he walked off, bluntly refusing to return. He would not work for a woman, he insisted, who cursed his entire family, referred to him as the son of a whore, ridiculed his work and constantly belittled his manhood with unflattering references to the size of his penis. Nevertheless, a new shelter was erected that, made of wooden shipping crates was far better than the original. Herminia had a new home and came fairly regularly for breakfast. The mornings she didn’t, Beth knew it would be days before she would reappear, sick and hungry-looking, vowing on all saints never to smoke again. Meanwhile, Truman evolved into Chauita’s basketball coach. The game was new to him, so Beth downloaded a complete set of rules compiled for school coaches with reams of tips. He acquired a referee’s whistle and Oscar’s basketball court became a training camp that attracted every boy and girl in Chauita. As skills improved, teams were formed and evening basketball games became a ritual.

Beth and Truman were resting from a swim, their heads above the surface with toes poking the sandy bottom, enjoying a lively conversation when Herminia once again became the topic, and Truman's mood plummeted like a dropped rock. "Why are you so interested in this woman?" he asked, springing buoyantly to keep his head above the swell of an incoming wave. "She's stolen from you twice. What else do you want to happen?" He was looking directly into her eyes.

Beth had no doubt that he had thought the incident with the stolen briefcase would put an end to Herminia in his life but, of course, it hadn't. His cold stares and quick departure when seeing them at breakfast spoke for itself. She knew she had gone too far with the box and since then, he'd been different – quieter, probably angry and that saddened her. "There's something about her, Truman. I can't even put my finger on it. I used to see homeless people in Green Bay, but they didn't affect me the way she does. Perhaps they should have. Some people just seem to fall through the cracks in society and get left behind by the rest of us, and the more needy they become as the gap grows, the less willing we are to care. A large part of how I feel about her comes from my experience with my cousin Evelyn. She was so defeated by rotten breaks in life that, when the drug pushers got to her, she was already as good as dead, and her life by comparison with Herminia's was a bed of roses. I could have helped her, but I didn't. So, I guess I'm feeling guilty about Evelyn and trying to redeem myself through Herminia. I'm sorry to involve you in my personal mission."

"Um-hum. Well, I have to admit that, when she returned your papers and led you to your briefcase, I was totally surprised. I've seen her when I was out jogging. So I decided to take your advice and try to understand her a bit. She seemed to need to talk so I listened while she has told me a little about herself and you're right: her life is a gruesome story not her own fault at all if what she said is even partly true. Anyhow, she has allowed me to read several of her journals and it's remarkable, but her writing is better than just legible; it's actually interesting."

Beth listened, but could hardly believe her ears. His attempts at self improvement were paying off. "Truman, you surprise me!" she said, beaming. "I thought you hated her."

"Well, I wouldn't say that, but until you came along I would never have tried to converse with her."

"She's a thief, there's no doubt about that and a prostitute too. But, you know, Truman, those are things that were forced on her. So were the drugs. Plus, she is intelligent and can be rather enchanting. So, I suppose that's why I feel guilty eating when I know she's down the beach with nothing."

He appeared not to be listening. "You have ideas about helping her, don't you?" he asked at length.

"Well, yes, I'd like to help her, if only I could. What she really needs is to get off crack. She claims that she would like to go to a resident detox center, but the free government ones don't accomplish a thing, drugs are smuggled in just the same and, according to her, they are more plentiful and cheaper than on the street. She seems convinced that she can do it alone, so I'm trying to help by feeding her when she isn't high." Beth's head was washed over by a wave.

"She doesn't have any clothes – does she?" Truman asked when she emerged. "I'll tell you what: if you think you can keep her from selling them, I'll lay out the money for some. I won't give any cash to her, you understand, but if you go with her to Limon to buy the stuff, I'll give it to you."

This was unbelievably wonderful. "Oh Truman, you're a love!" She kissed him, then splashed her way towards shore, leaving him to stare after her, touching his cheek.

* * *

The new clothes found their home in the closet of Beth's cabaña and thereafter following breakfast, Herminia, rather than leaving, would shower and try out hairstyles and outfits (frequently Beth's), emerging for appraisals well into office hours.

Nonetheless, she still disappeared occasionally only to materialize several days later, a tight bundle of nerves with oscillating emotions that could within moments take her from pathetic tears to a screaming rage over some misinterpreted word or gesture. Between these extremes, she was no more stable, switching randomly throughout the entire range of human feelings, although mostly she was paranoid, paralyzed by fear. When the dangers she imagined on the beach became too horrific, Beth allowed her to sleep in her bungalow and endured, flatly refusing to give up on her. She needed to talk and the restrictions imposed by English often drew Truman into conversations that continued then without her, affording relief from the intensity. Apparently, the extended dialogues had an impact, because permission was given for Herminia to eat the remnants of the buffet and daily special. She took it as her job, always on hand when meals were done. When she was told, Cecilia could hardly believe her ears, but Herminia's helpfulness in the kitchen came as an even greater surprise. Sunken eyes began to sparkle ever more brightly and cheeks fill out as she quickly put on weight. A woman's figure returned to her emaciated frame, erasing the starved kitten look, and a healthy color began to replace the pallor of death.

One afternoon Beth interrupted Truman working in the back room of the beach bar counting inventory. She explained that she would be away for a while because her tourist visa was about to expire, requiring a border crossing into Panama through the city of Sixaola, and that Herminia, convinced she had beaten her addiction, insisted she was also leaving, returning to her life and work at Hotel Paradise in San José. He fixed her with such a sorrowful expression that she quickly added that renewing her visa meant that she would be out of the country for only a few of days. But, as she so often did with Truman, she misinterpreted, for he replied that he too was leaving and would be away for two weeks on another of his periodic business trips.

"Again?" she questioned. Cabañas Arrecifes was a very different place when he was away and with Herminia also gone, it would feel deserted when she returned. "Why do you go away so often?"

"I have other business interests in Nicaragua and Honduras and, every three months, need to go keep the books in order and check up on things," he replied.

Beth had long wanted to see the sights of San José and tour the country, taking in the reserve at Monte Verde, the Pacific beach of Manuel Antonio, the active volcano, Arenal, Lancaster Botanical Gardens in Paraiso, Cartago and white-water rafting, but she had been having such a wonderful time in Chauita that her departure had been continually delayed. This seemed the perfect opportunity to give her skin a rest from the sun and see more of Costa Rica. He then suggested that he could wait for her to return then perhaps she would like to accompany him as far as the City of Limon where he would need to be for a day before continuing on to Nicaragua. She could avoid the uncomfortable bus and Limon could prove to be interesting, he said, because he was also inviting her to join him for brunch with an important politician, Mr. Gordon Edward, a colorful figure whose name was frequently in the newspaper. He accepted that Herminia ride with them so the two women could travel together to San José. She was instantly euphoric over the unanticipated change in her plans. She would miss Truman, but seeing the rest of the country would make up for his absence and, when she returned, he would already be back. He expressed skepticism about bringing Herminia to the brunch, but there seemed to be no other choice even though Beth offered assurance that nothing would happen to embarrass him.

"Wow! This is going to be great. Thank you!" She beamed mischievously, placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him, full on the mouth. Opening her eyes, she was greeted to the sight of a dark, cloudy expression upon his face and his body rigid with his arms at his sides.

"Yeah," he said flatly, "it's hot and crowded in here. Come on, let's get out!" He lifted her arm from his shoulder, turned and headed back towards the hotel. Her euphoria evaporated. She was crushed. How could she have been so sure of

his feelings and yet so wrong? She hurried beside him and slipped her hand into his. He held it, but with the lightest of touch, walking on without speaking. She turned to look at him, but his gaze was focused on a distant past, and there rolled from his chest a deep, growling sigh, cut short as he heard himself. A meek smile came as he noted her gaze upon him. She made no reply beyond grasping his hand more tightly while pondering the conflicting signals and the name, Lucia.

* * *

Beth, returned from her trip to Panama, declared herself on vacation, packed away her computer and gave it to Alberto and Cecilia. As far as San José was concerned, she knew exactly where she was going to stay. The stories she'd heard about Hotel Paradise had created such an image in her mind that she wouldn't consider anyplace else. After that, who knew? She was free and ready to go.

Stretched out in the back seat of Truman's Mitsubishi, Herminia had fallen asleep right away. Her deep breathing was a gratifying sound; she could speak seriously with Truman. At the wheel, he appeared introspective, preoccupied with something that caused him to glance occasionally at her without comment, before losing himself again in thought.

"All right, Truman," she asked at length, "what is it?"

"What's what?" He focused on the highway, avoiding her eyes.

"There's something troubling you. It's me, isn't it?"

"You? No, it's not you." He gave her a quick glance. "Not directly, anyhow."

"Truman..."

"Well, take a look at me, Beth. This face of mine scares the hell out of most people and it's kept me isolated. I don't know how you put up with it, but I'm not asking. This time we've shared has been the best I have felt since, well, since – since a long time." He looked her direction again, fixing her with a soft gaze, smiling warmly. "But, it has also stirred up thoughts of things that happened a long time ago – and," he said glancing quickly from the road to her, "thoughts about my wife, too." The word exploded in her ears.

"Wife? You never said you were married. Why haven't I met her? Where is she, anyhow? Nicaragua? Is that where you go on your little 'business trips'?" She leaned forward to see better his reaction: He said nothing, staring down the highway, swallowed, the scarred tissue of his throat lifting and shook his head tightly. At length he spoke:

"She's dead. She died in the war. Her name was Lucia." Another explosion: Lucia, the name he had accidentally applied to her. She gaped at him unable to speak. God, there was more: his lip trembled and he began speaking: "I lost my children too. My daughters were Lucet and Laura and I had a son; his name was Pablo and he was two years old. I know I should have said something much earlier, but I prefer not to talk about them."

"I'm sorry," she said. "So sorry. I had no idea." Why did she have such a talent for saying just the wrong thing? She felt dreadful.

"It's okay, how could you have known?" he asked, stroking the back of her hand with a look in his eye that said he understood. "Lucia and the children are good memories; it's the others that trouble me. I don't know why, but lately, thoughts I'd rather remained forgotten keep occupying my mind. Since we talked, I've been remembering some of the things I did back then and frankly, I'm ashamed. I was a young fool who managed to get himself mixed up with some strange characters – very strange – and some of the worst came from your country..."

* * *

Through his college years, Truman renewed a puppy-love romance with Lucia, the daughter of the second richest man in Jinotega and owner of the best farmland along the eastern slopes of the valley. Via her father's influence, he moved into the closed-door society of Managua's powerfully rich. He relaxed on private estates and attending parties that were written up in society pages. He loved mingling with the power structure that steered the nation's very direction, feeling that in some small way he participated in policy decisions going on around him and accepted as his own the currently popular political opinions circulating the country club set, learning to look with aloof disdain upon the discontented poor that marched in the streets, disrupting progress. How he resented the endlessly chanted slogans designed to destroy the fabric of Nicaraguan society! He absorbed the self-righteous contentment that came from knowing that the *campesinos* (country folk, or more correctly to his new thinking, ignorant country folk) represented a class of fools who wouldn't listen to their elected officials and without the political sophistication to realize that they were, in fact, trying to help all citizens. If they had any at all, they would see that the innumerable benefits from big foreign companies investing in Nicaragua would filter down to them if they would just discontinue their protests and simply do their job. They needed only to bear up a little longer under poverty; any damn fool could see that. Government and corporate executives had solutions for their problems. President Samosa himself was always talking about the unfortunate predicament of the poor and the programs his government was soon to enact, once revenues improved. All that this milling mass needed do was wait for the profits to be realized. Rather, they rioted in the streets: screaming animals, hampering the very operations of government and business that strove for their benefit.

"Fools!" Truman parroted at cocktail parties when conversation reverted to the *campesinos*. On campus, he joined a discussion group chaired by a visiting Political Science professor from Indiana. Professor John Hall helped them understand that the demonstrations were positively not the spontaneous actions of Nicaraguan *campesinos*. He offered proof that they were events planned and staged by professional agitators from Cuba and Russia. The foreigners were filling the ignorant peons' heads with fairy tale visions of a perfect society.

"How long will Nicaragua allow agitating foreigners to fill foolish heads with such fanciful daydreams?" he questioned his eager audience. "The poor, ignorant *campesinos* haven't the slightest concept of even the basic principles of communism or capitalism, yet they listen to this propaganda and swarm up by the thousands without ever knowing why." Professor Hall authenticated all of his charges, willingly sharing the evidence of captured documents, which supported, beyond any doubt his contention that it was all part of a grand communist plot to gain control of the Americas and from there, the world. "Cuba already has been lost, and look," Hall pointed out, "the Cuban people live as prisoners within their own country. Nuclear weapons have even been installed there." He fired their patriotic passions, convincing the young group that time was short: the communists were organizing and gaining ground quickly. "If Nicaragua doesn't get tough and use what force may be necessary to eliminate the agitators," he prophesized, "this country will slip into blood-drenched chaos, then become yet another communist slave state." He urged them to consider Nicaragua's need for valiant young men, themselves the quintessential example, if she hoped to save herself. He assured them that the United States had drawn a line in the sand on the issue and was offering its full support to the government of Nicaragua so it should prevail over this ominous threat that menaced the entire hemisphere. Truman came to know him well, never missing any meetings. It seemed obvious that an aspiring young man would do well to become associated with a man such as Professor Hall for undoubtedly, he was more than just a visiting PhD: he obviously represented his country in some official capacity. Perhaps he had come to surreptitiously offer Nicaragua aid, or simply to open the eyes of those whom the nation needed most. Through his loyalty to him, Truman found himself included in a trusted secret group, assigned to collect data on fellow students, foreigners behind the FSLN.

His cousin, on the other hand, studied modern farming techniques and cattle breeding. As most farmers were campesinos and their overwhelming majority supported the Sandinistas, he became involved with a group Truman knew to be agitators. He was horrified one afternoon to discover Raul plastering an inflammatory FSLN poster on a university wall. He worried about him, baffled at how such an intelligent person could be led so far astray by foreign communists and campesino mobs. In their first year, they clashed heatedly over politics, but after several screaming matches, the boys agreed to disagree and not discuss politics. Somehow they managed, except for some memorable arguments, one in the dining hall, when Truman could take no more of Raul's political rhetoric and pushed him, tipping his chair over backwards with him in it.

Both were married shortly after graduation. Raul and Hilda took their vows in the snow-white cathedral with the high domed ceiling with a quiet Saturday evening ceremony. She was the daughter of the third time reelected president of the largest farmer's cooperative in the valley. Three months later, it was Truman and Lucia in the same church, staging the grandest affair Jinotega had ever seen. They rode in a shiny black Cadillac convertible at the head of a twelve-car procession to the reception party on her parents' estate. Every local government official was present as well as both banks' presidents. The Agricultural Secretary on President Samosa's cabinet, a personal friend of his bride's father, came all the way from Managua with their mutual acquaintance, John Hall. It wasn't all happiness, though: bricks were thrown at the Mercedes Lucia's mother rode in, and stitches were required to close the nasty cut on her arm.

"It went on in like fashion until the situation disintegrated into civil war," he said in conclusion, "but there's no need to get into all that. War is a horrible experience for anyone: the best way to get over it is to forget everything, just block it from your life and go on, and I've done a fine job of it – up to now. So, maybe now you can understand what's been going on in my mind lately and why I seem so moody, but I'll soon get over it."

"It sounds as though you were used by that jerk, Hall. Was he an army officer or something?"

"The US Army wasn't directly involved with Nicaragua: the CIA was in charge of your country's interests. The few military officers who came to Nicaragua took their orders from agents like Hall."

"The CIA! You were tricked into digging up information on other students for them? How creepy! Little wonder you don't like to remember it, but you shouldn't feel so guilty: after all, you were just an impressionable kid." Apparently, talking about it did little to ease his conscience because he reverted to his quiet, contemplative mood. For a very long while, he had lived alone within the isolating barrier of a burned and scarred face with the awful memories of a war that killed his entire family. By stages, the door was opening, but she shouldn't push. A semblance of normalcy returned as the palms lining the highway prompted Beth to tell how she and Herminia attempted to extract coconut oil in a large cauldron over a flame on the beach, like a pair of old witches: a very smelly failure!

CHAPTER SIX

Gordon Edward loved election years. How he enjoyed toying with the scrambling political fat cats, vying for invitations to fundraisers he sponsored! Any other time, he could hardly get them to return his calls. Election years were different; they all wanted to be photographed with Limon's handsome, dynamic political leader, R. Gordon Edward. (The 'R' was his own addition. He liked the distinguished sound it gave to his name.) Any San José candidate worth his salt knew an endorsement from Edward from 'Poor Limon Province' was worth many a valuable vote back in the capital. Election year, his turn to get his black ass kissed; he relished the thought.

His desk, a massive thing of mahogany (product of Limon Province), reflected a burgundy glow onto the teak paneled walls (also a product of Limon). Seated behind it, slightly elevated on a raised platform, with 'his' port visible through the window behind,

R. Gordon presented the image he desired: that of an imposing leader, in charge of all he surveyed, particularly the person seated before him. He personally had designed the effect using mental images of potbellied legislators from San José as those who would be seated before him. They had always looked upon Limon and its black population as insignificant, second class citizens. Disregarding its problems, they consistently voted against funding for the province. Election years were different. Seeking votes, they came with their slicked back hair, printed silk shirts open at the collar to display gaudy gold chains, and, of course, the obligatory crucifix lying as a trophy upon a hairy chest.

They arrived expecting Edward's profound gratitude for honoring Limon with their presence. He wasn't about to grant them that pleasure, rather, he delighted in the opportunity their vote gathering political visits presented for revenge. A visiting fat pig ignored for a mere fifteen minutes on the broiling tarmac at Limon's airport melted into a rumped, sweat drenched, slob, panting in the heat. Following instructions, the Port Authority Police kept news photographers off the tarmac until Edward, with all the aplomb of a Prussian general, strode from his air-conditioned limousine before awaiting cameras. Cool and impeccably dressed, he would present himself; the perfect smiling host greeting the pathetic, sweltering figure from San José.

Edward knew the greatest asset his reelection campaign had going for it, was right there – smiling back at him from the full-length mirror on the back of his office door. Now there was the perfect black man! How could anyone not vote for the image he saw reflected? Groomed to the highest standards, dressed magnificently, poised, well spoken in three languages, holder of an impeccable political record, and the architect of most of Limon's social programs, he was everything the people of Limon could want in a politician. 'The Power and Glory of Limon' as headline above his picture: it still seemed to be an excellent idea. The campaign manager's rejection of the catchy phrase as his slogan had been a major disappointment.

At thirty-nine, Gordon Edward presented to the world an image simultaneously homey, authoritarian and that of a polished professional (a combination of traits possible only among the politician subspecies). He accomplished this remarkable feat by carrying his trim physique with an aristocratic posture and having the pampered good looks of a daytime drama hero and a speaking voice that carried tones of deep sincerity. His pride and confidence, always his most visible attributes, more noticeable even than his physical appearance, combined in the man to produce a born politician. Perhaps that came about through discovering of himself that he was a natural leader who wielded power as comfortably as others walked. From his crib, he began learning how through expression and poise he could influence events around him and grew into a man

who was the product of his own grooming, and it showed. His complexion was smooth and dark brown, with features suggesting mixed blood: African with a touch of Native American. His cheekbones were high and wide over a strong, square chin and slightly rounded cheeks. He held his mouth with a hint of warm smile softening the overall impression of concerned firmness, rather as a trusted family doctor. When he spoke, he did so without hand gestures. He held them loosely at his side or in his lap when seated, fixed an easy steady gaze on his listener, and let his baritone voice deliver his message.

Photographers were on their way to capture on film the perfect image capable of conveying all his wonderful qualities to the voting public. Glistening teeth, expensive glare cutting make-up across his broad nose, and a one hundred fifty dollar haircut and manicure enhanced the effects of what he considered to be nature's best: the perfect black man.

Since becoming the Director of JAPDEVA (the Spanish acronym for the Port Authority of Limon), Edward had transformed the previously obscure position into the preeminent seat of power for the province. His ability to influence legislation relating to Limon as it worked its way through the political processes in San José was the key to his remarkable success. Simultaneously, his personal generous donations to charities within the province contributed to his public image as the people's true representative. He appeared often in the press and on television handing over checks, cutting ribbons, and, of course, accepting interviews.

One thing about Truman Herrera that Gordon couldn't get used to was his punctuality. It was something Truman had to have learned those years spent in The United States. Costa Ricans, Ticos as they prefer to call themselves, have their own method of arranging appointments or arriving for them. The system even has a name: Tico Time. Under it, a person with a ten AM appointment isn't expected until eleven. Foreigners and a few punctual oddballs like Truman can throw an office planner into total confusion.

True to form, although again, totally unexpected, Truman arrived for his nine thirty appointment at precisely that hour. Knowing better than to ask Truman to wait for an hour, Gordon's secretary sent him right in with the result that Truman sat in on the tail end of Gordon's meeting with his reelection committee. As it closed and the team filed out, every head half-turned to steal a close-up peek at Truman's face. "I don't get you!" Gordon declared when the door had closed behind the last one. "You have more money than the Pope, yet you walk around with that ugly face of yours, drawing more stares than Madonna. Why is that?"

"I don't think you draw any less, pretty-boy!" Truman chuckled, studying Gordon's face. "Isn't that eye makeup you're wearing? And what happened to your skin? You look pasty."

"It's foundation. We were having a photo session."

"Foundation?"

"Yeah, you know – makeup," Gordon explained. "It keeps my nose from shining and evens my skin tones."

Truman couldn't contain the belly laugh that erupted. "Who were those people, Gordy? Your fan club?"

"Don't you follow the news? We're in an election year and that was my campaign committee and photographers."

Much to Gordon's chagrin, Truman chuckled at his explanation. "What's so funny?" he asked, "I have a campaign manager, a strategy specialist, press secretary, finance manager, plus art and image people, the works."

"Why do you need all those people? I thought you were a shoe-in." Gordon was right: Truman didn't follow politics; he could not care less.

"I am. Nobody can beat me, but I'm not taking chances. Besides, I like the excitement and of course, I get plenty of press coverage and that's good for the province. It is a good reminder to the San José assholes that Limon is part of this country too."

“This will be your last term, won’t it?”

“Next election Leon will run in my place. The public will know that they’ll actually be voting for me. We’ll leak the information, and then deny it officially. It’ll be a wonderfully scandalous story and the press will come flocking. Whoever dares to run against us won’t even be able to find his name in print. After all, my political record speaks for itself; what can anyone say that can hurt us? That I want to bend the rules slightly and remain where I am doing for Limon the job no one before me has been able to do? After Leon’s term is over, I’ll be free to run again under my own name. No, I’m here to stay.”

“Your brother? How are you going to get him elected? Every time I see you, it seems you’re telling me about some new sort of trouble he’s gotten into. He would be the laughing stock of the country if he ran for public office.”

“He’s never been convicted of anything,” Gordon insisted, “and officially, he’s never had any trouble: I’ve had his police records shredded. Spreading a little money and a few choice jobs around will keep anyone else quiet. He’s clean. All I have to do is keep him that way through this next term.”

Truman failed to understand why Gordon didn’t come down hard on his younger brother. Often, when sent to San José on errands, a call would be received from some casino or bar concerning trouble involving a prostitute, an unpaid tab, or worse. Delicate negotiations were frequently required to resolve the problem without involving Gordon’s name. The idea that Leon might keep his nose clean through his entire next term of office was pure Mother Goose to Truman’s thinking, unless some very basic changes were made, but his opinion would have to remain his own: his brother was one subject Gordon kept strictly off limits. Moreover, he hadn’t come to discuss Leon or his selection as stand-in for an election more than two years away: it was the fishing boat, El Tiburón Limon, that was on his mind. He interrupted.

* * *

Beth had to agree: Truman had been right. After enjoying Herminia’s fascinating tour of Limon, having brunch in the finest elegance Limon had to offer with R. Gordon Edward was an experience not to miss. They dined like royalty at a table overlooking the harbor while restaurant staff fawned over their every wish. Mr. Edward (he said to call him Gordy, but she found the familiarity uncomfortable) was a polished gentleman, an entertaining conversationalist and like Truman, had a tendency towards Victorian chivalry. Upon introduction, he rose in a courtly manner, took her hand in his, pressing his thumb across her fingers and bent her palm over the back of his hand. She blushed, certain it was about to receive a kiss, but he merely held it that way as he expressed his profound pleasure at making her acquaintance.

Mr. Edward was obviously devoted to Limon and her people, a quality refreshing to a born cynic regarding the motivations of politicians. The man’s love of Limon was positively infectious. He was also quite taken with the concept of Truman escorting, not just one woman, but two. Herminia, on the other hand, seemed completely unimpressed, arching a dubious eyebrow as she was introduced. She had seen the treatment Beth’s hand had received. Hers wasn’t offered. Truman had been uncomfortable about inviting her, but Gordon’s brother, Leon was such a boor that Herminia appeared as an elegant lady by comparison. He seemed to have a penchant for inane comments at the most inappropriate of moments. Apparently, Mr. Edward was well practiced in dealing with louts as his composure never varied.

He maintained that he “just couldn’t live with himself” if Beth and Herminia traveled by bus. Leon, he said, was bound for San José and his Range Rover offered better comfort and speed. “Hotel Paradise?” he questioned upon learning of Beth’s selection. “Leon maintains a suite there and it’s fine for him, but I wouldn’t consider it a fit hotel for a woman alone. If being downtown is important, why don’t you stay at the Holiday Inn?” She mentioned a certain sense of adventure that came with staying in a place like Hotel Paradise, although Mr. Edward didn’t seem to be the type who could appreciate the

fascination she felt for it. She was certain the very reasons she was attracted were why he felt she should stay away, but a diplomat to the end, he simply insisted that she allow Leon to drive and escort them to dinner that evening. “It will be my treat,” he said, “and will give peace of mind to both Truman and myself, knowing that you are safe.” Beth felt more inclined to endure a crowded bus than hours together with Leon, and another meal with him was a dismal thought, but Truman’s smiling agreement on the heels of Herminia’s excited acceptance sealed her fate. She’d been betrayed!

□ □ □

CHAPTER SEVEN

The new highway connecting Limon with San José rises from sea level to almost seven thousand five hundred feet. The scenery is spectacular with changing climates as one climbs, providing the viewer a wide range of tropical plants throughout the three-hour trip. Camera at the ready, Beth sat in the front seat for the best view, determined not to think about Truman's involvement in the war or speculate as to how his wife and children had died and equally decided not to let Leon be her distraction: capturing the scenery would be occupation enough. Her returning skills at photography were resulting in a beautiful collection badly in need of shots from the remainder of the country.

Herminia, streetwise and experienced, propped a pillow behind her head in the back seat and laid down, shrewdly avoiding the torture that Beth thought staying busy with photography would protect her from, Leon. His nonstop jabbering began even before they were settled in their seats. Between sentences, his large mouth hung open as he squinted in concentration, gathering his limited thoughts. When he had sorted through the confusion – no doubt abundant – and assembled a sentence, he spoke in a rush, apparently to get it all out while the thought held together. In his haste, saliva built on his teeth and lips, producing a spray of spittle that accompanied each delivery, followed by a cleaning of lip licking and swallowing. His face was fuller than Gordon's with strong family resemblance about the eyes, however that was as far as it went. His round cheeks were stubbly and spotted with a freckling of black dots from ingrown hairs. Beneath the hem of a short sleeved, red silk shirt, the bulge of his stomach folded over his belt.

She glanced enviously into the back seat where Herminia lay in apparent peace, not enduring Leon's monologue, forced upon her with touches of his hand for attention. She smiled, noting Herminia's feigned sleep, exposed by fluttering eyelids. Meanwhile, he talked. And talked. His lips never completely drew together, giving his voice a flat, indistinct quality. He paused, assembling words: time for her own strategy! She bent to her camera bag and ignored completely his uninterrupted grumbling about lack of respect received for his work and a constant stream of complaints about his brother and his own particular lot in life.

For the first hour they drove fast on the straight as an arrow highway crossing the hot, flat coastal plain as Leon continued, his droning voice faded into the background as they drove by endless rows of bright green banana leaves, waving hypnotically in a hot breeze while Beth attempted to capture the sense of motion on still film. Leon's monotone and the unchanging columns of bananas lulled her to thoughts of Truman: they were warm and teased up smiles, which quickly faded when the brush-off kiss imposed itself upon her. Later, he had been himself again, but Truman was capable of withdrawing like that, to some unreachable place within. She could just picture his face clouding over whenever something struck that secret, melancholy chord. His eyes would seem to lose focus on the physical world and he'd suddenly be tense, or sad, or seething with anger but, just the same, he'd be gone. Ghosts and mental images of, God only knows what, would transport him far, far from where he was physically. Undoubtedly, he had been to hell and back in the war, but were all of his confusing mood shifts the result of those experiences, or something else, maybe something about her?

The banana plantations were huge, extending as far as the eye could see. Fruit trucks emblazoned with familiar logos rolled by regularly, some of the cargo certainly bound for produce counters in Green Bay. It was a strangely amusing thought. "I'm no errand boy. I'm his brother," Leon was saying somewhere in the distant background. She heard, but didn't listen, fixed on the enigma of Truman's moods. Workers, seemingly immune to the heat, fitted protective blue plastic bags over

pendulous clusters of ripening bananas while whacking away at the tree-like plants, their machetes flashing arcs of steel lopping off any leaf showing a brown edge. “He thinks he’s such a big shot. Well, he won’t talk to me like that any longer!” She shook herself from contemplation and carefully swung the lens to cancel the car’s movement, capturing the action of two men teams harvesting pendulous bunches. In one swift movement, one would slice the thick stalk, separating the bunch from the plant while the other supported its weight. Then, together they lifted, making the backbreaking work of transferring the hefty load to a metal hook without inflicting a bruise on any banana look like child’s play. A tram-like system suspended above irrigation ditches between the rows then transported the bananas to the loading area at the other extreme of the farm. “Well, he should, shouldn’t he?” Leon gawked at her, apparently searching for a reply.

“Sure, Leon, sure, everyone can see that!” She let out half a breath and held it, steadying the camera. Great pictures! Thoughts of Truman had been put on the shelf with her growing excitement over the fascinating photo album that would result. At last, they were beyond the seemingly endless banana plantations. Her last picture was of one of a wooden clapboard house built on pilings and surrounded by palm trees with leaves and coconuts that looked disproportionately small atop fantastically lofty trunks. Black girls in billowing skirts were captured waving from a wide veranda. She leaned from the window to return the salute with a broad wave above the car. The mountains, no longer hazy with distance, but deep green and filling half of the sky, drew close, standing before them as an impenetrable wall.

“– doesn’t even notice me, but who gets...” His words lost their meaning: there were just his lips moving and the droning of his voice while missiles of spittle exploded on the dashboard.

Lenses were switched for fields of sugar cane, reminiscent of crab grass grown gigantic and in desperate need of mowing. Individual blades, similar but for their size to common grass, stood well over ten feet in height with taller-still, silky seed pods waving in the breeze high above the leaves like plumes of ostrich feathers. Huge, rickety wagons, over-filled with cut cane swayed from side to side as they lumbered past harvested fields, stripped bare to the earth, then burned black. Unable to pass, they followed one closely, flattening fallen stalks of cane to leave raw syrup on the tires that stuck to the road, making a kissing sound with each revolution. “I even know how much he paid. Ha! And he thinks I don’t know anything. He’ll see.”

The change from flat plain to switchback curves scaling precipitous slopes brought them to cooler temperatures almost immediately. Sheer-face cliffs to one side and deep ravines on the other gave Beth the alarming sense they were clinging to the mountain’s side, about to tumble. She photographed a splattering waterfall cascading from a cliff face onto a protruding rock: thousands of droplets appearing as glistening globes drifting through space, then snapped another two of a wooden railroad trestle that spanned a perpendicular ravine cut by a raging stream of white rapids. It seemed inconceivable to trust one’s life to such a bridge, yet but a couple of years earlier, ancient steam trains providing passenger service to the capital crossed the decaying lattice daily. Higher still, they entered the permanent gray mist of cloud forest where direct sunlight never penetrates. In this environment of heavy mist and perpetual one hundred percent humidity exists a strange tropical world, an island ecology where sun hungry plants that thrive elsewhere on the mountains can’t survive in the murkiness. In their stead, grow plants appearing to be from a different universe.

“– working on it for months. You wouldn’t understand, because...” It was Leon, still yammering away, audience or no. Dribble everywhere.

Clouds forming as the warm, moist air from below rose into the cooler heights, created billowing mist that tumbled across the highway as rolling fog patches. Beth worked frantically, changing lenses and settings while outside beads of moisture formed then ran in rivulets from every surface. Leon switched on the Range Rover’s headlights, dual cones of yellow through the gloom. Windshield wipers thumped steadily. Plants with leaves of gigantic proportions, looking like genetically

altered rhubarb groping to absorb its portion of weakened sunlight through the murky air, hung from the rocks. Every branch, electrical wire, rooftop – any surface at all, was encased in a thick growth of brilliant green moss that gave a branch overhanging the road the appearance of a heavy, green spider web extending from the tree.

“ – his shit anymore. He’ll never – “

Like stepping from a steamy bathroom, they were suddenly above the mist, emerging into dazzling brightness above the clouds, a blanket of dirty lamb’s wool lain over the earth and pierced in places by tree covered peaks rising as dark mysterious islands. Gone were the strange plants, replaced by now familiar tropical broadleaves and surprisingly, fir trees. Still the road ahead tilted upward. She anticipated each succeeding bend in the road to be the one concealing level ground or a downgrade, but no – the road continued up, up, and up into the ever chillier air.

“ – you must have guessed that by now. Pretty clever, huh?” He captured her with eye contact.

“Oh yeah Leon, it sure is,” she said, smiling weakly. Groaning with exasperation, she turned to stare from the side window as he continued uninterrupted. They were driving along a roadway cut into the sheer face of the gorge of Rio Reventazon. Far below, kayaks jumped through white water spray, narrowly missing jutting rocks. She leaned from the Rover’s open window for a better camera angle, thrilling to the excitement of seemingly flying high above the canyon with the raging river directly below.

“ – ering with the log barges. Right there, in Limon harbor. See what I mean? That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

She glanced in amazement at the fool yammering on without an audience then extended the upper half of her body from the window. Below, kayaks fought with double-ended paddles to follow a slalom of brightly colored flags in the river’s center while simultaneously avoiding being dashed against rocks in a high speed race through the white rapids. Shooting around a bend behind the kayaks, an inflatable raft, loaded with people rowing wildly was suspended in time on film.

Finally, they reached the top; ahead, the terrain began to descend. “Everybody in San José knows me. I can’t see...” Leon’s voice was still dragging on after more than two and a half hours. Woof! The Rover rocked on its suspension. They were in a tunnel pitch black except for the warm glow of headlights reflecting from tile walls. Ahead, in the far distance was a faint glow with a bright pinpoint of at its center. What a picture it could be! It would look as though she had traveled to the edge of life and photographed the tunnel of death.

“Leon,” she begged, “when I lean out would you shut off the headlights for a few moments so I can get this shot, please?” She extended herself almost entirely from the window, sitting on the ledge with her toes hooked sailboat style under the frame of her seat. Wind ripped at her hair and clothes. It filled her mouth, puffed her cheeks and tears streaked across her face. Then suddenly, the headlights were off, plunging her into inky blackness while surrounded by the roar of all terrain tires echoing from the walls. She was in absolute darkness entombed within a mountain while before her was the mystical pinpoint of light towards which we all race. Squealing with delight, she clicked madly at the shutter until the headlights came on.

“ – been doing his grunge work. This’ll wake him up,” Leon asserted, slapping the steering wheel for emphasis. “He’ll be sorry then, you can bet on that. What do you think, Beth, will it work?”

She gaped in amazement. How can a man be so stupid? Did he actually think she heard him with half of her body outside of the car? “Sure, it will be just fine,” she replied nodding and smiling. Somehow, she had chosen the perfect response, because he grinned, threw back his shoulders and – praise God! – stopped talking.

Ahead and far below, spread over the basin of an enormous soup-bowl valley, lay San José, the capital and heartthrob of Costa Rica.

* * *

Beth wasn't particularly impressed with Hotel Paradise. It was hard to say in what way it was a disappointment, but the setting for Herminia's colorful tales should be expected to radiate and this was an edifice completely devoid of character. Several forlorn chandeliers draped with cobwebs were the singular attempt at elegance and the paneled walls reflected runs of dripping varnish. To the left, by virtue of a short wooden railing and worn green carpeting, the lobby transitioned to casino.

Leon, swollen with self-importance, gave them instructions in authoritative tones that the entire lobby could hear carrying all the earmarks of his brother's voice: "Remember girls, my business associate will be in the dining room at ten and I want you to be on time." Stepping closer, he added, "Remember, my name is Ed Lyons and another thing, don't mention anything about Gordon."

"Sorry, Leon," Beth retorted, "I won't be able to make it for dinner."

"No," pleaded Herminia, tugging sharply at her sleeve. "Si, we go, Beth. I am back after long time. I wan everyone see me come een dining room clean and healthy weeth beautiful gringa friend and two men who take us to dinner. Then nobody talk bad about me any more. Please, please!" Beth sighed, rolling back her eyes. It could be better than sitting in her room crying over Truman's family: with pursed lips, she nodded. Answering for them both, Herminia promptly replied that ten o'clock was fine.

"Just one minute here," Beth interrupted. "I want to make myself perfectly clear, Leon – okay, I'll call you Ed – I'm nobody's date and I will have to leave right after dinner because I'm meeting a friend."

Herminia knew exactly what she would wear. It was a black dress, bare-shouldered and tight to her body, an item that just might need letting out to accommodate her new breast size, she said wiggling them in demonstration. The dress hung in her transvestite friend Flavio's closet, whom she claimed to be the most talented beautician in the world. She was as excited as a child at an amusement park to resume living with him: he willingly shared his entire wardrobe and for this, her big night, would artfully apply her makeup and fix her hair.

Beth had no idea what to wear for Herminia's 'coming out' but the many shops and boutiques hadn't gone unnoticed. She hadn't missed Green Bay at all in the nine months since leaving, nevertheless, she rushed her shower, anxious for the taste of civilization, browsing for an outfit. After seeing dozens and trying on three, two blocks from the hotel she encountered a full-length dress in burgundy. Strapless and elegant, it caught her eye from across the street through hordes of traffic. An amber necklace with matching teardrop earrings practically jumped from the jewelry case saying, 'buy me, buy me.' It added up to quite a bit, but she pictured herself strolling into one of the fancy casinos amid the excitement of glittering lights and gaming tables, and asked herself how long had it been since she had worn something really nice: she charged it. Shoes and a purse to tie it all together were next and by then, money no longer mattered: a hairdresser created a coiffure of loose curls while a manicurist did her nails.

* * *

She fidgeted in the lobby awaiting Herminia: she felt far too elegant to dine with slobby, spitting Leon and ward off the advances of any friend of his. The situation was ridiculous: she had allowed herself to be manipulated and now she wanted out.

"*Mira, la guapa* (look at the beautiful woman)!" Herminia's voice echoed from every wall. Heels tapping the ceramic lobby floor set the tempo of her squeals: "*Que mujer! Linda, linda, linda* (what a woman! Pretty, pretty, pretty)," she

gushed. Beth was no less amazed with Herminia. Her friends were going to have a difficult time recognizing her, the petite, lovely woman rushing towards her bore not the slightest resemblance to the half-starved wildcat that had once inhabited a box. A long finger of dark hair curled over a shoulder, her left eyebrow arched questioningly and her smile radiated, riveting Beth's attention. She was truly a Spanish beauty. No small wonder every man's head turned as she passed. How Beth hated disappointing her, but she just couldn't

"Herminia, just a minute! I don't think..." She paid no mind, circling and offering gasps of delight as she touched Beth's dress, her hair and ogled the amber, caressing it reverently between thumb and fingers.

"Thank you, Beth! You are beautiful and make Herminia happy, happy, happy. My friends," she said indicating with a twist of her head the wide entrance to the bar, "thinking, 'Herminia? Oh this one, she very bad, went away to die in street.' Now they will see: I am back, not so skinny and with beautiful gringa friend! She smoothed her short dress over the curve of her hip, adjusted a bra strap then raised her chin slightly, patting her hair into perfection. "We walk once around bar before dining room, hokay?"

"Wait, Herminia," Beth said, grasping her arm. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't go in there with Leon. You saw him at lunch: this will be worse with him sitting there pretending to be 'Ed Lyons' and putting us on show for some other slob."

"Si, I no like too, he meester big bull sheet. But, these, she is easy. Doan worry, Herminia feex everything. Now, come." The grin was heart-warming: her moment of glory was at hand. Beth was pulled into the wake of her perfume for a victory stroll through the bar. Herminia sauntered through the double doors like royalty with a wiggle, head high and radiant smile illuminating her way. Beth was introduced to 'professional girls' from Colombia, Panama, Surinam, Cuba and Honduras, all of whom squealed with delight upon seeing Herminia and appeared appropriately awed with her healthy figure, stunning appearance and particularly with her 'important American scientist friend,' Beth. All were told, to more exclamations of wonder, that they couldn't stand around and chat because, 'their boyfriends waited in the dining room.'

"Okay," Beth said when they returned to the lobby, "I'm going to grab a cab and find a nice restaurant. Do you want to come along?"

"No Beth, all Herminia's friends watching; we go to dining room, please."

Beth looked to the bar doors and, sure enough, two bar girls stood at the door excitedly watching their every move. "Well, I'm not sitting next to anyone," she insisted.

"Si, si, I know. You no wan Leon bothering you and you wan seet alone. Herminia do. I make heem forget all about you." Words of faith: somehow, they weren't particularly comforting, but Herminia was already sweeping through the open doors to the dining room. They found 'Ed Lyons' and his companion in a booth. Clearly, the later, a man of slight proportions, wearing glasses and a vest with many pockets was confused and uncomfortable as they approached – that was a good sign, wasn't it? Gawking at the approaching women, he pulled himself to his feet in the narrow space between chair and table. "Seet, seet," Herminia instructed, using her lips to indicate the spot he had just risen from. Withdrawing from her incessant stare, he lowered himself and received as his reward a radiant smile. Satisfied, she continued wiggling into the booth to sit at Leon's side. The place remaining was opposite Leon's friend, not beside him, just as promised: Beth eased in. The man looked intently at her through lenses that magnified his eyes. He then spun to fix Leon with a hard stare.

"Okay Ed, what's happening?" he snapped, "Who are these women?"

"Relax, George! They're friends I have invited to dinner with us." Beth could recognize in Leon's carriage and slight gestures an imitation of his brother's politician's polish, but his companion didn't appear particularly impressed.

“Ed,” he called across the table, drawing bushy eyebrows together and wrinkling his forehead, “the bank paperwork we were supposed to review is ready. I thought that’s why we were getting together. We don’t have much time remaining, you know.” Turning, he faced Beth, pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled feebly. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude but we have pressing business matters and I hadn’t expected company.” His attention returned to ‘Ed’ who was lifting a shoulder against Herminia’s playful attempts to whisper into his ear. “Oh, great! Just great! So, now what, huh?” He snorted and slapped a palm flat upon the table.

Leon pressed a restraining fingertip over Herminia’s pursed lips. “I don’t know what you are so worried about, but okay,” he answered shrugging regrets to Herminia. Although silenced with his finger, she remained in charge, baby-face pout and doe-eyed gaze captivating him. He gave up all pretense of high roller intent on impressing his companion, and allowed her to pull him close for the cheek-to-cheek delivery of her secret. In that position, hidden from the men, she grinned and lifted her eyebrows in rapid succession. It was a performance such as Beth had never seen and caused her to smile broadly. “Considering your personal problems,” Leon said to his companion while peering around Herminia, “naturally, I thought you would appreciate a little female company,” his eyes flicking towards Beth. When George’s gaze lit upon her, she found herself still smirking at Herminia’s manipulations. Immediately, she composed herself and offered a meek smile.

“I’m sorry again,” he said, “about him, that is. He made assumptions about things that are none of his concern and now we have this uncomfortable situation. Perhaps you should stay for dinner anyhow. However,” he said, with a little frown, “I’m afraid I will have to excuse myself immediately after.”

“No, no, don’t apologize; it’s okay. This is fine,” she replied, appraising him as she spoke. A collection of pens and pencils protruded from one pocket of his vest and from another a second pair of glasses. “Your friend already knows that I too am only able to stay through dinner.”

“He did? He knew that?” They both glanced in “Ed’s” direction. His hands were busy beneath the tablecloth. He squinted, groping lower with no attempt to disguise his movements. George shook his head slightly then returned his gaze to Beth with his cheeks visibly reddened. “Then I’m the one who misunderstood. I’m sorry. Okay then, Ed, let’s eat.” George said, tossing a menu across the table.

Despite her initial reluctance, meeting George Dearling was becoming a semi-pleasant surprise. He wasn’t particularly good-looking, with a beak-like nose, thin lips and bald head but, he certainly was better company than Leon, appeared more intelligent, was tall, clean-shaven, and what hair he did have was neatly trimmed; not at all what she had expected. The source of ‘Ed’s’ misconception regarding his need for female company came, he explained, from the fact that his wife of eleven years had recently filed for divorce. Yet, however inconceivable it might be to ‘Ed,’ George Dearling loved his wife and longed to win her back. His hopes, he explained rested in the quick cash he intended to earn by selling the rights of two patents he held and ‘Ed’ represented the investors who wished to buy them: hence tonight’s meeting.

George had done extremely well as a computer programmer, however, the fast paced, highly competitive Silicon Valley life was not suitable to his gentle nature, so several years earlier, he had come to Costa Rica with his wife and the apple of his eye, his beloved daughter, to start over where the peaceful lifestyle was much more to his liking. His wife, Becky, loved it and they both considered exposure to a second culture an excellent opportunity for their daughter’s development. In the Orosi Valley, a quaint colonial area famous for its gourmet quality coffee, he bought a beautiful farm, rich in volcanic soil and there, raised flowers for export to the US and Europe. Life in Orosi was the stuff of his sweetest dreams, until financial problems destroyed it.

Leon's antics had gone on long enough. Beth pushed her plate away. "I'm stuffed," she proclaimed. "Sorry to eat and run, but I must go. It was a pleasure to meet you, George," she said standing and offering her hand. "Good night, Herminia, enjoy yourself. Ed, you be good to my friend and thank you for dinner."

She wandered into the casino and began walking among the tables absorbing the excitement. Intimidated by the fast pace of chips, cards and swirling wheels, she headed for the slot machines. Moving from one to another in a futile chase for the easy jackpot, her stack of chips ebbed and flowed, eventually ebbing completely as she slipped her last into a slot. Blackjack proved to be more to her liking. Twenty-five dollars worth of chips grew through a thrilling winning streak to eighty-seven, dwindled to thirty-four then in increments grew again to one hundred twelve before she quit. Craps was fun to watch but beyond her: each roll of the dice would surprise her, when bets she assumed to be losers were paid and those she thought winners were hauled off with a wooden hook. Roulette was straightforward like blackjack, but more colorful and exciting, plus you could play on your feet and players were less serious. Beth moved up to the table and stacked her impressive pile of chips in front of her.

"Your date hasn't shown up?" It was George Darling leaning over the board to place his bet.

"No, he may have gotten delayed with his work, but I'm sure he'll be along soon."

"It looks like you've been enjoying some good luck or did you start with more?"

"I won almost all of this: it's so exciting! I'm feeling a strong addiction coming on. Do you suppose I'm a future candidate for Gambler's Anonymous?"

"I could use a little of your beginners luck, and maybe you would do even better if you used a little strategy: let me show you my system. Go ahead, select any number." It lost, but he had limited that bet to two chips. Meanwhile, the five they bet on the group as well as another five each on column, odd and red all won. She went wild with excitement. "Perfect," George declared. A doubter of the integrity of casinos, he maintained as part of his personal faith that a pretty woman, whose excitement at winning draws a crowd to a table, has an unusual tendency towards long streaks of good fortune. Such was the simple strategy George unveiled after a brief introduction to the fundamentals of roulette. Beth was in: she blew kisses on the chips in her best 'Lady Luck' fashion. Jumping, shouting and giggling, she stirred the interest of other gamblers, drew a lively crowd to the table and her winning continued.

"A few more big ones like that," he cheered, clapping her on the shoulder when the dancing tiny ball came to rest on her number, "and you're likely to be banned from the casino." When Beth lost on three consecutive spins, he abruptly announced it was time to cash her chips, but quickly discovered that getting her to quit was far more challenging than getting her started. She left only reluctantly, steered away by George's persistent pressure on her arm. She could have remained had she resorted to kicking and screaming, but considering how well she was dressed she left quietly for decorum's sake.

"George," she complained while succumbing to the weight of his hand in the small of her back steadily guiding her towards the exit, "I was just getting going in there. Come on, I want to win some more; let's go back." He suggested that perhaps it would be prudent to rest a while over an espresso and pastry in the coffee shop, a delightful proposition considering her hunger after consuming only half of her dinner.

"May I ask you a personal question?" she queried after they had been served.

"Sure, what would you like to know," he asked, removing his glasses and looking at her with eyes that suddenly appeared smaller.

"How is this money you're going to earn supposed to save your marriage?"

“For my wife, financial problems with our farm are what this divorce is all about. She is upset with me because I was taken in by a crooked lawyer when I bought our farm so, if I can prevent foreclosure, I think she’ll come around.”

“Well, I hope you’re right. What is it that the lawyer did?”

“Actually, it all started last year when I went to pay my property taxes. I didn’t happen to have the registry number of the farm with me so I asked the tax clerk to find it by searching the records for my name and guess what? It wasn’t there. It didn’t take long to discover that my lawyer had never done his job of filing the correct documents. He just took the fees and tax payments and put them in his pocket. The result was that it was still registered in the previous owner’s name and he had moved out of the country. Fortunately, I had the original documents that were supposed to have been recorded. Of course, the lawyer couldn’t be found, so I hired a new one to get it all done properly. Anyhow, while searching the registry for all documents pertaining to the property, he made another discovery that was even worse: not only was the sale not registered, but the son-of-a-bitch hadn’t even researched to discover that there was an existing mortgage. To make matters worse, the owner had abandoned some huge debts when he left Costa Rica, and to collect, liens had been registered against the farm. In one crushing blow after another, first my crop, then my farm machinery were impounded. The next thing I knew, my bank accounts were frozen and I found myself facing foreclosure.”

“Wow, that’s horrible! It’s like a nightmare!”

He lifted his gaze from his fork and fixed her with a wry grin. “But, I’m going to save the farm and then Becky won’t be so angry.

“Well, I wish you luck. What do you say about going back to the roulette table and stirring up some more excitement? I’m still all fired up and ready to win.”

“If you accept my theory, it’ll only work once in any given casino. I think it’s time for me to move on.”

“What do you mean? Why? We were doing fine, just like you said we would. What’s different now?”

“Call me a cynic if you want,” George said, “but I truly believe that if you go back, you’ll just lose. Think about it: if we won because that’s what the casino wanted in order to attract more money to the table and that, of course, means that they control the game. So, if you go back in now with a pocket full of chips they essentially gave you, don’t you think they will try to get them back? Of course, if you accept that the tables are honest, well, go ahead, but my suggestion is that you stick to the slot machines until your friend shows up.”

“So, you’re leaving. Why so early?”

George laughed, turning his cheeks red. “Ummm, yes I am... I’ve been having a wonderful time, but... Well frankly, my wife has always been unreasonably jealous and I’m worried that someone will see us together and make too much of it. I just don’t think this is a good time to be throwing logs on the fire with her. Understand?”

“Sure, no problem. Drive safely on the way home.”

“Don’t worry. Actually, I’m not going far. I’m rather like you; I have this feeling of a winning streak coming on. I’m going to try my luck in Club Hollywood.” The name struck a cord: Club Hollywood was the bordello where Herminia, at the tender age of fourteen, was introduced to cocaine.

“Club Hollywood is a casino?”

“Yes, it’s owned by a friend of mine and I go there often. In my opinion, it’s the best club in town. I was warming up to go there when I bumped into you at the roulette table. I had a great time, thanks, it took my mind off my problems for a while. I’m going out this side door to grab a cab, perhaps you ought to go back inside and look around for your date before he starts thinking he’s been stood up”

“I have a confession, George. I don’t actually have a date waiting for me. I made it up to have an excuse to get away from Le... from Ed.”

“But you’re dressed for a date,” he said replacing his glasses and pushing them high on his nose.

She smiled. “I know, I felt like treating myself to a special night in the casino.” The smile continued, remembering the infectious excitement. “It’s far too early to call it a night and I don’t relish the thought of losing all my chips right away by staying here: I’m going to ride along with you to Club Hollywood. Just look at all this,” she said upending her bag of chips onto the table. “Let’s go cash them in.”

“But, we can’t go there in the same taxi. Everyone will see us.”

“Oh come on, George! You’re carrying this a little too far. What are you going to do: go to the same club as me in a separate taxi, then pretend you don’t know me when I get there? We are going separately, just sharing a ride. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, you’re right, of course, but Club Hollywood isn’t for you. Let me take you instead to the Star Casino. It’s a good place and I’m sure you will have a good time.”

He wore an expression that tweaked her curiosity. “Okay, why isn’t Club Hollywood for me?” she asked.

“Well, it’s that, uh,” he hedged. “Well, it’s a casino all right, but it’s coupled with a house of prostitution. They’re in separate parts, so once you’re inside you’d never know unless you went through the connecting door, but I still suggest the Star.”

It was the same place! She could just imagine: there’d be a door with a little window that popped open. ‘Joe sent me’ or some equivalent, would be the password and inside, the narrow-eyed owner dressed in black that enslaved little girls for their bodies. “No, I’m going with you to Club Hollywood,” she said. “C’mon let’s go.”

* * *

If first impressions count for anything, Club Hollywood was just the sort of place Beth would recommend to any visitor wanting to experience San José nightlife: brand new shiny-bright glitz with hundreds of lights, glass, chrome and uniformed doormen, just as she envisioned Las Vegas to be, and completely contrary to her expectations. Where was the den of iniquity Herminia described? George, it was immediately clear, was a well-known regular in the club. Upon entering, they were stopped by several people wishing them a good evening, all with a curious eye towards Beth that demanded introductions. At the cashier’s window, buying chips, they were approached by a large, powerfully built man with ginger hair. On his arm was a woman of exotic beauty. Beth was overcome when George introduced the well-dressed man as Brian Walston, the owner of Club Hollywood. She had heard much of this man: Herminia’s emotional tales of the horrors she encountered here centered about him. Now the monster had a name – and a face, a face that didn’t fit. Beth looked deeply into his eyes. Standing before her, was a man who fed cocaine to a fourteen year-old girl to entrap her into a life of prostitution, yet she could detect not the slightest trace of evil lurking there or in his body language, which always spoke so loudly if one paid attention. Radiating from the corners of wide crystal-blue eyes, sparkling with mirth, was a pattern of fine laugh lines forming a web that embraced his temples. His broad face was every bit as amicable, sporting cherub cheeks sprinkled with blond stubble. A small smile and soft but full voice also were disconcertingly warm and engaging, as was the rumbling chuckle of this cuddly gentle giant you felt you could trust with your life. Herminia had started here nine years earlier. “How long have you owned Club Hollywood?” she abruptly asked, interrupting something derogatory being said about a person named Mike. She watched for his reaction, not entirely certain what she might be looking for, but it would be wicked.

“Thirteen years,” he answered with clear-eyed innocence. “At least, in two months it will be. I hope that doesn’t mean we’re going to have an unlucky year,” he added with a chuckle. The beautiful woman clinging to his arm grazed her breasts across his upper arm while running a forefinger from his Adam’s apple to his chest and what could the teddy bear do, but blush?

“We won’t have a bad year, you can be sure of that!” she said looking askance at Beth, “because we don’t let superstition rule the business or our lives, do we, darling?” Her name was Caroline Steepleton, Brian’s fiancée. She was striking: tall, slender, graceful and with green eyes. Long, wavy strawberry blond hair tumbled over the shoulder of a shimmering silk blouse with plunging neckline. She melted into his side and pulled his bear-like arm around her. They were both Canadian, she explained while snuggling in: she from Ottawa and he from the other side of the continent, Victoria, BC. “Brian used to run a Vancouver disco...” she began, speaking with a debutante’s talent for mingling words with an occasional polite titter. Beth suspected that the society editors of Ottawa’s dailies were acquainted with her name. Together, they created a ‘beautiful couple’ such as she might expect to encounter at a Southern California cocktail party – not operating a warehouse in Central America.

George chose a blackjack table while Beth explored, dropped an occasional coin in a slot machine and watched with fascination a baccarat game. Towards the rear, she found the door that connected the casino with the bar and ventured in. She may as well have traveled to another planet. It was a poorly lit, cheap, grungy and reeked of stale beer and dirty ashtrays. The wooden floor felt like sponge. On three tiny stages set into the walls nude women danced to the music of a jukebox. Spotlights bathed them in bright light contrasting the prevailing gloom throughout the bar, broken only by the pale glow of candles under ruby-red glass. There were other women too, dressed in baby-doll pajamas. Some huddled in booths and at tables with their clients while others sat casually around the room, half-nude and chatting. To one end of the bar, populated entirely by men in various stages of inebriation were the rest rooms. The opposite end was more interesting – it had to be the entrance to the ‘back rooms’. A matronly woman perched atop a bar stool that threatened to collapse under her bulk guarded a curtained doorway. On the wall beside her was a sign in English headed by the words ‘room rentals.’ Laid over the back of her stool was a collection of hand towels, and the basket beside her, Beth was willing to bet, was filled with condoms. She was dying to stay and have a drink to watch for a while, but George Dearling walked in, appearing acutely embarrassed, his ears aglow.

“I know it’s none of my business,” he said, “but this is no place for you and I feel somewhat responsible because I brought you here. Let me get you back in the casino before these guys start thinking you work here and bother you.”

“Oh, George,” she protested. “Are you trying to tell me that after all I spent on this outfit that I look that helpless, how about svelte and sexy?” He offered a wry grin, but held her by the elbow and, practically pulling, hustled her towards the casino door.

She was in the lady’s room of the casino freshening up when Caroline Steepleton, the owner’s fiancée, came through the door, pausing as she entered. In the mirror, Beth watched her slow scan of the room that eventually came to rest on her. Caroline pulled her hair from behind to fall over one shoulder then approached. “He’s married, you know,” she said, examining herself in the mirror.

Beth turned sharply to face her. Caroline seemed not to notice, continuing to smooth eye shadow with a fingertip. “Excuse me?”

“Your friend out there, George,” she said, speaking to Beth’s reflection. She finished scraping with a fingernail the line of lipstick along the corner of her mouth then turned towards her. “Hasn’t he told you?”

The edge of a giggle escaped before Beth cut it off. “As a matter of fact, yes, he did. He said that his wife has filed for divorce, but he’s trying for reconciliation.” The giggle wouldn’t be restrained. She brought her hand to her mouth to stifle it. “I’m sorry, Caroline, but it wasn’t but half an hour ago that I told George he was overly concerned that someone might see us together and assume we were dating or something. But, really, it’s okay. You needn’t worry about George: we aren’t together. He was only being kind enough to introduce me to Club Hollywood.”

“I should have known but, the way he was drooling over you out there, I couldn’t help but wonder. People change, you know, especially with the amount of pressure he’s been under lately. Please, don’t be offended by me. I know I shouldn’t be so inquisitive about something that is none of my business, but I’ve known George from when he moved down here, three or four years ago. He was a close friend of my husband, so we used to see him and his wife, Becky, often and never, in all this time, have I heard of him showing the slightest interest in any other woman. So naturally, when I saw him holding your arm and fawning over you, I wanted to know what brand of perfume you use.”

“No perfume, but then, no George, either,” she joked. “You said your husband? George said you and Brian were engaged...”

“Oh, my husband – I should have said ex-husband: the bastard’s back in France where he came from. The marriage was a horrible experience: cocaine abuse, domestic violence; the works. Luckily, I had a court order that kept him away from me because one day he completely lost it and was arrested trying to kill some tourists. I don’t know how, but he managed to escape the country before his trial. He won’t be returning.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER EIGHT

Beth filled her days joining tours that assembled each morning in the lobby. The trips were enjoyable for more than just acquainting herself with the sights and history of San José: they were also excellent for meeting people from all parts of the world. Speaking with inhabitants of every continent, she tried to get a sense of what their lives were like, and dreamed one day of visiting their countries. On one trip, the bus followed the twisting road that ascended Volcano Irazu. Above the tree line, the landscape took on a barren, lunar appearance, except for the greenish-yellow sulfured lake in the basin of the still smoldering crater. From the summit, she was able to see across the entire country, from the Caribbean Sea all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Far, far below was spread the entire central valley containing a miniaturized San José, all its suburbs and the airport. After nine months of Chauita's heat, she shivered in the crisply cold air despite several layers of sweaters. Another day, she and a group of fellow tourists donned helmets and life vests to ride the wildly exciting white water rapids of Rio Reventazon she had seen from above.

When the group returned she would have lunch then treat herself to a long, hot soak in the bathtub. With her body still steaming, she'd sprawl on her wide bed and allow the slowly rotating ceiling fan to hypnotically induce first dreams, then sleep. Truman called one afternoon – to chat, awakening her. She listened through drowsy contentment as he told of being on an island in the center of a lake somewhere in Nicaragua and that she had been on his mind. They exchanged chitchat for more than an hour with Beth feeling secretly sexy, lying naked upon her bed. She rolled as she talked, seeing herself in the dresser mirror spooled with telephone cord. Tauntingly, she told of her evening with George Dearling, describing in detail her new outfit and the make-up she had worn. She then carried it further, giggling as she mentioned that they had gone to a whorehouse together. He laughed heartily and his voice came over the line with a smile in it, teasingly condemning her loose morals. She could actually see his face, laughing, with his twisted smile. Superimposed over her own image in the mirror, she imagined his. How he could pull off being so damn good-looking with a face so scared and ruined, she couldn't understand – but he did it well. She rolled onto her back, delighting to the sound of his voice. Hanging her head backwards over the bed, she caught sight of her reflected self and, once again, he was there – a fantasy in the looking glass. However, this time, he hovered above her, as she lay naked on her back. She moistened, then shuddered and unwound herself quickly.

“How is your trip going?” she asked much the same as she used to say: “Groundwater geology. Project engineer, Beth Tierney speaking.”

She lay afterwards, under the influence of the fan's steady rotation at the hazy edge of sleep wondering if perhaps there was a reason for the tragic events of her life, if the destruction of her career quickly on the heels of the pain suffered at the loss of her parents had been part of a plan to mature and offer her something better than a treadmill to nowhere. Truman had crossed the path of her life for a purpose, of that she was sure. Maybe they had been brought together for the betterment of both. Truman's wartime experience had left him a troubled and lonely man, isolated behind his disfigurement. Was it egotistical to think that, was it not for her, he would have remained in his isolation, perhaps for life? Because, unlike the world, which for his scars shunned him, she alone got past all of that to encounter within a vibrant, yet gentle and honorable man. It was that part of him that could be seen to be slowly emerging from his cocoon. He'd shown kindness and understanding towards Herminia, such as Cecilia, who had known him for many years, said she had never before seen. Then, there was the basketball court for Oscar: all of this from a man who had lived his days walking about under a sullen cloud, seeking only

solitude. She too had changed through knowing him: she was enjoying life – really enjoying living it – for the first time. In Green Bay, happiness for her was something gained through accruing prestige, promotions and sound financial growth. How hollow, fleeting and insignificant that all now seemed! In Chauita, she'd found happiness that sprang from simply being in this world and sharing time with Truman without the slightest need for pretense or position. Despite occasional periods of quiet, dark moodiness, she knew that when they were together he shared her sense of vitality: it was in his eyes and every aspect of being.

She had vaguely planned to settle in the capital, but perhaps the right choice was to stay permanently, right there on the beach in Chauita. It would not be a bad life, not a bad life at all. She could continue consulting for the government. What else, go back? Back where – and to what? Green Bay and its winters held no attraction and the remainder of the country offered less. No, Chauita was her direction: it was a door which fate had opened to her. No longer was she going to be the overly cautious creature she has always been. Where had all of those well-considered choices gotten her in life anyhow? It was time she allowed her spirit to run free for a change and throw caution and mouse-woman to the wind.

She was suddenly fully awake. Previous experience had taught her that it was best to express feelings clearly, right from the beginning. Hotel stationary was in the top center drawer. Truman's and her lives had crossed for a reason. She threw herself into the task of composing a letter that would say it all, including even the possibility of a mutually beneficial shared future, so much more concisely than attempting to stumble through it face-to-face.

* * *

Hotel Paradise was close to shopping, theaters, points of interest and transportation; the rooms were spacious and clean and it was reasonably priced, but far above everything else, Beth liked it for its cocktail lounge and casino. There were no outside windows, clocks or closing hour, so time was irrelevant. Twenty-four hours a day, prostitutes milled about and tourists slammed tequila down their throats, often becoming incoherent within minutes, while the bargirls in their company, intent upon the contents of their wallets, sipped expensive cocktails of colored water and offered gleeful encouragement. At the back, a low planter filled with plastic weeds separated the bar from the casino, creating a nook for Beth's table of choice. From this secluded vantage, she seldom missed the nighttime adventure of observing the multitude of human interactions playing out in the bar, the adjoining lounge and, by peering over the plastic foliage, the casino – three simultaneous stages of live performance.

When Herminia wasn't busy with a man, she would join her at the little table and weave undoubtedly well-embellished tales of the crimes committed, perversions and darkest secrets of the people they saw. Huddled close to keep conversation from being overheard, she would piece together snippets of bizarre events or the portrait of the entire life of some hapless individual across the bar. There was one she identified as an arsonist from Berkeley, California whose handiwork, she alleged, resulted in the deaths of a young mother and her two children, a harmless-looking young man from Illinois who sliced a girl to pieces when she refused him sex, plus embezzlers, forgers, thieves and drug traffickers. They were all in Costa Rica hiding, she said, behind its laws that limit extradition to only the most serious of crimes and prohibit it if a death penalty awaits. Among the Costa Rican regulars was a federal narcotics officer with hanging jowls and bald head who, according to her, stole kilos of confiscated cocaine and sold them himself. She claimed to have firsthand knowledge to the truth of that, saying that she had witnessed the owner of Club Hollywood on several occasions purchase from him. Beth surprised her, replying that she had been there and met her former boss, but her added note that she had once fantasized being a classy

woman like his exotically beautiful fiancée produced a startling reaction: Herminia's eyebrows shot up as though from a springboard.

"Theese one no ees fancy lady; ees *PURA PUTA*," she said, spitting on the floor. "She married woman who go out every night for fucky-fucky and, one day, husband just disappear. I theenk she keel heem."

A man in the lounge with a cluster of 'working girls' who was determined before he died to spend his every penny satisfying his lust for beautiful women had just been pointed out to Beth, when a scraggly, bearded man came to their table calling Herminia 'Chiquita' and took her with him to sit at the bar. Alone, she noticed a woman enter and sit at a table near the entrance, appearing oddly out of place in the lusty environment. The woman's clothing, makeup and hairdressing were impeccable. Beth wouldn't call her beautiful but she was poised and there was intelligence written in her face. She was undoubtedly not a tourist as several of the regulars greeted her. For the moment, the woman was alone, so Beth decided to satisfy her curiosity and approached her table.

Sylvia Henderson, as she introduced herself, was happy for company and eagerly invited Beth to join her for a drink. She had once been a real estate agent in Boston – a good one, she claimed, because she had made a fortune buying and selling the greater part of Massachusetts. "Friends tell me I should retire," she said, "but I'm afraid I'm addicted. I find myself sizing up every property I see, unable to control myself." She had come to the lounge in Hotel Paradise, which she described as 'a low class dive,' strictly because of 'an attack of a morbid curiosity.'

"Just look at the men in this place!" she commanded. "A herd of beer swilling degenerates. Like those over there," pointing at two men with the stretched skin of bulbous stomachs threatening to tear buttons from their Hawaiian shirts. "They probably haven't even seen their dicks in twenty years, but they're still slaves to the little shriveled worms drooling like a pack of hungry dogs over these whores!"

Beth was surprised to notice the tiny inklings of age etched onto Sylvia's face. She was probably twenty years older than she would first have surmised. Yet, her hair showed neither gray nor hint of artificial coloring. It was short and formed to her face, light brown and sun streaked: a young woman's hair, yet totally natural in its appearance. Obviously, she took as much care with her body as she did with clothing. She was trim and wore a designer's label pants suit with tasteful, expensive jewelry, and emanating from her, a lovely perfume she vaguely recognized without recalling its name.

"I'm 60," she said bluntly, responding to Beth's scrutinizing appraisal. "It's all been done over, the teeth, the hair, the eyes, but at my age, the expense is a necessity, especially considering my attraction to younger men." Her makeup, she said, was professionally applied in a nearby parlor, "but not before I turned the city upside-down looking for one who knew what she was doing," she said. "Costa Rican women have a strange concept of the proper makeup for a middle-aged woman. They expect blue hair, wrinkled lips and mortician's make-up, but what else from women who stop fucking at the first sight of gray hair? Preposterous! I was a women's activist in the sixties, so you can imagine how I feel about that... Anyhow, it wasn't easy, but eventually I found a girl who can do a passable job if I keep a close eye on her." Hair, as far as Sylvia was concerned, was a different matter entirely: no half-savage Costa Rican was going to touch hers. For more than twenty years, the same Boca Raton, Florida beautician had been its master. The man was an artist – an expensive, gay, talkative and overly emotional artist, but, she insisted, every penny was well spent. Sylvia paused, scanning the bar. Her penetrating green Irish eyes cast their gaze from one young prostitute to another. They were young, shapely Latin beauties, each more striking than the last. The men fawned over the sweetly smiling girls, plying them with drinks. "Pretty discouraging," Sylvia said, shaking her head. "This place makes me start thinking of face lifts." She shined a toothy grin across the tiny table.

Beth leaned over elbows planted on the table: “Well, since it’s obvious that nobody is going to buy us a drink, I will. What will you have?”

The fact that Beth hadn’t been to the Pacific coast meant to Sylvia that it was mandatory she go. It was her incontestable opinion that the perfect setting for ‘a woman such as Beth’ was none other than Playa Montezuma, a white sand beach on the Nicoya peninsula. She described a quaint little town tucked away in an almost inaccessible corner of the peninsula that offered ocean, jungle and waterfalls cascading from seaside cliffs. Divers plunged into roaring surf between outcroppings of rock below, testing the nerves of those watching perhaps more than their own. “Montezuma has something of a hippie culture to it,” she continued. “Primarily, it attracts the younger back-packer types. And for its size, it has quite a nightlife with live music, dancing and several passable restaurants. Bungalows in town are dirt-cheap, but if you’re interested there is a charming little place near the waterfalls that is comfortable and inexpensive.” Beth smiled at a dawning suspicion.

“Un-huh, I see,” she said with a twinkle in her eye. “And you just happen to be the owner of this charming little spot with a beautiful room just perfect for me, am I right?”

“No. No, I don’t, Sylvia replied as she clinked her glass against Beth’s. “We real estate agents tend to talk that way, but you’re getting ahead of me. However, to get to Montezuma, you must cross a range of mountains and along the way, well guess what?” Mirth shimmered in her eyes. “You will pass through Puriscal, a tiny mountain village where I do own a hotel!” She laughed heartily infecting Beth with an irrepressible giggle.

“Puriscal, what a beautiful name! I saw some of Costa Rica’s mountains on the drive up from Limon and the scenery was just marvelous. I loved all the tropical plants too, particularly the ones in the cloud forest: simply amazing.” Beth’s face shone with the memory. “I hadn’t seen mountains since college, but there’s no similarity between Vermont and what you have here. These are huge with stunning views around every corner and over every cliff, while in Vermont, the mountains have a peaceful beauty. I guess it’s because I spent practically my whole life in Wisconsin where there aren’t any that I love them all.”

“Well, that’s it then: you’ll have to come and spend a few days before going to Montezuma,” Sylvia insisted. “I consider Puriscal to be one of Costa Rica’s most picturesque areas. We have both the dizzying heights and serenity. But, the beauty of Puriscal hasn’t been properly appreciated until you’ve taken in the vista from my deck. It’s just off the lobby and wraps around three sides of the inn. Throughout the day it has a view that will astound you and probably make your knees go weak. It extends over the edge of the cliff so you can see the whole length of the valley, the mountains surrounding it and the river down at the bottom. There are times in the evening when fog fills the valley and you seem to float on the cloud surface with a star show overhead; can you imagine?”

“I can. It sounds beautiful. What’s the name of your inn?”

“It’s called ‘La Hacienda’. Any cab will get you there and you don’t even need Spanish. Just tell the driver, ‘La Hacienda’ and ‘Puriscal’ and they’ll take you right there. Next Wednesday, actually, would be excellent: I’ll be home all day and if you do come, I think morning would be best so you can have a chance to see everything. I know you would find the village delightful. We have a shoemaker who could custom-make a pair of soft leather boots, there’s heavenly coffee in the market, sold directly from the roaster, a peaceful little park and almost every evening, live music in the gazebo.” She flashed her conspiratorial grin in Beth’s direction. “It’s not very appealing, but it is music. They always have a three-man xylophone and sometimes a couple of old men will join in with dented trumpets. By the way, do you enjoy horseback riding?” Beth’s enthusiastic smile and exaggerated nodding encouraged her to continue. “Well then, I just happen to have a stable filled with riding horses and the entire valley is crisscrossed with trails. Every one of my guests who rides comes back raving about the

scenery. I'm afraid, however, that doesn't include me; I'm not a rider, I prefer to lounge beside the pool, where you are welcome to cool off with a swim when you return from riding, so bring a suit."

"Well, you've made me an offer I can't refuse," Beth replied. She was smiling broadly and holding both hands up, in surrender. "I adore riding and your inn sounds absolutely perfect. I'll plan to come as you said, 'Wednesday morning.' Is nine o'clock too early?"

"Nine o'clock will be perfect." Sylvia's smile waned with the conclusion of their agreement. Their eyes drifted, studying again the customers milling about the long room. "Isn't that woman over there the one you were sitting with?" Sylvia looked directly towards Herminia who was engrossed in conversation with the rough-appearing man who had called her Chiquita. Unkempt hair combined with a full, bushy beard caused his head to appear several sizes too large for the body that supported it.

"Yes, she's my friend. Her name is Herminia."

"She has to be one of the bar girls. No woman in her right mind would share a drink with him unless she was well paid," Sylvia stated harshly. Beth leaned from the table for a more careful examination of the couple. The man, whose eyes had been riveted to Herminia's well-exposed cleavage, nevertheless noticed their appraising stares. He glared, curling his lip in disgust and displayed his middle finger to them while mouthing the words, 'fuck you.' Beth instantly turned her head, but Sylvia remained unruffled. "How do you become friends with a bar girl?" she asked. "What did you do? Just walk up to her and start talking or did she charge you for the conversation?"

"I didn't meet her here. We met in Chauita on the Caribbean Coast, but she does work here. She's been in the clubs for years and knows everybody's dirty little secrets. She has stories to tell about everyone in here. If even part of what she says is true, Hotel Paradise is crawling with more shady characters than a Bogart movie - and that's another laugh: for some reason, the term 'shady characters' amused her and she wanted to understand its meaning, but I couldn't get past 'shady.' I know the word for shade is 'sombra' and she took it from there, including Hotel Paradise and the translation for the bar's patrons became: *Las Sombras del Hotel Paraiso*, which in English is 'the shades of Hotel Paradise.' I kind of liked it - it fits them except that I thought it sounded better without 'hotel' so I just call this bunch the shades of paradise. What do you think?"

"It's too nice a name for the likes of these bums. Creatures from the dark lagoon would be more appropriate!" Sylvia's enormous grin flashed on then, an instant later, vanished. "Your friend didn't have any juicy stories about me, did she?" She busied herself adjusting the pleat of her pants.

"You? Oh no, you hadn't come in yet."

"Well, I wouldn't guess she would, but you never know: people find rumor more fun to spread than caviar and a whole lot cheaper." Again, the grin. "But, heed my advice: your friend's stories are likely true. There are a lot of people who managed to escape the law back home, find their way down here and now can't go back. My own son is here because of gang problems." She leaned back in her seat to scan the wide expanse of barroom, shaking her head and sucking at a tooth as she did. Her gaze settled again on Herminia, chatting merrily with the hairy man. "She's a pretty woman, your friend, her smile is beautiful." It was an accurate observation, yet saying it seemed to upset her. "For the life of me, I can't understand how an animal like that can coax such a pretty girl to sit with him, even if she is a whore. Just look at him: he walks around drugged up and drunk - all the time - and smelling like something the cat drug in. Just disgusting!"

"You know that guy?"

The flashing teeth reappeared. “That sorry excuse for a man is my son,” Sylvia retorted, using her abrupt manner and widely opened eyes to good effect. “Can you believe it? If he would ever shave and clean himself there might even be a family resemblance, but ha! Fat chance of that ever happening! He’ll never do it just because he knows it would please me.”

“I guess I misunderstood, I thought your son was much younger.”

“Why, because he got in trouble for gang problems? That drunken bum is a forty-year-old juvenile. I have two other sons that I’d rather you met. One is an aerospace engineer and the other a dentist. They both inherited my drive while this one takes after his father, or maybe he is just some kind of mutant. I could never keep him in school and while his brothers were making me proud, he was constantly in trouble. He ran away once when he was thirteen – just disappeared. Then, after three peaceful weeks, the police chief of some town in Pennsylvania called to say that he had been picked up for shoplifting. The chief said that I could avoid additional problems if I paid for the stolen merchandise – charges wouldn’t be filed and I could pick him up. Drive all the way to Pennsylvania to bring him back? What for? I had just enjoyed my most relaxing three weeks in thirteen years! ‘Keep him,’ I yelled into the phone. ‘When he’s released from reform school he can find his way back the same way he left: hitchhiking!’ I couldn’t do it, though. Fifteen minutes later, I called back. Well, enough of that. “I’m hosting a dinner party for ex-pats at my place next Wednesday night. That’s why I’ll be there all day – making preparations. Why don’t you bring along a change of clothes, then after your ride and the afternoon at the pool you could join us for dinner. Please do: your presence would be a refreshing change from the same old crowd. You seem to like shady characters, or what was it you called them – ‘shades of paradise’? Whatever, you should enjoy yourself: you’ll be in the midst of a roomful of vipers.”

Afternoon of the following day, while Beth was thinking about what to wear for her visit to La Hacienda, Truman called. They talked for an hour that seemed to go by all too quickly. It was a cheerful conversation, filled with moments of childish laughter at scenes remembered together.

□ □ □

CHAPTER NINE

The beautiful stone stables of La Hacienda commanded a panoramic view from a wide terrace on the steep skirt of a long-dormant volcano. A chill breeze bearing the scent of pine mingled with coffee blossom created waves in tall healthy grass that flowed across the mountainside. Busily preparing for her party, Sylvia, after a quick hello, told Beth she would sign her into a room later and to just leave her bag by the desk. So Beth had descended from the main building on foot, picking her way along the rutted switchback drive avoiding most of the puddles, except for one slip that left a shoe and blue jeans cuff caked with mud. Upon entering, she was astonished to encounter an equally surprised Caroline Steepleton, the fiancée of the owner of Club Hollywood where Herminia had worked as a child whore, grooming a magnificent, snow-white Andalusian stallion, with its mane and tail brushed to resemble fine, flowing silk. Her appearance was no less magnificent. She wore black leather riding pants with knee-high boots, a close-fitting white blouse with pleated front, tiny collar and long sleeves. Her strawberry hair cascaded over her shoulders in loose waves and on the wall beside her hung a black riding helmet and crop.

Caroline was very gracious, offering Beth a leisurely tour through the stables to show her where everything was and detail the peculiarities of each animal. With her house only two kilometers away, she and Sylvia had long been friends and neighbors. Sylvia however, despite being the owner of a dude ranch in New Mexico, knew nothing of horses so Caroline operated the stables for her until, as the result of an argument some months earlier, both Caroline and her horse had been thrown out. They had only just reconciled and Caroline was still organizing the stables to her liking including re-hanging on the wall above the desk in the feed room trophies and ribbons she had won riding dressage while still a girl in Canada. She helped Beth select a chestnut thoroughbred stallion that snorted eagerly when led from its stall, and which she described as a great mount for an experienced rider but slightly headstrong. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to do your own grooming," she said while cross-tying the stallion in the center isle and presenting her with a brush and pick. "I used to have an excellent stable boy working with me who kept the stalls spotless, well-mounted shoes on every horse and groomed them all twice a day, but I guess he got fired while I was evicted." She laughed lightly. "Sylvia has all my admiration for how she fought for women's rights and her successes in business, but she can be a bitch when she wants to be." They were an odd couple for friends, Caroline the Madame of a whorehouse and Sylvia a women's rights activist. Beth commented on it and Caroline responded: "It's been an issue, believe me, but our friendship goes beyond that." Beth groomed while Caroline distributed feed to the stalls and explained that, before meeting Brian, she had a brief fling with Sylvia's son. He helped her when she was having trouble with her abusive ex-husband, she explained, and the affair ensued. Looking back on it, she speculated that living in isolation too long had driven her temporarily insane. At any rate, when Sylvia found out about it, she blew her top. "Of course, I might have said a few things while I was angry that made it all worse," she emphasized. "Anyhow, it's all behind us now. I just wonder if mending fences with Sylvia is going to include Mike, because I'm not so sure that I want it to." Beth could understand: the thought of being in a relationship with the guy she had seen with Herminia was enough to make her skin crawl.

* * *

Beth rode for hours on the trails crisscrossing the mountains of Puriscal. Peaceful tree-covered lanes gave way to narrow paths cut into the side of steep slopes that would suddenly open to glorious views of the gorge. The stallion soon

accepted his new rider as master as she worked it through walking, trotting and cantering with minimal signals from her legs, although the beast toyed with a touch of sassy insubordination. Birds chirping, occasional distant barking and the crow of roosters were the only sounds other than the steady clap of hooves on packed soil. The land they rode by was planted mostly with coffee, but she also saw chayote, bananas, papaya, pineapple and even a chicken farm where a dog came out to nip at the stallion's hooves. Deep in the valley, beside a footbridge suspended over swift water, she found a one hundred-year-old cantina constructed of two-foot thick mud walls where she enjoyed snacks of *chicharrónes* and a cold beer, while outside the stallion munched the leaves of a coffee bush. When they reversed direction, heading back, the question of master and servant again became an issue with the spirited animal, turning the trip up the mountain into an exhilarating test of control. The stallion's mind was fixed upon his cozy stall and eager to race back to it as quickly as his massive legs could carry him. Beth had other ideas. After several tantrums of head tossing, impatient snorts and anxious hoof stomps, he reluctantly submitted to her will, and they returned to La Hacienda in a walk that she brought up to a gentle trot.

Beth arrived bubbling with exuberance about Puriscal, the feisty stallion and the intoxicating charm of La Hacienda. "I think I'll stay for a week," she said to Caroline's satisfying joy that her predictions of Beth's reaction were accurate. She helped to get the horse cooled down, brushed out and settled in its stall, chatting continually of her friendship with Sylvia: "When she started coming to Costa Rica, it was just for brief vacations, but I opened my home to her and showed her the ropes. She was already a regular guest in my home when I introduced her to this place, which at that time had been vacant for more than a year but not listed with any agency. She fell in love with it – well, who wouldn't – and the rest is history."

Beth let her gaze take in her surroundings. The location for the hotel couldn't be better on the skirt of deep gorge with towering, jungle-covered mountains opposite, superb stables and the inn was anything but shabby. "It sounds like it was most fortunate for her that you two met."

Caroline stopped work resting an armload of hay on a gate rail and fixed her with a worried stare. "You see," she said, "that's just why I was so upset with her. I did a lot more than just help her get this place; I made a small fortune for her operating a horse exporting business that I started in her name and treated her to an expensive vacation, too. That's when she found out about Mike and me and, just like that, she blew up and walked out on this idyllic trip. That seemed pretty rude to me, but hey, forgive and forget is what making up is all about, isn't it, and I'm doing my part."

Later, riding up the steep incline in her four-wheel-drive Mercedes, Caroline grinned, glancing at Beth. "I was wrong about you," she said. "I guess because when we met at the club, you were with George Dearling. He is a very desirable man here in our little ex-pat community, not that the skinny little geek is so great, but because all the other guys down here are total creeps: they're either alcoholic, running drugs or some kind of pervert. George is strange, though: he's the one guy who could have any woman he wants and he doesn't go for any, 'because I'm married,' he says. Then he has the nerve to show up at the club with you! I can't stand him. But, you're all right," she concluded tossing her hair over a shoulder.

As they approached La Hacienda, Sylvia's screaming could be heard pouring from every window, berating some unfortunate soul named Julia. Beth entered the lobby with trepidation wondering what to do. Her bag was still beside the reception desk and, with such ferocity in Sylvia's voice, she didn't feel like going anywhere near the kitchen. "Oh don't worry about Sylvia," Caroline said gaily. "Actually, she's having a wonderful time. She is giving a party tonight and I think her favorite part is putting on her Hitler act for the help."

"Oh, well, I guess I'll just wait then."

"Wait for what?"

"Well, I don't have a room yet and I wanted to shower before going in the pool."

“Oh, that’s no problem,” she said grabbing the register. “Here, take the key to three, it’s empty. It’s down that hallway on the right.” Beth was crossing the lobby with her bag when the double-doors to the kitchen swung open and Sylvia emerged, instantly transformed into a smiling, gracious hostess. Didn’t she realize how her voice carried?

“Well Beth,” she said pleasantly without a hint of the venom spewed in the kitchen, “did you enjoy your ride?” Beth described in glowing terms her appreciation for the horse and the many wondrous sights, whereupon Sylvia extended an invitation to join her for tea on the outside deck after her swim. She then turned to Caroline. “Would you please show Beth to room eleven?”

“I’m using eleven for my shower,” she replied. “Beth is in three.”

“I invited Beth so she could enjoy the best we have to offer and eleven has the best view. Can’t you extend even that little courtesy to my guest?”

Caroline’s gaze met Beth’s then rolled back her eyes.

* * *

Sylvia hadn’t misled her about the balcony of La Hacienda: if anything, she had understated its height above the gorge. Except for her feet being firmly grounded well back from the edge, she may have been an eagle in its aerie preparing to soar from one peak to another. It would be a short flight to the closest, or so it seemed. So clear was the thin, cool air that upper branches could be distinguished individually in the canopy of jungle enveloping the mountain across the chasm. She wanted to capture the majesty of it on film, but before running for the camera bag, she needed to overcome a terrifying sense that, if she approached the rail too closely, she would tumble into the abyss.

“After this view, you can truly say that you have seen Puriscal,” Sylvia’s voice proclaimed from behind. Turning, she saw her hostess dressed in silken pants with a colorful floral top and a scarf about her neck, the ends of which flowed over her shoulder on the light breeze. Fearlessly, she strode to the railing. “Spectacular, isn’t it!” she said, sweeping an arm into the void.

“It’s a little scary, but the most glorious scary I’ve ever seen.”

“Well said. This deck is what sold the place for me, but it frightened me so badly that I wouldn’t go out on it until I had the entire structure reinforced with additional pilings. Believe me; you could drive a truck out here now. It survived the big earthquake with no damage at all. And, to make up for the breakfast I’m sorry I missed, I’ve ordered a champagne brunch for us – to be served out here. I do hope you are hungry.”

“I had a snack down in the valley, but yes, I’m famished.” Beth gathered her nerve and joined Sylvia for a stroll of the deck, which surrounded the inn on three sides and was furnished with occasional tables under white-fringed umbrellas and lounge chairs. Sylvia found it odd that a geologist, someone she envisioned climbing sheer cliffs in search of rock strata would be reluctant to lean from the rail for a view of the river below. It came as a revelation to Sylvia that Beth’s concern was not with hard rocks but groundwater and the soils that contain it.

The greater part of Sylvia’s life had been spent in Boston, she told Beth later over the rim of her champagne glass. There, she had grown up, been married, divorced and raised three boys. Only her father remained, now a resident in a nursing home – his third because ‘the old bastard’ had been thrown out of the first two for outlandish behavior. She and her poor sainted mother had suffered enough of his lifetime of drunkenness and affinity for prostitutes that Sylvia assumed that the nursing home director was probably doing her a favor by not calling the police.

After Sylvia's mother had passed away, the insurance premium (all her father had to show for a lifetime of hard drinking and stevedoring) was destined for the corner liquor store if he were left to his own devices. She was a busy housewife with a preschooler to care for, yet she took it upon herself to see to it that the money wasn't squandered. While riding roughshod over her father, she attended evening classes on real estate investment at the community college and plotted strategy for saving him from himself – and she did, too, she insisted with a sharp nod. Acting as his agent to buy the building he had lived in since before her birth, she negotiated toe-to-toe with the owner's lawyer. She had a slight advantage, she said with a wry, toothy grin: she knew the building intimately, having crawled through its every recess and been a life-long party to the tenant rumor mill, while the knowledge of the owner's lawyer was limited to what little the skimming building superintendent had revealed and what was public record. She knew, for example, that the coils of copper plumbing had never been installed, but sold, as had the new furnace, the profits split with a city building inspector. "I had them by the nuts," she boasted, "and don't you know, they sold and at my price! That's how I began my career in real estate."

Her life changed forever, she continued excitedly, when on campus, she became exposed to the blossoming women's liberation movement. On first encounter, Sylvia knew that she'd found herself. The bold new ideas of sexual and financial independence coupled with a complete revamping of society to include women in its mainstream triggered something deep within: from the first moment, it became her everything – her focus. She established herself in this world as a whole person for the first time by standing up proudly to defy the established order at sit-ins and on protest marches.

Beth felt that the social upheaval of the sixties was an environment in which her hostess would have flourished and said as much, instantly wishing she hadn't. The luster in Sylvia's eyes vanished as she slowly drew her hand to touch the tip of her chin, momentarily alone with some thought.

"I did what I knew I had to," Sylvia answered, "but the movement cost me the only man I have ever loved, my husband. Spiritually, I'd always thought we were connected at the hip," she continued wistfully. He should have understood how right we were and been proud of me, but no..." Pursing her lips, she smiled tightly. "I suppose a girl's first broken heart will always be her worst. You know what I mean?"

"Sure I do and I'm sorry for you, Sylvia," Beth murmured.

"So am I," Sylvia answered sharply, dropping her hand to her lap and re-engaging eye contact. "I was the one left with his look-alike brat: you've already suffered the displeasure of seeing him at Hotel Paradise with that bar-girl friend of yours. It was bad enough when he was a kid, but I'm still saddled with him. Wasn't I the lucky one?" She sipped champagne and munched a sandwich, then looked up. "Did I tell you I paint?" she asked abruptly.

"No, no, you haven't," Beth replied, grateful for the switch. "What is your medium?"

"Watercolors, definitely. I mean, I like oils very much, but in just one hour these mountains can completely change hue, especially in the early morning or late afternoon when we get the loveliest tones, and with waters, I can work quickly enough to capture them."

"Do you have any of your work here?"

"You bet I do and you're not leaving until you've seen it and said nice things about my work!"

"That's a deal: a good review and I get out of here alive."

"Right – but tell me, you seem to have been down here for a while, why does a geologist stay down here in Costa Rica when the good money is obviously back in The States?" Sylvia was certainly blunt, but she had been so open about herself – it was Beth's turn.

“I had an excellent job, but I got caught up in a big scandal that ruined my career. I worked for an agency that contracted government projects financed by federal Super-Fund dollars, allotted to clean up the nation’s groundwater. Our focus was abandoned below ground tanks, industrial sites, landfills, you know, that sort of thing. I used to drill wells around a suspect site and interpret the data from them to track the contamination to its source. When I identified it, hopefully, we’d get the contract and then I would supervise the cleanup project and follow up with monitoring data. I was career oriented, had my retirement planned, everything. Since the sad conclusion of a love affair, I lived alone, so my den became a second office and I worked nights and weekends because, believe it or not, it was my life. Idealistically, I believed that the agency, like me, wanted to improve the planet, even if just a little. But, the truth was that, they were busily robbing the government by submitting phony projects. When federal investigators started uncovering irregularities, my name showed up on fake contracts as supervisor, and data on some of my actual reports was altered too. Luckily, I had all of my original work backed up on my home computer and that was what saved me from being indicted. I was fired though, and couldn’t get a job anywhere: throughout the profession, my name was dirt, and I found myself to be thirty-five year old, friendless, unmarried, unemployed and blacklisted. And there you have the true story of my life.”

“And now?”

“Well, I sold everything I could and came here determined to start over using a whole different set of rules. So now, ironically enough, I work for the federal government over the Internet as a private consultant checking that data submitted by agencies such as the one I worked for contains no errors and is accurately interpreted.” They talked on through the bottle of champagne then, in Sylvia’s studio, Beth offered heart-felt praise and was granted the promised permission to leave in one piece. She used it to depart for central Puriscal where measurements were taken for a pair of boots.

* * *

Seating for dinner was assigned and she had been given the chair directly beside George Dearling. Respecting his desire that they not be seen together, she slid her seat as far from his as possible and promptly engaged the couple on her left in conversation. Near the head of the table and close to Sylvia sat Caroline with her intended, Brian Walston. Caroline, noticing her glance, shined a smile in Beth’s direction and pointed her out to Brian, who cupped his hand to his mouth and called out a greeting. With no more distractions available, she leaned discretely towards George and whispered: “I hope my sitting here doesn’t make things worse with your wife. I’m sorry; believe me, the seating arrangements weren’t my idea.”

He turned to face her, slid his glasses up his nose and smiled broadly. “Ah, Beth, I was beginning to think you would never turn around,” he replied. “No, don’t be silly: I told my wife about meeting you and there’s no problem at all. We’ve been working on some of our problems and I have a feeling that everything is going to turn out fine.”

“That’s just wonderful, George! What happened about your farm? Were you able to save it?”

“Yes, with a little help. I sold my patents, alright, only there was little problem with the bank, but at the last minute a friend came through and saved the day. Thank God, because otherwise I don’t think Becky would ever have talked with me again and now, at least there’s some hope.”

After dinner, Beth made the rounds, chatting with the obese owner of a roller rink, an American woman married to a local lawyer, a dentist, several ranking Costa Rican government officials, their wives and the owners of two bars. She also met Gene Frazer, the man with Western clothes and snow-white hair she had seen in the dining room of Cabañas Arrecifes with Truman so long ago.

“Are you enjoying our little get together?” It was Sylvia, suddenly at her side. She laughed telling Beth that the roller rink owner whose hand she just shook was a convicted pedophile. Beth grimaced and, to Sylvia’s delight, wiped her palm on her thigh. “Aw, come on,” Sylvia urged, “the guy’s life was a misery after he was released from prison. He moved several times, but it didn’t make things any better: he was burned in effigy on his front lawn and the police laughed at his complaint. Now he’s in heaven: he has a twelve-year-old live-in housekeeper, and who knows what goes on in the back room of his roller rink.”

“Good God! Why did you invite him?”

“Well, despite his personal life, which no one around here seems to care about, he is a financial genius. He runs the investment portfolios of half of the people here. Who am I to question? So, it looks like I did the right thing seating you next to George. The way he has been moping around long-faced and hurt lately, it’s good to see him smiling.”

“It’s not me that’s making him happy, Sylvia; it’s because the problems he’s been having with his wife are almost resolved.”

“He’s such jerk! I don’t know how Becky put up with him for so long! There’s nothing resolved at all: she doesn’t even want to see him, that’s why she isn’t here. He’s just too vulnerable, a born victim and a total fool. He had a fabulous career as a computer scientist, making a fortune, and threw it all away for a flower farm. Poor Becky had to leave behind all of her friends and give up on plans to go back to school. Now, here she is stuck out in the boondocks without so much as a car because it was impounded, and just waiting to be evicted because the moron was taken in by real estate fraud. The worse is, he had two patents worth millions and signed them over to the company he worked for and now there isn’t so much as a pension to raise their daughter on!”

“I don’t understand: he told me about his farm problems, but he also said selling his patents is how he saved it.

“Yeah, so we’ve heard. Becky doesn’t know what to make of it and neither do I. Not having any patents left to sell was one of the big issues between them. Apparently, George signed the agreement, but a co-worker who refused not only wasn’t fired, but is now a retired millionaire. I told her she should think about taking him back for a short while just in case there is something hidden away. ‘No way!’ she said, but maybe she’s reconsidered and that’s what the fool is all giddy about.”

* * *

“I guess you must be the newest member of the club. Welcome!” The strangely accented voice startled her. She’d escaped the after-dinner chatter by retreating with a cup of coffee to the refreshing coolness of the deck. A rolling line of clouds chased the moon above the mountain peaks, spilling a heavy drizzle in its passage. She had been mesmerized by droplets slanting over the roof of La Hacienda and falling into the abyss, missing the deck entirely. The voice was that of Truman’s enemy, Gene Frazer. Other than at costume parties and parades, she had never seen anyone dressed like him. Covering his snowy hair was a white Stetson. His torso, with sharply drooping shoulders and domed belly, was encased in a tight-fitting Western-cut shirt adorned with mother of pearl buttons. At his waist shimmered a silver belt buckle in the shape of the horns of a steer and his skin-tight jeans were tucked into boots with high heels and pointed toes. She half expected to hear ‘Trick or treat’ or ‘Howdy Ma’am.’

“I’ve joined a club?” she queried. “Which one is that?”

“I call these here little get-togethers Sylvia’s circle,” he answered in his strange, twang. “She is a fountain of social energy that pulls the foreign community here together, and my guess is you are her latest discovery. I hope you’ll pardon me,

but I can't recall your name." Beth gazed at him, wondering as she did what the 'vile reputation' that Truman had attributed to him was all about

"My name is Beth Tierney. I remember yours though; it's Gene Frazer, but then I'm cheating because I've seen you before," she responded. Whoops! Apparently she'd said something he didn't like, or he'd somehow known her thoughts: with her words, his face had tensed like a clenched fist and his chalky complexion reddened. The most ice blue eyes she had ever seen examined her through pink slits without lashes from below the cocked brim of his ten-gallon hat. His response came quick:

"Where is it that you've seen me and I didn't see you?" She worried the edge of her lower lip between her teeth wondering how she could have upset him.

"I saw you about nine months ago at Cabañas Arrecifes talking with Truman."

"Truman? Truman Herrera? You know my buddy? Wow, imagine that. You know, he and I are old comrades-in-arms; fought side-by-side in the Nicaraguan war," he boasted, smiling with a narrow exposure of yellowed teeth. Resting his arms on the railing, he leaned out into the vacant darkness while within, Beth seethed: Truman had lied! He'd said that he hardly knew Gene Frazer. "You do get around," the cowpoke continued, turning to face her again. "How did you meet our boy, Truman? He's not the type to pick up women, and I just heard Sylvia mention that this is your first time outside of the US."

"It is. We met while I was staying at his hotel. He's a wonderful man: we used to sit on the beach and talk for hours about almost everything." She watched in fascination as he set down his drink (bourbon, she supposed for a man dressed up as a cowboy) and shook tobacco from a small bag onto a piece of gummed paper and with one hand, rolled it, licked it and tucked it behind his ear then, with equal indifference, rolled another. This, he slapped between his lips and held a lit wooden match before it as he continued talking, causing the unlighted tip to dance before the flame.

"Truman talking a lot? That doesn't sound like the Truman I know. He's always been a man of few words. So, what did he have to say?" The flame had burned to within a quarter inch of his finger when he put it to the cigarette and pulled smoke deep into his lungs.

They stared at one another for seconds, Beth wondering how long the smoke could remain in his lungs while he waited for a reply. "Oh, we chatted about practically everything," she replied at length. Finally, he released the smoke in a prolonged billowing stream. The aroma of marijuana surrounded her as he held the smoldering joint out to her, offering it. "So, what brings you to Costa Rica?" he queried, shrugging his shoulders at her refusal, then pinched the joint between fingertips studying, first it, then her, before sucking in another drag.

"That's a long, complicated story, believe me. Suffice to say that I do my work through the Internet, so I'm free to travel." She grinned, pleased with this new explanation that portrayed her as a shrewd manager of her life.

He picked up on the smile and returned it. With complete indifference, he leaned against a light banister a thousand feet above jagged rocks, and lifted a foot to cock his heel on the bottom rail. "You seem to have already met Brian and Caroline."

"Yes, they seem to be an interesting couple; I met them in their club a few nights ago."

"So I've heard. Tell me, how does a young woman visitor from the U.S. find her way into Club Hollywood, of all places?"

Beth waved her hand dismissively, more than a little proud for breaking out of the mold she had cast for herself back in Wisconsin; here in Costa Rica, a long dormant free spirit was now flying through all the old barriers. "I'd never been to a

place like that before, so George Darling took me.” Oops, another mistake. Poor George: judging by Gene’s reaction and that of everyone inside, people were seeing them as an item; exactly what George had said he didn’t want.

“George? Amazing,” he said, fixing her with an incredulous stare. “I second Sylvia’s opinion; you are intriguing.”

She’d never in her life been referred to as intriguing. A broad smile was impossible to repress. “That’s very flattering. Unfortunately, there’s nothing at all intriguing about me,” she answered at length. “I’d love to be exotic like Caroline and own a nightclub or something, but I’m not. I’m just a geologist from Green Bay, Wisconsin. I’m sorry to disappoint us both.”

“Un-huh. Well, I’m sure it’s interesting work. Where did you study?”

He might find her ‘intriguing’, but his non-stop questions were becoming a bit of a bore. She answered that she did her graduate work at the University of Vermont.

“Isn’t that a coincidence: I was just today thinking about my friend Phil Hainsworth, the head of the math department. What a guy, and can he whip up a Texas-style barbecue.”

“Hainsworth? I’m sorry, but you’re mistaken. Arthur Nielson still heads the math department, and he was there even before my time.”

He rubbed his chin, studying her. “I’m sorry about the third degree,” he said. “I really shouldn’t do that. You know, people always like to think that their work is just what they do to pay the bills, but it’s not true. A person’s work defines them more than we care to admit. Take geologists, for example. There are two types: those looking for oil or minerals who couldn’t give a damn about the environment, and those devoted to studying the Earth’s past, all of whom belong to Greenpeace. They’re both geologists and should have a lot in common, but, in or out of the workplace, they don’t want to have anything to do with each other.”

“Well, okay then, what’s your point? What do you do?”

“I’m retired from the CIA, hence the suspicious mind. So, when I heard that there is a new face around with no apparent reason for being here and who claims to be a geologist yet, according to Sylvia, knows nothing about rocks, my old Company brain started imagining all sorts of things. So again, I apologize. I just have to get used to living in the real world again. Change comes hard, but I’m working on it.”

“The CIA! Eeks!”

“There; you see how things are? These days, the Company has a bad name. Something goes wrong in the world and right away, everyone points a finger at us. So, now the CIA is laying low and the DEA is out there doing what we used to do. They simply claim that whatever they’re up to is done in the name of protecting our kids from drugs and it comes across as not simply acceptable to the public, but it’s applauded and easily receives financial support such as we could never have dreamed of – and openly too, right there in the national budget!”

“Personally, I think the world would be a lot better off without anyone at all sneaking around behind the scenes.”

“Do you really? What if at the 1936 Munich Conference, Neville Chamberlain’s umbrella shaft was outfitted with a firing mechanism and half a dozen .38 cartridges? Don’t you think the world have been better off with an embarrassed British diplomatic corps than with World War II?”

“Oh, I see, Big Brother knows best!”

“That’s carrying it a bit far, yet in a sense that is what the Company tries to do – not the assassinations we’re accused of, but derailing future Hitlers before they can drag the entire world into another war. Believe it or not, we’re the good guys. That’s why I always wear a white hat.”

“Truman said he worked with some CIA agents during the war; is that how you met?”

“Yep, I worked with Truman on and off throughout the conflict and I have all the respect in the world for him. He was very dedicated and brave; undoubtedly, our best field commander, and a very stand-up guy. I owe that man a big one, but when I looked him up, I was disappointed to find that he’s still pissed off even after all these years.”

“Well? What did you do to get him so angry?”

“I did what I was ordered to do: I fired him and hated doing it, too. Truman had been my buddy but he suffered some losses very close to him and... Ah, just a minute, I don’t think I should delve into this: it’s rather personal.”

“If you’re referring to the loss of his wife and children, you needn’t worry; he has already told me.”

“He has? Another big surprise! Well okay, but there really isn’t much else to say except that he took it very hard – too hard. Anyway, he developed this here hair trigger about him that hadn’t been there before. He was cold and quick to violence – in short, one dangerous-ass man. So much the better for us, is what I thought, but I wasn’t the only one to notice. Hey! Here! Do you want any of this or not?”

Beth glared at the source of the spicy odor filling the air, while trying to picture Truman as cold, dangerous and quick to violence. No... The image just didn’t fit. She couldn’t believe it. She fixed her eyes on the smoldering joint. “Yeah, why not,” she blurted. In a quick grab, she snatched it from his fingers and took a tiny puff into her mouth. Releasing the smoke in two short puffs, she watched them drift as separate clouds drifting up into the rain. “I haven’t had any of this stuff since I was in college,” she said tasting its essence and holding the joint out for inspection. “I had to quit, it made me too silly.” She looked at this grown-up in a cowboy costume, who had the audacity to say with hayseed casualness that the emotional horror Truman suffered was a welcome gift. Talk about cold! Did it come with the eyes? She considered again the joint in her hand. “Maybe it’s time to give this stuff another try.” Her fingers swung again to her lips and she dragged, this time inhaling deeply. She looked about wildly, saucer-eyed, battling to retain the harsh smoke, and lost: her body deflated explosively, overcome by a coughing fit. As composure returned, she presented him with the joint. “Go ahead, continue with your story” she said softly.

“Yeah, where was I?”

“You were saying how delighted you were that Truman’s suffering caused him to be dangerous,” she said, casting an accusing scowl below the Stetson’s brim. Laughter. He was actually laughing, a strange hillbilly cackle.

“Ya wanna know why I said that about our boy Truman? He had it in mind back then to track down and crucify the Sandinista officer responsible for the attack that killed his family – I mean the real thing; nail him to a cross and let him hang there until he died.” More snickers; then he spit over the rail and continued. “Ya know, if he’d done it - and we hadn’t lost the war - he’d probably be a Nicaraguan national hero today and the cross some sort of nationalistic symbol. But, as it was, the brass worried that he was walking on thin ice – mentally. Imagine the circus if every newspaper in the world had front-page pictures of a modern-day crucifixion carried out by people supported by American tax dollars? So, I was ordered to join him on a mission to evaluate the situation and most unfortunately, I had to report that he didn’t measure up so it was decided to pull him out of the game. Because he was high on the Sandinistas’ wanted list, we put his uniform on a corpse and left it behind at a battle site, burning in a pile of rubble, and that was it; Truman was out of the war.”

“According to him, the CIA was responsible for a whole lot more than help on the battlefield. He said you tricked people into believing lies.”

“Well, Truman has a right to his opinion, but in a situation as complex as the war in Nicaragua, where the superpowers battled by proxy, there were probably less than two hundred people in the entire world who were in a position to know what was going on, and probably less than twenty-five who actually knew – and not one of them was Nicaraguan. Field commanders at Truman’s level on either faction knew nothing at all. They could only fall back on their particular brand of

patriotism that the leader whose orders they followed was the man they thought he was. There were no guarantees – there never are.”

“And who were you in all of this? What were you doing in Nicaragua, in the middle of a civil war, reading reports and deciding someone is more useful if he’s cold and dangerous?”

“I was there in Nicaragua, miss, doing what the entire country should have been doing: defending itself against creeping communism. We did what we could with limited funds and Congress fought us every step of the way. Then the Iran-Contra affair put the kibosh to the whole show and we ended up abandoning our allies to the commies: the result is that Nicaragua is still in a big mess.”

“But why were you CIA guys in Nicaragua in the first place if Congress was opposed? Since when does a US government agency disobey Congress?”

“I know it doesn’t sound right, does it? Well it wasn’t: our military forces should have been there and prevented the collapse of the Samosa Government. If we had done that, like we promised, there never would have been a war.” Beth pursed her lips and looked at him from the sides of her eyes.

“Whoa, back up a minute! I... Oh no! Look what the cat just drug in.” Gene groaned, his smirk vanishing as he gaped towards the windows of the bar. Reluctantly, she tore herself from his captivating eyes to follow his gaze. The windows, to her left consisted of small panes partially covered on the inside with hanging plants. Still, the milling remnants of the dinner party adorned in evening wear were easily visible, chatting in small groups, while emerging from the entrance behind them came Sylvia’s son in the company of several others similarly dressed in greasy jeans and black leather jackets. As one, all heads turned towards the group and conversation halted.

“The bum that just came in – the one with the big beard – he’s Sylvia’s son, Mike,” Gene remarked with his eyes remaining fixed upon the window. “He’s supposed to run this place when Sylvia is in The States. She has other businesses up there, you see, so she’s there more than here, and that animal is the reason this inn doesn’t make any money. A place as knock-down gorgeous as this should be full the year round, and it would be if it wasn’t for him.”

“It is lovely; I could stay here forever,” she agreed mechanically, her gaze locked in rapt fascination on the group entering the bar. Among them was a petite woman in a form-fitting mini-dress, snuggling against Mike’s sweat-stained tee shirt, whose figure and mannerisms were all too familiar. Beth’s hand came to her mouth: it was Herminia.

“Not with that guy around you couldn’t.” Gene broke her trance: he was holding his drink with his index finger extended from the glass, pointing towards the bar. “This guy, Sylvia’s son, brings these drunken bum friends of his down from Boston. It happens all the time. They hang out here and turn this place into a zoo. Judging by those backpacks, I’d say you’re looking at the latest bunch of good-for-nothings right there, just arriving from the airport, but of course, with a little stop in San José along the way to pick up those girls. By tomorrow night, what with Sylvia leaving, there won’t be a paying guest left once the public, drunken orgy gets underway.”

“Why does she let him do it?” she asked while doing her best to hide her shock at seeing Herminia, who was currently squealing and hopping for joy with another girl, to the astonishment of Sylvia’s more modestly comported guests.

“Why? That’s anybody’s guess,” she heard Gene reply then broke her fascination to listen as he spoke. “They’re a damn strange mother and son pair,” he said. “He don’t never do a lick of work and causes more problems than a rat in the corn bin, but she just keeps on giving him money. They have these bitter public arguments, screaming terrible things about one another, yet they would jump all over the first person to agree with them. You figure it.”

Caroline and Brian Walston, wearing a mirthful expression, appeared through the double doors carrying raincoats and umbrellas. “Excuse the interruption,” said Brian, directing his words to Beth. “I just wanted to see to it that Gene gets home all right.”

“You’re leaving?” Gene questioned.

Brian leaned close between them and, speaking from the side of his mouth, said: “You saw who just walked in, didn’t you? Well, that’s our cue to get out of here before I have to take him down and sit on him in front of Sylvia. Look Gene, we came with two cars and it’s raining like hell. Why don’t you take mine?”

“Are you sure?”

“Shit, yeah!” he said pounding Gene’s shoulder and handing him the keys, “you don’t want to mess around with taxis in weather like this! Just bring it by the club anytime tomorrow.”

“Hey, thanks man.”

“What are friends for? Have a good night – both of you.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER TEN

Beth woke early in the hope of being up and gone before Mike and his friends were out of bed. They – including Herminia – had been intentionally rude the night before, driving away all of Sylvia’s guests, then continuing their own loud brand of partying until the early hours. She descended through deserted corridors to the lobby in search of a telephone to call a taxi so she could leave immediately but, to her surprise, asleep on a sofa in front of the fireplace, she found Herminia with a pillow cradled to her breast.

“Herminia!” she called with a hiss, shaking her shoulder. “Herminia, wake up!”

“*Que? Que-que-que? Que fue? Por que estas acá, Beth?*” she responded, bleary-eyed and moaning. From the pinpricks she had for pupils and everything else about her, it was obvious that she’d been smoking again.

“Speak English, Herminia. I came here to attend a party, but what about you? Why are you sleeping on the couch?”

“I doan sleep weeth that *chanchó*. He smell too much.”

“I thought you liked that guy.”

“Heem? You crazy? He ugly. From long time ago he like Herminia, always say Chiquita, and sometimes he bring me here for party with mucha druga, swimming pool and American barbecue, but no like heem much. Then, theese beetch, Caroline keel husband and take Meester Mike for boyfriend. No more party for Herminia. But, she no like Meester Mike either; she just take heem because she no like me – beetch. But, ha! I steel heem back! Last night, I keess him mucho because she there.” She sat up, looking about. “Hungry, very hungry. Mucha druga last night.”

“But Herminia, why? You know you shouldn’t go back to drugs.”

Herminia’s eyes widened and she laughed. “You no unnerstan,” she answered, stifling her laughter as she reached to touch Beth’s hand. “Lez go; we eat someteeng, hokay?” In the kitchen, Herminia glared at a padlock affixed to the refrigerator and angrily rattled it within its hasp. She punched the refrigerator door then cursed and kicked it while Beth rushed to close the doors before her noise woke the entire household. Pleading with her to calm down only seemed to infuriate her more. She considered slapping her, but that only seemed to work in Hollywood productions: when she’d tried it once in Chauita, it had been the equivalent of detonating a bomb. Upon discovering the cabinets also padlocked shut, she spiraled into a wild frenzy of frustration. Frantic. Like a cat in a bathtub. It was Chauita all over again: screeching, kicking at cabinet doors and pounding the refrigerator with her fists while Beth backed helplessly to a wall and watched.

“We have to wait until someone gets up. It won’t be long,” she pointed out as calmly as she could manage, hoping it might somehow rub off.

“*Tengo hambre!*” Herminia persisted. Tearing madly about the room, her big eyes flashed in rage coming to rest upon backpacks Mike’s friends had piled in a corner. Unzipping one, men’s clothing spilled onto the floor. Grabbing the bag with both hands, she upended and shook it, scattering the contents across the floor while shrieking in frustration and kicking clothing across the room. Two large tuna cans tumbled onto the floor, one rolling on its side towards the opposite wall. She snatched it up midway in its journey, pulled open a drawer in search of a can opener, but found only napkins. Leaving it, she moved to the next, which she jerked open with such violence that it came free in her hand, spilling place mats onto the floor. One by one, she went through the drawers, leaving them open or spilled, until finally she was successful.

Beth stood stock still, shaken by the intensity of her fury, watching in mute fascination as the can slammed to the counter top. Fingers twirled in a blur as she spun the can opener. Prying back the top, her mania instantly ceased. She stood frozen, wide eyes staring with astonishment into the can. In slow motion, she pulled from it a fat wad of American one hundred dollar bills. Their mouths agape, both followed the movements of Herminia's fingers as she withdrew the bundle and held it out in between them.

Their eyes met in a frozen, questioning, stare.

Herminia broke the spell. "Call taxi," she commanded, doubling her bust size with the cash she stuffed into her bra. The second can was simply stuffed unopened inside her shirt. "We cut half-half at hotel. Hurry, Beth!"

Beth grabbed her arm tightly, stopping her. "No! You can't take that! Are you crazy? Put it back," she commanded as a chilling shiver of fear coursed her spine. "Close the knapsack and put the can and money inside. I'll fix up these drawers and let's get back to bed before someone finds us here. Then, as soon as someone else gets up we'll leave."

Herminia's eyes flashed in disbelief. "Put money back? No-no-no-no." Her head shook negatively at double time. "You doan want half, Beth?"

"No, I don't want half, I don't want any. Now, put that money back!" She stomped her foot in anger and fear and tried to reach into her shirt for the can, but Herminia jerked her arm free and pushed Beth from her.

Frenzied again, she snatched up the kitchen telephone, dialed and demanded a taxi come pronto to La Hacienda. The moment the phone was back in its cradle, she ran for the door, paused and looked curiously back at Beth standing yet amid the devastation. "Come Beth, hurry," she pleaded with her eyes, her voice and her every gesture.

"Damn it Herminia, get back in here and help me with this mess!" She put her hands to her hips and stood her ground, but Herminia was slipping from the doorway. "Please don't leave me here like this, please," she begged, but Herminia clamped her hand over her bulging chest and shook her head tightly. "Well, I'm not going," Beth snapped, suddenly furious, "so if you are going to run out and leave your friend in the middle of this, then go, get out of here! I guess I'll have to pick up this mess by..." Herminia didn't wait for her to finish. The door slammed and she was out, running up the drive. The sentence was completed in a whisper to the closed door. "—myself so maybe they won't miss the money right away."

Slipping back into bed after the luggage was replaced and the kitchen returned to a semblance of normality, Beth didn't reemerge until she heard Sylvia's shrill voice in the hallway. She was through the door in an instant, attempting to guide her far from Mike and his friend's bedrooms, and explaining that due to Sylvia's excellent suggestion that she visit the Pacific coast, her plans had changed and she was leaving immediately for San José to catch that day's bus. However, escape seemed impossible, when Sylvia replied that by dropping Beth off at Hotel Paradise while en route to the airport, she would arrive with time to spare and therefore insisted she join her for breakfast. What could she do, but thank her and accept while continually praying that alcohol and drugs had left Mike and his friends in a deep coma. Breakfast, it seemed, would never end. Light conversation continually came out wrong, which, for Sylvia's benefit, she assigned to tension due to impending menstruation.

* * *

Steam was billowing from the shower Beth was about to step into, when the phone rang. It was hotel security calling from the lobby, asking her approval for Herminia to come up. The tempo of her voice in the background was enough to know that she had consumed more drugs. Now was as good a time as ever to put an end to their relationship, but the lobby wasn't the place for that: her permission was given. Herminia's condition became ever more apparent when she entered with glassy eyes that wouldn't stay still and speaking a mixture of Spanish, English, and God knows what else at such speed that Beth

couldn't grasp what she was trying to say. And, from her haggard, dusty appearance and uncombed hair, it was also obvious that she hadn't showered. It wasn't going to be easy to tell her that this incident was the final straw; hopefully a good soaking under a hot spray would calm her down somewhat. She herded the emotionally charged dynamo into the bathroom.

With her safely in the shower and the final change of donated clothes laid out, Beth ordered from room service lunch for both in the hope that food might contribute to calm her and reduce the emotional crisis she sensed coming, then flopped on the bed trying to steady her own frazzled nerves. She'd stuck with her through the stolen briefcase and all the other craziness, but involving her in a major theft, even if it appeared to be ill-gotten money, went way beyond the bonds of friendship – all the way to bull! She was as hurt as she was angry, but it was definitely over.

It would probably be prudent to leave San José just in case it was suspected that she was involved, she mused, sighing. Well, it was time to go anyhow: there was just the question of where. She couldn't imagine herself in the little town Sylvia had insisted she see, Montezuma. The image she had painted of a single's scene and discos was about as far from the relaxing peace she needed as could be. Chautita. Yes, Chautita: it was time to go back. She did want to see the rest of Costa Rica, but she missed Truman. Perhaps she could convince him to go with her on a whirlwind tour of the country. He had called twice, she remembered with warmth and a soft smile and, both times, he had anxiously asked when she would be returning. She chuckled, remembering. He spoke at times, as though he was a knight from King Arthur's Round Table.

Regardless that she was still high, as Herminia emerged from the bathroom, she was radiant. A touch of 'borrowed' makeup brightened her pallor and out of character in Beth's clothes, baggy on her, Herminia's petite Latin look and flashing eyes combined with her trademark smile to form an image in the hallway that was enchanting. The illusion lasted only until she spoke. She was still so wired that her speech bordered on incoherent. Lunch helped – and it didn't. Food in her stomach, which had to be practically forced down her throat, slowed her, at least to the point where an exchange of ideas was possible, but it did nothing at all to reduce the emotional impact when Herminia came to understand that Beth was declaring the friendship ended. There was another stressful hour of tears, apologies and fury before Herminia's departure returned peace to her room – and perhaps a bit of boredom. With the walls feeling like they were about to close in on her, she rejected the shower and simply headed for the door, fresh air hopefully would clear her head. She thought that perhaps a stroll through the Cultural Plaza followed by a slowly sipped espresso in the courtyard of the Grand Hotel was exactly what she needed. Outside of Hotel Paradise, however the sidewalks on both sides of the street were filled with people all going in the same direction. She simply joined the flow.

The throng swept her to a parade marching up Second Avenue such as she had never seen. At parades back home, the crowd always remained politely behind yellow tape marked 'do not cross' and for their entertainment simply observed: this was a totally different experience. Each float had on its back either live music or enormous speakers and trailing behind, hundreds danced to hip swaying Latin beats encouraged by young people in colorfully fringed costumes, shaking maracas to the beat. She danced, laughing at her inability to duplicate the sexy, swaying of hips that seemed to come so naturally to everyone else. A youth in a luminescent green shirt with trim of black fringe and patent leather shoes with taps grabbed her hand and gave her lessons in the middle of San José's busiest street.

Beth returned to the hotel, the tension created by Herminia somewhat eased and with her mind firmly set: she would leave on the morning bus for Chautita. Truman, back from his trip, answered the telephone at Cabañas Arrecifes.

"Yes," he said, "of course you can have the same cabaña."

"Oh, I just can't wait," she answered dreamily. "I'll be on the first bus so I should arrive at about one thirty." He spoke with a professional, business-like attitude in deep, serious tones. She smiled maliciously, imagining him standing at the

reception desk feeling shy about speaking personally in public, and considered forcing embarrassing comments from him, but just giggled, saving him the torture. He said, yes that he would meet her when she arrived and she imagined being lifted by the waist from the stairs of the bus and held in an embrace that would wash all thoughts of Herminia's craziness from her mind. That image occupied her as she packed for an early morning departure, pleased with her decision and very anxious to see Truman. It would be an early supper and Beth knew exactly where: an Italian restaurant she had found with mouth-watering odors that poured from the door, such as she hadn't experienced in excess of a year.

* * *

Once again, clouds of steam rolling from the shower invited visions of skin pampered with herbal body wash, a sudsy shampoo and a wonderfully softening application of conditioner when that dream was shattered by the telephone. Hastily wrapping herself in a towel, Beth dashed to the outer room in the hope that Truman might be calling, but it was only Herminia, wailing and sobbing hysterically. Her stormy emotions had, in times past, been a daily event and no cause for alarm, but the genuine terror evident in Herminia's voice caused her heart to skip a beat.

"They keel me, Beth! Keel me," she wailed. "Geeve heem money."

"What? What happened Herminia?" No answer – nothing. She pressed the receiver to her ear to better hear the background sounds. There seemed to be a scuffle and the sound of a muzzled female voice. "Hello, hello. Hello!!!" she called into the phone. There were scraping sounds then Herminia was back.

"Beth, please. Geeve heem..."

"What are you talking about, Herminia, the money from the robbery? You know I don't have it."

"Mmfff. Let me talk! Beth, leesen; I hide money een your baño. Een the toilet. Geeve it... Ahii! No! Por favor, no mas!" Screams cut short her words.

"Hey you." It was a man's voice. "I want my money. You hear me, bitch?" The disheveled image of Sylvia's son took form in her mind. It was him! She felt his presence even through the telephone.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

"Don't fuck with me! You know who I am. Now, listen bitch: I want my money. This whore says you got..."

"Beth, geeve heem." Herminia's plaintive cry sounded far from the phone.

"Shaddap!" Whap!

Beth's spine rippled at the terrorized screams. "No more heet, please," Herminia begged. "*Por Dios, no mas!* She geeve money to you!" It was all happening so fast as to be surrealistic. Whap! Slap! The blows gave the sound of a palm slapped repeatedly upon the surface of calm water. "No! No! Ahii," Herminia's voice yowled as Beth's head reeled.

"Ya going to shut the fuck up now Chiquita or do ya want more?" Beth's arm pressing the receiver tightly to her ear trembled as he returned, speaking again with her. "The money, bitch. You hear me? You've got my money and I want it – today – or I'll kill this slut and you too."

"I don't know if I have your money. Just wait a moment while I look and don't hurt her any more." Storming towards the bathroom, her white knuckled clutch on the receiver remained, causing the telephone to hit the floor behind her with a bell-jingling crash. "Stay there!" she screeched at the wayward instrument, slamming it back onto the desk. In the bathroom, she lifted the toilet tank cover and there, half submerged in water, a large wad of bills clung to the mechanism. From the rubber bands, strands of Herminia's hair trailed across the surface of the water. She tore the dripping mass free, in the process

snapping an elastic painfully against her thumb. “Your money’s here,” she screamed into the receiver, staring at the bills clutched in her fist. “It’s just a little wet, that’s all. What have you done to her?”

“Just be at the side entrance of the hotel in thirty minutes – with my money – or you and your little whore friend will wish you had never been born.” He hung up abruptly, leaving her shouting a barrage of curses into a dead receiver.

Beth was pacing on the narrow sidewalk when the La Hacienda 4X4 pulled up at the curb. She stood with hands on her hips facing the car and unable to see inside because of darkly tinted glass. She didn’t move, just watched and waited. Eventually, the rear door swung open and from inside Mike Henderson’s voice called.

“Get in.”

“Get in? Do you think I’m crazy? Where is she?”

“I’ll take you there. Get in,” he persisted.

“I’m not getting in that car with you. Fuck you!” She stomped her foot in defiance.

“Is that my money in there, huh?” he asked, leaning towards the open door for a better view of the bag she held.

“It’s right here,” she snapped, displaying the handbag and patting its side. “Come back with her, let her go and I’ll give it to you. But, until she’s free, you’re not getting anything.” As he leaned from the window, she grimaced at the sight of his oversized head, covered everywhere but for nose and eyes with snarled hair and a bushy nicotine-stained beard. Gray-blue eyes, lined with traces of red, appeared sunken deep within the fur.

“Listen cunt, that money is mine! All of it had fucking-well better be there and, I ain’t doing business on no goddamn sidewalk so get your fucking ass in the car, now!”

“Your filthy money is right here, asshole – every cent of it,” she snarled, leaning towards the open door, “and you’re not getting your paws on it until I see ...”

Shoved violently from behind, Beth was propelled towards the car’s interior. She managed with one hand to catch the doorjamb, but Mike snatched a fistful of her hair and pulled. From behind, a knee rammed into the small of her back at the same moment as a fist, which hit her fingers against the metal of the car with crushing force. Her grip was ripped loose and she spilled forward to land splayed on the floor at Mike’s feet.

“Fuck you, you bastard!” she screamed, her face twisted sideways and pulled tightly to Mike’s knee by his grip on her hair. Wrenching her body over, she clawed for his face, but with his free hand, he seized her wrist and held it immobile while, from behind, a heavy man pounced on her, crushing her to the floor as the car sped from the curb. She struggled to free an arm or leg that she could defend herself. She’d managed to wiggle and twist free of Mike’s grip when she saw the fat man swing his fist in a wide, overhead roundhouse that connected directly with the side of her head.

Her ear exploded with a burning, ringing agony that shut down every other sense. She was lifted onto the seat and thrust in the corner. Curving her neck to cup a hand over her pulsing ear, she drew her knees up and hooked her heels on the edge of the seat. She watched, but only half saw on the other side of her pain Mike fishing the wad of soggy money from her handbag. She wanted to think – needed to think – but there was only her ear. Her bag was upended on the floor and everything examined, then the lining was torn from it and thrown on top of the pile of her things. “Pick up your shit,” Mike said. When she didn’t move, she was pulled by the hair to her hands and knees on the floor. Mutely, in trembling disconnected movements, having trouble getting her shaking hands to cooperate, she lifted her possessions, one by one, from the floor and stuffed them into the torn remnants of her bag while her ear pounded its beat of pain and heat, pulsing the entire side of her head.

“Check her, Patty,” Mike ordered. In an instant, the fat one’s hands were on her everywhere – feeling. She shrieked in revulsion, only to receive a stunning blow to the back of her skull. The pain, strangely, was felt in her ear. “Shut up and don’t move.” She shut up and didn’t move while sickened by hands traveling about her waist, down her legs, into her crotch then over her breasts.

Thrown back into her corner, she asked: “Where are you taking me?”

“La Hacienda.”

In a garage behind the inn where Herminia was bound hand and foot to a supporting beam, Beth was thrown into a chair and held immobile from behind by the fat one. There were questions about things she didn’t understand.

“What log barges?” she responded, and for that was hit across the face while from across the garage Herminia begged them to stop and wailed that she was sorry.

“I don’t know anyone named Sal Cassano.” A punch in the stomach, for that one, sent waves of pain and nausea sweeping over her and filled the air with Herminia’s shrieks.

“Shut her the fuck up,” Mike shouted above the piercing noise to a wiry man at his side with a cockroach tattooed onto his cheek.

“Can I cut her?” he asked snickering as a switchblade knife snapped open in his hand.

“Have fun, but don’t kill the bitch, not yet. Ya hear me, Dougie? We’ll take ‘em out in the woods later.” Herminia’s pleas for mercy and horrifying shrieks of agony reverberated in Beth’s head as other questions about log barges, kilos, Boston and forged checks, all of which she had no answers for, were fired at her. For each of her empty answers she was hit.

“No, no, no,” Herminia begged.

“Hear that?” Mike snarled inches from her, forcing her to face him by a painful grip on her hair. “You’re next ta get cut ‘less ‘ya start telling me the fucking truth.” Who told her about the tuna cans? Who beside Chiquita was in on it with her? How much had Sal promised her and how long had she and the whore worked with together? She would have said anything if she thought it would stop him from hitting her but couldn’t think of a reply that might satisfy them. The fat one pulled her to her feet and slugged her in the stomach with the force of a wrecking ball then lifted her from the floor and pushed her atop a table. That’s when the raping started. The others held her, laughing while Mike tore her clothes from her body.

“Tell your boyfriend Sal this here is from Mike – with love,” he said with a smirk, glancing for approval to his buddies as he lowered his trousers and wagged his penis. The bastards laughed. She tried, but couldn’t clear the acidic taste from her mouth. Vomit came, as she knew it would. She thrashed, gagging on it as they held her and Mike crammed his prick into her, ripping dry flesh. “Fuck a nigger, will ‘ya? I’ll show ‘ya, ‘ya bitch!” she heard him mumble.

The world outside appeared normal: she could see it through a window. The sky was blue and the white clouds cottony. The room she was in was a normal looking garage and she was a normal woman; she knew that, too. Yet, on this normal day, in a normal garage, a freak with a cockroach on his cheek traced the contours of her face with a switchblade knife then jammed it against her throat while the ugliest man she had ever smelled ground her insides to hamburger. She gritted her teeth and turned her face to the side to see neither and to pull her throat from the dagger, but she was unsuccessful at shutting out what was happening to her. He was right there, on top of her, twisting her breasts in his hands, and deep inside of her. It hurt, it wouldn’t stop and crying out only gave them cause for hyena-like laughter. The knife blade terrified her very flesh, she was afraid even to swallow for fear the blade would come through into her mouth, while her other end burned with violent pain and the fat one crushed her in an immobilizing grip. She was dreaming, dreaming with her eyes opened, not knowing what was real and what wasn’t. Images and feelings shuffled like a deck of cards in a terrifying blur...

Of the beady-eyed fat one, laughing.

Cockroach-face slapping her side to side.

Knife, again at her throat.

Gagging.

Pushing.

Pounding.

Pumping

Body odor that came and went.

He leaned over, his prick still inside.

Licked her face, scratchy beard.

Sylvia, with a wicked tongue, cursing her hotel staff. Or, was she remembering what Gene Frazer said about her fights with her son? She wasn't sure but, in a confusing whirl of knife blades, ceiling beams, fat cheeks wagging with laughter, squinty-eyed grimaces while his cock befouled her, taut shoulder muscles, angry shrieking, a dagger penetrating the soft flesh below her chin as she contorted her neck to escape it, blood trickling along her neck, the color red, a wash of green, a snickering cockroach crawling over her, red again, the ceiling, black, all black, it ended.

□ □ □

END OF PART ONE

The Shades of Paradise

Part Two

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sylvia Henderson's flight had not yet landed at Miami International Airport when her beeper activated:

EXTREMELY URGENT CALL MIKE IMMEDIATELY – REPEAT EXTREMELY URGENT. CALL NOW! He'd been left alone less than five hours and already he had screwed up something – again! She clamped the beeper to her chest and rolled her eyes skyward. “What,” she shouted to the heavens, “have you fucked up this time?” Nearby passengers swiveled in their seats to stare, their faces etched with scornful disapproval. She looked sharply from one to the other. A matronly old bag, probably years younger than herself, suspended her knitting and drew wrinkled lips into an indignant pucker of accorded flesh. “What's your problem, you desiccated old prune? You don't like the word ‘fuck?’ Try doing it once in a while, why don't you, it works wonders on wrinkles!” In a deflating gasp, the woman cast her eyes downward and her knitting resumed, the needles clicking a furious tempo. Other disapprovers quickly averted their eyes from Sylvia's glare lest they too fall victim to her tongue, and she was alone again with her agonizing worry. Mike was capable of anything – negative. An endless list of possibilities plagued her, as the airplane squealed onto the tarmac and shuddered with the roar of reversing engines.

He answered breathlessly with the first ring.

“Sylvia, shit I'm glad you called! We got a problem here, a really big problem.”

She could hear his tongue working the edges of his mouth: he was frightened. The sound disgusted her. “What kind of screw-up have you created this time,” she grumbled in annoyance. He couldn't be left alone for five minutes!

“No, nuttin like that, Sylvia. It wasn't me, it was the fuckin' whore. ‘Ya remember the one from last night, Chiquita? Well, the slut up and stole our fuckin' money,” he stammered. Sylvia digested his words, hoping her interpretation of his incomplete statement was wrong.

“Slow down a minute! Now, tell me exactly what happened.” She held her breath, almost afraid to listen, but whatever she was about to hear, she knew she wasn't going to like it.

“Well I dunno 'zactly what she done, 'ya know, or even when it happened. But, anyhow, when me and the guys gets up this mornin, two'a the cans'a tuna was missing outta Patty's backpack. Shit, we know Patty ain't gonna steal nuttin. So's it hadda be the fuckin' whore, 'cuz last night she snuck off and this morning she was gone. I mean, did you see her when you got up? Huh?”

“WHAT?? YOU MEAN YOU DIDN'T PUT THE CANS IN THE SAFE LAST NIGHT, YOU MINDLESS MUTANT?” Her screech rose above the murmur of a thousand voices to echo the length and breadth of the cavernous terminal. Travelers stopped to stare, luggage tumbled from an overturned cart and a nearby police officer unsnapped the flap of his holster, prepared for any emergency. Sylvia smiled apologetically, gesturing reassurance that all was well. Swallowing to ease the tight, tense lump in her throat, she returned to the phone, her voice controlled to near-normal levels. “Mike,” she said as calmly as possible. “Are you telling me that last night you turned a prostitute loose in the house and she stole two of my cans? Is that it?”

“Yeah Sylvia, that's about the size of it. Fucked, huh?”

“Fucked? You're fucked, you worthless idiot! I knew you were brain dead from the moment you were born. I should have saved myself all of this trouble and drowned you then. Are you so incapable of learning anything? You still don't know any better than to brag to some cheap whore about the tuna cans? I give up, you're completely hopeless.”

“No Sylvia, no you got it wrong! I never said nuttin to the bitch. I don't know how she found out about it.”

“Go out and find her, Mike and no mistakes this time. I want my money back and if you’re not lying about what happened, I want to know exactly how a San José whore knew where to look and, most importantly, what else she knows. I’ll be on the next returning flight and when I get there, you had better have answers for me. Do you think you can do that or am I going to have to get someone else?”

“Yeah, yeah, don’t get your knickers in a twist. I’ll get the money and I’ll get your answers, too, okay?”

“You’d better! Now get moving!”

Upon her return to La Hacienda, Mike insisted that Sylvia hear for herself what the prostitute had to say since, as he said: “you’d never fucking believe me.” Annoyed at his high sense of drama, she followed to the garage behind the inn where he, with the help of two Boston friends, was conducting the interrogation, but upon hearing what the woman had to say, she grudgingly admitted that, for once, he had been right. The tart’s story was beyond stunning, she wouldn’t have believed Mike’s rendition regardless of how he may have phrased it. She listened at the doorway out of sight as her son, with his fists and the lit end of a cigarette, forced the petite Latin girl, held immobile in the firm grip of two Boston street thugs to repeat for her benefit an astonishing story.

Sylvia always prided herself on her ability to identify people’s character. She considered her judgments to be an important and accurate guide. How could it be that she had so completely misjudged Ms. Beth Tierney? There had been nothing said to indicate that she was anything more than the wide-eyed, innocent young woman she claimed to be. Yet, unbelievable as it was, out of fear for her life, that was exactly the name the prostitute offered as the one who had her money. True, she claimed that Beth was an unwitting accomplice. She said she had found the tuna cans while alone and searching for food then hid the cash in the toilet tank of Ms. Tierney’s hotel room without her knowledge or consent.

“Ya see what I mean?” he questioned when the hooker became unable to continue, “she didn’t do this on her own! When I first got her to tell me this, I figured that the Tierney broad got Chiquita to help her rob us, and that, of course, meant that the American broad had been sent down here to Costa Rica by someone who knew about the cans – Sal, of course. So right away, I start worrying that maybe his plan includes robbing our next load too, so I ask what she knows about cocaine shipments and the whore starts in talking about your nigger boyfriend. She says he’s a big-time trafficker with hundreds of kilos coming in every three months on log barges – and that ain’t all! Then she says that your boyfriend’s brother cooked up a plan with George Dearling to rob him using phony checks! Don’t look at me like that, I ain’t making this up. You want I should tell the guys to get her to say it again?”

Sylvia boiled with fury. As naturally as a maggot takes to shit, Mike had successfully destroyed years of hard work. Of course, the two women hadn’t found the money by chance, but accusing Sal and George Dearling was just Mike’s device for deflecting the blame: undoubtedly, he’d bragged to both women about the money. Well, he could go ahead and ruin his own life if he wanted, she didn’t care any longer, but she wasn’t going to stand idly by while he did the same to hers. More likely than not, in his questions, Mike had provided the very information the prostitute needed to create her wacky story – or had it been entirely his own invention? She didn’t particularly care: she wanted her cash and she wanted to know who exactly was this Beth Tierney woman that mysteriously showed up, knowing everyone, and then probably slipped away with the money, cool as a cucumber, in Sylvia’s own car?

“No, I don’t want to hear any such nonsense! Do you have to be told everything? Go get her and bring her here - with the money,” she demanded. “Let’s see just how much she knows.”

Two friends accompanied Mike as he went to get Beth Tierney from Hotel Paradise. Doug, the skinny one with a cockroach tattooed onto his cheek drove while Pat, the fat one with the black beard and beady eyes rode with Mike in back.

Pat hopped out two blocks from Hotel Paradise that he could come up behind the bitch should she have any ideas about running off.



Mike woke early to the ear splitting pitch of the alarm clock. The sound pierced his head like a dagger. Blindly, he fumbled towards the nightstand until his groping hand found the clock and slammed down. Silence. That was better, much better: some half intelligent Jap engineer must have had guys like him in mind when coming up with that 'slap the clock' idea. The only thing missing was a picture of Sylvia's ugly mug centered over the button. Naw, that wouldn't work, he'd only end up smashing the fucking thing into millions of pieces.

God, he felt like shit! His tongue was too large for the bone-dry cavern that was his mouth and his head pounded like a drum. Judging by the size of the hangover, he must have drunk a whole goddamn bunch before Sylvia went on her berserk rampage and busted every bottle in the place. Poor Doug and Patty, her screaming had driven them right out of the house. What a fucking bitch! Most of the time, her shit just rolled off'a them like water from a duck's back. Nasty-mouthed, screaming old bags were the norm among their mothers and all the other guys he hung out with too. Each one came from families every bit as fucked up as his own: it was one thing they all had in common. Maybe hating their parents and all things authoritarian was the cement that had bound them in the first place. But when she flipped out last night, breaking all the bottles, that was the goddamn limit, they just got up and left. She was the sort'a broad who couldn't be happy unless she had some sort of nasty shit going to make life a misery. He lowered his legs over the side of the bed and pushed up to sit at its edge, dropped his head into his hands and with fingertips massaged his temples. A drink would straighten him right out, but he already knew there wasn't a drop left in the whole house, not even the bottle he'd had right there on the nightstand. She'd gotten to that too, the haughty bitch! Down the drain it had gone, and all the while she'd been screaming her usual stupid shit about drinking and alcoholism. There was nothing left downstairs in the bar either. The couple bottles she hadn't flung at him she'd turned around and smashed in the damn fireplace.

He threw back the covers and glowered towards the window. Sunrise! He hadn't been up this early in ages. He had to get going, but first there must be something he could do to ease the damn hangover. Then it hit him, he remembered. Scratching here and there to get the circulation going, he lifted himself to his feet, staggered across the room and mounted a pile of dirty clothes to enter his closet. On a hook in the back was the old dungaree jacket and, yes, sure enough, stuck in the side pocket closest to the wall was a nice, smooth bottle of Johnny Walker Black he'd stuck in there last time Sylvia flipped. He took a deep swallow, pinching his mouth tight upon his tongue as it slid down his throat, warming a path to his stomach. He'd be all right now, just another minute or two in bed. He flopped back onto the mattress and rolled in his pillow groaning, while with trembling fingers he pulled the sheet over his head.

Sylvia was so full of shit. It had never been in his mind to set those two bitches free. As soon as he'd grabbed up the whore and she'd started talking, he knew that both she and the American were gonna have'ta be snuffed. That's the way it is in this business. If you don't eliminate your problems immediately, they come back to eliminate you or to send you to jail – same difference. It's a simple choice when you're dealing with someone who's robbing your shit: us or them, no matter if they're broads or not. He'd been all fired up and pissed off about them stealing the money and ready to have Dougie do it too as soon as they got some place to dump the bodies. It would'a been over and done with. But shit, the snotty American cunt was a good looker and he hadn't fucked anything but spics since Caroline, so why not get a little off the stuck-up cunt while she was still

alive and kicking. So there he was buried up to the balls in fine, tight pussy when who walks through the door bitching her head off but fucking Sylvia.

“Let her go, God damn it, you degenerate!” she starts in, shrieking like a lunatic.

Oh yeah, right! She’s always with guys younger even than himself, wops and now even a nigger, but he’s the one who gets called a degenerate for humping a white woman! So there she is screaming her feminist crap and telling him that he has to let both of the broads go while his dick just melts away. What a dumb-ass idea that was, but that was exactly what she’d told him to do! So then, he goes and does it and no sooner does he walk in the door from dumping the two in San Jose, than she starts in hollering all over again, this time calling him an Irish Mick ‘cause he let ‘em go! “Now what are you bitching about?” he’d asked. “You’re the one who said to turn ‘em loose!”

“No I didn’t,” she claims. If he was to believe her shit, what she had said was to be nice with them before killing them. What a total crock of shit! He’d heard exactly what she’d said. She’d said: “let those women go, both of them,” nothing more, and that was exactly what he’d done. So what’s she doing calling him a Mick? She’d turned the whole thing around to blame it all on him like she did with everything. Just like when he’d thrown that California architect off the property. It didn’t matter that with a crew of just five peons he rebuilt the whole damn deck by himself. Oh no, she still bitched about the asshole. What shit! Now here he was, with an idea that could bring in millions and he couldn’t even get her to consider it. After all, it shouldn’t be so very difficult to grab a load of cocaine from a log barge, but every time he mentioned it, she’d switch right back to blaming him for setting the two broads free. Like she hadn’t said anything about letting them go and it had all been his idea.

“But Sylvia, don’t you remember, you said...” She never even gave him a chance to get the words out of his mouth before starting in on him again. Then finally, she says:

“Shut up and listen for a change. Okay? And stop looking at me like that – right now!”

“Huh? Wadda `ya mean? Looking at you like what?”

“Like an Irishman!” It was one of her favorite bitches and she said it snotty as hell too. She meant it as slander to his father. Like being Irish should be something to be ashamed of. All right, it was true that he had no actual memory of his father but, what he did know about him made him feel that he knew him well, and what Sylvia had to say about him was pure crap. He knew for sure, for example, that William Henderson was a longshoreman from a long line of longshoremen. Another thing he knew for sure was that his father had thrown Sylvia’s worthless nothing of a dad out into the street the night they married. William Henderson was like himself: a man with South Boston in his blood. A bred and born Southie, he was blue collar and he was Irish. Mike knew many men like that, South Boston, Irish longshoremen and for Mike they filled out the picture of William: surely, his father would be lyrical and of course, brawny; he would be a man after a day’s work to hoist a cold beer with his mates in a neighborhood tavern. Mike had seen groups of longshoremen such as that, singing ballads in unison, their arms draped over shoulders and mugs held high: men who were the backbone of the middle class, those who managed Little League teams and took Boy Scouts for outings in the forest. Such a man was William, he was sure of it. Sylvia’s remark stung his pride more sharply than a slap across the face. So she notices the reaction and over her face passes a smug little grin. Fired him right up! His ears burned.

“No, we’re not going to do anything about any log barge,” she says, like what he thinks counts for nothing! “And that’s it! Period! Why you couldn’t just do like I told you and stick with getting the money back, I’ll never know.” He knew: she’d fucking told him to find out everything the bitches knew, everything! But he’d had it with listening to her and tried to let the rest of her mouthy tirade slide right off his back. It was the only way to shut her up; let her have her bitch and go off thinking that she was right. All he wanted was a little peace so’s he and the guys could shoot the shit, relax a little and have a

quiet drink. But no, she wouldn't stop, just kept it up, carrying on how the whole thing from the beginning was his fault because 'he'd let the whore wander around loose in the house.' But wasn't Sylvia the one that brought the stuck-up American bitch home in the first place? She was the one who'd ended up with the money, not Chiquita, and what's more, she was also the one who'd just come from The States, probably on her own partner the wop, Sal Cassano's instructions. Sylvia had even given the broad, and probably the money at the same time, a ride to the front door of her hotel. Hah! As far as he was concerned it was all her fault that the cans got stolen in the first place. Yeah, and that the bitches had been set free, too. But, by that time a night he'd had enough to drink that he didn't give a shit any longer what she thought. He told her so, too. That's when she totally flipped out and started wrecking the bar. "Drunkard! Alcoholic," she'd shouted. Then whiz, another bottle would take flight. What drunkard? Anybody woulda needed a drink after everything he had gone through. But the guys weren't gonna stick around without booze, so when they see all the bottles getting busted, they up and split. Mike couldn't blame them, after all, but when she drove his friends out, he like lost it, and the fight got really intense. Round and round they went, screaming obscenities, storming after one another, slamming doors and hurling breakables.

"What I'm worried about now," she'd said, when she'd run low on things to smash, "is how much they learned from your questions. Don't you see? We now have these two women, running around out there somewhere, who hate your Irish ass and are probably thinking long and hard about you and your stupid questions." Like he didn't already know that. If it hadn't been for her coming in the garage screaming like a banshee, Doug woulda taken care of both of 'em and there'd be nothing to worry about. "Yeah, well we shudda cut their throats 'stead'a lettin 'em go," was his diplomatic answer, avoiding the fact that it was all her own fault. Then she came right back saying, "I wish neither one of them was alive, it would make things a lot easier, that's for sure. Tomorrow when you're sober, I want to sit down with you and go over everything that was said out there in the garage."

He'd thought through the entire situation when he'd gone to his room and no way in hell did he want to 'sit down and go over' with Sylvia the questions he'd asked the broads. She'd just use it as another excuse to belittle him and scream. He was gonna fix it so's there'd be a surprise waiting for her when she started in. Then maybe she'd 'sit down and go over' what really mattered: figuring out how to snatch her nigger boyfriend's coke. He'd set the alarm so's he could catch a few winks then, with a nice early start, he figured he should be able to catch the American broad while she was still in her room at Hotel Paradise. It's the only place he could figure she'd be. Where else would she go to lick her wounds? The cops? He doubted it: she was up to her eyeballs in illegal doings and an up-tight bitch like her wouldn't want anyone to know that someone had fucked her against her will; besides, if she had, the pigs would already have come looking for him. Yep, Hotel Paradise, room four eighteen is where she'd be.

The idea had been all well and good last night, but it was morning and in the cold hard light of day, he wasn't so sure that he was feeling up to it. He was no killer. They said the kid he shot in Boston died, but that wasn't the same. In the first place he hadn't meant it, and what's more it had all come down in the heat of battle and he hadn't had to look the kid in the face, either. Then there was the little whore: he'd had to sic Dougie on her last night in the garage, 'cause he hadn't had the stomach for messing her up himself. So now what? Was he really going to go out and shut off her lights too? He could picture her still, naked, over there by the window, soft brown all over like coffee with double cream, perky up-facing titties, a perfect tear-drop ass, that smile of hers, and fiery hot with emotions that made his dick pulsate. Yep, Chiquita was some kind of beauty! A shame the way Dougie had turned her into a piece of dog meat.

The American bitch was a whole different story. He knew all about that type of broad. Boston was crawling with 'em: stuck-up rich little shits going to expensive Ivy-league schools on Daddy's buck and learning nothing 'cept how to be

even nastier, till after four years they graduated as full-blown snots every bit as bad as Sylvia. He recognized the type the instant he saw her in Hotel Paradise with Sylvia: he'd been feeling fine and popped in for a cold one. He was halfway across the lobby when Sylvia's witchy cackle bounced off the walls. He'd about jumped outta his skin and tried to slip out without being seen, but it didn't work. So, after a few words that led to telling her to fuck off, she followed him in and sat there, glaring at him from a table across the room. His favorite whore, Chiquita had come back to work so he grabbed her and did his best to ignore Sylvia until the American broad sat down all cozy-like with her and they started in: Sylvia, his own, sweet, nigger-loving mother pointed right at him, snickering, with the college cunt sneering right along with her. So, he'd flipped `em the bird and the holier-than-thou college bitch had poked her fucking nose up in the air. That was just the sort'a garbage he always got from that type, looking down at him like he was fresh dog shit she'd just stepped in.

Remembering made the task at hand almost palatable. And hell, if he didn't do away with them, the complaining he'd hear about those two worthless broads would be never-ending. Much as he hated to admit it, Sylvia was right: they'd have a lot less to worry about if 'neither one of them was alive.' All right then, he'd do it! Yeah, and the little hooker too. At least then, maybe Sylvia would down enough so's she'd help put together a foolproof plan to get the nigger's dope. She was nasty, but smart, and her ideas always worked. Okay, first another line, or maybe another drink followed by a line. He tipped back his head and drew deeply from the bottle, dropped a chunk of cocaine onto the mirror and with a razorblade chopped it to dust. Within minutes, the hangover was gone, all traces of it wiped away by the powerful rush. Nothing troubled him, not even Sylvia, in fact, he was feeling downright kindly towards her. She was going to be his stepping-stone to a better life.

Too bad, he thought as he climbed into the car: he had always assumed that, as mother and son, they were a team and, in spite of fighting, shared solidarity when it came to the rest of the world. He'd accepted years of bitching by reasoning that, when two strong-willed people team up, fighting is inevitable. He knew now that he'd been completely wrong: Sylvia felt no mother-son solidarity with him – never had! It was time to strike out on his own and getting his hands on that coke was the answer! There'd be money enough to be free of her forever! He tromped down on the accelerator of the La Hacienda 4X4 firing a spray of gravel behind as he followed the switchbacks and ruts then, with a squeal, the tires found pavement and he roared off towards San José.

There was no way he was gonna get in Hotel Paradise and up to room four-eighteen without being recognized: everybody there knew him on sight. His best choice, he figured, would be not to try hiding at all. He'd just walk in to the bar cool and casual, like maybe he'd just stepped out for a minute to blow a joint or something. Then he'd take one of the crack-head whores up to a room without anything appearing unusual in the least. The whore could be left in the room with a spoon and a pile of coke. While she was cooking it up into stones, he'd slip out, pop the bitch, then zip right back. By then, the whore'd be smoked up too high to remember that she'd been alone, but he would make damn sure she didn't forget him: he'd have a little fun slapping her around the room – and there would be his ironclad alibi. Since Beth obviously hadn't called the cops, maybe she hadn't called anyone yet, including Sal Cassano. Hopefully, he'd shut her up before she did. It all hinged on getting there early. The sun was up and slanting into his eyes, but that was because he was high in the mountains. San José, far below, at the lowest point of the Central Valley was still in darkness. He'd challenge the sun to a race to see who could arrive first. He jammed the accelerator to the floor and came over the crest of a hill with enough speed to lift the wheels from the pavement and his heart into his throat. Goddamn, he was feeling good! What hangover?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beth looked around. She was in the backseat of the La Hacienda 4X4 but couldn't remember how she had gotten there. Herminia was there too. There were sounds: Herminia's sobs and the tires whining on pavement. Sandwiched between them sat Mike, leaned forward onto arms crossed over the front seat backrest. Looking forward, her eyes froze on the back of a thin, pointy head, which could only belong to the cockroach-tattooed monster with the knife. Transfixed, with mouth hung open and bile rising she had to fight to tear free her gaze. Succeeding only brought it to the wide balding dome of the fat man with the hammer-like fists seated behind the wheel. She turned away.

Everything hurt; everything. Was anything broken? It didn't feel like it, but she was far from sure. The entire side of her head throbbed, something could easily be broken in there. Her lip felt fattened and numb like after a shot of Novocain and some teeth moved with pressure from her tongue. What else? The knife! She had been cut! Tenderly, she fingered the spot under her chin, it stung and the digit came away bloodied. There was a slice, but it didn't seem to be very long or deep. Then there was her midsection: pain fired throughout with each heartbeat.

Across from her, Herminia appeared tiny, huddled to the door with both hands pressed to her face. She attempted to reach across behind Mike's back to touch her, but he snapped sidewise, glaring at her, clamped a hand on her wrist and twisted. She leaned away from the pain only to have her arm pulled up behind her back. He pushed his weight into her, plastering her face to the cold glass. Agonizingly, he wrenched the arm all the while speaking into her ear, saying ugly, hateful things that registered not as words which could be recalled, but rather as unspeakable evil shrouded in pain which would never be forgotten. Then he was working the door handle, and suddenly it flew open to send her careening. Landing face-first on the street, her breath exploded from her and was unwilling to return as she writhed on greasy pavement with one leg yet inside. A brutal kick to her ankle restored breath as the door slammed and the tires squealed the car's hasty retreat.

She lifted her head. Three feet away, casting a shadow that reached to a distant building, was a battered wooden table draped with cloth. Similar tables, pushcarts chained to utility poles and broken fruit crates lined an otherwise empty street. A vaporous cloud hung in the still dank air. She was transfixed as the ghostly veil seemed to take on an indistinct form that became the skinny, leering monster with his knife. Another misty formation simultaneously became Mike's tongue extending to lick her face until it swelled to fill her entire field of vision. She squeezed shut her eyes, struggled to her feet and attempted to draw herself erect, but couldn't for the pain in her midsection. She folded her arms tightly over it, staggered forward to the nearest table and sagged face-down onto it, groaning and rolling from side to side.

The cloth she lay upon was soaked through with the sour repugnance of rotted vegetables. She turned her head gulping for fresh air in a fight against overpowering nausea, with each movement renewing the agony in her middle. She couldn't unclasp her arms from their tight enclosure over it or lift herself from the table. And down there? Her labia throbbed. Was something ripped? It felt so. Pulling at the hem, she reached below her skirt and touched gingerly. It burned too much to tell what she had found. Her breasts throbbed simply being lifted from the table and she dared not touch them. Her lip was bleeding and puffy and she could feel swelling threatening to close her right eye. Blood trickled along her neck, but nothing appeared broken: arms and legs okay, neck sore from the cut but it moved all right. The worst were her belly and ear. A fingertip exploration located a point of intense pain at the left base of her ribs that pulled in her breath in a rush. Lower, somewhere within, near her navel, there was another hot spot that radiated fire of such intensity when she tried to straighten

that it could mean she was hemorrhaging internally. Throwing her head back, she screamed her pain to the unyielding darkness, then screamed again her grief and rage. Despair was growing and threatening to overwhelm her. If she hoped to get out of this, she had to overcome it, regain control over movement and reality. She sucked heavily at the air and spat, clearing her mouth of a viscous gob. That was an improvement, but the slimy mess pooled on the stinking rag a mere inch from her face. She rolled from the ghastly sight to her other side.

And Herminia?

Was she even there? Beth could neither see nor hear any sign of her. She raised her head to peer over the table's edge, and scanned the street. A distant light cast a crosshatch of shadows over cobblestones and mounds of discarded vegetable cuttings. A rat darted from under a cart. A moving silhouette along a wall offered hope, then showed itself to be a man in rags scurrying through the gloom who looked neither left or right: an addict, she thought, hurrying to score. An empty can rattled across stone, followed by a cat groaning strangely as it darted from the source. The slinking creature leapt through an opening in a fence and was gone, yet the groaning continued. Beth held her breath against the pain and forced her torso from the table, groped her way around it and there, on the sidewalk with her back to a wall, sat Herminia. Only hours before she had been a diminutive beauty in the bathroom hallway, now sat sobbing into her hands, blood oozing from between fingers. The front of the ivory linen jacket she had lent her was torn and stained by trails of it, and more matted her hair against the left side of her head while a steady drip fell from her elbow.

"Herminia?" Nothing. No movement, no answer.

"Herminia!" she called again. If anything, the sobbing became louder. Beth pushed herself away from the table and sank to her knees by her side. Feeling numb and uncertain of what to do, she stared helplessly at the blood flowing across the backs of her hands. "What did they do to you, Herminia? Let me see your face," she pleaded. Herminia shook her bowed head without interrupting her sobbing. Cautiously, Beth released her own arms from their clasp around her abdomen and lifted them to grasp Herminia's narrow shoulders. "Come on Herminia, I need to see," she coaxed, "maybe I can help."

"No," her voice murmured.

Enduring the pain it caused, Beth moved her hands to Herminia's wrists and gently pulled. She resisted, then, with a throaty whine, slowly lowered her hands as she inched the incline of her face upwards. Deep cuts, the length of both cheeks, exposed slices of flesh flowing freely with blood that quickly reached her chin and dripped onto the street. Over the jagged remains of teeth, hung meaty remnants of lip. An eye was purple, swollen shut, probably much like her own soon would be.

"Ees it bad, Beth?" she mumbled.

"Oh God, Herminia! Oh God! We have to get you to a doctor. Right now!" Herminia's eye widened and a tiny squeak erupted from her throat. She shouldn't have said that. It was important to instill calm, gain control. "Oh, but you'll be okay!" She forced conviction into her voice. "C'mon, get up. We have to get out of here."

"My babies, Beth! Ahiiiiii," she wailed. "My babies, my babies!"

"Babies? What are you talking about?"

"Now, I no can make money for babies," she wailed. "No man wan me no more."

"All right Herminia, all right. Now get up," Beth said, grunting at the tearing pain as she forced herself to her feet into an almost-erect position. She wobbled but held on. "You have to go to a doctor." She staggered past her into the street. "Herminia," she called back, "come on, I can't do this alone!" There was no move to get up, Herminia returned to sobbing into her hands. Beth collapsed in despair onto the hood of a parked car and beat her fists in fury against it. There was a nudge at her hip.

Herminia, returned to a faint semblance of sanity, sniffed and said, pointing with her thumb: “Theese way. Lez go.”

Beth straightened and joined in walking slowly by the tables and pushcarts. “It’ll be okay, Herminia,” she lied, taking her elbow.

A number of cars and two taxis had driven by before the third cab stopped. Herminia adamantly refused to accept any medical treatment if it meant going to a hospital. Although frustrated at her refusals and horrified at the sight of blood, the driver was a kindly man and went knocking at doctors’ office doors. He was near tears, however, before a window flew open from the residence above a clinic, and Herminia was paraded onto the sidewalk below as proof that they were indeed in need of medical attention. The doctor wedged his foot against the bottom of the door, peering through the crack beyond them in either direction, before he opened it fully.

“Shall I call the police?” he questioned.

“No, no, no!” Herminia insisted, suddenly animated, eyes wide with fear.

“No police?” he asked inquisitively, “But you’ve been brutally assaulted!” He looked to Beth, who couldn’t agree more. She nodded. “Olivia!” he shouted into a hallway, “*llama a la policia, ya!* (call the police immediately).” Herminia’s instantaneous shriek was a terrifying sound that paralyzed the very air. The doctor stepped back, appraising her suspiciously. He had first-hand experience with just how dangerous addicts can be in their desperation and Herminia had all the earmarks. He backed another step into the hall and slipped his hand to the doorknob.

“He come, not police, heem! I doan stay here. I go!” She turned and stormed towards the door.

“NO!” Beth was surprised by the strength and suddenness of her own voice. “Wait,” she commanded, and they did: all eyes were on her. “Doctor, please, don’t call, we don’t need the police, we need you. If she leaves, I’ll have to go with her and I don’t want to. We’ve been hurt and we need help. Please.”

“*Bien, bien, calmate* (okay, calm down),” the doctor soothed. “Olivia,” he shouted once more, “*Olvidalo! No las llama, ven aca ayudarme* (forget it! Don’t call, come help me).”

Time had lost its sense of movement. Beth had been dressed in a green gown, x-rayed, treated for various cuts and bruises by the nurse and left to wait while the doctor tended Herminia. The envelope of pain surrounded her, but otherwise she seemed far from her surroundings, carried off on the wings of no thoughts – nothingness. Curled into a fetal ball atop a waiting room sofa, her eyes glazed over, staring without seeing the adobe wall before her. Her hand moved by its own volition clutching then releasing an unseen fold upon her gown.

Olivia suddenly exploded into her awareness, appearing between her and the wall, speaking Spanish incomprehensibly fast. All she understood was that seventy-four stitches had been required to close Herminia’s wounds. The remainder was unfathomable. “*Que dice?*” (what did you say?) she asked. Her patience taxed, the nurse tried again, adding gesture. It worked: apparently, a bandage to hold Herminia’s nose in place completely encircled her head. It, together with other dressings on her face, would have to be changed regularly and Beth, she instructed, needed to know how to remove it, clean the wounds and reapply it with just the correct amount of pressure. The idea frightened her, yet mindlessly, she took the route of least resistance and submitted to a lesson, wrapping gauze about the nurse’s hands when from a doorway emerged the doctor with Herminia swathed from the neck up in bandages, save for her eyes and mouth. Beth couldn’t contain herself: responding to unknown emotions, she giggled, cried and then giggled again. A bizarre urge to laugh uproariously was stifled only because, with each rapidly taken breath that would begin it, came a painful and abrupt sensation deep within her center of a heated cable drawing taut. “Herminia, you look like a mummy!” she chided through clenched teeth as the giggles subsided, replaced by tears that welled and rolled across her face in hot streams.

“Mommy?” Herminia questioned. “I am Mommy!”

Fortunately, the doctor spoke English and supplied the necessary explanation, for such powers of reasoning were momentarily beyond her. He then directed Beth and the nurse into the treatment room where she noticed, for the first time, it seemed, a white bandage encircling her hand. It covered flesh torn open when she’d been thrown from the car, but was unable to recall it having been placed there. Was she losing it?

“Up here,” the doctor instructed, patting a paper-covered examination table. She sat at the edge of the table, still preoccupied at the lost memory, and watched the doctor place her

x-ray film onto a back-lit screen and turn to study it. She barely heard his announcement that it revealed a cracked rib, for her gaze had come to rest on the stirrups. “Loosen your gown and lie back with your feet up here.”

This was it. Could she do it? No, yes – she did. His explorations stung, but she endured it and was rewarded with the good news that nothing inside was damaged and the torn tissue outside would heal quickly. She turned to conversation, diverting her attention as he pressed and probed her abdomen raising nausea and burning pain. “What makes a man into a beast like that, Doctor? I know psychologists say the parents are largely responsible, but I don’t know if I agree. I’ve met his mother, and I have to say that she’s outspoken, but I like her. They argue ferociously I’ve been told, but she has every reason to argue with him. He’d probably be worse if she didn’t. Is it something medical or genetic that goes wrong or is it some kind of evil spirit at work?”

“That’s a weighty question.” He continued his examination with an occasional, “does that hurt,” and was soon finished, removed his gloves and tossed them into a trashcan. “The root causes for a personality like that can be many,” he responded at length, “but I can tell you that a person who can do such harm to another does so usually because of his own internal sufferings that are often worse than those he inflicts on others. His entire life is pain and he never knows true happiness.”

Beth drew no satisfaction from that thought, but the news that her physical damage was limited to a cracked rib, bruised abdominal muscles, minor lacerations, contusions and a torn eardrum, all painful but from which she would fully recover, was reassuring – slightly. The doctor wrote prescriptions and instructed her as to dosage and the purpose of each. Her analgesic was in pill form, but for Herminia he suggested the upper buttocks as the preferred location for the injections at eight hour intervals. Beth stared dumbfounded. She was no nurse. Changing Herminia’s dressings seemed horrible enough. Injecting drugs? No, not this girl. Offering a knowing smile, he wrote a second prescription for the tablets.

Ironically, Mike Henderson paid the bill. Credit cards, Beth was told, were not acceptable. As she tried to reach an agreement about returning in the morning with cash, Herminia put an end to it by reaching into her pocket and pulling out three neatly folded one hundred-dollar bills.

* * *

Beth was at the point of total exasperation. Her only desires were a hot shower and to crawl between crisp, clean sheets, but the night wasn’t over yet. She stood in the hallway of Hotel Paradise trying repeatedly and without success to get the ancient key to open the door to room four eighteen. For the life of her, she couldn’t understand how the hotel’s outdated fixtures could have struck her as charming, because at the moment...

“I don’t know why you wouldn’t let the doctor call the police,” Beth muttered while trying with increasing frustration to feather the key into the lock mechanism. “You didn’t really do anything so horrible. After all, it was drug money.”

Something jiggled into place and with a tiny click the key turned. "If you want not to be here when they come, I can understand, but I'm calling now."

"No, you can't! You no unnerstan? The police never do nothing to heem. Not Meester Mike."

Beth cast a skeptical eye in Herminia's direction and grabbed for the telephone. "Well, they're damn-well going to do something this time! That son-of-a-bitch is going to jail!" She glared at Herminia, switched the stare to the telephone and snatched the handset from its cradle.

With the swiftness of a pouncing cat, Herminia grasped the instrument and tugged at it, attempting to pull it from her grip. "You theenk the police always good, always help? You theenk that," she asked, tugging at the phone in quick sharp jerks.

"No, I don't," Beth retorted. Her grip was sure and fast "I've had experience of my own with police but with an animal like that, I have to at least try." She pulled hard at the phone and felt a sharp pain burn across her middle. Wasted effort: the phone was somewhat closer, but Herminia was still attached to it.

"Theese is not Weesconsin, Beth, theese is Costa Rica and you know nothing. Herminia, she know. In Costa Rica eef you rich there ees no law, and Meester Mike he have plenty money. One time, I see police arrest heem for having gun weethout permit and they let heem go. Geeve back gun, too. Then he arrested weeth cocaine, they let heem go. He arrested driving drunk, they let heem go. Si," she answered to Beth's skeptical frown, "all these happen and more. Weeth my own eyes I see Meester Mike heet a police officer weeth fists and weeth gun, until policeman is bleeding. What happen then to Mr. Mike? Nada, notheeng! Mr. Policeman, he have big trouble for fighting Mr. Mike. They take away hees gun and badge! Oh yes, theese all true and Mr. Mike very happy for new story to tell friends."

If there was a limit to the depths a corrupt cop would stoop, Mike Henderson and his friends were surely lower. An asshole like that can't own a police department. She wasn't buying it. "Bullshit," she said tugging at the phone.

"Yes Beth. I swear on Holy Mother these all true. But these policeman, he ees very stupid, he no learn. Herminia learn. You learn too and leesen to Herminia. Be happy mi amiga we not dead. But, if you call? Then I tell you: he come and keel us. The police? They do nothing, nothing, nothing!" Above Herminia's unblackened eye, the brow lifted in a high, challenging arch. It was a standoff. The arch collapsed suddenly, and the eye below widened. "Maybe he come anyhow," she whispered as the eye flashed to and fro. "We go!"

Beth might willingly delay the phone call while she sorted through confusion and uncertainty, but she was not about to spend the night in the street. Not this night. "Okay, I won't call" she answered and returned the instrument to its cradle, "but I'm staying here. It's been hours already. If he was coming for us, he would already have been here. The bus doesn't leave until six in the morning and, till then, I'm staying. So are you: you're going with me."

"Bus? Where to?"

"We're going to Chauita."

Shock, Mother Nature's anesthetic had provided Herminia temporary insulation from the full impact of pain, but a short while later it did hit, and in spades too. The tablets the doctor prescribed as substitute for the injections offered no relief. They did help somewhat ease her own head and stomach, but in Herminia's case, with her body grown accustomed to drugs, there was little to be done. Her agony continued throughout the longest and most dreadful night of Beth's life. Swallowing pill after intoxicating pill served only to increase tension in the midst of already electrifying horror. Beth became convinced that Herminia was intent upon suicide, consuming five times the prescribed dosage of mega-dose pills and still searching for the

hidden bottle. Meanwhile, she lashed out with accusation that Beth was punishing her for stealing the money when she refused a drug she could have self-injected.

The combination of intense pain and withdrawal from crack cocaine lifted simple paranoia to dizzying new heights. Her imagination was into the stratosphere, wildly conjuring deceitful plots and terrifying images of the madmen behind the curtain, in the closet, under the bed and in every shadow. Each apparition horrified Beth every bit as much as her, yet Herminia clung to her for strength, offering eternal thanks for her loving support. Moments later, she would launch a vicious verbal attack, accusing Beth of ruining her life and torturing her soul. Another instant and she switched from anger to remorse as she blamed herself for Beth's rape and pleaded tearfully for forgiveness. Sorrow evaporated just as quickly when a flash of insight warned her that Beth would soon seek vengeance. Those fears were confirmed when Beth refused to give her cash to buy crack cocaine or allow her to go out in search of it. There followed hours of first pleading, then threatening, any approach which might induce her to provide cash for "just two stones... for the very last time, I promise." She wouldn't brave a trip to the bathroom unless Beth walked the hallway first to confirm it was empty and then lead her by the hand over the dangerous ground. Only then, would she venture towards the little room where she imagined Mike and the others to be.

By some means, Herminia's horror had forced the full impact of Beth's own into a mental corner, where it waited. It found her however, when, at long, long last, she was able to have the shower she had tried to step into so many hours earlier. Away from the constantly wailing Herminia and washed over by a warm, soothing spray, the dreadful fear found her again. She was wracked by short quick cries and shudders of revulsion. Her cruel mind painted, then repainted, images too real to be screamed away. Crying, shivering, and convulsing with the revolting thought that HIS cum was a living thing within her vagina, she sat under the spray and forced handfuls of cupped hot water up into the recesses of her body. Rage came! What rage! She kicked the walls of the tub and pounded her fists against the wall then, succumbing to defeat, sagged into the comfort of debilitating sobs.

* * *

For Science class, Billy Hammond sat at the next desk and they sometimes had fun passing notes. It was therefore a class she didn't want to miss and first bell was ringing already! She was way at the wrong end of the school. If she were late, she'd first have to go to the office for a pass and she'd miss half the class. Besides Billy, science was her favorite subject and Mr. Hansen definitely her favorite teacher. He had a way of instruction that made Beth feel it was she who, each day, unraveled another fascinating mystery. But she was going to be late, and get in trouble too. The hallways just went on and on endlessly. Second bell. Her legs couldn't carry her fast enough. Now a man was chasing her, running after her through the halls. He wanted to hurt her. A cockroach raced along the wall matching her speed. Then there were hundreds of them, crunching under her feet and falling from the ceiling. If she didn't move faster, the man would catch her. Third bell: she was late. The man was upon her! She screamed.

Beth awoke in a struggle, attempting to free her legs from their hopeless entanglement among a snarl of sweat-soaked sheets. The telephone was ringing – her wake-up call. She reacted spontaneously, stretching to grab it. The movement shot a fiery cord of pain across her stomach. It rang again. "Hello. Yes, okay I'm up now, thank you." The swathes of gauze encasing Herminia's head so camouflaged her that at first glance, Beth thought she had slipped out, but the movement of nuzzling into her pillow for another forty winks gave her away. She let her sleep while packing a few last things and selecting something to wear for both, as all of Herminia's clothes were at her friend Flavio's, and Beth had no intention of going there.

She pulled back the curtain, relieved to see dry pavement. It was dark with streetlights still aglow, but there was full sun on the high skirts of the mountains. They should hurry, bus tickets, she knew, sold out quickly, soon it would be daylight and there were still Herminia's bandages to change.

When finally they emerged from the side door of Hotel Paradise, they were in a rush. Sunlight had found the valley floor, causing momentary blindness. Beth blinked into the brightness. There, parked at the curb was a car that stopped her dead in her tracks, his car!

"That's the car! Oh my God, they're here!"

"No, that isn't the car," Herminia countered.

"For crying out loud, it is too! Look what is written on the door and that smear on the back window is from my face!" They locked stares. Beth pushed Herminia back inside and raced through the coffee shop into the lobby, glancing this way and that, uncertain of what to do. At the far side of the building, the bar opened onto the other street. They'd catch a cab there. As she snaked her way among a group in the lobby, through the window a stunning sight appeared: there, on the opposite sidewalk, was the unmistakable figure of a mummy-like Herminia racing towards the corner. How had she gotten out there? Now she'd have to risk being seen and go outside to chase after her. Into the bar, out the door and towards the corner where she had seen Herminia, she ran. Incredibly, once there, she saw Herminia across the street reentering the hotel through the main entrance. Had she lost her mind? She had to be stopped before she got them both killed! She reached the entrance only to see Herminia, pushing her way through the same cluster Beth had just passed. Fortunately, neither Mike nor his friends were anywhere to be seen. She followed as Herminia disappeared into the bar and finally caught up with her at the exit.

"Where you go, Beth?" Herminia asked breathlessly.

"Me? Where did you...? Never mind. Quick, a taxi!"

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He made it. He'd beaten the sun to San José. It was just beginning to illuminate the top floors of buildings as he pulled to the curb beside Hotel Paradise. He wasn't feeling quite so cocky half an hour later. Everything went all right, up to a point. He'd put on a good drunk act, like he'd been throwing 'em down all night and gotten a broad and a room, no problem. The desk clerk and everyone in the bar who'd seen him would definitely swear if asked that he was far too drunk to do anything more than pass out and sleep it off. The room was even on the fourth floor. He'd taken that as a sign. The fact that he didn't encounter anybody making his way to room four eighteen had been even better, but then the lock wouldn't fucking open. Mike considered himself something of a lock expert. He'd mastered the one on Sylvia's bedroom door by the time he was nine or ten and by high school, he had a handmade little tool kit that could open anything short of a vault. But something was misaligned in the damn lock and he made so much noise that he was afraid the bitch was inside calling security. He walked quickly away and waited several minutes, but nothing happened. He smiled then, realizing that most likely she was on heavy-duty painkillers and would sleep through anything. He tried again and the lock opened right away, but the damn room was empty. It was obvious that he was late by only several minutes and that both of them had been there: both beds had been slept in, the whore's bloodstained dress was in the trash, and there were still wet footprints on the bathroom floor. Shit! He looked from the window and saw the whore with her head encased in bandages running down the sidewalk. He raced from the room, pounded on the elevator call button, gave up and tore down the stairs, but by the time he got down, he could find no sign of them. Judging by the panicked way she'd been running, they had apparently seen him, so there would be no sense in looking for them at the faggot's apartment. Now he was going to have to go back and face Sylvia with this news. He groaned at the thought.

Why'd she ever have to take up with that fucking wop, Sal Cassano, anyhow? Before he came along, they were doing great and maybe still would be. Sylvia had bought the place on Martha's Vineyard, was starting to behave like a real mother with the boys, and the two of them were getting along as never before. They went to the movies together and made barbecues in front of the sea. Never had he been happier, to say nothing of his two younger brothers. Then along comes this greasy, slick-ass wop and everything went back to how it had been before, in Boston with all the fighting and bitching. He was madder than he had ever been. The only good thing about Sal was that he'd gotten them started in the cocaine business. That was back when Mike was still using his real name: Shannon. But getting along with fucking Sal was just plain impossible so he moved back to the old neighborhood in Boston, put his buddies to work and started selling on a grand scale. Sylvia could hardly keep up the supply and soon they were all walking around with fat wallets, especially her and Sal, of course. But, he was the one who made the business for them. Without him, they never would have gotten beyond moving a few grams here and there at their parties. Then, after years of living the good life while he and the guys worked to make it all happen, they turned on him. A couple of scumbag spics burst into the apartment one day waving guns all over the place, almost beat a couple of his guys to death and run off with two kilos. Sylvia refused to help and the wop had the balls to say that the coke hadn't actually been stolen, and threatened his life if he didn't come up with it or the money. When a guy's backed into a corner like that he's got to do what he's got to do. He and the guys managed to find the spics and got back what was left of the coke. But then, in a drive-by shooting intended simply as a message not to try that again, one of the spics caught a bullet in the throat and died on the spot. Nobody talked when the cops pulled them all in for questioning, so with no real evidence, all the

pigs could do was give him a ration of shit and let him go – but they were going to figure it out. That seemed pretty obvious. Sylvia was cool and knew just what to do. Using his younger brother Mikie’s passport photo as a guide, she got out the scissors, chopped off his beard and cut his hair into a flattop and, just like that, his existence as Shannon Henderson came to an abrupt end. Was he surprised: he looked like a boy again with skin as smooth as a baby’s ass.

The same night that the cops released him, before things had a chance to change, Mr. Michael Henderson left on a flight for Costa Rica. Actually, the name fit like a glove: on the street he’d always been known as “The Mick”, so “Mike the Mick,” was perfect. It was his new self.

The idea of going to live among a bunch of spics in their own country seemed only slightly better than prison, but Sylvia hadn’t given him any choice in the matter. Yet, as he came to know Costa Rica, the place grew on him till he came to love it and to consider that blowing away that kid back in Boston had been the best thing he’d ever done for himself. Probably the best aspect of his new country, and his first reason for beginning to like it was the red light district in San José. Boston had no comparison. The chicks were everywhere and drop-dead beautiful too, and they never looked down their nose at a guy the way the cunts back home did. He could buy a pound of marijuana for less than he paid for an ounce back home, beer was cheap, gambling and prostitution legal so every night meant another party. Then there was the spot Sylvia picked out for his new home: La Hacienda. It was fabulous and isolated: perfect for hanging out when the guys came down to mule coke back to Boston. The only problem was that the old hotel was starting to fall apart. At first that sucked, but bit-by-bit he’d gotten psyched about rebuilding. He had the guys bring down books on plumbing, electricity, architecture, concrete, what have ‘ya, and then pitch in with the work too, but for the most part he completely did it himself with just the help of a crew of spic laborers, and that whole experience was flat-ass cool. But probably the best thing about living in Costa Rica was that the fucking wop was completely out of his life – at least that’s what he’d thought until now with this American bitch showing up knowing that the money would be in the tuna cans.

Well, she and the whore were long gone now but, they were gone running and that was good. The college broad would undoubtedly be out of the country on the next flight and the whore? Well, with her face cut up the way it was, she’d just go crawl under a rock somewhere: problem solved as far as he could see, but Sylvia sure as hell wasn’t going to agree. He would have to swallow his pride and sweet-talk her into forgetting about those two and helping devise a fool-proof plan for snatching the nigger’s coke, because coming across this was definitely the biggest score that would ever cross his path, even if he lived to be a hundred. But, sweet-talk her? Shit!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Beth coaxed Herminia into her seat on the Chauta bus and reclined into her own as a heavy curtain of exhaustion pulled her inward, away from a troubling world, but no sooner had the bus begun to move than Herminia renewed her nagging. Her will crumbled to dust and in total defeat, she handed her the remnants of the object of the nightlong battle: the painkillers. “Go ahead, I can’t argue any longer. You want to die? Here, take them all!”

Herminia’s focus didn’t extend far beyond the relentless wall of pain that enclosed her, shutting out sight, sound and reason, but the emotion of Beth’s voice did register. The pills she craved were now hers, but at what price? She compromised: rather than the whole bottle and ‘please God, just let me die,’ she shook only a few into her hand and washed them down with a Coke. “Sorry. Herminia very bad. Always, very bad,” she softly sobbed. “My own mother, she no wan me. Who are you, Beth? I doan unnerstan.”

“Trust me, you make me wonder, too,” Beth sighed, mentally reviewing the events of the previous twenty-four hours, “Do you remember that first day we met and after breakfast how you took the change the lady gave me?”

“Si. Si. I remember.”

“Well, I saw you give it away to those little children. It’s stuff like that about you: I think you just haven’t been in control of any situation your whole life. You’ve never had the opportunity to see what you are capable of. I would like to help you because I think you’re worth it, but you too have to think you’re worth it and go to a drug treatment program as soon as your face is better. No more going back to Hotel Paradise. No more being a prostitute. No more drugs. Can you promise me that you will go into a treatment center?”

“Si, I swear to the Holy Mother of God,” she vowed, making the sign of the cross over her chest and kissing her thumb.

“Tell me about your babies.” If she wanted to avoid the image of Mike waiting in dreamland, she needed to keep talking

“Herminia has three children. All leeve weeth Mommy.”

“Your real mother?”

“No, in barrio Quince de Septiembre where I grow up. For only Jeremy, the youngest, I know who ees father, others, I doan know because I get pregnant while working.”

“How old are your children?”

“Christian ees oldest, nine. Then girl, Catalina, she ees eight. Jeremy ees five. I am pregnant other times, but my mother make me have abortion.”

“Why don’t you ever talk about them?”

“Ees because I no like to theenk about them. Have much guilty. Doan eat much, just smoke, then too skinny and dirty for work. When I no breeng money for babies, Mommy, she tell Herminia, ‘no come no more, they no like you because you are puta. Very much Catalina, she no like me for this. So, I go to house only eef I have money, but I doan like because Mommy yell at cheeldren and heet them weeth stick. I yell Mommy for heet cheeldren and they mad at me for fight her. ‘Geet out and no come back,’ they say. Then leeving een street. Move to Chauta so my babies no can see. Theese money I steal, I

no geeve all to Mommy because maybe she go away, no take care of babies. I geeve her only three hunner dollar. For these reason, I hide money in your baño.”

“But, why didn’t you ever get another job and take them to live with you in an apartment or something?”

“What can Herminia do? No feenish school, only fourth grade. Mommy, she need money.”

“So how did she take care of them when you were away?”

“Ees very hard. Some money come from government and Mommy make cheeldren sell clothes.”

Beth remembered the tunnel, she was sure of it because she recalled that the lights were on, but she must have nodded off shortly after for it was afternoon and Herminia, the mummy, was telling her it was time to wake up. They had arrived in Chautita. Already, she felt better.

* * *

Anxiously she waited for the crowded bus to empty onto Chautita’s dusty main street. She couldn’t see him, but Truman was out there somewhere. He’d wrap her up in his arms and hold her until the waves of revulsion that swept continually through her, suffocating her soul like a dank fetid fog, lifted, and she would breathe again. But, why couldn’t she see Truman’s car, nor spot him in the street? He could have walked, that would explain the missing car, but where was he? Down from the bus at last, she stood waiting, studying the street in either direction. He wasn’t there, nor did she find him in the bar across the street. She gathered up her things and they walked to Cabañas Arrecifes, Herminia’s bandages drawing curious stares from every person they passed and once there, she discovered Truman’s car to be missing and his apartment door locked. Don Alberto, to her inquiries, replied that yes, Truman knew she was coming today because he instructed them to prepare her room. Yet, he also said that he had departed several hours earlier without saying anything. There was no message for her in her room, with Doña Cecilia, Jesus or at the bar. All she could assume was that something had happened. She asked Doña Cecilia to call the transit police to see if there had been an accident, ‘Truman is fine,’ she assured her without calling anyone. It was maddening. Was she the only one worried?

Herminia, even with three quarters of a bottle of pills in her, still wouldn’t sleep, so she sat in the room and took her frustrations out on her. “What a fool I’ve been!” she said. Herminia’s response was indistinguishable, but it didn’t matter: she just needed to talk. “When am I going to wake up to reality and accept that I am alone in this world? I don’t have family any longer and there is nobody I can trust, it’s me, solo. What a fool to think that someone is going to come waltzing into my life and be perfect! Wake up, Beth! It’s not going to happen! What? What did you say?” She bent close to Herminia’s mouth and listened.

“Truman no good!”

“I know, Herminia. He’s cold. I needed him so much. He was the only person I thought I could turn to and he can’t even be bothered to be here.”

“No,” she answered, nudging Beth’s hip for emphasis, “not for thesee. You really doan listen what Leon tell you?”

“Leon? You mean, creepy Leon? No, why?”

“Leon say that Truman work for his brother as traficante.”

“What?”

“Si, he say thesee but, en car, I no unnerstan much. Later, when we make sex, I make heem tell me everything. Say they hide cocaine in log barges and...” She told a bizarre tale of Gordon Edward as a drug lord with Truman as an assistant and of Leon’s intention to rob them with checks forged by George Darling!

“What?” Beth was stunned beyond belief: log barges were just what Mike Henderson had been asking about! Had Herminia put that idea in his head and it led to her getting raped? “Leon didn’t say anything like that, Herminia. Did you tell Mike that he had?”

“Si, tell heem everything or keel me. I theenk Meester Mike work weeth them and this is why he get money in tin cans.”

“Oh my God Herminia, what have you done? Truman’s not a drug dealer. Can’t you see that it’s just that Leon is envious of his brother, angry that he isn’t the clever one? He makes up these stories about his brother being a criminal so he doesn’t have to face his own shortcomings.”

“Wha? Beth, talk normal. I doan know thees word, ‘envious’ and what are ‘shore comings’?”

Beth couldn’t take any more, she needed air. “I’ll explain it all later. Get some sleep, okay?” She lingered in the doorway, staring back at Herminia. Had all of this happened because of that woman’s over-active imagination? She shook her head, unsure of how she felt about anybody, then closed the door gently. She found her way to the beach where she lowered her aching body to the sand, and wept. When she could cry no longer, a great weariness descended upon her and she returned to the room, swallowed two pills, curled into a ball and slept.

* * *

Wendy, Alberto and Cecilia’s daughter, awakened Beth at sunset. With her favorite party dress she wore a shy grin and carried a small silver dish with a note upon it lain over with a single red rose. Barely awake and groggy from the pills she’d taken, she picked up the rose and sniffed – hardly a hint of odor. Wendy giggled then ran off leaving Beth alone to unfold the note. It was from Truman: an invitation to join him on his patio for dinner. She looked at the note in disgust: when she had really needed him, he hadn’t been there, and obviously by choice! There was nothing in this folded piece of paper to make up for that! She tossed it and the rose onto the bureau and sat on the edge of the bed, dropping her head into her hands. She remained so but a moment, before rising again to study herself in the mirror. Her hair was a big snarl, there was swelling and discoloration around her right eye and more at the side of her mouth, a sewn cut below her chin, her eyes were lined with red and dried streaks of tears lined her cheeks. Great! All right, she would go, but with strengthened resolve not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She’d be as indifferent and cool with him as his cavalier attitude regarding meeting her showed him to be – and she wasn’t going to show up looking like this. Into the bathroom she went and began brushing out her hair. The facial makeup Herminia had induced her to buy stank to high heaven, but it covered the strange yellow and purple tones and that was good enough for Truman; besides, she would keep her distance. Smearing the stuff on, she recalled suncreening for their snorkeling adventure, when she asked him to carry her. He must think I’m pretty humorous, she thought staring at herself: he’s probably up there right now, laughing at my idiotic letter. Well, I’ll do this, and then I guess I’ll have to leave Chautita. It’ll be the early morning bus back to San Jose and I’ll figure things out from there.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Truman, wearing a white dinner jacket and open collar blue shirt over a white turtleneck, appeared relaxed, smiling sheepishly as she appeared in the doorway. Stock still, she stood between the open patio doors with hands clamped to her hips taking it all in. He sat on his patio behind a table set with white linen, china and crystal stemware. On a sideboard, dinner: lobster, wild rice and a fresh salad, and to his left, a bottle of white wine on ice. A Mozart piano concerto came softly from corner speakers. The air reeked of aftershave. Nature, on his side, provided the perfect backdrop: above the Caribbean, purple clouds edged with the pinks of sunset drifted lazily. There was even a gentle sea breeze to flutter the leaves of his potted palms and tease her hunger with sumptuous odors. If she'd been in a better mood – if he had been there to meet her and they had talked – it could have been a most wonderful surprise, but this had the distinct look of seduction about it: wrong move, Truman! Was he really thinking this was more important than being there when she arrived? Besides, he'd lied to her and he looked ridiculous in that jacket. Remaining where she was that her injuries wouldn't be noticed, she focused on the stereo's dancing columns of light to maintain a stern expression. "Truman, I'm getting a lot of confusing signals from you and it's driving me crazy. I need to know where you're coming from."

"What's going on? Why won't you sit down?" Mr. Innocence. He paused, then not receiving a response, continued: "Where I'm coming from? You know I just came from Nicaragua and Honduras."

"Truman, please. You know what I'm talking about. I want to understand about you not coming to meet me today or for that matter, not being here the whole day. I want to know why in the cocoa plantation you pushed me away, then on the phone, say that missing me is driving you mad. I want to understand the reasons for all of that and what you intend to do about it. It's called, 'where you're coming from,' okay? And please, let it be the truth."

"You know I'll tell you the truth, I always do."

"No mister, you don't, that's one of the problems."

"Okay, but you need to come over here and sit down, I have important things to explain: that's why I made this dinner, so take a seat, please."

"First I want a few honest answers. Tell me, did you receive my letter?"

"I did. Yes, I did. You see, that's just one..."

Beth cut him short with a sharply upraised palm. "And do you remember when we spoke on the phone and I told you I'd be on this mornings bus?"

"Of course. I've been thinking of..."

The silencing palm again muzzled him. "You also said you would be there to meet my bus but no, you couldn't be bothered. So what are you doing to me, Truman?"

"Okay, you're right, I should have been there. I'm sorry, but I wanted everything perfect when we got together. So you see, I haven't been 'doing anything' to you. Now come on, what I have to say isn't easy, so give me a break here and don't make this any harder than it already is."

"That's it? You decided that 'you needed to talk' and, just like that, meeting me is no longer important. That's lame. You might at least have called to see if I was alive. Everything isn't just about you, Truman! But apparently, what I needed doesn't matter to you." She could see his tension building. He couldn't understand why she was so angry, it was written all

over his face. She didn't care. He deserved it. He avoided her eyes, pursing his lips and looking fixedly at the floor. She might have backed off, but too little sleep and way too much aggravation had taken their toll. To hell with behaving herself, where had that ever gotten her in life? She was mad at the world, Truman included, and besides, he was no angel. For one, he had lied to her, insisting that he hardly knew Gene Frazer, but what was it Gene said? 'We're old war buddies,' he'd bragged. 'I've know Truman for years'... And the damn place looked like the set for an X-rated movie. Is that was what this was all about? Her voice was shrill when she continued. "What is this, anyhow? The Grand Seduction, feed the girl a little wine and music and make your big conquest? Well, guess what? I'm in no mood."

"No, no, take it easy, you don't understand, I'm not trying to seduce you. What's the matter? You know I wouldn't do anything like that to you."

"The matter is that I'm feeling like I can't trust you anymore. You lie."

"Why do you keep talking about lying? I haven't lied to you. My God, I've told you secret truths I hadn't spoken a word of since they happened."

"Oh yes, you did lie!" she retorted. "What about Gene Frazer?" She abused the name contemptuously. "The first day I met you, you lied about him. Why was that, huh?"

"What? Who are you talking about?"

"Gene Frazer, the cowboy guy I saw with you and when I asked about him, you said he was someone you didn't know well. Remember now?" A strange expression washed over his face. He sat there studying her and swiped at a nervous tic in the corner of his eye. She had seen that twitch before, but only when he reminisced about the war. What was he hiding this time?

"I'd forgotten about his new name," he replied. "Well okay then, maybe you're right. I apologize if I lied but, if so, it was about someone I was trying to forget I had ever known. When you asked about him I had just thrown him out of here several days earlier, and I think what I said about him wasn't so much of a lie. I think I said he's bad news and I didn't want you to assume that he was a friend of mine." Truman rubbed at his temples, glancing about as though searching for an escape, but there was nowhere to go. He fixed her with a steady stare. "Who told you what about Sinclair?"

"Sinclair?"

"Sinclair is the name I knew him by. Maybe it was an alias and Gene Frazer is his real name, but who knows?"

"He told me about himself," Beth answered.

Upon her reply, his head jerked backwards as though he had been slapped firmly across the face. "You were talking with Sinclair? How the hell did that happen?"

"Do you remember the dinner party I was invited to? I met him there. Why?"

"Stay far away from that man!"

Beth was startled. The power of his voice seemed to reach out and shake her by the shoulders. "Stay away from him? Hey, what's this? You have no right to tell me whom I can or cannot talk with. I'll speak with whomever I wish, so just forget that! And what for? Why are you so mad at him anyhow? He said it was because he had to fire you when the pressures of war got to be too much. Sounds to me like you're over-reacting; maybe you should have been grateful."

"Beth, he's dangerous and it worries me that he was around you. Did that bastard follow you, or was he already at the party when you arrived?"

"Oh please, do you actually believe that he'd track me down because you're angry with him about something that happened so many years ago? That's a bit paranoid, don't you think? He doesn't strike me as the least bit dangerous. We

talked and had coffee and he was a perfect gentleman, just a little heavy on McCarthy era politics, but for an ex-CIA agent, I would guess that's normal. Do you want to know what he said about you?"

"What? What did he say about me?" He sounded exactly as nervous as a person would be whose lie had been discovered.

"He said you were old war buddies. And you know what else? He doesn't have anything against you; in fact, he admires you. Said you have great military leadership and he is deeply indebted to you. So, what's it all about?" No answer was offered up. He just sat there looking at her with his face contorted into a look suspiciously akin to possessiveness. A smile came to her lips, the first in a long while. "Is it jealousy?"

Despite her grin, Truman's stolid expression hadn't changed one iota. "That man is not a joke," he continued. "There are things more ungodly horrible about him than you could believe. I mean it Beth, stay away from him."

"All right, if you insist, but tell me why."

"He was a CIA intelligence officer whose specialty was interrogation. He tortured people."

"Him? Oh, come on!"

"Yes, him."

"What makes you so sure?"

"It's a long story and not very pretty. Just trust that I am sure."

"Trust hasn't been working so well between us, I'd rather know, thank you. We have plenty of time – tell me." The stern expression she'd molded onto her face softened of its own volition because curiously, despite the slant of conversation, she found comfort in his presence and the sound of his voice offered reassurance that the world might yet return to normal, but she had promised herself to be firm: concentrating, she restored the frown and offered a disapproving glare.

"You want to hear about torture?" he quizzed.

"I'm fast becoming an expert," she replied curtly, not altering her firmly held scowl.

"You certainly have a morbid curiosity."

"Perhaps I do, but I'd rather know the whole truth right here and now."

"Well okay, the truth. Let's see... When was that?" He became thoughtful, staring at nothing and cupping his chin with his palms while she came a bit closer to the table.

She studied the food, stopping when Truman appeared ready to speak, but he only rolled his eyes and wiped a hand over his face, struggling with thoughts. She pulled a chair to the far end of the table and sat. "Wow, this looks great," she whispered peeking under lids. "It just hit me: I haven't eaten a thing since before everything happened. You did say you've made this dinner so we can relax and talk. Well, I'm famished. This stuff is way too good to waste; let's eat." Her voice broke his concentration. He frowned, looking towards her, perhaps because she hadn't sat near him, or did it have to do with Gene Frazer?

"I have been thinking so much lately," he said at last, "and most of it I would rather had never entered my mind. But you, yes and Herminia too, have caused me to examine myself and my past. I don't know how I've operated for so long without looking at the big picture of who I am and what I've become, but recently, I have. This entire trip, my head was spinning like a top. I came back with an entire speech prepared for you. The thing is, it was all crap because it avoided things like Sinclair, but actually my problems began with him and the rest of his friends. So, if I'm going to do this right, he should be included."

"Well, go ahead, then," she mumbled around a cream cheese stuffed celery stick. "Don't mind me, I'm listening."

“First of all, that man isn’t my buddy. Make sure you get that straight. I hadn’t seen that nightmare with feet for years, then, out of the blue, he waltzed in here one day calling himself Gene Frazer. ‘Just popping in to renew old acquaintances,’ that’s what the bastard chirped, chatting away as though we were long lost friends, but my blood ran cold at the sight of him. He claimed that he was ‘so happy to have located an old friend in Costa Rica’ because he was retired and living here now. I told Gene Frazer or John Sinclair, whatever his name was, to re-lose himself and not come back.” He looked up expectantly.

Beth was scooping mashed potatoes. “Okay, so he stopped in to see you and you weren’t happy to see him. Not too morbid yet, sounds like it’s strictly your problem.”

“I haven’t started. I will now, but I’ll have to put it all in perspective. Soon after I graduated college, I married Lucia and shortly thereafter, joined the Guardia Nacional. I was a very patriotic youth, terribly misinformed, but fiercely loyal to the government which was under attack from all sides. Foolishly, I was a believer in the honesty and good intentions of the ruling Samoza family. I didn’t have a scar on my face, either, can you imagine?”

“I enrolled in a training program conducted in the United States, so Lucia and I went to your country, eventually staying beyond the basic program so I might complete my business degree. All in all, we were in The States for almost three years and in that time, the situation in Nicaragua deteriorated from bad to explosive. What used to be street demonstrations became riots, strikes crippled the economy, and there were killings, kidnappings and reprisals on both sides. In a move to reestablish civil order, the Guardia Nacional effectively absorbed local police departments. I was delighted when I heard the news, certain that the country would soon stabilize. I couldn’t wait to return, that I might be in on the excitement before it was over. Well, I got my wish and, in May of ‘75, I returned from the US, a snappy young Guardia Nacional captain. What a fool I was! I was actually comfortable in my idealistic certainty that the Sandinista movement’s leadership was an evil cult of subversives and foreign communists, like the government claimed. I further believed that the salvation of the country was in our hands and we represented the people of Nicaragua.”

“Okay, I get the idea: the valiant young man!” She chuckled, he frowned. She returned the frown defiantly, but he averted his gaze and continued.

“No, I was a young father with a precious two year old daughter, Lucia was pregnant again, and I believed in what I was doing. I felt good about it. However, from that point, things went downhill rapidly, and that coincides with meeting your ‘perfect gentleman’. Military intelligence had been my field of study, so I was posted at Guardia headquarters as liaison officer between certain special units of military police and the Managua Municipal Police. These ‘special forces’ assisted in interrogating captured FSLN organizers and foreign agitators. I think now that it was structured that way to create an impossible trail for anyone attempting to locate missing persons, even if access was gained to police or military records. Anyhow, unprecedented powers had been granted to these groups: they were no longer burdened by the necessity of observing the civil rights of citizens suspected of treason. In cases of acts of sedition by foreigners, notification of consul was also suspended. Nicaragua had been pushed to the wall and no longer was able to handle subversives with kid gloves. I, like the rest, believed that the survival of the country was at stake and these actions were necessary: foreign agitators with the help of treasonous Nicaraguans were funneling weapons into the hands of the protestors, providing para-military training, false documents, and printing revolutionary propaganda. Our orders were to stop their printing presses, break up the protests and bring the organizers to justice – or kill them: it didn’t matter any longer, but time did. If Nicaragua hoped to survive, agitators privy to critical information could no longer hide behind legal maneuvers.

“My assignment had come through while I was still in the US and, yes, I suspected that some of the rumors of torture must be true, exaggerated but true. Nevertheless, I wasn’t prepared for the realities of that morning when I met your friend. It was my first day of duty and I was wearing a new tailor-made uniform, meeting officers of the various units I would be working with, when I was brought to a basement interrogation room below a police precinct. John Sinclair was there, working a prisoner. Luckily, there was a chair next to me because I felt the blood drain from my face, and a cold sweat on my brow. My knees were reduced to rubber. I tried to appear to be sitting casually while, in reality, I was fighting for composure, because polite introductions were being offered between the moans and gasps of a man whose fingers were being systematically crushed in a vise. Sinclair was the man operating it and he was smiling. Before offering his hand to shake, he had to wipe blood from it. “Oh, I’d been through all the training! I had learned how to interrogate a suspect with intimidation and the application of some force, slaps, dunking heads in water or slaps in the face or sharp jab to the solar plexus and I can remember fighting my conscience over the idea of using any of them.

Recurring visions of the scene I encountered in the basement of that police station, complete with moans, were to haunt my dreams for weeks. I’d awake with goose flesh and have to fight nausea. I didn’t dare tell Lucia anything about it. She treated me for flu and demanded that I call in sick. The other officers seemed not to be bothered by any of it and I felt inadequate for my weakness, so I battled not to think of the fate awaiting those unwilling to talk. Eventually, I was able to block such visions from my thoughts, primarily by having my visits to the ‘chambers’ as we called them, be as infrequent and brief as possible.

“Many of the officers in my unit were interrogators and among them, John Sinclair was legendary. He never allowed regular interrogating officers to handle his subjects. He had his own methods and he always got results, or the prisoner died. Even I had to admit the man was effective, weird, but effective. His exploits in the ‘chambers’ were the topic of unimaginable office horror stories, all enviously related in boisterous tones. Sinclair could show up anywhere, because he was the American CIA agent to be called in for particularly sensitive situations that involved the movement of communist military hardware. I had to liaison with him so I couldn’t avoid him entirely, besides, I was continually hearing of his latest ingenuity for mutilation. He wouldn’t use our information, but came with his own intelligence files and questions, which he wouldn’t share with our office, claiming it sensitive to American Intelligence. By nothing more than simple bad luck, it befell me to be the one to have to meet with him after a questioning, to keep our office abreast of the latest intelligence. It was a job I did not relish. Anyone could see that he was a sick bastard, who actually enjoyed what he did. I would meet with him after an interrogation at a certain hotel bar. Several times, he walked in with blood splattered across his face wearing his stupid hat and starched western-style shirt. He’d order a beer, in English, with that East Texas twang of his, smiling as though everything was wonderful.

“He’s still an ugly bastard, but then he was worse than ugly: he looked as weird and scary as he actually was. His hair was as white then as it is today, but it hung almost to his waist. He used to keep it tied at the back in a long ponytail. Circulating through the rumor mill were countless stories about the psychological effect of that white hair and his blotchy-pink complexion. The worst, though, were those icy-blue eyes of his. The guards were constantly yielding up these stories, riveting for their stark terror which would then circulate through the office until Sinclair show up again to loosen the resolve of the next headstrong individual, and there’d be a new rumor. These stories always seemed to begin with him entering ‘the chamber’ and taking a seat in the shadows where he would study his prisoner. The poor slob could just sit there, tied to a chair under a bare bulb surrounded by goons with clubs. Sinclair would wave them to one side and the unfortunate soul would be left to sit alone and wonder what was to come next, while at the edge of darkness, a malevolent silhouette fixed him in an icy gaze. Minutes that surely stretched neurotically into hours for the prisoner would be allowed to pass before John’s chair would scrape the

floor and he would stand. The heels of his boots had taps so every click of his approach could be heard. As he'd come into the glare, the prisoner's first sight of him would be that chalky skin, eyes moist with lust and narrow lips drawn to a heinous smile. That alone was enough for many: they would urinate where they sat and readily give up their mothers if asked to.

"I may not have wet my pants when he showed up here and you saw us together, but the sight of him triggered a migraine that went on for days and, when you asked about him, I'd been determined to close him permanently from my existence. Well, my mind went off like a rocket, and the pressure of the damn headache started building. I knew I couldn't continue chitchat, anything I said would only have come out angry. If I wanted to avoid another couple of days in bed, the only thing to do was to walk away and force my thoughts onto something pleasant. So that's what I did.

"You have to understand, Beth that this guy is no folksy, down-home servant of the people and certainly no 'perfect gentleman', he's a monster, the real tamale. I have seen him, with cool nerves and a steady hand, mutilate live human beings able only to scream while they begged for God's mercy of death. He once bathed a woman's face with a cold towel to revive her: he had just sliced her open from ribcage to crotch and wanted her awake for the pleasure of reading the horror in her face when he pulled her intestines out like a jump rope. The story surrounding the incident says that he actually came in his pants. That's who this guy is. So, do you understand now why I said you should stay away from him?"

"Okay, I'll take your word for it, Gene Frazer is another Freddie Kruger on the loose, but I'm beginning to think I'm stuck in the middle of a nightmare. If you told me that story before, I wouldn't have believed a word of it, I'd have written the whole thing off as male exaggeration. I've always felt comfortable knowing that fiends like that were forever somewhere I wasn't, lurking in murky alleys or forests, but not real people that you actually meet and certainly not a friend's son or a nice guy at a party. I keep hoping that this is a dream and I'll wake up soon, but now, I'm scared. I'm really scared, this is all too real. Why are there suddenly sadistic madmen licking their chops in every shadow?"

"Unfortunately, they were there all the while. You just didn't see them."

"Really? All right then, if all of this madness is in fact reality and Gene Frazer is the fiend you say he is, then you should stay away from that politician you introduced me to in Limon."

"Gordon Edward? Beth, I'm serious about Frazer. This isn't something to..."

"What, to joke about? I'm not joking, you should stay away from that man! According to Herminia he's a cocaine smuggler and that other depraved animal, Mike Henderson, works for him."

His mouth had sagged open. He snapped it shut and fixed her with a quizzical stare. "Why would she say that?"

"She believes Mike Henderson works for Edward, transporting cocaine and I think she has very good reason for saying so."

His voice changed, it was steady and quieter: "Don't you know that since crack cocaine showed up in the province, Gordy has been something of an anti-drug nut? He is the man responsible for those infernal roadblocks on the coastal highway. He has even built rehabilitation clinics and runs public awareness campaigns aimed at teenagers. It's crazy to say something like that. Someone might hear her and the next thing you know it'll end up in the news and ruin him politically. And who's this other guy she says works with him?"

"You haven't heard of him? That's good, because he's another bloodthirsty monstrosity like your Gene Frazer."

"No, never heard of him. So who put the idea in her head that Gordon is running drugs?"

"The way she explains it, Leon did and with a little help from Mike Henderson."

"Leon? I don't get it. Why would Leon say anything to her about Gordon?" And who exactly is this Henderson character?

“Apparently, you haven’t seen Herminia yet, have you?”

“No. Why, is she here?”

“See what happens when you don’t show up to meet your friends? You don’t have a clue of what’s going on around you. Herminia’s whole face is covered with bandages. She’s lucky to be alive, that butcher, Mike, cut her face to shreds when he was trying to force her to tell everything she knew about Gordon Edward and his drug smuggling. That’s Herminia’s story, anyhow. I just don’t know what to think.”

“What’s this? Herminia has been cut, you said? By this guy? Because she knows something about drug smuggling? I don’t understand any of this!” The eye fluttered like a hummingbird wing and his lower lip had taken off on its own oscillation. “Tell me what’s going on, please.”

“It’s a long story. No, not a story: it’s a nightmare and I’m not sure it’s over yet. I was at that dinner I told you about in Puriscal, the one where I met Gene Frazer. Anyhow, he and I were on the patio chatting, when who comes in, but Herminia with the son of the American woman whose place it was, this animal, Mike Henderson with wild hair and scraggly beard. Apparently, after the others went home, he, with Herminia and his friends, partied most of the night consuming massive amounts of drugs. The following morning, I was up early and downstairs before anyone because I wanted to leave, and I found her sleeping on a couch in the lobby. I woke her, but she was so strung out that I could hardly understand a word she said. Suddenly very hungry, she transformed into a madwoman after discovering a lock on the fridge and completely freaked out, tearing the kitchen apart and throwing stuff everywhere. After totaling the entire place, all she had come up with was a couple cans of tuna, and – you’re not going to believe this, but I was there and saw it with my own eyes – when she opened the tins, it wasn’t fish: they were crammed with one hundred dollar bills. Right away, she wanted to steal the money even though I begged her to put it back and clean the place, but you’ve seen how she can get. She grabbed it and took off in a taxi leaving me there with that whole mess.”

“My God! What did you do?”

“What did I do? I did what I could to straighten the mess and got out of there before they discovered anything. But, when Mike and his friends discovered both Herminia and the money to be missing, they knew right away she took it. Within a couple of hours they found her. It’s so awful what they did...” Her breath caught behind a high, tight knot in her throat. Biting at her upper lip and swallowing, she continued. “They hit her so often that her front teeth...” She calmed her trembling chin by pulling taut her lips, but her eyes were incorrigible, they burned and water pooled on the lower lids. “Her front teeth were all broken and her lips ripped apart on the stumps. Then this other one... a skinny little asshole, with a cockroach tattoo...” a tear traced a hot trail across her cheek, it fell to the tablecloth, “sliced her face apart with a stiletto.”

Truman stared wide-eyed, fingertips pressed to his lips. “My God! That poor woman! Is she going to be all right?”

“She’ll live, but I don’t know about all right. Pain pills are doing nothing, so she’s suffering terribly. There will be enormous scars on her face, too. I know you of all people can understand that the hardest part isn’t the pain, it’s acceptance. Fortunately she’s finally asleep because I’m already beyond my limit of patience.”

“But, shouldn’t she be in a hospital?”

“I took her to a doctor in San José. All he was able to do was sew her up, but he said she needs cosmetic surgery and the sooner the better. There’s a lot of dental work to be done too, but she’ll never get the surgery. She could never pay for it and you know public health is nothing more than a sorry joke. They would only put her name at the bottom of a waiting list that never gets any shorter except for those who bribe their way up. Anyhow, right now she doesn’t need a hospital, what she needs is peace, quiet and moral support – so do I, that’s why we came.”

Truman sat considering what he had been told. He appeared alternately angry, then quizzical. “Mike Henderson, that’s the son-of-a-bitch’s name? No, I definitely haven’t heard of him, but I will. And, I’m still not understanding here: you said that Herminia thinks this asshole is trafficking cocaine with Gordon Edward? Where did that come from? I can’t see how any of this has anything to do with him.”

“I don’t know that it does have anything to do with your friend, but Herminia believes it does. She said that when they started with the questions, all they wanted to know was where the money was and how she knew about it, but every time she answered that she found the cans accidentally they punched her. Out of desperation, she told him it was Leon, your friend’s brother who told her. Then they made her repeat everything he said, and when she got to the part about shipping cocaine, they really went crazy.”

“Leon wouldn’t say anything like that. This is not making any sense.”

“I agree, but let me tell you where it all came from. When Herminia and I rode to San José with Leon, it was ‘blah, blah’ blah’ blah’ from the moment we got in the car. She was in the back seat lying down and supposedly sleeping. She wasn’t: she claims she was wide-awake the whole while and listening to everything he said. Well, we both heard him rattling on endlessly about how unfairly his brother treats him. After maybe an hour of that, I tuned him out. Herminia didn’t. She told me he started in bragging about his brother being a major drug smuggler, you his assistant and himself as the one who pays off the police and politicians, and that he and the guy we had dinner with want to rob Gordon’s money with forged checks. All I heard of his nonstop chatter was an occasional small bit because I was leaning out of the window taking pictures and ignoring him, so I can’t say, but what I do remember actually does bear a powerful resemblance to what she claims he said.

“All she wanted was for the beating to stop, so maybe she invented it all and now remembers it as the truth. That’s possible, I suppose, but from the nature of their questions she was left with the impression that they were more interested in this cocaine than about getting their money back. Apparently, they thought she was working for someone whose intention it is to steal a shipment. At any rate, they beat her until they were satisfied that she had nothing left to say.”

“Leon was talking to you, at least he thought he was, so he would have been turned away from her. With her comprehension level and how poorly Leon speaks, she undoubtedly misunderstood then came up with her own highly dramatic interpretation. The same probably happened with this asshole Mike: she was hysterical, didn’t understand the questions, and told him what she assumed Leon said.”

“That’s not so! Later, she was with him – professionally – and she got him to tell her the whole story and I’m certain that she understood Mike’s questions perfectly!”

“You can’t know that. Her English is terrible, and she was terrified.”

“I certainly can know that! They asked the same questions of me, exactly!”

“You? What do you mean?”

“Herminia hid the money in my toilet so they came to get it and when I was going to hand it over, they grabbed me off the sidewalk.”

“What! Grabbed you? What do you mean, ‘grabbed you’? He didn’t... hurt you or anything... did he?”

“I was raped, Truman.”

“You were WHAT?” Wide-eyed and breathless, he gaped at her, the only sound that of a fly performing aerial acrobatics above the table. “Raped?” Truman was on his feet now leaning over hands pressed flat upon the table. His chair had fallen backwards.

“Yes,” she whispered, quickly clamping her lip between teeth to prevent her chin from quivering, “I was.”

“But, but raped? What exactly do you mean, ‘raped’?”

“Will you stop asking what everything means? Raped means violently fucked against your will, Truman! That’s what rape is! I was beaten up, questioned, held down and fucked! Now, would you stop looking at me that way? I’m the lucky one: you’ll be sick to your stomach when you see what they’ve done to Herminia.”

“Mike Henderson...” his voice was tight with tension “... beat you...” he lowered slowly onto the chair “... and raped you?”

Her chin trembled furiously regardless of a toothy grip on her lower lip. She nodded. Her eyes burned, but she managed to keep them dry.

He came to her end of the table, pulled close a chair for himself and grasped her shoulders, maneuvering for a view of her lowered face. “Let me see, you,” he said, his voice as tender as a kitten’s purr. She relented to the pressure of a finger crooked below her chin allowing her face to be lifted. “That’s a black eye,” he murmured almost inaudibly, “and those are stitches,” he said, tenderly touching the wound on her throat. “I thought something didn’t look right. That’s why you’ve been staying so far away?” He looked again to her eye, kissed it and pulled her into an embrace. “Oh my Beth, my dear sweet Beth.”

Her resolve crumbled and a flood of tears poured from her eyes. Her legs felt as though they too would crumble. Holding her hands feebly in his own, he looked on helplessly as she convulsed in unrestrained sobbing. The release drained her final reserve of strength, physical or mental. She was suddenly at the point of exhaustive collapse with legs and arms that were uselessly weak. She leaned forward to rest her head against his shoulder. The comfort she felt in his embrace lowered her eyelids and softened her breathing. When they opened again, she found herself being carried in Truman’s arms. She had to blink twice to be sure it wasn’t a dream. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’re falling asleep. I’m taking you to your room.”

“No, not downstairs. I want to stay here with you. Can’t I just rest for a while in your hammock?”

“Sure you can,” he answered. He turned and carried her to the hammock, pressing his lips to her forehead as he lowered her in.

“Please, don’t leave me alone. Stay here, if I doze off.”

“Close your eyes, Beth. I’ll be right here, I promise.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was dark. Truman sat several feet away upon a stool, his back to her, his feet crossed and resting on the railing of the patio appearing contemplative. Fingers interlaced behind his head, he stared without seeing across the beach to the wide sea beyond. “What time is it?” Beth mumbled through a dry mouth.

“Oh, you’re awake!” he said, rotating his head. “It’s five-twenty. The sky is starting to grow light at the horizon. How do you feel?”

“Better, much better. Thank you.” She stretched luxuriously in the hammock. “You haven’t slept?”

“No, I haven’t, but I’m fine.” He stood and ambled towards her. “There’s fresh coffee, would you like a cup?”

“I would, yes, thank you very much.”

Truman returned shortly carrying a tray containing rolls and a pot of steaming coffee placing it on a table beside the hammock. He poured and with his finger hooking a coffee cup, pointed towards the heavens. “Look at the sunrise,” he urged.

“It’s so beautiful!” she said softly after maneuvering in the hammock for a view. The emerging sun painted the water of the Caribbean and the sky above it a deep burgundy. They sipped coffee, not speaking, just watching and dunked their rolls while familiar stars faded into the lightening atmosphere. Gradually, the colors brightened and spread, sending spears of pink light through holes in the clouds.

“Beth,” Truman said at length, breaking the silence, “how do you really feel? I mean, what I’m asking is, shouldn’t you see a doctor? You know, to be sure that everything is okay.”

“I’ve already been to a doctor, thank you,” she answered with a sigh, distressed that such a priceless sunrise should announce the arrival of another day in which first thoughts would chill her to the bone, and wondered how many similar mornings she would need to endure. “There was no serious bodily damage. I’ll recover. I have to go now, Herminia needs me.” She struggled to release herself from the swaying net.

“There’s no need, relax. I hired a nurse. She’s with her right now – everything’s okay. And, if you’d like, I can have Doña Cecilia fix a nice fruit salad with yogurt and granola, the way you like.”

“No, I’m fine.” She stretched her cup towards him. “Just a refill, please.” He inched his chair closer and poured. “Beth, last night when you were telling me what happened, there were some things I didn’t understand. I’d like to…”

“Like to what? Go over it again, every bloody detail? What? What didn’t you understand?”

“Well, you said, when you were going to return the money, they grabbed you from the sidewalk. How was that?”

“How was that? Simple: one of them came up from behind, smashed my hand against the side of the car, and threw me in.”

“But why? Wouldn’t you give them the money? Is that what it was?”

“No, that’s not it. I had the money in my hand. The reason they kidnapped me was because they thought I worked for someone named Sal, and they wanted to know everything I knew about Gordon Edward.”

“About Gordon? Are you completely sure about that? Why should they think you know anything about him?”

“Probably because of something Herminia said; I don’t know. The questions were ludicrous. For the most part, I didn’t know what was being asked. He started out with the accusation that this Sal had hired Herminia and me to steal his money. Somehow, in his sick mind, I’m Sal’s girlfriend and I wouldn’t answer his stupid questions because I was protecting

him. Look, I got the impression that he thinks this guy is Gordon Edward's competition or something like that. Raping me was supposed to be punishment to this 'boyfriend,' because I wouldn't tell them anything about his brother's log barges. It was all completely insane! I had no idea of what any of that meant until yesterday, when Herminia told me Leon said Gordon Edward's cocaine comes hidden in log barges. Anyhow, I begged Mike to believe me, that I don't know anyone named Sal or anything about cocaine trafficking. It did no good, because then he raped me. That's all. His disgusting friends held me down on a table with a knife stuck in my throat and he did it."

Truman's eyes glazed over in disbelief and rage. From deep within his throat, a strange sound escaped. "I'll kill him! I'll cut that stinking bastard's balls off!" he shouted. His coffee cup sailed the width of the patio to smash against the far wall.

"No, Truman, stop!" Beth cried out. "I don't want any more horrible things to happen, with you involved, dead or in jail. Please, I want to rest and have it all be over. Later, some other time when it doesn't hurt so much, we can talk about it. But for now, please, I'd rather we don't even mention it. I just need some time, okay?"

"I'm not going to just let this pass. Oh no! Just tell me how can I find this bastard and I'll never mention it again."

"Stop, Truman, stop! Get a grip on yourself and sit down! We're not talking about something that happened to you! It was me! I was raped and the last thing I want now is to sit here and discuss the details with you. I wasn't going to tell you anything, because I was afraid you might react this way. Don't prove me right. Besides, I'm not finished with you."

"Not finished about what?"

"Think about it, mister: how do you suppose I feel about you trying to seduce me the day after I was raped?"

Momentarily startled, Truman failed to react, then a faint smile rippled across his face only to vanish. He furrowed his brow then leaned into his hands and began to rub his knuckles on the sides of his head. "Beth, I've spent the entire night regretting what I said earlier. I was lying for Gordon's sake, and there is no way I can sit here and do it any longer." He didn't look at her as he spoke, but kept his face bowed into his hands. "When I told you that Herminia must have misunderstood what Leon said, I was misleading you. The truth is that, in large part, what Herminia said is correct: Gordon does traffic cocaine, but I can assure you, he has never engaged in violence and definitely would not have anything to do with the likes of Mike Henderson."

Beth held her gaze on Truman, searching for his eyes, but he wouldn't lift them to her. "Are you really all that sure he wouldn't? I'm not. Maybe everything Herminia said is one hundred percent accurate."

"It isn't, and yes, I am sure. I've known Gordon for many years and I know him well enough to say with certainty that he would not associate with anyone so crude as you describe this son of a bitch to be. You must understand: Gordon's a cleanliness nut. He wouldn't so much as talk to this guy, let alone work with him. I can also say that Gordon does not engage in violence, in fact he has made it a commitment."

"A commitment to non-violence? For God's sake Truman, he's an international cocaine smuggler, you just said so yourself!"

"Don't look at me that way, I'm serious. He isn't a Hollywood drug smuggler, this is real life. He was a fisherman previously. I know him from then, and I can tell you with certainty that in all this time he has never resorted to violence. Plus, he got involved with trafficking a long time ago under circumstances that were not entirely his own doing."

"I see, Saint Gordon, the drug trafficker!"

"I didn't say he is a saint, although he thinks he is. He didn't enter the business the way people do now, with the coke in one hand and a gun in the other. The people who set him up worked for your government. I should tell you about it sometime."

“You should tell me about it right now. I’d like to believe your friend had no part in this, but frankly, I’m beginning to doubt that you can convince me.”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

“Of course, aren’t they all, with you? Go on, convince me with your long story!”

Truman began hesitantly, then, as he became immersed in the account, the words flowed, creating not a narration for her ear, but a mental image of Gordon Edward nineteen years earlier.

It was 1978 and Gordon Edward was just another fisherman struggling for existence, pursuing the forever dwindling schools off Limon’s shore. Costa Rica, a defenseless nation without armed forces, had, at that time, been the apprehensive witness to Nicaragua’s civil war unfolding across its northern border. The entire nation breathed a collective sigh of relief when the inevitable happened: the Somoza regime collapsed, ending the fighting. Nevertheless, with it supposedly finished, armored personnel carriers, helicopters and airplanes, offensive weapons that gave them the capacity to overrun Costa Rica in a matter of days, continued to arrive. Long a friend of the United States, they listened in horror to daily broadcasts of anti-American propaganda by the new Sandinista government. Assurances by the US to come to their aid in the event of an invasion, instead of soothing their fears, convinced them of its imminence. One fine day in the midst of this turmoil, two American men, Mr. Hall and Mr. Tand, came aboard Gordon’s fishing boat. They asked if he would be interested in joining a secret project that, by working to defeat the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, could be considered a patriotic service to his country in her time of peril. They explained that financing the resistance in Nicaragua required a great deal of money, much more than would be forthcoming from a reluctant US Congress.

“As rebel patriots have been forced to do in wars throughout history,” they explained, “we are forced to use illegal methods to accomplish a greater good. Huge profits, sufficient to fill the financial gaps left by Congress, can be earned for the cause by transporting cocaine.” They had the operation planned in its entirety, all they lacked were the right people. Costa Rican log barges loaded with cargo harvested on the Pacific Coast routinely passed through the Panama Canal. The drug would be there waiting, having arrived overland through the Darien jungle. Line handlers, who routinely board every vessel passing through the locks, would load it aboard. Log barges were selected for several reasons: they carried no crew who might otherwise stumble across the drug and, bound for Costa Rica, not the US or Europe, they would not arouse undue suspicion in the tightly monitored canal. Additionally, the trip to the Port of Limon was coastal, never venturing into international waters where US Coast Guard vessels operated. Edward’s job would be delivering the coke to a Contra commander. The rendezvous point was an estuary just north of El Bluff, Nicaragua. The commander would, in turn, hand cash over to him. The distribution of payments to various officials within Costa Rica would be entrusted to him. The remainder of the cash was to be delivered to a certain San José banker for deposit in a blind account from which the Colombians would be paid.

Edward was way ahead of them. It was obvious that they hadn’t picked just any boat tied at the fishing wharf. He had only recently installed a new 671-T Detroit in his engine room, making the inconspicuous old hull the fastest and, by far, the most reliable of Limon’s fishing fleet. What was also blatantly obvious was that they knew very little about him personally, for if they had, they wouldn’t have talked they way they did. Gordon had recounted with pride many times the answer he gave them.

“My black skin got you boys thinking I’m one of your plantation niggers? Looka me,” he demanded. Hall’s head had been turned away. “Looka me, gringo! I’m only 21 years old and this boat is mine. How’s a poor black boy whose father has a vegetable stand in the market do that?” he asked, slowly tapping his temple with an outstretched index finger. “With this!

That's how! I used my head, played the angles, worked hard and cut the right deals. And now you come here, thinking I'm going to buy your bullshit appeal to patriotism and 'ya suh, Ya suh, Missa Hall' myself right into prison? No sir! Not this nigger! You want this done? You're right, you came to the right man. I am the guy! However, this man needs protection. You wrap that coke up as though it's something else, medical supplies, maybe. Then give me a bill of lading, whatever it takes to cover my ass, paper-wise. I want something saying I'm an innocent man who believes he's delivering so many pieces of medical supplies all proper like. If I'm caught I want my lawyer to be able to say I had no idea, or any way to know there was cocaine in those packages."

Hall, taking notes, looked up from his pad. "We can do all of that, Gordy. Those are fine ideas. You think fast on your feet. I like that, too."

"You wanna know what I'd like," Gordon asked. "I'd like you to get a few things straight, so we can talk together. First off, my name isn't Gordy. You're Mr. Hall, he's Mr. Tand, and me? I'm Mr. Edward. Got it?"

"You're right, Mr. Edward, sorry. I had only thought that 'Gordy' would be more familiar for you, more relaxed."

"Mr. Edward relaxes me just fine, Mr. Hall," he said. "Now just one more thing: those little bitty numbers you were throwing about for what my share should be. I didn't like them. They weren't making me feel relaxed. Let's discuss them one more time."

"So? Well, what happened then?" Beth asked.

"What do you mean?"

"How did he get into politics and all of that?"

"It was years later, in November of '86, that Hall showed up in Limon on one of his rare visits, in the company of another American, John Sinclair – surprise, surprise! Well, Gordon knew the moment he saw the white hair at the end of the pier that there was trouble. The only times he had seen the weird, white-haired, cowboy had been when problems developed and invariably, soon after his visit, the person or persons responsible were problems no longer.

"They were there to deliver bad news: a major shakeup that reached all the way to the White House threatened to expose them all. The operation was being shut down, permanently and at once. Gordon was to destroy anything incriminating and forget the operation ever existed. When they left, the idea of resuming it as a private venture with him as its master occurred to him. He began several days later, seeking out the same people the North Americans had used and asking if they had any desire to become rich. A team was soon assembled, all eager to begin. However, the problem Hall had warned about and its magnitude became glaringly apparent when the world's headlines announced the uncovering of the Iran-Contra Affair. For safety's sake, Gordon moved all records to an aunt's house and, with travel arrangements and luggage close at hand, watched the live broadcasts of the US congressional hearings. The same people who obviously had been the architects of both schemes endured grueling questioning yet, to his immense relief, not one revealed his operation. With the hearings concluded and all quiet, a first shipment of baking powder arrived in Houston without incident. Assured of a secure supply route, Gordon met his American wholesaler, ironed out the details, and soon thereafter cocaine began moving northward in a flow that has continued uninterrupted and undetected to this day.

"Without a war to support, Gordy was soon fabulously wealthy. He established himself as successful businessman with roots in the waterfront and a penchant for philanthropy. Two schools within sight of his office window were built for the community by charities he founded and financed. Granted, this was done with great fanfare the year before he ran for his first public office, but he felt he was fulfilling his destiny as Limon's political savior, and soon had a loyal constituency to continually feed his ego. Then came an earthquake with its epicenter directly under Limon. Gordy personally, did more to

help the people than did the federal government and, following each succeeding hurricane that hit the coast, his charities were the first to arrive – with the cameras rolling, of course.”

“You sure seem to know a lot about him and the things he does.” She was propped on one elbow in the hammock trying to maintain balance that she might face him. The smell of aftershave was gone, that was an improvement.

“Yes I do, and that’s why I cannot believe that he had anything to do with what happened, regardless what Herminia claims Leon said. Can’t you see, by the way he became involved, that he’s not some kind of a street thug? So, I think that we definitely shouldn’t go to the police about Mike Henderson because that would only bring the house down on Gordy. I can take care of this creep. Just tell me…”

“Why is it, Truman, that you sound more interested in covering up for Gordon Edward than you are in me? I don’t give a damn about him, all right, and what do you mean ‘we’? I’m sorry, but what happened is personal, very personal. What I do or don’t do about it is my decision, not yours, and my reasons for not calling the police have absolutely nothing to do with protecting your friend! I simply don’t want to talk about it with anyone, especially anyone in a corrupt police department where Mike Henderson has friends and influence, and I have no proof.”

“Do you know why I prepared that special dinner for you last night?”

“No. Why?”

“Because, there was nothing I would rather have done yesterday than meet your bus. I had pictured myself there, lifting you by the waist from the steps, but I couldn’t allow myself to do it. All day, I stayed away, avoiding you, every minute fighting an overwhelming temptation to come to you, because I’ve done a terrible injustice to you by allowing us to become involved the way we have. I’m so very sorry, Beth, it was all a terrible mistake: I shouldn’t have allowed things to go so far. I’m no good for you. There are too many things, things that happened during the war, and after. The effects are all around me and they’re awful and permanent, certainly not things you should be exposed to.”

“Oh great, Truman! Just what I need! When did you come to this decision?”

“I thought about little else the entire time I was away. That’s what the dinner was about, a celebration of you returning and an explanation of why we shouldn’t continue as we were. Then your letter was here and I became more certain that, as difficult as this is to do, it’s for your own good and I have to see it through. Now, with everything that happened to you, I see that I can’t use my carefully rehearsed speech. It’s a long time ago that I should have used it and none of this would have happened. I can only apologize that I didn’t, but now it’s far too late for it. I’ll have to do what I hoped to avoid and tell you the whole truth.”

“Now there’s a novel idea!”

He smiled sheepishly then puffed twice into the air. “Whew, okay, I don’t know if I’ll ever be any more ready than I am right now.” He spoke in measured tones, nevertheless, his voice shook. “This is a very difficult thing to say, but yes, I do work for Gordon Edward. I was that Contra commander he delivered to in El Bluff.”

Kind, generous Truman, trafficking cocaine? It had been a long time since that frostbitten morning in Green Bay when it seemed that life couldn’t get any worse. She knew in that instant how wrong she had been: it seemed that as long as there was the breath of life yet within her, things could still go downhill.

“You! You bastard! What about Herminia? Did you do that to Herminia, too? Is Mike another one of your ‘friends’ doing jobs for you and your pal? What he did to me, who gave him that idea?”

“Hey, now wait a minute! Take it easy! You’re going overboard here. You don’t understand, it’s not like that at all. I didn’t have anything to do with what happened to the two of you, nor did Gordon. I’m as hurt, angry and confused as you

about that, maybe more so, because in some ways I'm partially responsible for some of Herminia's other problems. I invited you here last night to tell you not to involve yourself with the likes of me."

"Well, it's about damn time!"

"I know, you're right, but this isn't the sort of thing you can go around telling people. I've avoided the violence associated with this business and, somehow, that convinced me that I wasn't one of the 'bad guys'. Before meeting you and Herminia, that was apology enough for me. I never concerned myself with what became of the coke after it left our hands. It was simply my work: pick up the drugs, transport them, keep the other people who work for Gordon content and well paid, all with never a second thought for how it might affect the lives of those who eventually use the stuff. Being honest with myself about what I do and what it means for others is something that has nagged my conscience only since you and Herminia came along. Before, I'd always been able to push aside any fleeting doubts. Well, no longer. Getting to know Herminia and talking with you has brought it all into the forefront of my mind, and I can't stop thinking about what might be happening with all those thousands of users. You both have caused me to begin questioning myself about who I am. Frankly, I don't like what I see, but I don't know what I could do to change anything other than quit, and it's just not possible, not now. Too many people rely on me and Gordy is in the midst of reelection."

"But Truman, a drug trafficker? Why did you start in the first place?"

"The same as Gordy, the war."

"Truman, you can't spend the remainder of your life blaming the war for everything, that's ridiculous: you're a responsible adult."

"Okay, of course, I'm responsible for my own actions, but when the war ended, I was walking around numb. I simply followed the flow of things, and events steered the course of my life, I didn't." Beth's dubious stare caused him to fidget uncomfortably. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"You're making it rather difficult."

"Then you should know how it all began. You, yourself told me once that the best route to self-understanding is to put your motivations into words that another person can understand. So, let me tell you. Are you willing to listen?"

"All right, go ahead. One last story."

* * *

Managua, January 11, 1976. The chauffeur cut the wheel sharply from one side to the other cursing under his breath as he inched forward trying to nudge the car through the milling throng. Truman, now a Major, was sitting in the back seat of his shiny Lincoln town car with tinted windows, directing police operations. From this vantage of seeing without being seen, he was attempting, if not to bring an end to this street demonstration, to prevent the next by identifying those inciting the campesinos and radioing the information to Guardia Nacional troops ringing the plaza. Suddenly, the windshield shattered. An urban Molotov cocktail, the bottom of its plastic container filled with concrete and protruding nails, erupted across the chest of his chauffeur. Burning gasoline sailed over his shoulder, splashing across Truman's face and chest. Enveloped from head to waist, he dove through the door of the still moving car. He dared not breathe for fear of inhaling fire and, as a walking Roman candle made for a patch of grass behind a knee-high fence. He rolled and writhed on the ground leaving behind roasted flesh, cloth and smoldering hair as the blaze extinguished. A soldier rushed to the car moments too late to aid the driver whose body thrashed in the midst of the inferno, and began shooting at the locks of bouncing black hair and green shirt of the youth weaving through the mob who had thrown the bottle. Other troops joined in, firing at random into the huge crowd and the entire plaza erupted into bedlam. Bodies crumpled to the pavement as screams, gunfire and smoke obliterated cease fire

commands. Terrorized demonstrators stampeded in random directions, colliding with one another. Those who, in their frenzied dash, were unfortunate enough to trip over a body were trampled to death. Riots and shootings gripped the city for days and footage of the carnage appeared on television worldwide.

High collared shirts and turtlenecks later were used to hide some of the scars on his neck and chest, but wrinkled black and red scar tissue covered the left half of his chin continuing down his throat. While he was recovering in the hospital, Lucia and the children moved back to Jinotega.

In 1977, promoted now to Lieutenant Colonel and transferred into the depleted officer corps of the infantry, Truman was leading an assault team around a bend in a dirt road north of Ocotal, near the Honduran border, when a whistling rifle round cut a furrow across his right cheek and punched a neat hole through his ear an instant before the first cracks of AK-47's rang out. As he dove for cover behind a rock at the side of the road, the next round clipped off the tip of his ring finger and bored through his intestines. He wasn't fully recovered from those injuries when, on July 17, 1978, the Samozas regime collapsed. The government's death knell was actually sounded six months earlier, on December 23, 1977, just prior to midnight when a violent earthquake struck Managua, collapsing half the buildings and burying thousands of people below rubble. The magnitude of the devastation focused the world's attention on the Nicaraguan capital as rescue efforts began. Foreign news teams that rushed in picked up on the parallel story of the previously ignored political strife gripping the nation. Sandinista activists seized upon the opportunity of focused international media by staging enormous protests and provoking confrontations with the Guardia Nacional, even in the midst of rescue efforts. Already convinced of widespread corruption within the Samozas government, international reporters gave wide coverage to the conflict and abuses of civil rights by security forces. The government was again charged with corruption. This time, it was the Samozas family itself accused of misappropriating (outright stealing) donated earthquake relief funds. Furthermore, 'rescue teams' from units of the Guardia Nacional, were video taped dynamiting damaged buildings with the wretched pleas of trapped victims clearly discernible before the blast. The government claim was that the screams were later dubbed in to discredit the Guardia Nacional. Nevertheless, in an avalanche of events, the government was further hampered and weakened by feature stories that included accounts of atrocities by a government mired with rampant corruption, while the flow of arms from Russia and East Germany to the Sandinistas increased, creating a rebel army from the mobs of protesters. The Sandinistas, already enjoying widespread popular support, quickly overwhelmed attempts by the Guardia Nacional to contain them and the Samozas family ran, ending it all, or so it was thought.

Recruiting within the officer corps for training with the newly formed and highly classified Contra Officers Combat Readiness Training (COCRT), sponsored by the CIA, began even before the Samozas family's hurried departure. Truman was among one of the first groups of officers to depart for the training center located on the Honduran island, Roatan. Lucia wasn't permitted to accompany him to the top-secret facility. (Technically, the US was 'not involved': the official decision by CIA Director, William Casey, to 'offer support to' the Contras or Frente de Democracia Nacional, FDN came later, in 1981.) Much to Truman's surprise, John Hall was one of the two CIA men conducting interviews at the training center. The other, whom he was destined to know well, was Louis Tand.

Hall came to see Truman in his room one night and disclosed in strictest confidence that he and Mr. Tand were seeking a dedicated patriot to perform some rather difficult operations vital to support of the fighting men. Truman had already proven he could be relied upon for discretion while assembling dossiers on students in Managua. If he would but assure him of that same level, the assignment would be his. He could say nothing further. Truman enthusiastically accepted the blind offer, proud to have been selected. Assignment to the Caribbean coast and promotion to Commandant immediately followed.

As a guerrilla commander fighting the Sandinistas he came to know the Atlantic coast intimately, from the Caribbean port town of Bluefields, north to the frontier and well into Honduras. He and his men marched in blistering heat through the pine forests along the wide coastal plain, extending inland one hundred sweltering miles before the first low hills. In swift surprise attacks, they assaulted Sandinista installations, then melted into the inhospitable expanse of uninhabited marsh, earning for Truman the title of Commandment Cobra, among friend and foe alike. They swatted mosquitoes and crawled through crocodile infested swamps in the flood plains of snaking rivers. In camp and on interminable marches, he studied the first language of the province, that of the Indians. Fortunately, he already spoke the second, strongly accented Caribbean English, in use by the black population, and the third, Spanish.

The Sandinistas were not just the government in control of the country; they also had the loyal backing of the peons throughout the region, making life difficult. But loyalty was something that could be bought with cold hard cash, so the CIA provided it. The cover it bought translated into life itself for Truman and his men. More than just money was provided: work visas were available for family members allowing them to travel to the United States. There, not only could they earn a salary to send home, but were safe from conscription into the Sandinista army. Scholarships at American universities for children were also in the offering, and Truman made sure that those who aided his troops received it all.

John Hall and his secret mission were but a dim memory when his sealed instructions arrived. Truman was directed to rendezvous with a Costa Rican fisherman on the narrow peninsula forming the breakwater for the port of Bluefields. The fisherman and his boat were to be found hidden under leaves in the wee hours in an estuary north of El Bluff. Buried under the fishing nets in the bottom of his boat were twenty-five kilos of ninety-three percent pure cocaine, disguised as packages of surgical bandages. Truman's instructions were to move the cocaine north, through a series of Contra safe houses, to a contact in Juticalpa, Honduras.

On the first delivery, his Honduran contact handed him two large bundles of American dollars. The money in one was his to be distributed among those who offered assistance, his men, and to cover operating expenses. The other was to be returned to the Costa Rican, a young fisherman by the name of Gordon Edward. He was also given the number for an account in his name at a Cayman Islands bank. He was told a deposit would be made in the account following each successful delivery. Truman attempted to refuse the payment: the money was supposed to be for the war effort. He was informed that refusal wasn't an option.

After the Iran-Contra Affair and the US pullout, the war ended abruptly. Without bullets to fire, the fighting just seemed to die out, and it was over. With his family dead, he had no desire to return to Jinotega, in fact, he had no desires at all, or anywhere he wished to go. He drifted into Bluefields with nothing but the clothes he wore, but in an offshore numbered account was all the money he could ever want. He didn't want anything. He spent his days drinking Flor de Caña rum in a rented room in Bluefields which, with the shifting wind, smelled alternately of fish or hot tar from a nearby asphalt plant. On trips to the liquor store, he imagined faces seen to be relatives of wartime victims, so he hired a runner to buy his booze and kept his door locked. One day, Gordon Edward appeared with something for him to do that would occupy his mind. He immediately accepted and, until only recently, had been grateful for the job.

* * *

"Some job! Sounds like you've had such a difficult life, Truman and I'm sorry for you, but at the moment, I have my own problems."

"I certainly understand and anything I can do to help, I will."

“I should leave here immediately, but we’ve been through a lot and need a place to recuperate. Cabañas Arrecifes is perfect for that, so I think we will stay until Herminia is better able to move. When she’s up to it, we’ll find another place, but meanwhile you’ll just have to learn to deal with seeing us around.”

“No, it won’t bother me, in fact, I insist. I’ll take care of all of Herminia’s medical expenses, and she definitely shouldn’t leave until the doctors have done everything possible for her. And you too, of course.”

“Of course,” she said, “well, good-bye then, we’ll probably see each other tomorrow,” and descended the stairs wishing to high heaven there was someone she could talk with. Herminia was too removed culturally and linguistically to relate. She thought of calling Caroline, but then she was too self-centered to care about another person. Sylvia came to mind. She recalled the sad story of Sylvia’s life, losing her love and hopelessly trying to replace it with her rotten brat. She would be the perfect one, but then, Mike was her son. At least she had him: Beth was to be left with nothingness.

□ □ □

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sylvia usually took breakfast on the deck. It could be a little cool sometimes, even with the Plexiglas windbreak she'd had installed under the railing but, surrounded by such magnificence, one rarely noticed. Today, however, with so much on her mind, she wanted time alone before having to deal with Mike. Breakfast in bed, still snuggled into the downy comfort of her pillow sounded perfect: she rang the kitchen.

Breakfast arrived in the hands of the new girl, Maria. There was no newspaper or coffee on the tray, the overcooked eggs were cold and the silverware was rolled into a paper napkin. "What is this?" she demanded. "Take it back and, Maria, before going down, wake Mister Mike. Don't let him frighten you either. Just tell him I want to see him right away."

"But, Doña," she answered, cowering like a whipped puppy. "Mister Mike left early this morning."

"To where?"

"I... I don't know, Doña Sylvia," she answered in a whisper. "He ran through the lobby without speaking."

Sylvia sighed in frustration. "Okay forget it, just bring me a proper breakfast and, please understand, this is a hotel. I shall expect cream and sugar in their proper containers, a cloth napkin and a folded copy of La Nacion. Remember to speak English too, that's why you were hired. Now let's see how well you can do."

So he'd left! No backbone: when things get rough, run away – just like his father!

* * *

When she met Sal and started selling cocaine, Shannon took to the business like a natural. Then later, back in the city, his volume of street sales grew so large that Sal became a twice-weekly commuter on the Boston/New York shuttle. Another big plus about Shannon's return to the old neighborhood, she remembered distinctly, was that he and Sal saw each other less frequently, contributing greatly to the quality of her life. By far, however, her greatest reward was the joy of seeing her son achieve something at long last in his life. Then after years of steady growth, the bottom fell out. One minute Sal's supplier, Charlie, was there, the next – he wasn't. Five federal officers showed up at the place where he worked and, just like that, he was gone and, with him out of the picture, there wasn't any coke to sell. Sal came up with the idea of the Costa Rica trip to see if perhaps they could hook up with Charlie's connection. He knew the man's name was Enrique and that he and Charlie always met in San José at the bar in Hotel Paradise. That was about all he knew, except that the one kilo packages always carried a seal, or trade mark, bearing the likeness of the cartoon character Tweety-Bird. He said that Sylvia would have to be the one to go because of a passport problem of his, stemming from a real estate deal the government didn't consider legal. The cover story he created was supposed to help her locate the man: she was to let it be known that she had a message for Enrique from his Boston friend Charlie, a message delivered from his deathbed. The message would concern a girlfriend, Tweety. She was highly skeptical but, especially for Shannon's sake, felt she had to try.

It seemed eons ago, although only three years had passed since that first trip. Every damn night she'd sat in the bar at Hotel Paradise. Suggesting that the girlfriend was named Tweety was, according to Sal, the key that would lead her directly to her contact. Every time she mentioned Tweety to anyone, however, she had been looked at as though she was nuts. She was beginning to believe that they were right. Then one night, everything changed, including the direction of her life, when she met

Caroline Steepleton. At least, that was her name when her husband was away, her new friend said with a light, twittering laugh. Her husband, François, was the Latin American representative of his family's Parisian business and traveled extensively throughout South and Central America, wholesaling French wines and other food products. When he was home, she used his name and social stature to experience life as Caroline LeClerc, the socialite who, together with her husband, mixed with other influential couples. They regularly attended the national theater, musical recitals and political affairs. At the prestigious country club, François played golf while she lounged with other women's husbands in the clubhouse bar, orchestrating countless real-life dramas, complete with steamy sex scenes and her as leading lady. When he wasn't home, she broke contact with his clique and retreated to her palatial home on the side of a mountain, in Puriscal, sleeping away the days, living for the nights, when she would revert to her other self, Caroline Steepleton. She became a creature of control, intrigue and sex, whose prey was to be found in the fantasy world of San José's red light district. When they met and Sylvia asked about the long-sought Enrique, she was led directly to him.

Within the week, she completed her first buy and immediately called Shannon to send down four of his gang members to mule the coke back to Boston. The enterprise proved to be a financial success, a whoppingly huge financial success. Actually, Sylvia hadn't thought beyond that first trip. Any long-term business plans centered on real estate. There were other interests that involved her deeply, even on an emotional level, any of which she would rather devote her time than international drug smuggling. She did it all for Shannon – at least that's what she told herself. The truth was considerably different: cocaine trafficking turned a quick and enormous profit, and it was real, real easy. Additionally, the level of excitement that surged through her veins from the first moment of talking with Enrique was unmatched by anything she had done previously, regardless of how profitable it may have been. She couldn't just walk away from a rush like that. She had to go back, at least once more.

As time dragged by and the trips became more frequent, a close personal friendship developed with Caroline. Sylvia was often a guest in Caroline's Puriscal mansion where she often practiced her favorite hobby of surveying available real estate. Caroline introduced her to a twenty-five-room country inn that she liked immediately, envisioning a slowed pace with placid afternoons on the deck, capturing the views in watercolors. The only problems were that it was in need of extensive remodeling and hopelessly overpriced so, after several attempts at negotiation fell flat, she put the idea to rest. But then, five teenagers were shot down in Boston, one mortally wounded – dead! Shannon claimed he didn't do it. Even Sylvia didn't believe him, and she was his mother! She had to get out of the country in a hurry and didn't have time to look around so, despite the fact that she couldn't negotiate a fair price, she bought the place.

Caroline was thrilled for a reason of her own apart from the healthy commission she earned: the extensive grounds included a superb twelve-stall stable sturdily built of river rock, surrounded by hectares of lush pastureland and neither Sylvia nor her son had any interest in horses. Since childhood, dressage had been a special thrill and, as it required absolute obedience of the mount, it was particularly important that hers be male, a stallion, not a gelding, and of the very finest breeding. Clamping a magnificent animal such as that (fifteen hundred pounds of pure, living, muscle), between her legs and bending its will to hers was, to her, the ultimate sport. She particularly appreciated how a well-trained horse – as should any well-trained man – would respond to the slightest pressure offered by her thighs as guidance, and how a sharp flick of the crop, snapped so the beast could hear it, instantly stifled disobedience. She liked that. She bought a birthday present for herself from her husband; an Andalusian stallion, fifteen hands high, snow white, and with bloodlines to some of the best stables in Spain. He didn't know he was buying his wife such a generous present, but then he was off on another trip. He owed it to her. After all, leaving her all alone the way he did, any girl would be bored – need a hobby.

Expensive as the stallion was, by North American standards, it was a steal. The same animal in the US or Canada would be worth a small fortune. Caroline advised Sylvia that a wise investment would be to buy another and resell it up north. Sylvia knew absolutely nothing about horses, but commercial advertising in equestrian magazines for similar animals convinced her of the enormous potential for profit. With a successful sale behind them, Sylvia gave the green light to repeat the process when animals became available and with that La Hacienda became a horse-trading enterprise, apart from the hotel. When Caroline suggested that a stable boy was necessary, Sylvia agreed to that as well, asking only that they also acquire four or five trail horses for guests. For Caroline, it was perfect: not only was she able to slip her veterinary bills in with the others and feed her enormous stallion on grain Sylvia paid for, but she was also relieved of shoveling horseshit.

Despite a new name and a clean slate with the law Mike, after less than three months in the country, started in again. The incorrigible bastard got into fistfight in a barroom with a guy who turned out to be an undercover narc. And he, a Mick to the core, compounded the problem by offering a bribe. Caroline had often boasted that with the connections she had, the law in Costa Rica was nothing to be feared, so with heart in throat, Sylvia called begging her assistance. She drove to Police Headquarters, half expecting to be arrested too, but found Mike, not in custody, but in the cafeteria chatting amiably over a cup of coffee with Caroline and a senior police official.

* * *

The door opened and, without knocking, Maria reappeared. The tray set across her lap had a cup without a saucer, and by its side, atop a napkin, cloth this time, a soup spoon, steak knife and bent fork. Culture was beyond the grasp of these people. "Mister Mike is back," she announced.

Ah, so he'd come crawling back with his tail between his legs.

"Forget breakfast, Maria. I'll just have coffee out on the deck. Tell Mr. Mike that I expect him to join me."

She sat in the fresh air awaiting her son, admiring the hotel and remembering. In the early days, with each trip down there had been changes to be noticed: some good, some questionable and others bad. The deeply rutted and switchback entrance from the highway had always been passable only by four-wheel drive vehicles and too narrow when meeting head-on: she had once had the harrowing experience of backing through a hairpin at the edge of a cliff to allow the passage of an electric company truck. She arrived from the States to the wonderful discovery that bulldozers had widened it, cutting into the cliff face. Another time, Mike's crew of workers had built a new garage, large enough to accommodate two-dozen automobiles. An aviary came into existence with the number and species of birds flying about inside increasing each visit. The manmade pond had not been filled in as she had suggested, but repaired. Goldfish swam beneath the bridge and a fountain gurgled from a pile of rocks. A fresh coat of paint brightened the hotel walls and the roof had been completely recovered. Additionally, a charming lattice-covered patio appeared where had been a garbage dumpster and the entire lower level was torn out. That was the good.

The questionable was that Caroline become a familiar sight, not just at the stables, but in the pool, behind the bar and using the kitchen as though it was her own. She and Mike appeared to have their ups and downs, but apparently had built a tentative friendship as well as an enormous demand for bar supplies. Sylvia might have put up a stink but, as she had so often, Caroline came to the rescue whenever Mike encountered another of Costa Rica's insurmountable bureaucratic obstacles to just about anything. Naturally, the help was as self-serving as it was altruistic: two of the new phone lines Sylvia paid for ended up in the stables.

Perhaps the amusing was to watch Mike get Caroline to pay for house privileges by prevailing upon her to collect building supplies with her shiny-new, four-wheel-drive Mercedes.

The bad was simply Mike: as time passed, his friends came down in increasing numbers and stayed for longer periods. They put on a show of working whenever she was present, but their primary function appeared to be getting drunk, stoned and procuring prostitutes. Naturally, the greater their numbers, and the longer they stayed, the less interest Mike showed in carrying on with the work at hand. More and more, she would arrive to find them lollygagging at poolside with a harem of hookers. Remarkably, in view of the state he was usually in, he did continue to supervise a crew of laborers, and eventually the work on the deck and the lower level drew to a close.

The grand opening came and went, yet Mike, his black-leathered thugs and their whores continued to occupy the majority of the rooms. Staff she'd located and trained, would be gone when she next returned (fired 'for cause', he would invariably say), and she would then be stuck dealing with their complaints of abuse and compelled to pay Social Security benefits. Money was being spent as though a spigot had been left open, and any legitimate guests that showed up ran off in fear: she was beside herself. La Hacienda should at least have the appearance of profitability. It was, after all, the business she claimed to be the source of her cocaine earnings. His retort was that guestrooms should be open to the public only when not occupied by those who earned the money to buy the place. "If what you're worried about is the income," he had said, "I'll tell 'ya: Sal, is totally unnecessary. I got more than enough control over the Boston end without him, especially with the guys coming down all the time. All he ever does is cause trouble for people who are making him rich. Cut him out and save the money."

"That's funny," she snapped, "Sal told me almost the same thing: you're 'dead weight,' he said, and I should 'cut you loose.' Oh, stop worrying, I'm not giving up on you yet! I must have been out of my mind, but I said that I'd get rid of him before you." His head cocked with a smug smile and, at that moment, she could have strangled him. Did he actually think that she should rely solely upon the likes of him and 'his guys'? They were essentially children. Their entire lives would be spent on the underside of an upturned beer can, without an authority figure to tell them what to do, and Sal filled that slot perfectly. Like it or not, before the IRS started asking difficult questions, La Hacienda was going to become a hotel and managed as such – with or without Mike at the helm. She hired a manager and returned to Florida.

Rather than spend his days lying around La Hacienda drunk and stoned, occasionally supervising his workers, he began passing both days and nights in San José, scurrying from one brothel to another. On one outing, he started another brouhaha with the same cop as before, only this time he was found to be carrying an unregistered gun. Fortunately, Caroline came through again and, via a hair-raising flurry of telephone calls, each requiring 'a little something to show my appreciation', she arranged his immediate release, but the close call was infuriating. Sylvia couldn't believe it when later she laid eyes upon the officer who had given him so much trouble. From Mike's accounts, she had pictured a big, burly brute, but the cop turned out to be just a midget Indian, dressed like a circus clown in one of those multi-colored jackets the tourists were always buying. The top of his head barely came to her son's chest. And he called himself a fighting Irishman! That was it! Last straw! Despite cries of: 'It wasn't my fault. It was that fucking runt cop, he's got it in for me!' she called an end to it all. Mike's buddies were no longer to use La Hacienda; she'd put them up in a hotel. Then maybe, with Mike's contact with them reduced he would come around and be a little more responsible. Fat chance! They were back at La Hacienda the moment she returned to the States.

* * *

Such an empty feeling overcame her as Mike explained what he had done that morning, that it seemed the wind might whisk her from the deck. “Last night you let them go then this morning you suddenly decide to kill them but instead botch it all up and let them get away!” she screamed. Why had she been so cursed and what was she to do? He was an alcoholic, whore monger, lazy, rude, filthy and disrespectful but she couldn’t send him away. Where could he go? La Hacienda was, in truth, his hideout, permanent in nature. “They saw your car, too? Oh great! So now, they’re panicked and we’ll never find them. The entire operation is at risk!”

“What are you so worried about?” he asked, “those two ain’t going talk.”

She fixed him with a loathing stare. “Maybe not the whore, but that American woman isn’t going to sit still about being beaten and raped. Of course, she’ll get the police, you idiot!”

“Trust me, that cunt ain’t going to no damn cops.

“Woman, goddamn it!” Sylvia stared into eyes virtually identical to his father’s. How could she and mild-mannered William produce a son so stupid and utterly disrespectful of women, especially after all he had seen his mother do in defense of their dignity? It was a sure sign of male insecurity. “Can’t you get it through your skull that women are not ‘cunts or broads or bitches’” she screamed. She wasn’t fooled by his bullshit: oh no, not in the least! Only a blockhead would believe the hooker’s wild story, invented to save herself from a carving knife – *or* about Gordon Edward in the coke trade, no less; So Mike, being one, he, of course, believed. Then, using his nimble ability to twist things to his purpose claimed to misinterpret when she shouted that he should let go the woman he was raping like some drooling, low-life redneck! So, she thought, last night was no misunderstanding; he released them intentionally because he thought that, with them free, I’d close up operations and help him chase his non-existent pot of gold. Now this morning, just so he could be sure that they got away, he goes out and gives them a good scare that’s sure to put them in hiding. Bastard! “Where did you ever get the idea that you’re capable of independent thought? How many times have I told you that you’ll be okay if you just do what I tell you?” She was momentarily slowed, as it came to her what might be the source of his recent shift towards independence. “Oh I see!” she said, “it’s Caroline; she put you up to this!”

“Aw Sylvia, knock it off, huh? Caroline ain’t got nutting to do with this. It was your guinea boyfriend that set up this whole job and you know it. So stop crawling all over my ass.”

“Sal? You’re still trying to accuse Sal? I’ll have you know that he’s holding up his end, just fine! There aren’t any problems in Boston, but we sure do have a big one here in Costa Rica now that you’ve put those two women on the run!”

“You trust that wop? Wada `ya, crazy? Don’t you see? He was the one that sent the bitch down here. And I’m telling `ya, she’s already long-gone.”

“Woman! Can’t you say woman?”

“For fuck’s sake! Will `ya? The bitch lied to you and stole the money and still she’s a woman? All right then, if ‘the woman’ ain’t already on a plane, she soon will be. The bottom line is, she’s outta our hair – it’s over. But, don’t you see what happened, Sylvia? The American broad is Sal’s bitch. She didn’t meet you by chance – she came looking for `ya, but you ain’t got nutting to worry about from her no more. A thief like that sure as hell ain’t going to no cops, or that crack-head whore either. Oh, sorry mother, they’re women!”

“That’s ridiculous! If Sal wanted to take it, he could have when he had it in Boston.”

“No, he couldn’t, that’s just it. I figured it all out this morning. Don’t you see, if he took it then, he wouldn’t a’had nobody to pin it on. This here way, he can blame me, an you know that he’s always had it in for me – c’mon, you know that.”

Sal sent them? She doubted it. He was a man without vision. If he ever did successfully steal such an amount (something she doubted he had the capacity to do), he wouldn't know what to do with it, and, of course, he'd be on his own again. A man like him without someone to guide him would never earn the kind of money he was bringing in. No, Sal hadn't sent anyone: he wouldn't want to rock so profitable a boat. Yet, had those two women really stumble by chance across the money, as they claimed? Not likely. But, it was easy to see the source of their information. She could just picture her low-life son trying to win a free fuck with impressive stories of – and maybe even displaying – tuna cans stuffed full of cash.

Log barge, log barge... It was all he would talk about. Regardless that the story made no sense at all, he continued to ask her to concoct a plan for hijacking non-existent cocaine from an imaginary log barge. After all these many years of work, sweat, mistakes, readjustments and risk, lots of risk, she has this perfect deal going for him, and what does he do? A Henderson to the core, he destroys it for all the wrong reasons. Any regrets, apologies? Oh no, not him! Instead, he has the goddamn balls to persist with the hare-brain scheme. She was beside herself with fury. The clock from the reception desk was handy: she threw it at him. The bastard sidestepped.

He obviously hadn't been listening to her objections and it wasn't going to get any better: the house reeked of the marijuana he was pumping into his befuddled brain. It was time to try a little reason and see if that could reach him. "You can't just up and run off to Limon because of what your little sweetie said. Can't you understand that she would have told you anything for you to stop hurting her? For this fantasy to be true, Gordon himself would have to be mixed up in a major smuggling ring. Mixed up in? No, hell no, operating the damn thing! That's just outrageous! If you could only see the gallery in the reception area of his office lined with awards for fighting drug trafficking then you'd know the absurdity. This insane story would also require that his half-wit brother is the author of a complex conspiracy, and George Dearling is his partner! Give me a break! I've known George, his wife and their daughter since we came down here. They're honest people and George is just pure wimp." Not only that: even should this coke exist, trying to steal it would be the act of a total sucker. Gordon Edward, she patiently pointed out, was a highly placed political figure who controlled the Port Authority Police Department as his own, personal mini-army. He was also an extremely influential presence in the federal government. To hijack something as sensitive as cocaine from the likes of that man - where it might be traced back to him - would be nothing short of suicidal.

"Now, think about it: this little whore probably saw Gordon's name in the news, knows George, and because she saw him last night, his name came to mind as a way to get you to stop hitting her. You undoubtedly helped her along with the rest by acting like you believed. Just forget about this nonsense and let's hope neither of those women surfaces."

Mike continued his ridiculous contention that everything was her fault, and asked again that she devise a plan. The door she slammed, storming from the room, rocked the entire building. "Just like your father," she screeched through the wall.

□ □ □

END OF PART TWO

The Shades of Paradise

Part Three

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Three years earlier

Forty-four year old Police Lieutenant Edgar Vargas joined in laughter with a North American tourist seated at a nearby table. The man continued his pantomime of smoking a cigar, thumb and forefinger and lips pulled forward in an exaggerated oval. Edgar chuckled and made a show of blowing a long, blue jet of Havana's best smoke followed by a quick series of rings. He enjoyed meeting foreigners, particularly those from the United States. He promised himself to stop at the table later and buy drinks for the man and his two friends. Meeting people such as them was an aspect of the job that went a long way towards compensating for its few, but grave, failings.

Officially, he was an undercover cop whose job it was to supply others with the information necessary for successful arrests in any class of crime, but in the red-light district of San José that translated into cocaine. Purportedly to protect his cover, he wasn't included in the teams that made the actual arrest, although on the street his occupation was common knowledge. He took it as a given that the actual reason was because he was Native American, and prejudice deemed that glory go only to Ladinos. It had also been suggested that he would fit in better if he changed his position of adamantly refusing his share of bribes and proceeds of criminal activities. He accepted exclusion from the circle of 'good-old-boys' readily enough. He had desire for neither company from their kind nor their ill-gotten cash, but to be continually passed over when truly exciting assignments came along was a difficult pill to swallow. Nevertheless, spending his nights hanging around the bars and casinos of San José where the tourists were thicker than flies seemed a satisfactory way to make a living, and the job had also done a lot to improve the English he had struggled so to learn. He thanked the Lord daily for these and the many other blessings he enjoyed in a solitary life.

Edgar was Mayangna, one of the Native American peoples able to trace their roots to 'The First Time,' when Europeans lived in caves as animals. His birthplace was a village in the eastern hills of Nicaragua, far from electricity or telephones, where Mayangna was the only spoken language. After his parents were 'taken away for questioning' by a unit of the army when more beans were discovered to be planted on their *milpa* than were necessary to feed themselves and an infant, he was raised by Jesuit priests. The Jesuits provided his elementary education and left him with a simple credo that guided his life: Put your faith in God and do the right thing. Easy.

Regimented by the monks, he took well to military life (where even Indians, as the invaders referred to his People, were accepted as conscripts) and earned his commission on the battlefield. He became a Sandinista, with all his heart believing they were the ones who would bring to Nicaragua responsible government where his People would be recognized as people. However, when the fighting ended, they were again ignored: communism's promise that all Nicaraguans were equal was reduced to political rhetoric by a government every bit as wrought with nepotism and corruption as the Samoja regime had been. He had to leave.

Based upon his unblemished military record and experience as an investigator, the Costa Rican National Police (OIJ) offered the job he eventually accepted. Since the vast majority of Ladinos totally ignore Indians and would therefore never suspect one could be a narcotics detective, he was considered perfect for the job. As it turned out, his assignment to the division came at a most opportune time: Costa Rica had recently succumbed to US pressure insisting that it expand its efforts

against cocaine. At the time, cocaine passed through virtually unnoticed, a problem of little consequence for law enforcement, and that was perhaps the main reason he received the assignment. As Costa Rica gave way to the political arm-twisting, so did other countries lying in cocaine's northbound path as the field of players on both sides of the law expanded enormously. The nation was greeted to an influx of armed domestic and international traffickers, far more dangerous than their few unsophisticated predecessors. The local street price skyrocketed, creating an attractive market to be exploited. The country suddenly found itself in the whirlwind of America's 'War on Drugs' and in need of additional officers to combat the menace. The division expanded again and again, giving seniority to those already in.

Initially, Edgar was an effective team player, but as time wore on, the intractable corruption within the department sickened him. He began to feel that what the traffickers did was far less dishonorable than the actions of his colleagues and would have preferred to lock away half of the OIJ before even the worst of them. When, for example, a shipment of one hundred-fifty kilos became officially reported as a fifty kilo bust, Edgar was perfectly aware that the excess cocaine made it to the streets, only through the hands of cops, themselves. He knew several other things as well: that the profits of the illegal sales found its way to the highest levels the OIJ and that among the ranks of cocaine dealing cops was his sometimes partner, Officer Enrique Segovia.

Enrique was as corrupt as they get and connected to the highest echelons of power both within and outside of the department. Edgar did what he could to distance himself from his partner, but he was there, nevertheless. Just the sight of him anywhere near one of his suspects, such as now with Alan Bergen, drove him wild. He couldn't bust a trafficker if doing so might ensnare Enrique, because that just might finish things for Edgar. If however, to avoid such problems, he shared with him the information he had uncovered or even the identities of those he had under investigation, the entire volume of months of observations would undoubtedly become worthless

The Lord blessed him with good fortune when a new Columbian cocaine-producing lab began to sell its product. Competition with better established labs, jealously guarding their markets, resulted in information being passed to him regarding movements of this new Tweety-Bird label. Twice, when a Tweety-Bird shipment arrived in Costa Rica, OIJ officers were there, waiting and, with each, Edgar's stature within the department increased. Yet, even as they praised him, they shunned him, keeping him from the truly interesting, high profile assignments where he might demonstrate to the world the worth of a Mayangna Native American.

He believed in going by the book, but within a system as corrupt as the OIJ, he simply couldn't. He had, at long last in his life, become a realist. He knew that one lone cop, a hair's breadth shy of five feet tall couldn't single-handedly clean up the corruption entrenched in the OIJ, or so much as slow the increase in trafficking by removing an occasional smuggler. New ones were showing up all the time at a rate far greater than the number arrested. They multiplied faster than flies on hot fresh manure. He used his newfound stature to break away and become an independent operator. It allowed him to derive satisfaction from his work, despite what went on around him. He hardly shared a word with his partner and seldom entered his office except when it became necessary to file reports. When information of a shipment came to him, he would telephone the information to the interception team. The rest of his business, he conducted alone. He kept his files in his apartment and shared them with nobody, including, or perhaps, in particular, his partner.

In retrospect, it seemed appropriate that his first encounter with Michael Henderson occurred in the men's room. It was before the bum grew his hair out to take on the appearance of a werewolf. Edgar was busily washing his hands when Michael, together with several friends dressed in black leather, entered and began abusing him for his height and the *chamarra* he wore. The confrontation resumed later in the bar, when he strode directly up to Edgar's booth to go on with his prejudicial

abuse. Edgar had hardly gotten the words police officer out of his mouth than a mug of beer was poured over his head and, with a sweep of the arm, Michael dropped everything from his table onto the floor. Including him, they were four, but undaunted, Edgar leapt from his seat. Two, he dropped immediately by coming at them low and abruptly lifting the hem of their trousers. Unfortunately, before hotel security was able to pull them off, all four pummeled him. He placed Michael under arrest on the charges of assaulting a police officer and bribery, for the fifty US dollars he had been offered.

When he arrived at the booking desk with his captive, a police captain was waiting: "Thank you, Officer Vargas," he said. "I'll take it from here. Go to the medical office and have that nose attended to. Mr. Henderson, come this way, please." It wasn't until three days later that he discovered the lout had been released that same night without a single charge filed. Someone with connections to the corrupt power structure within the OIJ had intervened. He was infuriated! Michael Henderson represented everything he hated. In him, Edgar saw the greed and prejudice that had so adversely affected his life, brought together with privilege, arrogance and ignorance to form a living monstrosity. He stomped through the halls of OIJ headquarters in search of the liberator, but ran into a blank wall such as could be erected only via the intervention of higher echelon: there wasn't an officer in the building willing to admit to any memory of Mr. Michael Henderson. He was to the point of storming a plush office on the top floor when a savvy sergeant reminded him of the futility of challenging the ingrained system.

Although he backed off and undertook to ignore the arrogant swine, Michael took his unconditional release as license to repeatedly insult him publicly, a virus that spread through the criminal element, turning his job into a nightmare. It cumulated one night when, particularly drunk and abusive, he pulled a gun and commenced to menace Edgar. A member of the untouchables or not, that was stepping over the line. He knew that Michael did not have a permit for a weapon, so he arrested him for armed assault of a police officer and for the unlicensed gun. The welcoming committee at the booking desk had grown. This time, he was met, not just by the same captain, but also by an attorney from the prosecutor's office. The captain took Michael away, while Edgar received the once-over from the lawyer. Michael, indeed, had a concealed pistol permit, he contended – although, as Edgar recalled, Michael knew nothing about it when he arrested him. The attorney hardly considered that failing to carry the license was an offense worthy of arrest, particularly, he said, when witnesses reported that Edgar caused the problem. Lies, lies, lies! The lawyer advised him that, with two incidents now on record, it would be wise to discontinue his harassment. If continued, a departmental hearing could very well result in criminal charges.

A long-range plan developed right then and there. He would build an airtight case against Henderson that no amount of influence or corruption could sweep away, and he would then rub the system's nose in it! It wasn't going to be an easy task: snitches weren't going to be any help this time. If he wanted him and his friends, he would have to work for his pay and find the evidence. All the pieces had to join in irrefutable perfection before he would dare another arrest. To gain conviction against him, Edgar was fighting more than just a highly skilled defense lawyer: also to consider were corrupt judges and public attorneys, all of whom, even the semi-honest, succumbed to political pressure. Add to that the corruption within the department and prejudice that preferred his skills remain in doubt, and his goal seemed impossible; but he wasn't going to let that stand in his way. He had the Lord on his side, a considerable advantage.

Usually at this hour on a Tuesday, he would be eating, but his very dearest friend who found Edgar's occupation fascinating mentioned that he would join him. He was disappointed, but not because his friend hadn't arrived – he had undoubtedly been called out in search of another displaced war refugee needing assistance – rather because he was anxious to see if his friend would notice the chamarra he wore. He had several of the colorful native jackets and wore them daily, but this

particular one was his first, from long ago when he lived with the priests, and had come back with him on his last visit. It was the very same one he'd worn the day they met.

Tuesdays and Wednesdays were best for the sort of criminals he wanted to observe. He had learned that they preferred to move their product on weekends when the seniority earned by experienced cops allowed them to be home with family. The traffickers' social life therefore peaked, not Saturdays or Sundays, but on Tuesdays and Wednesdays when work was done. They would then seek out one another to rub elbows socially, each striving to create in the eyes of the others an image of himself as vitally important, slick and, most importantly, as one dangerous bad-ass. There were other places drug traffickers congregated, but the bar in Hotel Paradise was where they met before going elsewhere.

Soon after coming on the scene, Edgar developed an understanding of the traffickers' society. A member's stature was not measured by the amount of money he had; they all had more than enough to satisfy any whim. Rather it was a question of bravado where posturing was everything. Some made a show of suddenly noticing him, as they 'just happened' to walk by his booth then, in an act designed to bolster their status, would buy him a drink. Others would swagger directly over and deliver a few wisecracks at sufficient volume that their comrades could hear. But, if someone had dared infringe upon the territory of another, the drink or disparaging remark might be accompanied by a scrap of paper or whispered phrase.

He liked to compare himself to a jungle scientist, developing an understanding of animal behavior by noting every action and connecting it to its initiating event, gradually building a profile until the beast and its motives were fully understood. What allowed him to consider locking a human being away in a cage to be a pleasurable pursuit was how devoid of morals they were. Take Pacito, the one he watched at that moment, as prime example. Pacito was a street name. They all used them, probably to hide their identities, an absolutely absurd idea. Edgar had a file on him that included every person in his family and the names of their dogs, and when he got home, he would add more entries, little things to be sure, but it was those little things, like the name of the prostitute who hung all over him at the moment, that built Pacito's prison cell, one brick at a time.

"Señor Vargas, good evening, sir." Edgar looked up, startled, to see a cocktail waitress at his side. "Mr. Bergen would like to know if you would care to join him for a drink. He's over there, at the bar."

"Thank you, Ana," he replied, embarrassed for having been startled. Edgar knew Alan Bergen and exactly where he sat. He was the one at Pacito's side where Enrique had been sitting. Alan was a relative newcomer. He was a German who had come to Edgar's attention about a year earlier when he began showing all the classic signs of a man new to the trade. After several months of close observation, Edgar had enough information to be certain that, yes, he had another one on his hands. In the ensuing year, Bergen's file had steadily grown. Across the width of the bar, he was smiling and gesturing to a stool from which he had just ejected an admiring underling. Edgar slid from the booth and weaved his way through the maze of tables.

"What'll it be, Alan? I'm buying," he offered.

"Oh, so this is official business, then?" he questioned loudly, slapping Pacito's shoulder. "Well, thanks, Edgar. As long as it's on the government's tab, I'll have a gin and tonic. Say there," he continued as Edgar ordered drinks, "I wanted to see you because I hear you've been asking around about Doc. The reason you haven't seen him lately is because he went to San Andrés for vacation. Rumor has it that he likes it there so much that he ain't coming back." Edgar nodded. Doc hadn't gone to the Colombian island of San Andrés or anywhere else, and they both knew it. Doc was Alfred Corban, also German and also from Hamburg. He had been trying to break into trafficking back home by selling cocaine to some of the same people as Alan, only cheaper. Doc had been eliminated and Alan was boasting, challenging him. Edgar smiled. Go ahead, gloat, he thought, it will make your arrest that much more of a pleasure.

“Is that so?” he queried. “He must have gotten there by swimming then, because he didn’t fly or take a boat. There’s no record of him leaving Costa Rica or arriving anywhere else, and I’ve checked just about everywhere, including Colombia.”

“Hey, little cop, what do I know about such things?” Bergen answered, flagging his head from side to side haughtily. “You’re the big detective who’s supposed to figure out all that stuff. I can only tell you what the guy told me before he left.”

“Well, thanks for the information Alan. We all hate when one of our friends disappears. Don’t worry, though. I will figure it out, you can count on it.”

“YOU, figure it out? You mean like a real policeman?” He smiled around, making sure that all heard. “You’re nothing, Vargas! You got an uncle on the force, or something that keeps ‘em from firing you? I mean, have you ever made a fucking arrest? No guys, he hasn’t. This here guy is *The Little Cop Who Thought He Could*.” A chorus of laughter erupted. “What’s the matter with you, anyhow? You think you’re some kind of undercover investigator? Well, it ain’t working; everybody already knows you’re a cop!”

Such abusive talk was Michael Henderson’s doing. Something was going to have to be done about him and his mouth, and soon. He looked over his shoulder to where Alan’s attention was drawn. Edgar’s officially assigned partner, Enrique Segovia, was approaching.

“Edgar,” Enrique said as his curt, one word, greeting.

“Enrique,” Edgar responded in form, neither offering his hand. “Well, I guess you two have plenty to talk about,” Edgar said, and stood to leave. “I’ll be in the booth or the casino if you need me, Enrique. We’ll be seeing each other, Alan – soon.” Edgar weaved his way back to the booth and seethed as Enrique and Alan shared a hearty laugh. His partner, what a joke!

□ □ □

CHAPTER NINETEEN

There were periods when the money rolled in, major advances were made and everyone appeared contented, but there was a downside to the peace. Sylvia would get so involved in the project at hand that she'd forget how much of a basic fuck-up Mike could be and allow herself to be lulled into a false sense of security. Like when everything at her new hotel on Marathon Key was just beginning to click. A year of intense effort and investment had brought it to the point of grand opening while complacency had convinced her that Mike could be trusted to deliver the cocaine to his mules at Hotel Playa Tambor. It became routine and, in increments too small to be noticed, Sylvia's time in Costa Rica dwindled to but a day or two.

She should have seen it coming: Sal had again mentioned something about mules arriving drunk and stoned. But he and Mike badmouthed each other so consistently that the comment hadn't registered as it should have. It wasn't as if she hadn't spoken to Mike about the need for the mules to remain sober and his role in keeping it that way – she had, countless times.

News arrived in the form of an urgent message from Sal: one of her cocaine carriers had been arrested at Logan International Airport with five hundred grams of cocaine taped to his lower back. The man was keeping his mouth shut and expected certain things to be done in exchange. He needed a criminal lawyer, a very good one, plus his wife and son must be provided for. The truly unfortunate part of it was that, of all the creeps in Mike's gang, the one arrested was the one with a woman and kid to support. Sylvia was certain the police knew the man they'd arrested was not, as he maintained, smuggling cocaine for the first time or acting entirely on his own, but he'd been unshakable through hours of rigorous interrogation. And that was just plain luck. Any other of Mike's 'loyal buddies' would have rolled over in a heartbeat. She didn't want to be proven right, so ordered an immediate halt to all operations. She needed to go to Boston anyhow, to pick up her profits from the previous shipment. Her plan had been to swing through after completing her business in Kentucky: Caroline had sold two more horses and Sylvia was scheduled to visit with the buyers and pick up their check. She was looking forward to that as she enjoyed the Kentucky trips as pleasant diversion from her usual mad pace. From the moment they met, she and the young couple who owned the farm hit it off well. She was hoping to capitalize on that relationship to expand her contacts in equestrian circles, but the arrest changed her schedule, putting Boston first, Kentucky second – business before pleasure.

Her frequent trips to Boston for the purpose of personally carrying cash to Costa Rica where she could deposit it as La Hacienda profit were creating too regular of a pattern that was bound to attract attention eventually. Additionally, the amount she carried on her person was way too large. She had never had her luggage so much as unzipped, let alone dug through and scrutinized, but she wasn't anxious for the experience. Technically, anything in excess of ten thousand dollars should be reported. To be found transporting many times that could lead to serious laundering charges, tax evasion and possible exposure of its source. It was high time she discontinue being the one for such a high-risk task. Particularly with one of their men arrested and the cops undoubtedly watching anyone even remotely associated, safer methods of transporting both the cocaine and the cash had to be found.

She and Sal talked one entire night, considering one smuggling scheme after the other, but in each, they found insurmountable shortcomings. The idea they eventually settled upon came to Sylvia via a joke, when the glass toilet reserved for anyone suspected of swallowing cocaine-filled condoms was mentioned. Then it came to her: Caroline's horses weren't subjected to such things, nor did they have to pass through dog-filled airline terminals! Why, if there was some way to stuff

condoms into a horse – By God, it might just work! Unanswerable questions immediately surfaced. For example: how long after ingestion do things come out the other end, and is that enough time to get a horse through customs? What tests, if any, are the animals subjected to? How many condoms full of cocaine can one expect to stuff in each? Would a condom even remain intact? Sylvia was starting to see just how valuable her trip to Kentucky could become. The concept became her plan, a plan for which she would conduct a feasibility study with Caroline's next sale.

Her mind became inescapably fixed on the Mexican horse trainer at her friends' stables. Certainly, he was a man who knew the answer to each of her questions. Moreover, he was the one who traveled to Charleston to receive the animals they shipped. If the scheme proved viable and she could solicit his participation, her cocaine could possibly begin arriving in the United States again in time to avoid an interruption of the flow to their street dealers, considering current reserves. She left it to Sal to come up with a new and safer method for transporting the cash to Costa Rica, and the other problems, legal and domestic, regarding the mule and his family. Sylvia wanted the woman well cared for, but not in a way that it would end up as nothing more than a paycheck to a drug habit, or worse yet, traceable to her, Sal or Mike.

"There's a restaurant/nightclub not five blocks from my hotel hosting a *Ranchera* group from Matamoros," she said to the Kentucky horse trainer, Diego after mentioning a desire to speak in private. "How would you like to be my guest at tonight's ten o'clock show; we can talk there. I'm absolutely mad for the music and would hate to miss this performance." He offered no resistance, and no time was wasted looking for him that evening: he was waiting outside. When the band stood down, Sylvia ate tacos while he wolfed down an impressive quantity of enchiladas with rice and beans. She confined conversation to her dude ranch and napkin drawings of fence arrangements to allow for rotation of grazing areas while she sized him up. "I'm a little tired," Sylvia said, fishing about in her handbag when the band began tuning up for a second set. "I think I'll step out to the car to powder my nose," and held open her hand for the vial of cocaine to be seen. Their eyes met. She smiled toothily. "You look like you could use a little perk-me-up. Care to join me?"

They met again in Sylvia's suite to 'finalize the agreement'. As she revealed her plan and the part she saw in it for him, he appeared hesitant but, upon clearly understanding that, in just two shipments, he could exceed his current annual income, hesitation became eagerness. The choice was simple: he could remain an errand-boy for foul-tempered millionaires, or with what he could earn in a few years, become one himself.

"What do I have to do?"

She left directly for Costa Rica and the inevitable showdown with Mike. The whole, horrible scene was rehearsing in her mind when, just prior to boarding, Sal handed her two tins of tuna. She looked questioningly from them to him, but he insisted they were something Mike requested. "He called the other day," he said, passing them to her, "carrying on about how 'a guy can't get a decent can of tuna in the whole f-ing country.'" As far as she could recall, Mike didn't particularly like canned tuna. It was but a fleeting thought. The cans went among the assorted essentials in her toiletries bag and weren't thought of again until evening, finally at home on the deck at La Hacienda, relaxing and Sal telephoned. They chatted, then Sal, in an apparent afterthought, interjected: "You sound like you're hungry. Why don't you go and fix yourself a tuna sandwich?" His voice carried a provocative tone that caused her to spin and stare accusingly towards the lobby where her makeup case sat, balanced atop her other bags. "Go ahead," he prodded, "fix that sandwich. I'll hold; don't worry." In a flash, she was in the lobby, pulling the tuna from her bag. She opened it in the kitchen and inside found, wound in a tight roll, the money that had Sal promised to get to her. Even from where she stood, she could hear his unmistakable laughter coming in tiny squawks from the telephone lying on the counter.

The fiasco of the arrest in Boston had cost her a small fortune and cash was needed on all sides in a hurry: her idea of using a horse needed immediate testing. With that thought uppermost in her mind, early the following morning, and for the first time since buying the property, Sylvia found her way to the stables. Diego, the Kentucky horse trainer, had advised that the condoms would need to be put into the horses immediately prior to landing and, for that to happen, an active participant had to be on the boat. She envisioned that ‘someone’ to be Alfredo, the stable boy. Caroline said he spoke English and was a natural with horses. Although he had been in her employ for some period of time, she had yet to meet him and felt fairly certain that Caroline led him to believe that she was his employer. That needed correcting and it also needed to be firmly established, before he learned of what she had in mind, with him that Caroline was never to learn of anything of it. Alfredo was so eager that he volunteered even before her sentence finished. Money had yet to be discussed. “Si, Doña Sylvia,” responded he, with eyes twinkling. “In the horse’s belly I can put anything you want, emeralds, cocaine, heroin, anything,” he boasted, smiling and adjusting his hat. She was caught short. “When will I go, Doña and what do you want in the belly of the horse?”

From the depths of her handbag she produced a condom filled with flour and dangled it before him, grinning. “Cocaine, Alfredo!”

His eyes followed the swaying condom hypnotically. “We make mucho dinero, no?”

“Si Alfredo, mucho dinero.” She gave him an entire box of condoms and four bags of flour and told him to get started with experiments to determine how many might be stuffed into a horse and how long they could be expected to stay put.

Her long-overdue departure to Marathon Key was further delayed so she could speak with Caroline. She had some choice words for Mike, too, but he had thus far avoided her. That was okay: with the entire operation on hold anyhow, straightening him out could wait. Caroline couldn’t. Losing control over the stable boy might upset her and Sylvia didn’t want that; now, she needed Caroline. She wanted more frequent sales and shipping of horses. That would mean that horses, with qualities such that Caroline had a talent for recognizing, needed to be presented for sale to the Kentucky farm. She’d be walking on eggs trying to make the proposition come off to Caroline as a favor to a friend and neighbor. Caroline was a shrewd one and at even the hint of manipulation, she would become even more offended than she was likely to be over the stable boy and back out of the deal. Sylvia would be left needing to search for a qualified someone and no time to do it in. Additionally, she didn’t want to create an enemy the likes of which she wouldn’t want to have.

She wore her new blue suit, a *Sally Rutherford* original, high button jacket, double-breasted, butch but stylish. She arrived at ten-thirty as Caroline suggested, but was seated at a glass-topped, wrought iron table under a hanging wicker lamp in the sunroom to wait, by a maid who explained that Doña Caroline would soon return from riding. It was a lovely room with wrap-around windows that provided a panorama of tree-covered mountains losing themselves in the clouds. Within minutes, Caroline (reeking of horseshit, completely overpowering the scents of plants doing their thing under the sun) appeared at the door wearing boots, helmet and jacket. A crop, clenched in one hand, tickled a boot-top. There was even perspiration beaded on her brow: Super Bitch. Behind her, also sweaty and in riding gear, Señor Ruiz, the *alcalde* of Puriscal, entered on hands and knees with a dog collar strapped around his neck and a leash clamped between his teeth. As his eyes lit upon Sylvia, he leapt to his feet, stammered apologies, backed through the door and disappeared. Caroline seemed not to notice.

“Well ah, hello,” Sylvia said after an uncomfortable pause. “Your maid showed me in,” and with that, poured a quantity of cocaine onto the table. Beside it she tossed a razor blade and two straws. “You’re not busy are you?”

“Well HELLO, Sylvia.” Caroline sang the words as her face lit with joy. “What an excellent idea! I swear, you’ve read my mind, I was just thinking about firing myself up.” She spoke while working the razorblade, separating a line from the pile. “This is so great!” she said, looking up. “I’m going out on the town tonight, girl. You coming?”

“There’s not a thing on my calendar!”

“All right! Let the party begin.” Caroline added a bottle of white wine and a pair of long-stem glasses to Sylvia’s offerings then passed a stack of CD’s for her to leaf through.

The topic that Sylvia came to speak about passed through conversation so easily that it seemed of no consequence. “You’ve been doing a great job with the horse business, “ she began. “We’re both earning a nice profit and we’re actually acquiring quite a reputation in Kentucky. How about you; content?”

Caroline was leaned over the cocaine. Smiling, she held a hand aloft for the pause needed to snort a double line. “Yeah, sure. Everything’s wonderful,” she answered, tossing her head as the drug assailed her senses. And it was over. Caroline seemed thrilled by the idea and responded with but a shrug when Sylvia said: “Oh, by the way, the stable boy, Alfredo? I’ve told him that he’s to accompany the horses, so you’ll need to get someone to cover for him when he’s away. The worry she’d assigned to recruiting Caroline hardly seemed worth losing a day over, a feeling that was strongly reinforced when she awoke the next morning with a hangover of enormous proportions and an airplane to catch, but the many pieces were in place and maybe in time to prevent a shortage of product.

* * *

The mad dash back to Florida paid off. She arrived in time to save the deals that were pending and managed to earn several additional weeks of grace on this payment and that. No sooner were those delicate negotiations complete then Alfredo called to say that his tests went well: a horse could easily contain a small fortune’s worth of cocaine for ample time enough to pass through customs. She scurried back to Costa Rica, bought the drug and condoms and sent Alfredo off on his first trip as a *seahorse*. The shipment arrived without a hitch. Three anxiety-filled weeks passed before her mules departed Boston with the long-awaited tuna cans innocently tucked into their luggage.

She stayed in Costa Rica for the entire two weeks they were down, keeping them in line by her presence and seeing to it that they left when they should. Several paying guests showed up her first week in La Hacienda, the next, they were full – and without any unpleasant scenes. The final morning started peacefully enough. Mike left for the airport with his guys while Sylvia headed in to San José. Money needed to be deposited into La Hacienda’s account and she had an appointment for a facial and manicure. While in the beauty salon, she planned a conversation with Mike that would be free of recrimination. Perhaps if she offered him a share of La Hacienda’s profit, his own, to do with as he pleased, things would be better between them and the place would become a real hotel. She felt optimistic: it seemed that, with the horses and tuna cans in use, there was little left that he could mess up. The first cycle of northbound seahorses and southbound mules was a complete success, pulled off in just the nick of time, and worry about an airport arrest would no longer plague her.

It was not to be.

As she learned later, when her attorney was allowed access to the report, the Boston PD’s narcotics division had called Costa Rica, informing the OIJ of the arrest of her man at Logan International. And who should catch wind of it but the midget Indian. The report triggered the idea in his mind that the individual arrested in Boston was very likely one of three with luggage he had seen in the company of Mike at Hotel Paradise on the day in question. He tracked down the waitress who had served them and she recalled that they had said they were departing for Boston. When Sylvia read that, she wanted to squash

that waitress like a bug, but it would have done no good because Officer Vargas' suspicions were confirmed even without the waitress' statement; Boston PD followed up with a faxed copy of the arrested man's mug shot, which he recognized as one of the three.

The Indian had his personal axe to grind with Mike and this must have been just what his little heart had been hoping for. She could imagine his thoughts jumping for joy, anticipating a felony cocaine trafficking charge. And how the little shit must have relished the idea of clamping a cold pair of handcuffs on Mike's wrists. Other officers reported that he'd actually been laughing when the fax arrived. Obviously, he'd seen Mike and friends at Hotel Paradise and recognized his buddies as those who had been with the one who'd been arrested in the U.S.. So then, all he needed do was stake out La Hacienda and be at the airport waiting when the group was seen loading luggage into the car. And, if they made the pinch before anyone got out, Mike would be as guilty as the mules with sacks of cocaine taped to their lower backs. Or so he must have thought! Fortunately for Sylvia, fate always seemed to have a strange way of putting her in the right place at the right time and, just as she entered La Hacienda returning from the hairdresser, the phone was ringing. It was her lawyer who described how Mike's car was surrounded by five cops with drawn guns and the pipsqueak Indian pulled him from the car and ordered him face-down on the greasy pavement.

How she would have loved to be in the custom's interrogation room to see the color drain from that Indian's face when their bags had been torn to shreds, they'd been stripped and searched, including a digital exam, and found nothing incriminating. The realization that his time was up must have dropped like a bomb into the pit of his stomach, because he knew that, in the very next room, waited Sylvia Henderson, three lawyers, a consulate officer from the US Embassy, a newspaper reporter with two photographers and the police captain in charge of narcotics. By the time they got done with Officer Vargas, he was under a two-week suspension, facing a possible departmental hearing for official harassment and restrained from approaching Michael, his friends or the grounds of La Hacienda! How sweet it was!

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWENTY

Horses went northward, tuna cans south, and everything ran like a well-oiled clock. The only exception was, of course, Mike. All attempts to keep him and his “guys” separated and away from La Hacienda ended in frustration. On the other hand, it no longer really mattered if they returned to Boston stone drunk and with their pupils reduced to pinpricks. Only in Costa Rica did they need to arrive without arousing suspicion, and Sal saw to it that they left Boston clean and straight. Besides, Mike had a valid point in saying that he needed time with them if he hoped to maintain control. However, she still often found the hotel staff she had hired the previous visit fired and Mike’s guys occupying the rooms. She’d run around, putting things in order and hiring help, but they never lasted for long after she’d gone. Luckily for him, she had other things on her mind, busily shuffling between Florida and New Mexico, with brief stops at La Hacienda to enter cash into the books, buy from Enrique and deliver sealed condoms to Alfredo. In other words, except for the usual nonsense she’d come to expect from Mike, everything was fine. She had just returned and was in the midst of the standard argument with him, when Caroline came seeking advice about François.

They met years earlier in Mexico, where she had been hiding from a former boyfriend. A fellow woman who shared her beliefs, someone whose life also had come to nothing and who was between – God only knows what she was between, husbands, jobs, lifestyles: she was between something and therefore free – had gone with her. They left together on a trip of undetermined length to a beach in Mexico. Caroline had money yet, with no income, she spent carefully (easy, when virtually all of her meals were paid for by men she met). François was the best of the lot. He was sweet, considerate, handsome, adored her and soon asked her to be his wife, but she didn’t love him, not at all. Yet, money wouldn’t last forever, neither would good looks, and when again would a gravy train such as this be offered? What was more, he traveled so often that she would hardly see him and she certainly liked him. Maybe, she could learn to overlook his weaknesses, love him and flames would ignite. She accepted and they married in a civil ceremony in Costa Rica.

Even before his accident, things had not been going too well between them. She had largely lost interest in society life, becoming so deeply involved in several ongoing affairs and the happenings of San José’s nightlife scene, that she felt she couldn’t simply vanish the moment François arrived at the airport. As she said: “staring as a socialite wife is fun and all that, it’s just that I don’t have time for it any longer.” With each trip, she cared less about maintaining the illusion of being ‘the happy bride’, in fact, as she explained it, she just couldn’t get herself to care at all. Yet, François ignored the lovers, accepting without question paper-thin explanations, foolishly perhaps, but he was not a man to doubt his wife.

It was in Santiago, Chile, that François had his accident. He fell from a ladder while reaching to adjust a display above an entrance to a wine cellar. Two vertebrae at the base of his neck, C-6 and C-7 were broken, as well as five ribs and an arm. His neck was a searing fountain of white-hot agony that radiated to the extremities of every limb. Every breath was drawn with the foreknowledge of the pain it would bring. The doctors could only inject him every several hours with morphine, hold him immobilized with a bizarre contraption encircling his head and wait for the bones to knit.

Unfortunately, Caroline was unable to visit.

“Who would have cared for the horses?” she would later respond. Why she didn’t meet him at the airport might be more difficult to explain. She wasn’t concerned. She simply didn’t care and certainly wasn’t going to allow worrying about when François arrived at the airport to interfere with her schedule, besides she had a date that night. Another compelling

reason was that Caroline didn't look forward to François' return. He would be home permanently, on retirement. His arrival meant that she would be saddled with a man whose right hand was semi-paralyzed and suffering with chronic pain. He would need to remain close to home so he might lie down when standing or sitting became unendurable, and Caroline Steepleton wasn't about to accept permanent conversion to Caroline LeClerc, a woman with an invalid husband to care for.

When she did not appear at the airport and was not to be found at home, François began calling friends. Something must have happened, he reasoned and someone must know what. To his amazement, everyone he called was unaware that he had been injured. When asked if he had seen her, a close friend responded rather nervously, perhaps guiltily: 'But, François, don't you and Caroline have one of those open marriages?' Caroline arrived in the early hours of the following day in the company of friends, all as equally drunk as she was. While she slept, François ventured to the bank where he discovered that their three accounts combined contained less than one thousand dollars. She had often boasted of the interest their money earned via certificates of deposit, yet the bank officer could find no record of any certificates in their names. He returned and demanded the key to the bedroom strong box where any certificates would be. With a huff of mock indignation, she slapped it onto the table and vanished. The safe was completely empty. In a wretched mood, François stormed across the lawn demanding an immediate explanation when he finally located Caroline outside, by the front gate. At the sight of him, she recoiled through the entrance, into the protective arms of a policeman. Her hair was in disarray and her blouse hung from her arms in tatters. The police officer in charge stepped forward, asking if he was the lady's husband.

"Yes, I am," he replied whereupon he was roughly grabbed at each arm, and handcuffed.

"Oh, thank you, thank you! Did you see his eyes? I thought he was going to start beating me again," Caroline gasped in Spanish before sobbing against the officer's tunic. His questions were refused answer and he was driven to the Puriscal police station in silence. Bolt upright in outrage he sat, certain that he would be released when the station captain he knew well realized the wrong man had been brought in. It wasn't until François was locked in a cell minus his shoes and belt that he learned he had been charged with savagely beating his wife. The station captain had refused to speak with him, giving him instead an evil glare when looking up from consultation with Caroline. In the morning, he appeared before the Alcalde in his secondary role as local judge. The evidence consisted of Caroline's panicked telephone call and subsequent terrorized dash into the arms of the police and their statements as to his violent rage.

"She was badly shaken," an officer testified, "from the brutal treatment received at the hands of her husband. I fear he would have torn her limb from limb if my men had not been able to subdue him." Caroline's acting skills at the matinee performance were worthy of award. She dressed for her role with skill, selecting a lovely, light chiffon thing, which she complimented with a white linen hankie. It was used to great effect dabbing away tears that welled onto her cheeks between gasps and sobs, as she told of the brutality she suffered. François began his account with what happened at the bank, but was abruptly told to confine his statements to the violence. He replied that there had been no beating and his fate was sealed. He was served a protection order that forbade him to approach his wife or enter his home for a period of six months.

"What are you going to do, Caroline," Sylvia retorted, flashing a sudden smile, "when his restraining order expires?"

"I'm working on that," Caroline answered. "No hurry. I have six months to come up with something."

"No you don't. I assume you want to win the property and you don't want to have to answer hundreds of questions about what became of his money, do you?"

"Yes. No. I mean, of course. Obviously, you understand completely." Caroline smirked.

Sylvia stared at her – Caroline had experience in the game she was playing, but she was in way over her head. She became an expatriate of Canada for the same reason as so many others: she was running from her past. But she was fleeing

from more than just the memory of the girl she had once been: she was afraid of something far more menacing. She left Canada to avoid a man she had used just a bit too much, a man she justifiably feared would kill her if he found her.

She had become the owner of a house badly in need of repair in a comfortable Toronto neighborhood; however she had overestimated, by a large margin, the amount she would earn in sales commissions. Her calculations for proposed annual income assumed a success rate that was more than four times what she achieved in real numbers: the house was beyond her means, as were her plans of renovation. That situation changed when she met Tiny. He was a carpenter who, like all men, was anxious for Caroline's attentions. She taunted him, giving him the worst case of blue balls Toronto has ever seen, but refused sexual advances saying that she wasn't the sort to engage in casual relationships, then batted her eyes in mock surprise when he suggested that he move in with her. He wasn't quite as easy as she had assumed, because he wrote a contract and had their signatures and that of a witness notarized. Under its terms, Tiny would renovate the house at his expense; they would then sell it and split the sale price down the middle.

With work on the house dragging on, Caroline's taste for the wild nightlife got the better of her and she began to slip away evenings to the downtown clubs. She returned one early morning trailing a new boyfriend, and Tiny snapped. He just lost it: jealousy took over and he attacked the man. Caroline joined in the fracas, breaking a bottle over Tiny's head. With a nasty cut on his scalp, he turned and furiously pushed her before returning to the boyfriend. She was toppled backward and suffered a bruise on the arm that quickly turned an ugly purple. By the time the Toronto police responded to the neighbors calls, the boyfriend was gone. Caroline accused Tiny of beating her and he was hauled off to jail. She acted quickly, receiving a protection order that commanded him to stay well away from her for ninety days. During this period, the new boyfriend moved into the house and Tiny, unable to control himself, violated the order, entering through a window he knew only too well as he had installed it, and up from the basement came a wild man, bent on revenge. Fortunately, the boyfriend kept him from her while she summoned the police. Caroline went into court, pleading for understanding. "When Tiny's sentence is completed, he will be back, worse than ever," she beseeched the judge, "and he will know exactly where to find me, unless the court voids the contract that exists between us so I can sell the house and leave before his release date." No problem, her request was granted. Caroline sold the house and left. She took everything, his stuff included: clothes, books, even his carpentry tools. It was for vengeance, but she knew that when he got out he would search tirelessly for her: it was time to get out of Dodge.

François was no under-educated carpenter with an attitude, who would help her out by violating the protection order. He was well connected and had a wealthy family behind him. There would be lawyers working angles. If she didn't act soon, she'd find herself out on the street. Sylvia sat her down right then, and they developed a step-by-step plan.

It began later that month with the arrival in Costa Rica of two of Mike's friends. They drove to a lonely spot in the countryside with a rental car, stopped and fired three rounds from a .38 caliber pistol into the hood and driver's door. The unregistered pistol was on the hot list for weapons used in the commission of a crime. It had seen action against its previous owner, when a simple drug deal became something deadly. From there, at a very reasonable price, it found its way to Mike, who had passed it to them.

Upon returning to San José, the men went to the parking area of François' apartment complex. There, one broke into his car while the other stood lookout. On the underside of the radio, the intruder slapped a wide strip of Velcro. The pistol was ready with another piece encircling its grip and barrel. It held firm, hidden but accessible. Turning quickly, he suspended from the springs of the driver's seat a vial of cocaine, and it was done. He was in and out of the car in twenty seconds.

At an intersection with no pedestrians or traffic, while François waited for a light to change, a car suddenly crashed into the rear of his. He fished about for the vehicle's papers and his license but, when he emerged, a strange thing happened: two men leapt from the car that had hit his, tossed firecrackers into the air and ran off shouting. Totally bewildered, he returned to his seat and turned the flashers on, waiting for the police.

They arrived within minutes, but they had come for him. François couldn't appreciate the significance of what was happening, but his lawyer later provided a clear understanding: the police report stated that two tourists briefly lost control of their car and rear-ended his. When they attempted to exchange documents with him, he leapt from his car in a rage and opened fire with a pistol. Witnesses reported hearing the shots and the smell of gun smoke. The three slugs dug from the tourist's car matched the recently fired gun found in François possession. Furthermore, both the gun and François had violent histories. It was traced to a murder in a suspected dispute over cocaine – and from his car was recovered a vial. He found himself accused of assault with a deadly weapon, possession of cocaine, under investigation for murder, and following Caroline's success at spreading the tale of her ordeal, was left without a friend to intervene. The worst news was that the evidence was deemed compelling enough to continue him in custody pending trial. He remained four months in San Sebastian prison, seesawing between hope and despondency, before his judge could be reached with a bribe of sufficient magnitude to secure his release. He left immediately for France with no intention of returning. Caroline filed for divorce, citing François' history of violence, desertion, armed assault and cocaine addiction. A sympathetic court granted her title to all his property within Costa Rica.

Mike and each of his two friends promptly received three thousand dollars, and Sylvia's gratuity was set at five thousand dollars, which Caroline intended to give her personally upon her return to Costa Rica.

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“This is the Charleston Marine operator. I have a collect overseas call for Sylvia Henderson. Do you accept the charges?” A nasal and scratchy voice, difficult to understand for its heavy southern accent jolted her to full awake.

“What? Who is this?” Sylvia demanded. She flipped on the nightstand lamp. It was five past four. Not even the roosters were up!

“This is the Charleston Marine operator, ma’am, with a collect, ship to shore, overseas call for Sylvia Henderson. Do you accept the charges?” the irritating voice repeated.

Her eyes shot open as her stomach dropped into an empty pit. She swung her feet to the floor, sitting at the edge of the bed. “Yes, yes I accept the damn charges!”

“Is this Sylvia Henderson speaking?” the woman’s voice continued.

“For God’s sake, yes!”

“Go ahead, sir. Your party is on the line,” she said, just as a deafening blast of static assailed Sylvia’s ear. She jerked the receiver away. Cautiously, she listened without pressing the unit to her ear.

“Doña Sylvia? Are you there? Over.” Alfredo’s voice! Another loud blast of noise followed. She switched to the other ear.

“What is going on, Alfredo?” she asked then held her breath.

“Señora Henderson, we have a serious problem here. I was beginning....”

“No shit you have a problem,” Sylvia snapped, interrupting. “It’s four AM. Why else would you call. What happened?”

“ – go in to quarantined. Do you understand? Over.” Again, a blast of static followed the voice.

“What’s the matter can’t you hear me,” Sylvia asked.

“I’m calling from the boat, Doña, on the ship-to-shore radio and we can’t talk at the same time. When I’m finished, I’ll say, ‘over’ then it will be your turn. And you do the same so I will know to speak. Do you understand? Over.” She was ready. She jerked the phone protectively from her ear just as he was saying, ‘over’ and the noise blast failed to deafen her.

“Yes, I think I understand. Now, start again from the beginning and tell me what this is all about. Oh,” she said when he didn’t reply, “over.”

“We are about to enter the port of Charleston, so I fed the horses the high protein feed like I always do. Are you following? Over.”

“Of course I’m following! Just tell me what the problem is. Over.”

“It’s not good, Señora Henderson. Something went wrong and one of the horses collapsed and died. I think maybe the feed was too strong. If we go into port with one of the horses dead, the other will be placed in quarantine. If that happens, I won’t be allowed to clean the stall, someone from the Department of Agriculture will do it and they will probably perform an autopsy, too. . Over.” Fear was now clearly readable in his voice. It gripped her too, causing the skin at the back of her neck to crawl.

“I understand only too well, Alfredo,” she answered. “Can’t you just get the body thrown overboard and continue as though nothing happened? Over.”

“We can’t do that Doña Sylvia,” he answered, breathlessly. “The horses are documented on the manifest and they both have to be here when we arrive. Also, the captain said that we can’t dump garbage in the territorial waters of the US, especially something like a dead horse. I think the only thing we can do is to turn around, but the captain refuses to do it. He said there isn’t enough fuel to make it to Costa Rica and even if there was, he wouldn’t do it without cash in advance. He says that we’re going in. In fact, we’re on our way in right now. What should I do? Over.”

“The first thing I want you to do, Alfredo is to park your ass with those horses and make sure you are the only person to enter or clean their area and if you can think of any way to clean the dead one, do it right away. I will take care of everything else. Don’t worry about a thing. Now, put the captain on the phone,” she demanded.

“This is the captain speaking,” a loud and clear voice announced. “This vessel is inbound towards the port of Charleston and we arrive at the sea buoy in twenty minutes. I understand you don’t want your horse quarantined. Is that correct? Over.”

“Captain,” she answered, “good morning. This is Doña Sylvia Henderson speaking from Puriscal, Costa Rica. The horses you are carrying belong to me. You have transported horses for me from Costa Rica to Charleston many times, and you have been paid in full and on time for every one of those shipments at a rate that we both know is very good. Now there is something you must do for me: I want you to go back into international waters, but stay close enough to maintain radiotelephone contact with the Charleston marine operator and I will call within twenty-four hours. I understand that this will add additional cost to the voyage and I give you my word that you will be paid double for the time you lose. Can you do that for me? Over.”

“Señora Henderson, I can do that, but the expense will be considerable. There is more to consider than fuel. There will also be crew costs and I may be charged for late arrival of my next cargo. Are you prepared to pay all of these additional costs? Over.”

“Yes, and, if you wish, in cash. Please wait for my phone call before you do anything. Are we in agreement?” she asked, her voice as sweet as she was able. “Over.”

“Si, Señora Henderson. We are coming about now and will hold off the coast awaiting your call,” he answered. “Please hang up your telephone now so I can terminate the call with the marine operator. Over”

“Okay, captain. I thank you for your cooperation. We’ll be speaking again soon. Bye-bye.” She didn’t know whether to be thankful that Mike was such a screw-up or not: if he had been a little closer to normal, she wouldn’t have stayed a few extra days to put things back on track from his customary mismanagement and been there for the call. Fate again was on her side.

Immediately upon disconnecting, Sylvia dialed her lawyer’s home number and let it ring until he answered. His voice betrayed that he was anything but pleased to receive her call, yet he knew that if he didn’t comply, he could very easily lose his best client. He was left no choice but to be gracious and give Sylvia the best advice he could. He listened to her tale of woe, although she offered no hint that there was anything illegal: she simply explained that her clients wouldn’t accept any horse if they knew one had died at sea. She needed the incident to vanish and for the remaining animal to enter the United States this same day, without indication that there had been any problem at all.

It was a tall order, but Sylvia knew that there had to exist somebody, somewhere, who, with the proper inducement, could accomplish the impossible. She paid Olger big bucks to know or quickly find these special individuals and make things ‘nice’ again. He was good and had once bragged that, through him, anything was possible. But he meant, ‘anything in Costa

Rica', and the horses were in international waters, almost within the borders of the United States. This would be his big test. He did his best to soothe her and promised to call back within a couple of hours.

It was seven-thirty when the phone rang again with Olger's call. He asked if she thought the people aboard the boat could be persuaded to discreetly dispose of the corpse at sea without attracting the attention of the American authorities. Because, if they could, her problem could be made to vanish.

Did he really believe that would be adequate? Could he be that naive? "What about the shipping documents? Dropping the body to the bottom of the ocean isn't going to do a damn thing to fix them, you fool!" She was shrieking. The three precious hours had been wasted by this shit-for-brains! Another lawyer would have to be found – in record time – and that would mean involving Caroline!

"Sylvia, my dear," he said, purring the words.

It stopped her cold. She hated when some condescending, chauvinist pig called her 'my dear,' in that tone. He'd resorted to the strategy once before and she would have slapped him then had he not taken her hesitant moment of shock to make an important point. "What?"

"Ah, you're now listening! Good. I've been busy with your problem from the moment you called. I've gotten important people up from their beds and taken some risks I normally wouldn't. This is a very delicate thing you're asking to be done and it's going to require much more than disposing of the body. I won't be able to do this for you, you'll have to do it yourself, and there's not much time. So, if you will give me the opportunity to explain what needs to be done, it's possible that everything can work out for you. Are you ready to listen?"

"Yes, Olger Manuel, I'm ready to listen, but this has to happen today, or tomorrow dawn at the latest."

He ignored his full name, but she knew he hated it as much as she hated 'my dear.' "Let me tell you up front, this is going to cost you plenty and I'm not talking about my bill alone."

"I know, I know. Time's a-wasting, Olger. Get on with it."

"You will have to do a lot of running around but, if you hurry and have luck with you, by tomorrow your problem could very well be resolved," he began. "Here's what you have to do: you must be on this morning's flight to Limon that leaves Juan Santamaria Airport at 9:30. It's only a twenty minute flight and if you're on it you should arrive in plenty of time. If it were possible for me to do this for you, I would, but it isn't. You, personally, have to be on that flight. I've reserved a seat for you. I know that doesn't leave you much time, but the only appointment I could get for you to meet the man you need to see is at ten this morning, but with him, trust me on this, that means eleven-thirty, so just behave yourself and don't get all worked up about being ignored or he might not even see you, because Mr. Gordon Edward is the Director of the Port Authority of Limon and the only person who can help you.

"You will be met at the airport. If he likes you and feels you can be trusted, you will be supplied with a duplicate set of documents showing that the boat departed Limon with only one horse. He'll want to go to lunch with you. That's where you are to discuss your business, don't mention anything about it in his office. You can talk about his charities. This man has an ego bigger than Texas, so be sure to compliment him on his philanthropic activities.

"I have to caution you about something you may not want to hear. Please try to take it as friendly advice from your attorney. This Mr. Edward has a reputation for being a very difficult man to deal with. He is a black man, who seems to be focused on the social wrongs of the past, so keep that in mind and don't say anything that might offend him, or there is no hope that you will get what you want."

"I'll have you know," she snapped, "that when I was in college I marched..."

“Hey, hey! Take it easy. Now, that’s just what I’m talking about, Sylvia. Outbursts like that can ruin it for you.”

“All right. What else?”

“He is expecting you to make a donation to his favorite charity in the amount of five thousand dollars.”

“Five th...!”

“I told you this was going to be expensive. Are you getting all of this?”

“Yeah, okay, I have most of it. Let me have the flight number, and what’s the name of this charity?” she asked, scribbling the answers on the notepad beside the phone. “Right, right. Got it. Edward, you said was this racist’s name, right? Is that his first name or his surname?”

“Don’t call him a racist, Sylvia. I’m not kidding. Call him Mr. Edward or, better still, sir. You have to be sweet as honey with this guy, I’m warning you. I’m sure you know that sometimes you come across a little harsh. You can’t be that way this time. You know what I’m trying to say, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, I’ll be a veritable Mary Poppins. Don’t worry about me. Is there anything else I need to know?” Sylvia was anxiously glancing at the clock. There wasn’t much time.

“Nothing more than these papers, the originals only, have to be delivered to your boat before it enters port. Once you have accomplished that, your problem will be resolved. One more thing: I want you to know that I went way out on a limb for you this time. I’ve called in favors people that have been owed me for a long time. I can’t have my billing show the true value for what I’ve done for you today, but I expect your compensation to reflect the level of your understanding. We’ll talk more about that, later. Right now, you have to get going and I wish you good luck.”

“All right, then, Olger,” Sylvia said dodging response concerning his compensation. “Thank you again. I’ll let you know how it goes as soon as I get back.” She hung up quickly and began to rummage her closets for the correct thing to wear when meeting a black racist who held her life in his hands.

She was met at Limon’s tiny airport (nothing more than a landing strip, a windsock and a scattering of buildings) by a long, black limousine. The chauffeur, a uniformed Port Authority police officer, was beside the airplane when the door opened, offering a steadying hand as she descended the shaky, flip-down staircase. He then guided her to the limousine and again offered assistance as she entered. It was a greeting to be afforded royalty; she loved it, class all the way. The treatment continued when the chauffeur spoke over the back of his seat to explain the workings of the tiny bar and entertainment system. The glass partition then slid closed and she was whisked away in the golden chariot.

Mr. Edward’s suite, she soon discovered, occupied the entire second floor of the Port Authority building. As the elevator’s gleaming brass doors closed behind, Sylvia looked around the smartly decorated outer room. It was large and brightly lit with white russet carpet, high white walls and adorned with large, colorful canvases of local art, apparently created by children. The secretary’s desk was of the same brass as the elevator doors, (but with the Port Authority logo etched prominently into its face) and so were matching planters at either side of it. “Good morning,” she said. “You must be Mrs. Henderson.” She wore a smiling, open expression, loosely knotted silk scarf about her neck and white suit with, of course, brass buttons, and had every appearance of being pleased with Sylvia’s safe arrival. Yet, there was a tone...

“Why, yes I am,” Sylvia answered. She glanced at her watch: ten-twelve. If Olger’s cautionary advice about Tico Time was correct, she was an hour and forty-five minutes early. Was that so, or was she twelve minutes late? Something was amiss, she could sense it, or had Olger made her paranoid? Lawyers!

“Shall I announce you to Mr. Edward?” she asked.

“You have a lovely office!” She allowed her gaze to scan beyond the planters and spotlighted artwork. On the far wall, two wide corridors bore signs identifying them as entrance and exit. Between, in brass lettering upon the wall was spelled out: *The Edward Collection The Peoples of Limon, their past, their plight and their future*. That was it. “Unless he’s waiting for me now,” she replied, “perhaps I have time to see *The Edward Collection*.”

It seemed the correct response because the woman instantly smiled. “The galleries are an important first for a clear understanding of Mr. Edward’s charities,” she explained and enthusiastically invited Sylvia to explore.

The cubicles transported the visitor, via collected artwork, handicrafts, well-written captioned photographs and documents, through the history of the province and the peoples of its population: native Americans and Africans imported as slaves. The first was devoted to pre-Columbian Native American culture. The second depicted the original culture of the African people before they were chained as animals and brought to the Caribbean. With the exception of those first two galleries, the tour was a sad one, portraying a dismal history of repression, genocidal disease and a relentless succession of natural disasters. Remarkably, despite all the suffering and hardship, a light spirit was reflected in the people’s art throughout all of the time represented and cultural traditions, dance and religious festivals were kept alive.

The exhibits carried Sylvia to the history of the early 1800’s when the racial makeup of the province experienced its first changes, as black fishermen of turtles settled the coast and intermarried with the native Indians. Later in the century, more Blacks, these from Jamaica, were brought into the country to build a railroad into the interior that would connect the port of Limon with San José. They worked under deplorable conditions. Four thousand succumbed to yellow fever, malaria, and snakebite during the construction.

New industries came to Limon as coastal lowlands were cleared for banana and cacao. The plantations continued to grow in number and size, eventually employing thousands, typically, at slave wages. People in coastal villages like Chautita lived a better life as subsistence fishermen, working the rich waters along the reefs.

In the 1930’s, a devastating blight struck. United Fruit Company solved the problem by establishing new plantations on the Pacific coast where the disease hadn’t struck, abandoning Limon. Black workers from the Limon fields were prevented from following their jobs by a racial protection law forbidding them to enter the interior of the country, leaving thousands unemployed.

More recently, tourism became a major industry for the province and brought new life to the economy, competing each year with bananas for first place. In April of 1991, a major earthquake measuring 7.2 on the Richter Scale and with its epicenter directly below Limon Province jolted the land, laying waste the works of man. Virtually every bridge linking Limon with the capital was destroyed. Many, particularly those to the profitable resort area south of the city of Limon, remained collapsed. Access to the area was limited to four-wheel drive vehicles: only they were able to navigate the diversion down the banks, crossing rivers axle-deep in water. The province’s thriving tourism industry was all but eliminated in the scant forty-five seconds it took the Earth to shake off the strain along the fault. Resorts and restaurants all up and down the pristine Caribbean beaches closed, bankrupt.

In August of the same year, a hurricane dumped torrential rains in the mountains, swamping the low-lying towns still reeling from earthquake damage. Rivers overflowed their banks, contaminating water supplies and bringing waterborne illnesses to communities beyond the reach of water trucks. Another hurricane repeated the devastation in 1995. Time and again, the poor people of the coast suffered yet another of Nature’s furies, but Nature wasn’t their only source of trouble.

The banana plantations eventually returned to Limon Province. They brought jobs back to the province, but they came using new agricultural methods that visited yet another disaster on the province. The plantations' ever-greater reliance on pesticides and chemical fertilizers polluted the Estrella River. The harm to workers' health by repeated and prolonged exposure to the dangerous chemicals became a contentious issue. The companies insisted that stories of sickness were greatly exaggerated, and repeated so often that even the peons who invented them believed. Another newly introduced improvement to agriculture was the use of plastic bags to wrap the ripening bananas. At harvest, they were tossed into the river by the million and together with the run-off of agricultural chemicals flowed unimpaired into the coastal Caribbean. Trapped in the water volume between coast and barrier reef, the deadly brew and choking plastics were continually washed over and against the coral. The result, as a gallery of spectacular underwater pictures clearly demonstrated it was largely dead coastal reef, which collapsed the food chain, depleting or eliminating entire fish populations. So few remained that commercial fishing from dugout canoes, practiced since man first settled the region, was all but extinct.

Sylvia read on, learning that the natural disasters, so bad for tourism, were no kinder to the plantations. Each new hurricanes and its subsequent flooding caused millions of dollars in damage. Additionally, international politics dealt the plantations and the province's economy another serious blow when the European Community imposed taxes on Costa Rica's bananas in favor of their former African colonies, making them impossible to sell. There were photographs of mountains of bananas left to rot in the streets of Limon.

Poverty areas are always the worst affected by drug addiction. Limon was no exception to this sad rule of sociology, as Sylvia's journey through the following gallery clearly demonstrated. Marijuana had long been in common use with the native people, and the Blacks from Jamaica had brought Rastafarianism, which encouraged and even glorified its use. However, the 1980's saw the use of cocaine as a recreational drug dramatically increase from almost zero. Shortly following this, the province was swept through by widespread crack cocaine use. Whether the practice began in San José or Limon was unclear, but it spread to affect all of Costa Rica, burglaries and muggings, practically unknown before, becoming common and increasingly violent. Clippings from the national newspaper were shocking for their obvious lack of objectivity and racist slant, leaving would-be tourists with the conviction that only in Limon was there danger, black muggers lurking in alleys waiting to slice their throats.

When she strolled out again into the reception area the secretary greeted her with brochures on several charities. The full color glossies described their founding by Mr. Edward and depicted some of the projects they supported or accomplished entirely on their own. There was a hospital and an affiliated series of local clinics, drug rehabilitation centers, job training and an emergency response center. The leaflet claimed that Mr. Edward, who appeared in every photo, paid every administrative expense as part of his personal contribution. By so doing, the brochure underlined, the charities are able to boast that an impressive one hundred percent of a contributor's donations go to their actual work.

A concluding page was devoted to an historical depiction of the political battle

Mr. Edward had waged against the federal government, which clearly had long engaged in systematically slighting the province and ignoring its citizenry. A chapter illuminated this fact by offering comparisons between the levels of public works funds the central government disbursed following each natural disaster visited upon Costa Rica. In each case cited, Limon was the province awarded the least assistance – if any was given at all – although it was the one hit hardest in each instance.

She was in awe. Gone were any concerns Olger may have planted. In retrospect, she could only say that with the bad came the good because, if the mess she found herself in that morning was the price to be paid for meeting Gordon, it almost seemed worth it. Despite Olger's admonition to be careful, she admired him immediately and caution was thrown to the wind.

She couldn't wait to see him. Eleven o'clock, only a half hour early. To hell with Olger, he was probably a racist like the rest of them.

"Excuse me," she called to the secretary. "You may tell Mr. Edward that I'm here now for our appointment."

"Good morning, Mrs. Henderson," Gordon Edward said, rising from behind an enormous desk. Sylvia smiled, appraising the thickly carpeted office and plush decorating. "How good of you to arrive on time," he continued, confident that her wandering gaze would approve. "So many foreign guests fail to understand Costa Rican lifestyle. However, a traditionalist, I consider local custom important." He was impeccably dressed in a dark suit, charcoal, of a soft rich fabric, over a white shirt and red silk tie.

"Good morning to you, too, Mr. Edward. Pleased to make your acquaintance. I consider it an honor." Sylvia smiled broadly and extended her hand across the wide expanse of desktop. They exchanged a firm handshake as she admitted to being half of an hour early. She wore a tailored designer label pantsuit in navy. Below was a crisp white blouse with starched collar and pearl buttons open to cleavage. It was a look she preferred: professional without sacrificing sensuality. She took the chair offered, in front of and slightly below his desk and sat with hands crossed over a knee, waiting for his opening.

"An honor? Well, thank you." he responded, leaning over on the heels of his hands. He spoke in baritone with the confidence of a practiced politician and carried himself with comfortable composure. His gestures were few and his smiles frequent.

Sylvia arranged the pleat of her pants suit then looked directly into his eyes. "May I speak frankly with you, Mr. Edward?" she asked.

"By all means, however it's entirely possible that you will be the first person to occupy that chair and do so," he said, flashing a smile of perfectly shaped teeth.

"I've just completed a tour of your galleries and despite expectations to the contrary, you have won my admiration."

"Indeed, Mrs. Henderson. I've known Olger since my first days in politics and I'm afraid his opinions represent the consensus of San José's political climate. Rather than ask what was said, I think how you see me now is more to the point."

Never had a man fallen closer to her ideal. He was a revolutionary and courageous battling the power brokers single-handedly, and on top of that, he lived in style. "I see you as strongly motivated to improving the conditions that Limon and her people find themselves living under. You stand up against an entrenched system, struggling for basic human rights and a sense of belonging to a country that would rather you and your people didn't even exist!" The idealistic zeal of college days spurred her on. "Your people have suffered an entire history of abuse and exploitation, and the only concern the central government shows is that you produce a great deal and require nothing. Our country has the same problem, of course, and precious few have had the strength of character, stamina, and dedication to affect any noticeable change. Well, you seem to be one and that, Mr. Edward, is why I consider it a privilege to make your acquaintance."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Henderson," he said, smiling like a black Cheshire cat. "I so often feel that my efforts go unnoticed."

"I'm really quite embarrassed: I came to offer five thousand dollars, simply to achieve my own goals, but now..."

"Ahem, um. Mrs. Henderson," he said, holding his hand up and suspiciously eyeing the intercom. "I'd rather save the fine details for later."

How could she have forgotten? “What I meant was that I applaud the work your charities are doing and, in particular, your personal devotion that brought them to life in the first place. Allow me to clear my conscience by offering not five, but ten thousand. How should I make that out?”

“Why thank you again, Mrs. Henderson,” he replied, beaming continually as it was filled out.

“Mr. Edward,” she said, sliding it towards him, “It is a pleasure to offer this to so worthy a cause, I hope that I will be able to repeat it soon. And please, I’m not Mrs. Henderson. I’m a single woman.”

“Thank you, this is exceedingly generous,” he responded scanning the check. “Shall I call you Ms. Henderson?”

“That would be fine if we are to remain formal, but I’d rather you call me Sylvia and consider me your friend,” she said as provocatively as circumstance permitted.

“Well then, Sylvia it is. Please, call me Gordy. Usually, I avoid allowing such intimacy. Maintaining formalities works best, I find, because it is often their breaking down that opens the door to outright disrespect. However, by all means, call me Gordy, and I should apologize about this desk. As you can see, it’s a bit of a throne. I had it built with political rivals in mind, not personal friends.” He stood as he spoke, sliding his chair to one side. “Yes, it will be very comfortable for us to know each other by first name. So, let me get down from my throne so I can, without props, welcome Sylvia, my friend, to whom I hereby extend an invitation for lunch.”

“Thank you, Gordy. I accept! A throne, huh? Well done, I’d say particularly when considering the manner in which I’m sure San José politicians would undoubtedly prefer to deal with a man such as you. A nice touch might be a dress flag of Costa Rica on one side of your window and Limon Province on the other.”

“The flag of Limon? We don’t happen have a provincial flag. Why don’t we discuss possible designs in the restaurant?” Sylvia slipped her hand comfortably over his offered elbow and, as they walked arm in arm to the elevator, the secretary stared in silent stupor.

Over lunch, Sylvia spoke of La Hacienda and her dream of creating a time-share triangle of hotels. She wouldn’t blunder again: the horses wouldn’t be mentioned until he brought it up. She laughed and made light of the frustrations she suffered with her son’s mismanagement. “He is getting better,” she was quick to add. Then, without mention of the subject, he passed a large envelope to her and asked that she examine its contents: duplicate shipping documents – official in every way, he assured her – for the boat sitting off the coast of Charleston. Everything was in order, complete with all the necessary seals and stamps to show that the vessel left Limon with but one horse on board.

It left by overnight courier, arriving the following morning in Charleston at the home of a man whose name Sylvia received from the Charleston yacht club. Three hours later, it was in the hands of the captain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

With Sylvia so often in the States pursuing other business interests, Caroline's work with the horses was transacted through Mike. He wrote the checks for the purchases, paid her and made all the shipping arrangements, something she used to do but, with her commissions unchanged, who was she to complain about having less to do? Previously, she had avoided Mike as much as humanly possible while maintaining an amicable relationship with his mother. But, with his lusting after her so blatantly obvious, she thought to take advantage of the situation by allowing a friendship - and nothing more - to develop and as it grew, it afforded her ample opportunity to manipulate things such that she was able to use La Hacienda as her personal resort as freely as did he. The fact that the place was a business failure without paying guests suited her perfectly and she influenced Mike's thinking to keep it that way. With a key of her own to the front door, she came and went as she pleased. La Hacienda became a favored hideaway where she and her most privileged friends would engage in games of pleasure that could last an entire uninterrupted day or two.

She appeared alone and late one night and discovered to her disappointment that Mike, his Boston friends and some San Jose bargirls were in the midst of a poolside party; not exactly her cup of tea. Their crude humor, roughneck game of tossing one another into the pool and, in particular, the hideous laughter of one of Mike's 'buddies', a thin and rather nervous man with a tasteless tattoo on his cheek, quickly bored her. She was about to leave when it came to her attention that the sugar bowl on the bar was filled to the top not with sugar, but cocaine and that the cigar box contained rolling papers, a pipe and some of the finest light-green, sweet-smelling bud she had ever encountered. After sampling both, the poolside games seemed more like fun and she actually found herself laughing along with the weirdo. A bag of charcoal was tossed onto the barbecue and the subsequent grilling of steaks and hamburgers attracted her attention, not for the aroma or fine cuts of meat but for the hunk with the build of a fullback who was doing the grilling. He was Kevin, who enjoyed a reputation among the group as a man to fear. When the Mick had departed Boston abruptly to live in Costa Rica, it was Kevin's reputation for brutal strength that held the gang together and kept intact the chain of authority, with Mike on top but with himself firmly established as number one in Boston. Caroline smirked, snorted another line then sauntered over to offer her help with the grilling. Soon, the new couple was cuddled on a chaise-lounge, sharing marijuana, cocaine and conversation that continued for hours into the night and in private intimacy even as the party rollicked about them.

* * *

The following day, Caroline invited her new friend for a horseback ride on what she was sure he envisioned to be a romantic romp with his new girlfriend, something on the order of Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. Unfortunately, he wasn't comfortable with the image he would present upon the horse she chose for him to ride, a gentle mare fully three hands shorter than Caroline's huge snow-white Andalusian. That wouldn't do, he insisted. He needed something more macho - suitable to his stature - like the chestnut thoroughbred stallion that stomped and snorted in a nearby stall. That was more his style, at least that one had a dick, a big one that hung down like a fire hose.

Caroline could see from the moment he climbed into the saddle, that Kevin had no idea of how to control a horse, let alone an animal the likes of which he had demanded. She trotted her stallion and watched in silent delight as Kevin struggled to keep his bouncing bottom centered. Tiring of that, she galloped her steed at a fast, distance eating pace for the pleasure of

seeing the terror in Kevin's eyes when his mount rose to the challenge and raced alongside on the inclined and weaving trail. His voice was interrupted with each impact of his bottom nevertheless Kevin, while clinging desperately to the horn and with his reins hanging slack and useless, managed to assume a masculine and in-command tone as he came alongside to suggest they stop for a rest.

"Okay," she shouted merrily, reined her horse in abruptly and dismounted quickly so as not to miss the show. Kevin came close to flipping over his mount's head as the stallion, without direction from his rider, suddenly reversed then danced nervously sideways as he tried to dismount, kicking his animal and tugging at the reins. She stood with her horse between them, watching over its back to hide her smirk as she explained, in a voice that conveyed no awareness of Kevin's plight that they should loosen the saddles while they rested. Much to her amusement, he clutched at the saddle in desperation when his feet found earth and his wobbly legs would barely hold him. "Are you all right?" she asked in her most caring of tones.

"Fine, fine," he answered, blushing. "Just a stone in my shoe, I think," and sat in the grass – ever so gently – and pulled off a shoe.

On the return ride, the spirited thoroughbred knew exactly where they were going: they were retracing their steps and at the end of the trail waited its cozy stall with a feed bin full of fresh grain. Even as Kevin attempted to mount, the stallion completely ignored the confusing series of tugs he applied to the reins, and tossed its head to slacken them, spinning in tight disobedient circles. Caroline loved every moment of it, but exercised phenomenal self-control and demonstrated nothing but sympathy. Kevin eventually gained the saddle, and she began along the trail at a walk, but his mount, aware of his rider's ineptitude, continued its disobedience, prancing sideways. She called out that perhaps he could gain better control if they trotted and, without another word, signaled her stallion to increase its stride while her hips picked up the rhythm, moving as one with the animal. She knew what to expect next, but maintained an expression that revealed nothing. Kevin's bottom, treated so tenderly during the break, was immediately attacked with a firm, swift swat from his saddle as his mount also broke into a trot. "Wait! Slow down!" his voice called in interrupted bursts with such desperation that it almost cost her self-control.

"I can't, the horse won't obey," she panted, certain he would empathize. "Oh my God, look, Kevin!" she announced hastily. "Get ahead of me quickly, before this next turn, there's room for only one horse at a time. We'll get our legs crushed against the tree trunks if we try to go through side by side. Let up on your reins and kick hard with your heels. Hurry!" She reined in to better watch the show. He kicked the horse's ribs – then again.

"Shit!" he grunted as the stallion beneath him flexed its great hind legs and he was thrown back in the saddle, his head snapping to horizontal, looking skywards. "Fuuuuuuck!" he shouted as the horse's front legs drove into the earth on a sharp angle to gain traction needed to round the tight corner. It leaned into the curve and its rear legs caught again to thrust it sharply uphill. Astonishingly, and certainly unfortunately for Kevin in view of what happened, he stayed on, but only because his desperate dive into a bear-hug around the neck of the run-away beast came in time. Actually, from the moment Caroline's mount began to trot, everything that followed was inevitable: Kevin lost even the faintest hint of control, and under him was a powerful and lightning-fast horse receiving no guidance. With no one to tell it otherwise and having been kicked for speed, the beast took off, every muscle maximizing for a headlong dash up a rutted, inclined and twisting trail towards its comfortable stall where feed might possibly be waiting.

Mike caught up with her at the stables. She'd seen him coming. How could she not? He'd fishtailed down the hairpin turns, throwing showers of gravel over the cliff as he accelerated through each. He grated to a halt, scanned the building until he saw her and jumped purposely from the big four-by-four, slamming the door behind and stomping across the exercise yard. He seemed to have something on his mind. She leaned her arms over the top rail of the gate, rested her chin on a wrist and watched.

"Jesus, Caroline!" he shouted. "What the fuck, huh?" She smiled and tossed her hair. Her eyelids drooped to closed, then reopened as she lowered her chin again onto her hands. "You bitch! You did that shit on purpose!" At the conclusion of each sentence, he snorted.

She smiled warmly.

"You knew what would happen. Don't fucking look at me like that, this ain't funny! Wadd'a `ya fucking mean telling Kevin to kick his horse outta a trot going up that fucking hill? Huh, Caroline? I mean, shit! You knew he was fucked!" He looked directly into her eyes. Nothing moved save her lips, which she pursed then returned to the smile. "Have you seen what you did to that poor bastard? You know his fucking shoulder's dislocated and his arm's busted in two places?"

"Oh lighten up, will you!" she retorted, combing her hair with her fingers. "He'll heal. You're just mad because you weren't there to see it. I wish you could have, though, it was priceless!" He readied to say something. "Mike really," she silenced him with a dismissive wave of her hand, "if you could only have seen..."

She began to mimic a beleaguered Kevin bent over in the saddle to where the horn was punching his stomach clear through to his backbone while trying to get a good grip around the stallion's neck. "Pull him in, Kevin," she screamed, claiming that thus was her shout as Kevin's horse took off. It sounded like a convincing cry of desperation, when she reenacted the scene. But Mike imagined that, just as the poor bastard realized he'd lost control, with the reins torn from his grip and his legs flailing from the stirrups, he'd heard a much less authentic cry of alarm followed by the sound of Caroline's unrestrained laughter ringing in his ears because, according to Caroline, it was just then that her composure broke and she sagged into her saddle, weakened by peals of laughter that the unfortunate oaf couldn't have missed.

Overcome by laughter, her head sagged onto her arms.

A semblance of composure regained, she wiped away her tears, began anew and finally, extracted a wary chuckle soon followed by Mike's full-blown hilarity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A week after meeting him, Caroline could hardly remember his name, but there was little doubt that she remembered well her conversation with Kevin while at the party, snuggled on the chaise-lounge and chain-smoking joints. They spoke of what they had in common: drugs, Mike and La Hacienda. They, Kevin said, had been ‘like this’ (holding crossed fingers aloft) since childhood and he worked for the Mick ‘from the start’. He related stories of gangs, fights, stolen cars and the hijacking of a truck, as he tried to impart a sense of how it had been, growing up as Boston ‘Southies’. Neighborhood was everything, he explained and if you were the sort of kid to take to the streets, you hung tight with the guys from your neighborhood and fought the gang from the next or you didn’t hang out at all.

“It sounds like *West Side Story* or something,” she answered. “I grew up in Ottawa Canada where we didn’t have gangs like in your American cities. It sounds pretty scary though, especially for a young kid.”

“Yeah, well you’re right it was, but you grow up fast on the streets, you know? It’s a matter of survival. You learn how to make a quick buck too. Shannon and I, we started selling grass when we was still little kids. Used to steal the shit from his old lady’s stash then go down on the Commons and sell to college kids. If we could, we’d get their money in our hands before handing the shit over, and then just take off running.”

“Which one is Shannon?” she asked, and then stiffened in resentment as he laughed at her.

“Hey, relax,” he said “it’s okay; how could you know? But shit, ‘Who’s Shannon?’ That’s a rip! Who’s Mike is more like it. Mike ain’t his name, you know; he just started calling himself that when he come down here, but don’t worry: half the fucking guys don’t know nothing for Mike or for Shannon either, all we ever called him was the Mick.”

“You do? I know that he hates when his mother calls him a Mick. Well, how old were you boys back then?”

“Oh hell, I don’t know, maybe eight, nine, ten. Sumpin like that.” Using the edge of a coin, Kevin reduced a piece of cocaine to dust atop a wallet calendar, rolled a one hundred Colon banknote into a tube and passed it to her. “Here, take a hit, but go easy, that stuff’s pure,” he cautioned. “Maybe you’re used to it, living down here, but I’m not. Back home, when we get it from the wop it’s already cut and I like it better that way. How about you?”

Caroline sniffed up half of the dust, wiped her nostrils and sniffled before returning the rolled up bill. “Nope, I prefer this. You get a great hit and besides, if it’s cut, you never know who’s been cutting it, or with what. This is far better even if it does make your nose bleed sometimes.”

“I seen you before,” he said, running fingers through her hair. “You was riding a big white horse, right through the center of Puriscal. Looked like some kind’a goddess: this red hair’a yours and the horse’s white mane blowing in the wind. I have to tell you; you made quite an impression! Everyone was staring, especially me. When I told him about it, the Mick bragged that you were his friend, but I never figured it was true.”

“Oh yeah, how long ago was it that you saw me?”

“Oh jeez, that was a long time ago, back when Mike was still putting us up at this resort down on the Gulf of Nicoya. I came up here with him one day to help with construction and that’s when I seen `ya; definitely more than a year ago.” Caroline looked at him blankly. “Let’s see, what was the name of that place? Oh yeah, *Hotel Playa Tambor*. You know it?”

Yes, Caroline knew *Playa Tambor*. She had been there on occasion. It was a beautiful, luxury resort on a sheltered beach that included with the price of a room all the food, drink and beach toys one could want. “Mike put you up there?” she questioned, “paid the bill and everything?”

“Yeah man! He put us up there to keep us away from his old lady. You know what I mean?”

“I sure do and I can understand anyone not wanting her hanging around when you’re trying to have a little fun!”

“No man, definitely not! She’s some kind of loud-mouth bitch, all right. But still, thanks to her being a bitch, me and the guys had some really great times down there! Usually, we’d stay two weeks and sometimes even three. You ever ride those sea kayaks they got there? Those are the nuts, man. The spics there must still be talking about us. And you know how much the Mick had the wop pay us when we got back? A thousand fucking bucks each!”

“A thousand dollars? U.S. dollars?”

“Yeah man. Easy money and great times too – what a fucking deal we had going!”

Was this guy totally whacked out, just trying to impress her with a fancy line of crap – or what? He certainly had some astonishing bullshit! Dozens of questions sprang to mind yet, with a knowing smile, she feigned having familiarity with it all and, to allow herself pause to think, began rolling a joint. *Mike* living under an assumed name *plus* paying for this entire group of guys to stay at a first class resort and *then* giving each one a thousand dollars as well? She couldn’t imagine a bone-head such as him in such a position! Yet, *something intriguing* was going on. Either that, or this guy had the best line of shit she’d ever heard; she wanted to know more but caution was the word if she was to garner more from this guy. “Too bad it had to end,” she murmured coyly, hoping to coax him on. “But then, nothing lasts forever, does it; so, what happened?” He laughed again at her – something she would normally not tolerate for one instant; instead she managed a chuckle pretending she understood perfectly whatever the joke might be.

“What do you mean, ‘what happened’” he snickered, poking her in the ribs, “You happened; that’s what and don’t try to pretend that it wasn’t you, ‘cause I know now that it was you.”

“Me? What did I do?” This was getting really weird. She felt the hair at the back of her neck began to bristle out of fear – or something.

“Well, I suppose that it was Tommy really that started it all by getting busted, but don’t play innocent with me; I’m no fuckin’ idiot. When I seen you show up here today with that red hair and fine body, I remembered seeing you that day up on that big white horse and, right away, I knew it had’ta be you that got started us with the horses. So, you see; if it wasn’t for you, everything would’a eventually cooled down and gone back to how it was. and we’d be down at that resort today instead’a here. But, you just watch,” he challenged, “you might be on top now, but this horse thing ain’t gonna last forever, and one day the Mick’ll switch to something else, maybe using some’a my ideas and it’ll be your turn to get the shaft. So, enjoy it while you can, baby. See what I mean?”

Did Caroline see?

She saw, all right! She saw that she was being used and excluded from something lucrative involving the horses, but what was it, anyhow? Was Mike trafficking perhaps? He hardly seemed capable. And who was this ‘wop’? And if Kevin and his friends got ‘the shit’ from him, how then was Mike involved? Still, if this wasn’t just a bullshit story designed to get into her pants and Mike really was paying all those hotel expenses then, he must be more than just some minion of this ‘wop’. She let the thought sink in and said nothing other than buttering Kevin up for more detailed information but, just about then, his idiots friends came over, grabbed him by the wrists and ankles and threw him in the pool and the conversation was over.

Caroline now had different perspective for her vision of Mike. She had always assumed that he, starting to stick his nose into her horse trading business, was just another scam of his to squeeze something extra from Sylvia without having to lift a finger. Apparently his mother, ignorant in all matters related to horses, didn't realize that it was she and Alfredo who did the entire thing and that Mike's only contribution was to control everything and collect whatever she paid him. Caroline hadn't raised a bitch about it because, after all, it was through him that she got the job and when he came on board and they began selling more horses her commissions had increased. But this! Whatever it was; well, she'd been back stabbed and was she pissed! Then again, so obviously had been Sylvia, but frankly she couldn't care less about her. Actually, if Mike (or – Shannon, if that really was his name) had been able to pull off such a stunt right under the nose of someone as crafty as Sylvia, more power to him. Never had she envisioned him as a source of money or power. In fact, she had dismissed him as an absolute zero. Yet, if there was any merit to this clown's story, he apparently, had both. That changed everything. It even seemed possible that she might manipulate herself into a position to assume control of La Hacienda. Caroline could do a lot with a place like that: she knew that its worth was close to double what Sylvia had paid. With all of that it mind, Mike no longer seemed quite so awful and judging by Sylvia's power over him, he could easily be controlled. She began the following day:

Presumably to cool off after a day's work in the stables, she drove up the hill to La Hacienda. Mike was where she knew he'd be: at the poolside bar. She came to stand beside him.

"Cold one?" he offered.

"Yeah, that'd be nice! Thanks. What are you up to?"

"Working on a plan for parking stalls next to the new garage," he replied without looking up.

"Um-um... that pool sure looks inviting. I think I'm going to take a dip." She took a swallow of beer then stepped to the outdoor shower, noticing as she did, that he turned his stool to divert his gaze from her. That wouldn't do. "Don't you have any soap out here," she asked, unlatching her bra. "I've got to wash the sweat from my body so I won't dirty your pool."

"It's there, right in the soap dish."

"Where? I don't see any soap dish!" She was topless and had wiggled her jeans to knee-level when finally he turned towards her, pointing.

"It's right there in front of you, built into the wall."

She stepped out of the jeans and slid down her panties. Stepping from them, she allowed her eyes to focus on the soap dish. "Oh, there! Look, I was feeling around up here," and demonstrated how she could reach the top of the wall by standing on tiptoes. He flushed at the sight of her and returned to his sketch. With the spray on, she began soaping her breasts. "Would you bring me my beer, please before it gets warm," she pleaded. The beer arrived, but disappointingly, he returned to his stool. She ran water over her body and lathered every crevasse then rinsed again, rubbing thoroughly. "I saw a nice looking filly down on *Finca Flores*, the other day. I was thinking about buying it for Sylvia. It was so cute. It stood only this high," and she raised a flattened hand to the height of her chest.

"Yeah. So why didn't `ya buy it?"

He wasn't watching. Both elbows were planted on the bar and he seemed to be studying the collection of bottles. She walked to the water's edge and inserted a toe, careful to keep her body faced towards him. "Oh, it's cold!" she said. "Look, the chill's making me point." She stared down at her breasts, oozing them together and lifting with folded arms. She glanced up. Now, he was watching. "Coming?" And she dove.

Apparently, she'd rejected him more effectively than she'd thought. He pretended to take no notice, and just sat there drinking beer and sketching. She remembered having been firm with him about keeping his distance, sliced him up verbally pretty badly, but it had been necessary: his sort knew nothing of innuendo. So now, what had she become to him? Not even a woman; just a friend of his mother, an old bat like Sylvia? She would have to be a little more direct. No way would she endure a romp in bed unless she could at least get him rinsed off in the pool. She climbed out, walked up to him and loosened the top button of his shirt.

"Come on," she said provocatively. "Let's stop pretending. We're not just neighbors, we mean more to each other than that." He looked at her with a dumbfounded expression, but a smile had begun to show beneath the beard. "You need help," she said and began to loosen the buckle of his belt.

* * *

They were nude, spread on lounge chairs on the deck of La Hacienda. The warm winds eddying across her body, while lying upon a grand stage before the entire expanse of the valley, titillated Caroline to newfound levels of horniness. Mike had been good earlier, fucking hard and deep while pulling her hair to tip her head back, but now his member hung slack and lifeless like a forgotten ice cream, melted onto the cushion. She ran her hands up the insides of her thighs with her legs spread to the wind, thrilling to the cool chill when she held open her labia. As she teased a fingernail over the moist flesh, the tip of her tongue extended involuntarily. She moaned, and turned her chair to give him vantage, wanting the build-up to linger but, as she diddled, he swelled and grew to full height like an emerging sapling and, within moments, she was overcome with a spasmodic orgasm.

"You broads get off that way better than you do with regular fucking, don't cha?"

"No. Unfortunately we need men."

"Yeah, to watch. Don't bullshit me. When I was a kid, I used to see Sylvia finger-fucking herself like that. She'd cum right away if I was there watching, but, if I ignored her, she'd be pumping away all afternoon. She needed me for that, but never was willing to admit it."

"I don't get it. What does that prove except that you're a couple of perverts?"

"Just that I know what broads are like."

"Yeah, okay. Fix me another line."

"I will, but first, you gotta tell me about the first time you had sex."

"Sure. Just get to work on that line." He began fumbling with a chunk of coke and a razorblade. She remembered her first time well. It was a summer afternoon when she was eleven. She and her older half-brother paddled to the far end of the lake in a canoe, where he put her off on a tiny islet, telling her he would leave her there unless she appeared naked on the beach. He patrolled the shores but wouldn't approach until she was bare, whereupon he dropped anchor, stripped and swam ashore, demanding she towel him dry, paying particular attention to his erect penis. Still, he would never take her back, he insisted, unless she lie on the ground with her legs spread. Caroline actually enjoyed the pain of being entered the first time and was swept through with multiple orgasm.

He wanted more after that. She did too, but she wasn't going to let him know: he would do anything to get her to agree to a canoe ride, and that leverage she could use. She invented ways for him to beg that he learned, oh so very well. The extremes he would go to thrilled her, while simultaneously his self-degradation disgusted her. Eventually, he moved to the city, leaving her without a servant. She found one in her uncle whose hands so often accidentally brushed her breast or bottom, and

when she was done with him, she got what she wanted first from one sniveling idiot, then another. “Well, I was a cheerleader,” she said.

“I hate cheerleaders.”

“So you’ve said. Anyhow, I, of course, was elected homecoming queen. And the captain of the football team was my boyfriend. He took me to the prom and I lost my virginity under the stars in the back seat of his father’s new convertible.”

“Stuck-up bitch! Tell me the real story.”

“No! You think that, because you tell me how twisted you and Sylvia are, I’m going to tell you about my sex life? Sorry, that’s personal.” She bent over the cocaine and sniffed two lines. “This is boring, Mike,” she said. “All we ever do is hang out here and you won’t even go riding with me.”

“I will too, but not if you’re going to get all dressed up like some kind’a woman bullfighter. Can’t you just wear a pair of jeans and a hat like a normal person?”

“I’ll have you know that I’m not a country hick. I ride a horse the way it should be done. What would you know about it, anyhow? But, come on, I want to go out on the town and have some fun. Let’s get all dressed up in our best clothes and start off in Hotel Paradise.”

“I can’t, I’m working.”

“Working? You’re listening to tunes, fucking and drinking beer.”

“I got a crew’a guys working here, Caroline. I’m supervising.”

She pouted. “Please, Mike...”

“Okay, I’ll tell you what: not today, but one’a these days, real soon, I’m going to take you on vacation to this beautiful Caribbean beach town I know. You’ll love it. It’s got to be the best place you’ve ever seen. Just like the movies.”

Along the Caribbean coast, south of Chauita, a tiny village lies hidden among the unbroken belt of coconut palms lining the coast: Puerto Viejo is in many ways the twin of Chauita. It differs only in that it is smaller, attracts fewer tourists, and observes an even slower pace than the tortoise-like march through time observed in Chauita. In all other aspects, the tiny villages are identical. The same crystalline Caribbean water, iridescent and turquoise, throws its surf upon the beach. The same soft beat of reggae fills the air, in the shimmering heat of the afternoon when the only movement is children at play and, in the evening, when the entire population emerges, sitting in lawns, visiting neighbors or patronizing open air establishments. In both towns, the populace displays an identical warm, open friendliness that sets the mood of the visitor for relaxation.

Puerto Viejo had the dubious distinction of being Mike’s favorite. He enjoyed its easy-going manner and acceptance of his appearance, not altogether bizarre in Puerto Viejo where dreadlocks and full beards were routine. Particularly, he enjoyed the abundance of marijuana grown in jungle clearings and the tolerance of its use at any time or place.

Mike never asked Caroline where she might like to go for their getaway vacation together. Puerto Viejo was long his favorite, so that was where they went. He rented a simple cabaña on the beach with a thatch roof, sand floor and little else. Caroline didn’t appreciate its quaint charm. With but one tiny room, there wasn’t any convenient place to escape Mike. The toilet and shower were equally unsuitable: they consisted of a tiny outdoor affair of bamboo walls with wide gaps and a sheet of dirty plastic that lifted with every breeze for a door. Water for both bathing and flushing came, not from a tap, but from a bucket dipped into a barrel filled with rainwater. Furthermore, the caveman-like facilities were shared with the neighboring cabaña.

Some kind of big spender he was turning out to be! Caroline was incensed. Where was this fortune he was supposed to have? And when were they going to start enjoying the high living, fast lane lifestyle of a guy with bucks pouring out of his pockets the way his friend had described him to be? This wasn't the beach she'd been anticipating. Not even close: it was deserted and there was nothing but the damn jungle and a scattering of half-fallen-down shacks. This is what he called a vacation paradise? Where were the luxury hotels, swimming pools and decent restaurants? How about doormen, tequila sunrises and room service?

It had been different when his friends were down: money flowed like water. Those two weeks they were in Costa Rica had been a non-stop party that shifted between La Hacienda and San José's hottest nightspots. Caroline had been in her element and shone. They were out late one night, when Club Hollywood was suggested. She had never been there because, from what she had heard, it was a dead-end joint and essentially nothing but a whorehouse. But Mike had tweaked her curiosity with endless boastful stories of his exploits there, so she had asked to be taken and while in a taxi bound for the place, learned from excited conversations that Mike's source of pride with regard to it was his claim to have had sex with every girl in the place. She was quickly losing interest.

They went in through a swinging door with a round window in its center. The air reeked of stale beer, overflowing ashtrays and cheap perfume. Mike stalked through the entrance barrel-chested, like an SS general goose-stepping into Paris. "Juanito," he roared to the bartender, "two tables for my amigos and cerveza for everybody! And send over the *señoritas*! Tell them that, if they're nice to us, maybe we'll invite a couple of 'em to La Hacienda for a fiesta! Hey but, Juanito," he continued in lowered tones, "tell Chiquita I'm sorry but not tonight, I've already got a date, okay?" Upon seating, Mike began relating the story of his brief arrest at Juan Santa Maria Airport and the resulting harassment charge against a most hated cop.

Caroline escaped to the washroom, just as he began boasting about having his own private cop he could annoy to his heart's content, 'and there's nothing the prick can do about it, either!' Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was a story that she had heard too many times already and, more filled with bravado with each telling. Emerging from the bathroom, she saw every available chair, including the one at Mike's side, was occupied by a prostitute. One, a tiny Ladino woman with curly hair and wide eyes had moved in and was whispering in Mike's ear while reaching a hand between the buttons of his shirt and Mike, the bastard, couldn't have looked any more smug.

Noticing Caroline's approach, he pushed the girl off. "Go on Chiquita, you have to go now," he said.

"No," she insisted, standing her ground at the side of the table. Her eyes followed his until they settled on Caroline. A singular eyebrow rose to form a high arch as her eyes widened. "You with her, Meester Mike?"

"Go on now, Chiquita," he answered. "You gotta go now. Yeah, tonight I'm with her."

"No!" the girl insisted. Caroline was astounded at the impudence. The girl refused to budge, remaining frozen in her spot, glaring at her with the ferocity of a stalking lioness. "Stay with Chiquitaaa," she purred through puckered lips. "She take goood care of Meester Mike."

Heat arose from Caroline's neck and she could feel her ears and her cheeks reddening. "Who do you think you are?" she demanded. The prostitute ignored her entirely, cheekily returning to sit at Mike's side. He placed his hand on the back of her head and pulled her to his chest with a wide grin spreading amid the snarl of beard. The son-of-a-bitch was enjoying himself! Two women battled publicly for his affection, right there, for his admiring fans to watch! Was she nuts, or what? The door at the back had a sign above it: CASINO. "Why don't you stay and enjoy yourself with your friends? I'm going to go check out the casino. No," she promptly responded to his attempted objection, "that's okay."

She had no idea that when she turned Mike loose with the whore, she too would experience a strong urge to go into a back room and get it on. Not with him, of course, but with the club's owner, Brian Walston. The man did something for her. Primarily, he brought into sharp focus just how utterly ridiculous it was to be with Mike Henderson when the world was virtually crawling with men like Brian. There were millions of them out there, men who were clean, handsome, gentlemanly and dressed stylishly. More than that, though: men striving to accomplish something, so that a girl felt good being around them. Not some disrespectful, derelict living by Mommy's donations and strung out on drugs.

The casino, such as it was, consisted of nothing more than a short line of slots and a scattering of tables where low-stakes poker and blackjack were the games of choice. Caroline was transfixed, watching the action at a blackjack table when suddenly, George Dearing materialized at her side. He was an acquaintance Caroline had shared with her ex-husband, in another world she had once inhabited, and as such was one of the last persons she might expect to encounter in Club Hollywood.

"George Dearing! My God, what are you doing here? I mean, I wouldn't expect to see you in a place like this." George was a devoted husband and father, a fact Caroline knew quite well: several years earlier, she suffered a humiliating defeat in an attempt to get an affair started. George was staring at Caroline with equal shock, partly for encountering her in Club Hollywood, but more for her filmy white dress. It was form fitting and cut with a plunging 'V', which a push-up bra filled to overflowing, causing George considerable discomfort. Despite his best efforts, his gaze fell continually, like a pair of loaded dice – snake eyes, locked in on her cleavage.

"I might very well ask you the same question, Caroline," George replied, blanching as he involuntarily glanced downwards again, "but, I won't be so forward," and with effort, forced himself to look at her face, removed his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief. "I'm here because my friend, Brian Walston is the owner, and it's a nice quiet place that doesn't attract tourists. That and Brian's personality make it a popular nightspot for a lot of the ex-pats. I've been coming here regularly for years." He flushed. Then, slightly ill at ease, continued. "By here, I mean in this room to play cards. I don't partake of the activities in the other side."

"Pardon my surprise. It's just that seeing you kind of brings back all the terrible memories of everything I went through with François," she said, incorporating the strain of grief into her voice and expression, while closely gauging his reaction to see if he harbored sympathy for her ex. "I'm even too ashamed to use his name any longer, so now I'm Caroline Steepleton, my maiden name," and he responded as she hoped, with attentive sympathy.

They played blackjack, with his money, of course. Caroline didn't care too much for gambling. Once cash was in her hand, she hated to let it go, but with someone else's she found it madly entertaining. George's meager pile of chips had grown to a respectable mound when the club's owner stopped by to check on the action. George had previously pointed Brian out to Caroline, suggesting that as a single woman, perhaps she would appreciate an introduction. She had turned down the offer, but after meeting the congenial Brian Walston with the cherub cheeks, her opinion changed. The temptation to stay with him was strong, but she felt she had to take advantage of Sylvia's absence if she hoped to get to Mike's money and, if she played her cards right, maybe a share or all of La Hacienda.

When she returned, the little whore was still occupying her seat, but Mike was at the other side of the room, standing with one of his friends by the bar. As she approached unnoticed from behind, she could hear Mike complaining bitterly: "– had it with shit from that wop. Who's he think he is, treating youze like dogs and watching your every movement? And now he thinks he can tell `ya how to dress and what you're allowed to drink? For Christ's sake! It's worse than working for the federal fucking government. You tell that slick-ass wop that I said we're done kissing his guinea ass and none'a `yaz are gonna

get on an airplane dressed like no traveling salesman and turn around to go right back after getting here. Tell him to squeeze the olive oil outta his head and wake up. Of course, you guys are shot in the ass and need time to unwind, especially after having ta deal with an asshole like him every time `ya need more shit to sell. And for my guys, unwinding means music, whores, smoke and good booze. `Yaz fucking-well earn it, and if it's any of his damn business, THAT'S what La Hacienda's purpose is, not as no damn hotel that no one ever goes to or a restaurant without customers. Shit!"

She should have known right then that something wasn't right and gone back in the casino in pursuit of Brian Walston, but all the money Mike was throwing around, paying for everything, kept alive the image of soon becoming La Hacienda's mistress with countless dollars at her disposal. So she stayed with him. Then, with his friends finally gone, came the promised vacation and off she went with him with visions of splendor under the sun, only to find herself berthed in a hovel in Puerto Shit-hole. She'd been had: Mike had probably paid the muscleman guy to feed her the bullshit story about him being the head of a profitable drug ring just so he could get into her pants!

She arose early their first morning at the beach, despite a late night of snorting cocaine and letting the brute fuck himself to sleep atop her. She felt a desperate need for air after waking and finding Mike's arm draped over her body with the oppressive odor of his armpit swirling about her head like a green cloud. Careful not to wake him, she slipped quietly from their shack to watch the sun lift itself from the sea. She imagined the fiery display to be a distant nuclear explosion and wished a finger of its flames would reach across the water and incinerate the grass shack with Mike it before he awoke horny again for her.

The brilliant, white center of the explosion assumed the shape of an egg and spread its glowing hues of orange, red, and yellow across the sky. As it rose higher and became round, Caroline closed her eyes, tipped her head and basked in its warmth allowing the rays to penetrate her very being. While she soaked in the sun and doubted her own sanity, two local men in tattered shirts and cutoff shorts appeared. One chatted incessantly while the other simply nodded and smiled responses as they worked to push their dugout canoe from dry sand down to the line of surf. With it at the water's edge, they spread their net and began inspecting for damage as Caroline strolled up to watch.

"*Buenos Dias, Señora,*" the talkative one sang out, intent upon weaving and without so much as glancing in her direction. Practiced fingers worked, joining and tying in a blur. The other, also seated in the sand with his legs covered by the bundled net, glanced up and displayed a wide grin. "My brother and I work each day to extend the life of this poor old thing," the first man said, smiling constantly as his gaze met hers and his fingers worked uninterrupted. "It is as old as us and should be replaced, but we are poor and cannot afford such luxury, so we repair it."

"I love your boat," Caroline commented, looking in admiration at the dugout. "How long does it take to make one of these?" The canoe, about twenty feet long and four wide, had been carved from the trunk of a single tree. The unpainted craft had to be old, yet retained the appearance of solid strength. Into either end where it began to narrow, small seats had been fashioned directly from the original wood.

"This canoe was made by our uncle, Tio Jorge, the last man in this village to make his living carving canoes, but he is dead now. It is hard to say how long it took to make, because he worked on many at the same time. First, he would search the jungle for a tree of this type with a straight trunk and without knots. When he found one, he would fell it, cut the section to be used, remove the bark and roll it into a stream where he would leave it for years for the wood to be cured by fresh water, so it

wouldn't split when he carved it the way a green log will. When it was ready, he would wait for the rains and, with the help of many men, work it down the swollen stream to the river, then to the sea and along the coast until it arrived right here. All the men folk would help and, with smaller logs underneath, they would roll it to his work area. Pepé and I – he is my brother, the silent one – remember well watching when he fashioned the canoes from the logs. Oh, excuse me señora, my name is Richard.”

“That’s a fascinating story, Richard,” she replied with honest admiration for the quality and sturdiness of the canoe. “I can only imagine the patience your uncle must have had. But, why are there so few canoes? I only see yours and two others.”

“Many years ago,” he answered, “everyone in this village lived by fishing or making dugouts. In those days, there were about one hundred canoes, and this time of the morning, the beach would be very busy, with almost the entire village working together. There was much laughter as the fishermen joked and the women prepared food over fires up there between the trees, but year after year, the catch became smaller. No longer would the fish practically jump into our nets. Nobody knew why there were so few fish until some environmental scientists came to study the problem. They found that chemicals and plastic from the plantations were killing the reef, but a lawsuit came to nothing. The men of Puerto Viejo began looking elsewhere for work. It is very sad, but all they found were the banana plantations. Now they live in constant debt to company owned grocery stores, and the bananas they grow are not even eaten by our people but sent to the United States.

“Today, we are fewer and most earn their living from tourism. Pepé and I are among the only ones who fish. We earn very little because the catches are small and our family large, but we are proud of the tradition and don't want it to end with us. If we continue, maybe before all of the fish have died, the plantations will stop polluting the river and the reef will live again for our sons. Meanwhile, every morning we fish – unless, of course, we can find tourists like you, who will pay for a tour.

“Maybe, you would like to go with us today,” Richard offered hopefully. “We can charge by the hour, the whole day or you can take our deluxe two-day trip. On the first day, we travel south along the coast, following the reef where we teach you how to dive for lobster. For lunch, we prepare fish on the beach of one of the islands in Bocas del Toro. Then in the late afternoon, arrive in the village of Bocas where Pepé and I will sell lobster and you can relax at the resort on the laguna. We return the next day and will have you back here before sunset. Are you interested, Señora?”

Caroline immediately woke Mike, but he had other ideas: he had been looking forward to spending the day in the tiny cabaña, mounted atop her. He did, however, grudgingly submit and pulled himself to his feet, shaking his head and running fingers through long snarls of hair. He prepared for a day in a canoe by stocking a cooler with beer, buying another ounce of marijuana, and selecting cassettes for his Walkman. They settled in the center of the canoe on the pile of nets and were off. Richard waded through the surf pushing, while Pepé, atop his little seat in the bow, guided to cut the breakers, and soon they were both paddling rhythmically beside the reef, paralleling the coast.

Later, they stopped to work with their nets while Caroline and Mike snorkeled, drifting hypnotically above the wonderland of the reef. Richard caught a two-foot long barracuda that they cooked over a flame on the deserted beach of one of the many islands protecting the bay of Bocas del Toro.

Beyond the cluster of cays, they entered the wide bay, greeted to a vista of unmatched beauty: the water had a mirror smooth surface, colored in shifting hues of aquamarine and deep blue by sunlight reflected from a bottom of coral and white sand. The majority of the islands were uninhabited, palm covered, little jewels. On some of the larger, with hilly interiors and waterfalls spilling into the bay, villages inhabited by Cuna Indians – who continue to live much the same as their ancestors for countless generations – could be seen. Dugout canoes that serve as taxis between the islands, sported colorful canopies. Deep

within the bay, they arrived at the village of Bocas del Toro, a cluster of houses on pilings above the water. Mike and Caroline relaxed on the deck of a small hotel while, in the kitchen, Richard and Pepé negotiated the sale of their lobster.

Returning the following day, they relaxed atop their fishnet, smoking marijuana while listening with one earphone each to Mike's Walkman, drinking beer and joking. Between fits of hysterical laughter, Mike related the story of François' bizarre encounter at a traffic light in San José. He hadn't been on hand, but knew the story's high points and his imagination supplied the rest. He stood to urinate, precariously balanced, with one foot atop the net and the other on the gunwale, eliciting squeals from Caroline and exaggerated warnings from Richard. "Steady as she goes, Captain," he shouted. Remaining upright, he impersonated a dumfounded François, trying to make sense of what was happening around him, then suddenly, his balance failed, and he collapsed in a heap on the net.

"No more grass or beer for you," Caroline whooped, tears of laughter streaking her face. "Any more and we'll lose you overboard." She tickled his ribs with a toe and continued telling of François' facial expression upon awareness that something had gone horribly awry when an army of cops waiting in the front yard grabbed him and clamped on irons. Mike wiggled free of her toe, drained a can of beer down his throat and tossed the empty into the sea, then burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"What's so funny?" she asked although his mirth was infectious and she too began rollicking.

"Another thing I would'a given anything to see is that skinny-ass stable boy having to gut a dead horse aboard a boat rolling around in the sea!" He doubled over with another bout of red-faced laughter. "Can't you just picture that little shit, smeared head to toe with blood, stuffing his arms up inside'a long, slimy hunks of guts, leaning first this way then that? The little prick probably threw up all over himself."

Caroline was caught short. She had been putting fire to a joint and so hoped that her startled expression had been hidden behind her hands and that her laughter, delayed until after a long draw, managed to come off as spontaneous. She hadn't been told about a horse dying in transit; why not? And, considering the excellent they were required to be certified as being in, a natural death seemed highly unlikely. But, Alfredo cutting open the gut and fishing about inside could only mean one thing: smuggling and a ruptured bag of cocaine was way more than enough to kill a horse.

He went on with his raving to complain about Sylvia calling crazy her idea of developing a triangle of resort hotels for time-share vacationers. "She's nuts: wants to put'a sign out on highway and keeps complaining that I haven't done it. What's she think? Suddenly people are going to start flocking down the driveway? Only ones who ever drive down that fuckin' road are campesinos wit their pickup trucks. She wants clients, what she's gotta do is advertise in the States – but she never fucking does. Then, with no bookings, she comes down and hires a full crew'a people that end up stealing more than I have 'ta pay 'em in wages. Hell, I don't blame 'em for robbing: they have fuck-all to do, and how am I supposed to supervise 'em if I'm supervising a work crew and got the guys coming and going all the time? I only end up firing all the assholes she hires. Last time, she hired some broad as general manager; to help out, she says. So then, the bitch starts walking around like she owned the place, ordering me around: 'Wadda `ya doing now? Do this, do that and don't do the other thing!' I threw her in the fucking pool along with all'a her shit and told her to get out!"

Caroline wasn't listening; her mind was racing even as she wore an amused smile. Mike *was* a trafficker after all! Well, that certainly went a long way towards explaining the stable boy's new clothes or how he afforded a car. She was getting close. And she had been ready to dump him! Similarly conflicting opinions of Mike and what he was about continued to lift, then drop, her hopes even to the last day of their short-lived affair.

It was an early Wednesday evening, a week or more after their trip; a time in which Caroline had learned nothing further nor enjoyed even one of the luxuries the girlfriend of a high-rolling drug trafficker ought to. They were lying by the pool, smoking, snorting and drinking till they were too stoned to move, except for fucking and the energy needed to watch stacks of videos.

“You’re going to take me out on the town,” Caroline questioned, “Really?”

“Well, don’t get yourself all worked up. The place I’m taking ‘ya ain’t exactly got four stars.”

“What place?”

“Club Hollywood.”

“Not again! Can’t you take me someplace decent?”

“Decent? You?”

“You know what I mean, a place with a little style, maybe one of the good casinos. Or can’t you afford a woman with class?”

“I can afford any thing I want and what I want is to take you wit me to Club Hollywood.”

“Yeah? And what do you intend to do about your bimbo whore?”

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll take care of Chiquita and, while we’re there, anything you want is yours – I’m paying.”

“You? What, are you still spending the three thousand you got from me?”

“Hell, no! Are you kidding? That was gone a week after I got it. But, the wop stuck a little bonus in wit that last bunch of tuna cans for me,” he said, swelling his chest. “So, maybe now’s the perfect time for us to blow it all on a big night in town.”

The combination of drugs had taken its toll on Caroline and there she was, caught in his knowing gaze, mentally piecing together the entire picture: an image of Mike as a second-class errand-boy for this ‘wop’ he and his friend both spoke of. Yes, Mike smuggled coke, just like the muscleman had said, but big deal! She could see it all clearly. Mike wasn’t in charge of a thing! He was just a hired flunky who sent cocaine to the States in the digestive tracts of her horses. His payoff, together with cash for entertaining the others, must be returning in tuna cans. But, it wasn’t his money – never was. It was the ‘wop’s’ and, once Mike had blown his bit on whores and booze, he was just another broken down loser. All she ever got for her considerable contribution was a sales commission and a night on the town in Club Hollywood. Lucky her!

He knew immediately that he had said more than he should have. “Oh, uh I guess you don’t know about that,” he stammered. “It’s a canning business Sylvia owns, but I get part’a the profits. She has this guy send me the money in cans like that to avoid taxes. You know how it is.” They fell into silence, their mutual discomfort hidden behind another joint, beer and cassette.

A night at Club Hollywood began to sound like not a bad idea at all. She could let Mike exhaust himself in the back room with his bimbo, giving her a break from the horny bastard’s insatiable sexual drive and, as an extra bonus, ample time to become better acquainted with her fellow Canadian, Brian Walston, the club’s rather attractive owner.

* * *

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but this place used to be very successful before the owner died and squabbles among his sons caused it to be shut,” Brian explained, expanding his arms to the emptiness of his casino. Like a friendly bear, he’d lumbered over and, chuckling at his own discomfort, remembered her name on the third attempt. “See over there?” he asked in

response to her request for a tour, “that used to be the main entrance, and the bar, which is actually a separate business, used to be the back room. However, when it was offered to me, the casino had long since been closed. All the gambling paraphernalia: tables, roulette wheels, security equipment, everything had been sold, with only the bar operable. All that remained were these few slot machines and the license. That didn’t matter to me at the time, because I bought with the idea of making this into a rock disco, but because of some technical problems, I couldn’t get a cabaret license. Eventually, I had to give up on the idea, and instead I pay the previous owner’s family to use the old bar and casino licenses. Technically, that makes them the proprietors, even if I do own the property and I can well imagine that if I started fixing this place up, they would try to leverage my profit. There’s more: neither license is, in fact legit, because they’re still in the old man’s name, and he’s been dead for more than ten years. I’ve found that by not advertising and quietly catering to the ex-patriot crowd, my operation stays out of sight sufficiently that other clubs don’t complain. Of course, the cops take their piece, but in the end I make enough to keep me happy.”

Caroline saw something in Brian Walston that she wanted. What attracted her wasn’t just that, as a real man, he was light years ahead of Mike, but Club Hollywood itself. Properly licensed, it had the potential to be an environment over which – if it were hers – she might reign, glamorously presiding over debauchery. Fate had finally brought her to her third door, behind which lay her treasure. Solving legal problems such as his was just her forte. She had indeed found her path! Within an hour, she’d won an invitation to dine with Mr. Brian Walston at the dining room of *Hotel Irazu*.

When Mike saw Caroline walking out the door with the club’s owner, he assumed her to be jealous over his time with Chiquita. It was days before he came to understand that Caroline had no desire to continue in their relationship. He was crushed, wounded to the core then seized with jealousy towards Brian, who was a patient man, yet had limits that Mike repeatedly tested. He exceeded them one night, beating a girl bloody in a back room of Club Hollywood and emerged, taunting anyone to ‘do something about it’. Brian crushed him in a bear hug with such force that Mike was only semi-conscious when he lifted him bodily from the floor, carried him to the door and dumped him on the sidewalk. Thereafter, Mike stayed away from Club Hollywood, but for weeks, shadowed Caroline, waiting on a side road with his lights off until she pulled from her driveway. He hounded her with telephone calls, sent flowers, and even threw a rock through her living room window. Nothing had the desired effect.

Caroline, for her part, did everything in her power to ignore him, assuming, probably correctly, that any reaction at all might well prolong the torture. He tapered off and eventually quit stalking and vying for her affections, but that didn’t stop him from pining over lost love. Caroline had been his first woman in years that wasn’t a prostitute, and the only woman of class he had ever known. He continued to desire Caroline very, very much.

* * *

“Do you remember when you said that you can’t get a casino license?” Caroline asked over a three in the afternoon breakfast. Brian had a double suite that occupied an entire upper floor of the *Hotel Cariari*. He lived in one, and used the other as office, spare bedroom, gym and library for his extensive collection of music and books. Caroline had first come to spend a night in the spare room to avoid driving narrow mountain roads while drunk and strung out on coke. She’d used the room again to avoid Mike’s stalking and more recently, with the image of her as a virtuous woman firmly established, she shared his bed.

Brian paused to dip a napkin in a glass of water and dab at a coffee splash on the lapel of his silk robe. “Yep, sure do,” he answered. “Why? Are you going to get one for me?”

“I was wondering why you couldn’t get it. You must have full residency, don’t you?”

“I do, yes. But there’s another problem, kind of technical that I’m not able to get around. I’ve tried everything and believe me, it’s a dead end.”

“A technical problem?” She spread her palms and fixed him with a stare. “So, what is it? Come on, you can tell me. I promise, it won’t go any further.”

He laughed. “Skeletons in the closet, Caroline. It seems everyone down here has a few, why not me?” He dipped rye toast into tepid coffee and ate the bit that hung sodden and ready to fall before speaking. He had once been manager of a highly successful nightclub in Vancouver, British Columbia, that featured rock bands and had dance floors on three levels. He did very well, and even better, he said, if cocaine sales were included. The coke was his own enterprise. The club owners were totally unaware that it was the primary reason for the amazing success of their business. Another thing they didn’t know was that Brian skimmed their profit and, the longer it went on, the bolder he got. He was no fool however and realized that eventually the widening gap between purchases and sales would be noticed, but he opted to continue while laying plans for a quick departure.

He applied through the Costa Rican consulate for residency and, as it turned out, the timing was perfect: no sooner had a certified clean bill of health from the Vancouver police been submitted than his ship began to sink. A bartender he fired for doing a bit of his own skimming reciprocated by telling the owners what he thought Brian was up to. Fortunately for him and foolishly on their part, they confronted him before lodging a complaint with the police (who in their investigation uncovered the coke sales) and, by the time the charges became official, Brian and his money were safely in Costa Rica – but he would never be able to get around the background investigation required for licensing.

Caroline studied him from across the table. “What would you say if I told you that I could get your license for you?”

“What? Oh... But, not in my name, right?”

“In your name.”

His eyes twinkled and his mouth formed a small smile. “Legitimate?”

“It would cost you. Probably somewhere in the neighborhood of five thousand US, but it would be a perfectly legal license in your name.”

“If you’re talking about a bribe, I don’t think it’ll work, I’ve tried greasing everyone I could think of. They all drooled over the money, but said that they can’t, it’s impossible.”

“You never talked to me, Brian. I can do it.”

“Hummm...” He held outstretched fingers together, prayer-like and pressed them to his lips, remaining motionless with an unseeing stare towards his coffee cup. “Well, I’m going to have to say no,” he said at length. “Guess not.”

“No? Why not?”

“Well, I don’t have the kind of money I used to. I could still afford to put together a rock disco and have enough left to cover operating expenses until it got underway, but a casino? That’s a whole different thing. You have to put in a fortune just in security cameras and such, and do you have any idea how much professional gambling equipment costs? Ha! And that’s just the start. I could swing a loan to cover most of it, but what about start-up capital? I’d need cash to cover potential gambling losses, wages and other expenses for a minimum of six months or the business is doomed, and a Costa Rican bank

just isn't going to give a foreigner that kind of money, especially on top of financing the equipment. Naw, forget it. I'm okay the way I am."

It took only a moment for the answer to come to her: Gene Frazer. He had money; lots of it. She could get him to lend Brian what he needed; the payments would have to be made on time or there would be hell to pay, but using her ideas, they couldn't fail. "Don't give up so easily, you could be on top of the world if this place was put together right. What if I could get the money too?"

Brian looked at her from the corner of his eye while tugging at a bushy sideburn. "Could you?"

"I could"

"Okay. Let's say I was interested. What's in it for you?"

"I'd want twenty-five percent of everything, the casino and the bar, and I'd want to be general manager."

"Oh really? That's a little steep for my blood, but maybe... You know, of course that, if we did come to an agreement, the money to repay the loan comes off the top before we figure your cut, right?"

"No Brian, you're not understanding. I mean twenty-five percent ownership."

"Ohhhh, okay... I see. You almost had me there. This, I'm going to have to think about."

Within two weeks, Brian was in agreement and Club Hollywood was a construction site. They kept the bar open while work proceeded in the casino. Caroline's first official act as general manager was a gratifying one: barring the insolent prostitute, Herminia, Mike's Chiquita. Keeping a complement of girls, Brian explained was the most difficult aspect of management of a brothel. He had been working with them from his days in Vancouver, and his experience there and at the club taught him that, for each there is usually someone – pimp, boyfriend, parent – lurking in the background taking their money and keeping them slaves to their profession. The most common tool of intimidation was crack cocaine. Brian's formula for helping the girls break free while simultaneously winning their loyalty was to be the one to provide their coke. He bought by the kilo and sold to the girls in tiny quantities without a dealer's mark-up, therefore far below street prices and, to help keep the dogs at bay, even extended them credit. At the entrance to the back rooms, an employee distributed condoms, towels, soap, body lotions – and crack. Below the counter behind which she sat was installed a sink where, in the event of emergency, the coke could be disposed of, with but a moment's notice

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It felt wonderful to be in Costa Rica for more than just another in-and-out buying trip. Sylvia had her mind set on relaxation. Not only had she hired and trained two separate husband and wife management teams for her resorts New Mexico and Marathon Key, saw her father through his final days, laid him to rest beside her mother and dealt with all the nonsense that entailed, but she'd finally done it: all ties with the Northeast were severed, permanently! Her father's apartment building she had bought so many years earlier was sold to Mike's friend Kevin and, to completely break free of New England, she had also gotten rid of her last holdings on Martha's Vineyard. After seemingly endless months of chasing from here to there, always at full throttle, she was burned out, completely keyed up and with a fuse so short, everything pissed her off. It was time to kick back and unwind and she was contemplating just that when Caroline called, determined to catch her before she disappeared again. Caroline, it seemed wanted to present her with the five thousand dollars Sylvia had earned for masterminding the successful sting against François. She even knew how Sylvia should spend the money: a relaxing vacation with her friend Caroline (Sylvia's treat, of course) and also had in mind the perfect place: Bocas del Toro, Panama. She had been there, Caroline said, and described it as a slice of tropical heaven on Earth; an enormous bay of calm turquoise water, crystal-clear when you looked in directly, that was dotted throughout by tiny islands. The reef and myriads of colorful fish were all clearly visible on the shady side of a canoe. The bungalows at first glance looked like nothing but grass shacks built over the water on sticks, but inside they were charming, with finished walls, air conditioning, kitchenette, bar and bed with soft mattress. That wasn't all her little paradise offered: there was room service, a restaurant with heavenly seafood and even a little disco. "Besides," she said, positively breathless, "you work too hard. A woman of your age, especially with the kind of money you have, should relax and enjoy."

'A woman of your age!' What cheek! Then to presume to tell her where to vacation and, without asking, including herself! What Sylvia had been contemplating was breaking out her easels to see if she couldn't capture all the daily hues of the valley via a series of canvases of an identical view but at four-hour intervals, yet she was taken with Caroline's description of a Caribbean paradise. Maybe she was just being too sensitive about Caroline's choice of words (she was, after all, extremely uptight), so she restrained herself from lashing out. Her sudden acceptance apparently astonished Caroline: she obviously had thought that persuasion was necessary, because she carried on yammering about how she needed to make time for relaxation in her fast-paced life, that she had such a talent for art and shouldn't ignore her friends, blah, blah, blah...

Two days later, they loaded into Caroline's Land Rover and off they went for the Caribbean coast border-crossing town of Sixaola. They were having a great trip, wearing shorts and halter-tops, the windows down and the wind in their hair. From time to time, they'd pull over and snort a line, then hit the road with the music blasting while tension melted like butter on a hot stove. The CD changer had just replaced the Gypsy Kings with the Rolling Stones, when Caroline inserted, amid her continuous chatter about Brian Walston's wonderful qualities and her trials and tribulations at having a troupe of prostitutes to herd, that the stable boy, Alfredo, had mentioned that a horse had died at sea of colic. He said he had been worried that the other horse might have to go into quarantine with the resulting expenses eating up their meager profit, but that Sylvia had somehow worked magic and managed to get new documents delivered to the boat. Caroline was impressed and wondered where Sylvia had turned for that particular miracle.

Sylvia's nerves instantly rewound. Alfredo! That big-mouth was fast becoming a liability. She'd already had Mike talk to him about flaunting his newfound wealth. Obviously, he needed another lesson, this one about keeping his big Tico mouth shut. She didn't need a stable boy who started Caroline nosing around in that part of her life. She made a mental note to phone and have Mike take care of him yet, still managed to answer Caroline with a laugh that what she had done was her secret but, she continued with a wry smile, should Caroline have any needs within the jurisdiction of the Port Authority, she could help.

Passing through the fringes of Limon brought a smile to her lips, remembering the several occasions she had been there to share lunch with Gordon Edward. Continuing south, she had cause to wonder at the state of relations between Costa Rica and Panama, for the squads of automatic weapon toting men in fatigues gathered along the north-bound side of the highway. At the border, which was also crawling with police, she got keyed up all over again, when it was discovered that Caroline's residency document didn't have the current tax payment recorded. As such, it was invalid and she was instructed to return to San José, whereupon Caroline immediately put on the bitch. As fired up on coke as she was, she had the appearance of being prepared to take on the entire squad.

Sylvia was almost sucked into the fracas, but it was the last thing she needed. Rather, she offered the man in charge a healthy tip to ignore the missing tax stamp and threw in a little bonus for tolerating Caroline's mouth. It was a good move because Caroline was about to bitch herself into an arrest. But, they crossed and so, with Costa Rica behind them, Sylvia could now relax: vacation had begun. Or so she thought.

"Border guards," Caroline complained. "What a pain in the ass!" It seemed to Sylvia that the border guards had simply done their job, in fact an exemplary job considering the verbal abuse they had endured. "You know," Caroline continued, "we could have avoided the checkpoint completely if we had gone by canoe from Puerto Viejo, like Mike and I did. We went all the way to Bocas and back again, and didn't have to contend with even one of those assholes."

"Mike, you said? My Mike?"

"Yeah, Mike. You mean, he didn't tell you?"

"Tell me? Tell me what?"

"That we went to Bocas del Toro together on holiday."

"You vacationed with my son?"

"Well yeah, why?" Sylvia bared her teeth into a smile that more closely resembled a snarl. "It was nothing Sylvia, just a fling." Caroline didn't have 'flings': she used men then tossed them aside. She gaped at Caroline wondering what it was she could have wanted of Mike. He didn't have a thing, but she then realized Caroline didn't know that. So, that was it: she'd taken advantage of Sylvia's absence and gone on a fishing trip for hidden treasure. "Really," Caroline said glancing quickly in her direction then tossing her hair into the wind, "a fling, that's all."

"A fling? You with Mike?" Caroline's indifference was contemptuous! Sylvia's mainspring was drawing tight again. Her lips pursed into a thin, tight line as she eyed Caroline askance.

"What?" Caroline questioned innocently. "Don't look like that!"

"Humph." And just why shouldn't she look at her like that? By digging for gold, Caroline had definitely violated the trust of their friendship.

"What's so impossible?" Caroline whined. "He's a man. I'm a woman. It's natural for us to end up together. Besides, it's over. Lighten up, Sylvia!"

* * *

A glass bottom boat ride around the islands, the following morning, sounded like an excellent idea when Caroline proposed it. But, when it was time to go, Sylvia had changed her mind. In the while that Caroline had been arranging the trip, she'd met Angel, the owner of their hotel, whose sideline was real estate. His descriptions of several properties including an entire island were far more juicily inviting than a boatload of tourists. Caroline put on a snit that Sylvia wasn't fun any longer, and waving her ticket in front of her, carped about money wasted. But, off she went in her glass-bottom boat, more interested in male tourists with dollars than any fish with scales, while Sylvia paddled away in a dugout with Angel in search of local real estate. Upon returning in the late afternoon, she retired to her room for a lingering shower, followed by room service dinner in bed.

Caroline encountered Angel that evening at the disco, and they danced non-stop for the better part of the night. It was later, when lying naked in bed together, that they shared a laugh: to maintain the murderous pace the other seemed so capable of, they had each disguised as calls from nature their frequent trips to the bathroom for blasts of 'rocket fuel'.

Morning, and Sylvia too, found them in the restaurant, staring at one another over half finished cups of coffee.

"Well, you two," she said noting in the faces of both every indication of a cocaine all-nighter, "aren't you going to share a little with your friend?"

Caroline managed a wry smile before digging into her bag for the vial. "It shows, huh?" she asked.

"Shows? Are you kidding?"

"Here, take a few hits of this," Caroline replied. You'll need it if you expect to keep up with us."

"Take it easy with this stuff," Sylvia cautioned. "I know this is a vacation and all that, but my god Caroline, look at yourself!" She pulled coke into each nostril with two quick sniffs and shivered once from the blast even as she delivered her abuse lecture.

"Oh Sylvia, really! Don't worry about me. What's with you, anyhow? You're sounding like an old mother hen lately. Relax for a change, will `ya?" Her tone was intensely annoying, but Sylvia was good and held her tongue. She simply resumed her and Angel's real estate discussion of the day before, speaking of square meters, utilities, owner financing and other equally boring topics. Excluded and totally disinterested, Caroline noticed a potential new friend strolling onto the dock and left.

As the day lingered and they continued to consume Angel's cocaine, Sylvia insisted upon paying for it, explaining that she and Caroline were spending money earned as an unexpected commission, so money was not an issue. He bowed regally and thanked her, but contended that it was his pleasure to treat. "Well," she said, beaming, "if you won't let me pay for what we've used, would you sell me twenty-five grams; that should be enough to see us through the week. How much do you get for a gram?"

"Quite frankly, I don't usually involve myself with such small quantities," he murmured confidentially. "I am reluctant to deal in any amount less than five kilos. Real estate, you see, isn't moving as fast as it should."

"Ohhh... I see," she answered in a whisper. "Well then, how much per kilo, just in case I get the urge?" He then quoted a price slightly less than three quarters of what she paid Enrique. Suddenly, she was very, very interested and confided that she too, generally purchased greater than five kilos and queried to be certain that they were talking about the same thing: ninety-three percent pure cocaine and American dollars.

It was Angel's turn to be taken aback. He blanched, but that was followed by a wide, welcome smile – which washed away upon Sylvia's request for a trial purchase with delivery in Costa Rica. "Costa Rica?" he questioned. "In Costa Rica the price is different." He then quoted a price slightly higher than Enrique's.

"Well, in that case, why don't we talk about it another day?" She lay awake that night remembering that Caroline said she and Mike passed from Costa Rica to Bocas del Toro and back again in a canoe, unnoticed by officials from either country. If she could do the same with Angel's cocaine, her profit would increase by a quarter! Maybe it could work, but once she had the stuff in Puerto Viejo, what then? She had seen only too clearly the squads of police on the northbound side of the Sixaola/Limon highway. The horses had served her well, but one dying at sea had convinced her that continuing to use them was too risky. She slipped through that mess but by only the skin of her teeth, and such good fortune wouldn't happen a second time. What she needed was a new and reliable method that could move Angel's cocaine to the United States and, if she was going to work at answers to that dilemma, it seemed that the place to start would be Puerto Viejo. Considering Caroline's disagreeable manner the entire trip, she decided to leave her in Panama and go alone in search of... who knew what?

* * *

Sylvia knocked on Caroline's door the following morning with her bag in hand, already checked out. The bleary-eyed and stubble-faced man who answered the door had just seen Caroline through her second consecutive all-nighter of sex and cocaine. Sylvia took one look and pushed at the door. He stopped it at half open with the side of his foot. "We don't want any, lady," he said, "go away," and pushed forcefully to re-close the door. Sylvia dropped her shoulder to the door, wedged a foot against a deck plank and heaved. Through the opening she created, Caroline appeared to be tottering at the ragged edge of consciousness. Had she been beaten? Her eyes seemed not to be focusing well. Sylvia cast a glance about the room. It was littered with vodka bottles, clothing, rumpled sheets, wet towels and spilling-over ashtrays. Caroline needed to get out of there!

"Out of my way, Buster!" Sylvia snapped at the man, "that's my friend in there." He strained ever harder against the door while with one hand, attempted to wriggle Sylvia's grip from the doorknob. "Caroline, for Christ's sake, get this asshole off me," she shouted. "I have to talk to you."

"Okay, okay," she answered. Her head bobbed with each word. "Knock it off," she slurred. "Let her in, she's my friend. Paul, why don't you run on down to the bar and I'll catch up with you in a half hour. Have a vodka screwdriver waiting for me." The man glowered at Sylvia and, grumbling under his breath, pushed past her and left.

"Caroline," Sylvia said gently, "forget about the bar in a half-hour. You need to go to bed, woman."

"Just 'cause you can't keep up the pace!" Caroline retorted. "You're starting to act like an uptight old bitty lately, you know that? Why don't you have fun anymore?" Caroline was just pushing all of the wrong buttons, but she let it slide.

"You're not looking well," she replied. "I suggest you take it easy today and get some sleep. Why don't you lie down and I'll ..."

"Listen, Sylvia," she snapped. "If and when I want another mother, I'll let you know, meanwhile, stay off of my case! Now, what is so important that you have to break into my room and insult my friend?"

Sylvia had had enough! She was out of there! "Caroline, something has come up and I need to go back to Costa Rica," she snapped. "I don't want to spoil your vacation, so enjoy yourself with the money that's left and I'll see you later in Puriscal." She turned to leave.

“Going? What are you talking about, we just got here!” she shouted with words barely understandable for her drunkenness. “I thought you were supposed to be on vacation. Just what’s your goddamn problem, Sylvia?” Caroline was sitting before the mirror of a low vanity on a bench seat and nearly tumbled over backwards adding emphasis with wide arm gestures. A quick grab was all that saved her.

“I don’t have any problem, Caroline,” Sylvia shouted, her hair vibrating with each syllable. “I have something important to look into. If anyone does, it’s you. And, by the look of you, I’d say it’s become a serious one.”

“Well, you have a problem now,” Caroline answered, wiping a line of wetness from the corner of her mouth.

“I do?”

“Yeah. Because I think it’s high time I got paid what I deserve for buying Mike’s horses, and stop getting cheated while everyone else makes the money. If you want to let him cheat you, that’s your business, but you’re the one who hired me, so I’m telling you: I want my share!

“What are you talking about? And what’s this, ‘what you deserve,’ stuff?” Sylvia was now shrieking as loudly as Caroline. “I’m paying you out of the kindness of my heart, you little bitch. You think I don’t know that Alfredo can handle the whole thing and at a much lower price? And you have the gall to tell me you’re not happy with the money you’re getting?”

“That’s another thing! That money Alfredo is getting is mine! I hired him, not you or Mike. How much he gets is my business. You’re both cheating me!”

“You’ve gone off the deep end Caroline. I’m sorry for you, but I’m not going to stand for you bitching your craziness at me.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m not going to have you calling me a bitch. Bitch!”

“Listen Caroline, like I said: I have something to do and I have to go. We can talk about this some other time, when we’re both in a better mood.” Sylvia spun on her heel and stormed from the room, throwing the door for a satisfying and resounding slam. Caroline burst into tears, her first in many years, then snorted another line of coke. Half an hour later, she joined her friend Paul at the bar, and Sylvia was left to ponder the significance of what Caroline alluded to when she carped about her share and the amount Alfredo earned. Why would Caroline concern herself with the pittance of his salary, unless he had opened his mouth about his *extra* earnings? That was it with him! He was finished.

* * *

In the trip between Bocas del Toro and Puerto Viejo, Sylvia was searched twice, and both times in Costa Rica. They were cursory checks through her handbag and overnight, not much in the way of searches, but they were there, nevertheless. The first, at the border – she discovered by asking the driver when everything was removed from the luggage bay – was conducted by federal narcotics police, and the second, only a dozen miles further along, by Port Authority Police from Limon. It was an election year, he explained, and Gordon Edward had raised a political stink about the federal government not doing its job of putting a halt to drug trafficking in Limon. The Port Authority Police were therefore under orders to prove his claim by finding a drug shipment missed by the feds. The federal police, not wishing to be embarrassed by Port Authority cops, had increased its presence in Limon, and the battle of the roadblocks was underway. It appeared that her new friend was making life difficult, and the water route in a canoe was the only way across the border that made sense. But that only got the coke to Puerto Viejo, and they couldn’t very well canoe it all the way to Limon. A larger boat was the logical choice, but there were Coast Guard boats and spotter planes out there. There must be an answer.

Sylvia checked in at the closest approximation of a hotel Puerto Viejo offered, uncertain as to what she might accomplish or even what she was looking for. She began by acquainting herself with the pueblo using her own particular method: searching out available real estate. She had long felt that in doing so, she was provided with more than just a free tour, it also gave her access to a well-informed individual, privy to important local information and a sense of the local economy. Puerto Viejo's was in a dismal state. The owner of the general store, who doubled as real estate agent, offered her an hour of his time and, while driving, explained that the fishing industry, previously the community's life-blood, was all but dead. Therefore, she couldn't imagine a property less likely to be of interest than the fish processing plant he insisted she see.

The entire place, building and pier, sat on a narrow strip of land between the estuary and the Caribbean beach. The plant consisted of an old, but sturdily built, dock that jutted deep into a wide well-protected estuary, with a building described to her as a fish washhouse built along its center. Ashore, was another structure housing ice machines, assorted machinery, and a room called the refrigerated rack room. They were boring, but the set-up of a pier hidden from the sea captured her attention, as did a boat tied alongside, half fishing craft and half oceangoing tug. It was old but maintained with reverence by a permanent captain and small crew, the agent claimed. He left her with the captain that he could check up on his store, and promised to return quickly.

The boat's master was a jolly sort with whom she took an immediate liking. He commenced to explain that with diminishing catches, it was increasingly necessary to divert to the port of Limon for purchases of fish to fulfill a contract for bi-weekly deliveries of red snapper to Tampa, Florida. The additional expense was cutting deeply into operating revenue: they could not afford to repair the radar or purchase the expensive hydraulic pump needed to return the back-up steering gear to operation. Both equipments were required for the vessel's overdue inspection, but, he joked, he simply avoided Costa Rica's only Caribbean coast guard cutter by monitoring its radio operating frequency.

She was impressed at his resourcefulness and told him as much, whereupon he beamed with pride and, in a conspiratorial manner, described another little system he had for avoiding regulations and saving money: below decks, in the barge used to transport their cargo, were two refrigerated 'fish houses', insulated by large blocks of Styrofoam removable for drying. Along the bottom row (never taken out because, with the layers above lifted, there was sufficient air circulation), he hollowed out a secret refrigerated chamber. Within, he hid fresh fruits, meats and vegetables, circumventing a US Department of Agriculture mandate that his coffers be emptied prior to arrival to avoid carrying potentially harmful pests into the country. In Sylvia's mind, flash bulbs began to ignite.

"So, you have never had your provisions found and confiscated?" she asked.

"Not one time in my many years in this business,"

"What about the US Coast Guard? I've heard that they stop boats all the time."

"Put a madre, si! They are like pirates. Never have you seen such arrogance. They come aboard with guns and dogs and treat us with contempt. But," he replied, immensely proud of his ingenuity, "their dogs are not trained to sniff out food, besides animals are not permitted in the fish houses." The plant's owner ought to have been proud of the captain's ingenuity, for it was then that she decided to buy. She called Mike and told him to get down to Puerto Viejo immediately and, that evening in her room, outlined the possibilities. Sylvia's first instruction to the master of her new boat was to change its name. It was to be renamed Caroline in honor of the woman whose bitchiness was responsible for finding her.

* * *

Since leaving Bocas del Toro, Sylvia had been brooding about her deteriorating friendship with Caroline and how to tell her without argument that the horse business was finished. She was driving on the Puriscal highway, just outside of town, when the familiar sight of Caroline's Land Rover approaching from the opposite direction tensed her instantly. As the cars drew closer, it became worse because, in the slanting rays of an afternoon sun, they were each plainly visible. She'd not known what to do, smile, wave, flip the bird, but Caroline settled the issue by lifting her nose and turning her head to one side. The lofty arrogance of that brief slight steeled her resolve. She would go to her that very evening, and end it.

When she called and left word with her maid that she needed to see her immediately on a matter of urgency, Sylvia had forgotten about the whorehouse. Within the hour, the maid called back to say that Caroline was working at 'the club' and would be available to see her the entire evening. 'The club!' A brothel was all it really was! Yet in a bizarre way, that was good, because it made her job that much the easier: the contempt she felt for whorehouse owners was more than enough to see her over any pitying emotion and, as it turned out, 'the club' was even worse than she imagined. It was positively revolting.

Caroline, smooth as silk in a glittering gown and her hair piled atop her head, met her in a barroom the equivalent of a cesspool. On tiny dance stages built onto the walls, women flaunted their nakedness to a roomful of lecherous baboons, and Caroline had the audacity to expect her to sit there and chat.

"Somewhere else, Caroline, before I make a scene," she hissed.

"If you insist." And, without a word, she turned and walked through a door into an adjoining casino. Oddly, until entering the whorehouse, Sylvia had still hoped to keep the friendship. But, by the time she was led into a room for private card games at the back of the casino, she had stopped caring, and began by saying it was good Caroline had reminded her of the horrible incident of the horse's death. The problems associated with that mess had caused her to reconsider the entire business effort. Both she and Mike had been complaining, so she decided to get out of the business altogether. Mike, she said, didn't matter, Alfredo was already gone, and she was there to let her know that her job too was terminated.

"Fine," Caroline retorted. "That's just what I would expect after what you did with Angel."

"Who?"

"You know perfectly well who: that Indian guy in Bocas del Toro, Angel. He was with me until you came along. Then after taking him, you just up and walk out on the guy leaving him high and dry. You never wanted him in the first place, did you? You were just being a nasty bitch."

"What are you, hallucinating? He is a real estate agent. He took me to see some properties." Caroline continued carping until Sylvia's patience gave out: she ordered Caroline and her stallion off La Hacienda and stormed from the room.

Earlier, when the realization first came to her that she no longer needed horses, or Caroline either, Sylvia had been giddy with delight – but that had been in Puerto Viejo, with the nasty scene in Bocas del Toro fresh in her mind. However, as time passed and her emotions weakened, her anger became tinged with doubt. Sylvia always had 'friends,' but that was networking, keeping her finger on the pulse of what's happening: their value came from being a connection in the right place or staying privy to things important. With Caroline, it had been different, they'd somehow fit together. She had felt comfortable with her like she'd never felt with anyone, especially another woman, and doubted that she ever would again. When it was over and done, all that remained was lingering regret and memories that continued to drift in at the oddest moments.

The task that remained, that of informing Enrique she was quitting the cocaine business, was something she greeted with jubilation and it didn't come with a sense of regret. She had never cared for Enrique and, as a person who wormed his way around every dirty deal in San José, he was forever in need of someone to sacrifice. Separating from him, while planting in his mind the idea that she was out of the business, would go a long way towards creating a better sense of security. She had

kept the relationship on a strictly business level, so it was a tie she could sever without losing him as a valuable connection and bountiful source of information.

He was the untalented third son to a powerful family for generations on the inner-circle of Costa Rican power. Early in his career, his superiors recognized that his true value lay not with investigative research, but in his corruptibility and access to the private family functions of the nation's most powerful figures. He was given an assignment unwanted by fellow detectives: partnership with the highly independent little Indian, which left him free to serve as the OIJ's ambassador of corruption to the power brokers.

"What am I doing it for?" she asked him when they met at the bar of Hotel Paradise. "I already have plenty of money and more than enough business interests. I don't need the headaches or the risk."

"That's understandable," he replied, and it was done. It was that easy.

"Thanks," she answered. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you. Perhaps you can do another little something for me. It's your partner. Could you speak to him about keeping off my son's ass? He's been harassing him from the beginning, and life would be so much better for us all if he would just back off."

"I'll talk to him, but it won't do any good. This guy was raised out in the jungle by a bunch of Jesuits, and I think he imagines he's one himself. I'm telling you, the man has no sense of the real world. He can't be bought, either: people from both sides of the law have extended very good offers and he's turned them all down. And when he gets an idea in his head, like he seems to with your son, he's relentless. For old times sake, I would help if I could, but I'm sorry, there's really nothing. What are you worried about, though?" he asked. "You're always complaining that your son is incorrigible, so let the little guy arrest him. With you out of the business, he can't be charged with anything serious, and cooling his heels in a jail cell for a few weeks would probably do him a world of good."

The cocaine shipments assumed a routine that varied little. Via a simple telephone code, Sylvia would stipulate a specific date and room number, which corresponded to a like number of kilos and Angel, in turn, would notify Mike of his 'reservation.' It worked perfectly. Mike would then travel with Richard and Pepé to Bocas del Toro, return after sunset to the fish processing plant and hide the cocaine. Following their usual schedule, the crew would arrive the next morning and the insulating blocks became hopelessly buried behind tons of fish and ice. The only noticeable change in the *Caroline's* routine was the addition of a new customer. Mr. Cassano always arrived at noon of their second day in port when all fish but his order had been removed and while dockworkers broke for lunch. "I can offload it myself," the captain always insisted, when he granted his crew the day ashore.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Edgar spent time every day in his study playing with dolls, at least that's what he called it. It was his private method for organizing thoughts regarding the cases he worked. His system required sheets of white Formica, which he cut into 4X2 rectangles for use as work boards. Sitting in his study with the contents of a case folder spread on the surface of his desk, he would place on an easel the appropriate board. As his notes came together, forming in his mind a congruent thought or picture, he drew images with felt-tip pens on the board to represent it. Living people became his dolls, funny looking stick figures with exaggerated features that often times brought him to laughter, but they served their purpose well. The case files contained all the important details, but the Formica sheets with a case number in the upper corner of each, was where Edgar developed his ideas. They were currently arranged haphazardly around the room, on the sofa, leaned against the file cabinet and generally cluttering the room, as he studied cases and indicated important points on the appropriate board. When finished, he would organize and tuck them all neatly away in the closet, all that is, except that of Mr. Michael Henderson. Since the humiliating dressing-down he received in OIJ headquarters, his particular work board had earned a permanent location against the study wall. Still fuming several days after the incident, he had found his way to the archives of the immigration service where he discovered a very peculiar thing: Michael came from California. His clean bill of health from the California State Police indicated that he had been a resident for years. A phone call to their Sacramento headquarters confirmed the accuracy of the report, and the officer updated it, saying his only recent offence had been for passing a red light the previous month. Michael wasn't Michael! Edgar drove to OIJ headquarters like a runaway locomotive for the file and fingerprint card it contained. There was no file. He dashed to the booking room for the other, but it had also ceased to exist. He considered bringing the matter to the attention of immigration officials, but with the level of corrupt influence he was obviously up against, some semi-plausible explanation would be proffered and he would be facing harassment charges. It was all noted down, every detail, and transcribed into his files at home.

Edgar loved the comfort he had created for himself in his study. The floor was covered with a dark-green wool rug reaching almost to the walls, but with a foot of gleaming wood exposed. A soft leather sofa fit comfortably under double windows that opened to a private, enclosed garden. Opposite, where the light from the windows was best, stood a tall bookshelf overflowing with reference material, art books, maps, novels, and beside the bookshelf, under a mountain scene was the place of honor (or in this case, dishonor) Michael Henderson's board had earned.

He ran his hands lovingly over his old oak roll-top desk, pausing to gather thoughts while adding notations to the file of an unrelated case, with Michael's work board far from mind, when his gaze lit upon it and, just like that, the answer was suddenly crystal clear. He wondered how he hadn't seen it sooner when for months it had been right there, in front of him. Edgar had far too little respect for Michael to consider him capable of putting together a cocaine smuggling ring other than maybe the most basic, consisting of nothing more than using his friends, who visited him regularly, as mules. That wasn't the case, as he knew only too well from the fiasco at the airport. There had to be intelligence behind him, someone with powerful connections, and here she was: Caroline LeClerc, the former wife of a wealthy Frenchman and intimate to some of the nation's most powerful families, who led a second life of shameless debauchery that had made her into something of a legend among the regulars of Hotel Paradise! Mr. Henderson's smuggling activities had been going on for some time before he began dating Ms. LeClerc, and he'd never connected them. She was someone he had long since written off as Vice's problem.

On Michael's board, he had long ago drawn the stable as an outbuilding of La Hacienda and he doubted that Michael had ever been on a horse, so naturally, it had never before registered as significant. It was there because of the previous owner's equestrian interest, and that was as far as his thoughts had ever gone. However, a recent check of the hotel's payroll records on file with the Department of Social Security revealed that a stable hand had been employed for a considerable period of time. Where else would Caroline board that big white horse? That put them in contact much earlier than he'd thought and it changed everything. Quite possibly, they hadn't gotten along as poorly as outward appearances previously indicated. He snapped up from his desk a red felt-tip pen, created a 'Caroline' board and set it in place beside Michael's. He drew a wide circle around the comically drawn woman mounted on horseback and with an arrow that skipped the inch of space between the boards, connected it with another circle about La Hacienda's stables then stepped back, admiring his handiwork.

Could it be that, when their man was arrested in Boston that Caroline had decided they should switch their delivery method from mules to horses, and that was why when he made the arrest at the airport nothing had been found? How he craved a look around those stables, but it was out of the question: almost the entire length of the switchback entrance was clearly visible from the hotel, and any nighttime attempt without lights was an invitation to be dashed to bits at the base of a cliff; besides, if he was so much as seen on the property, he would likely lose his badge. No, the risks definitely outweighed the slim chance that he would find anything of significance. He would bide his time, watching and one-by-one assemble irrefutable facts. Yet, he could hardly contain himself. Michael Henderson... Three years of police work with careful attention to detail and now, with this new connection, he felt certain that he was at last closing in on his man – and woman. Yes, her too, the perfect match. "Wee-ho-la!" he cheered to the walls. "You're mine, Mr. Henderson, and I'll take you too Caroline LeClerc, thank you very much!"

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Two weeks before Sylvia's scheduled departure to Marathon Key, while she was in San José making arrangements for a going-away dinner party, her friend Gordon Edward was in Limon meeting with his associate, Truman Herrera. Gordon's reelection campaign committee had just filed from the office leaving them free to pursue the business they had come to discuss. And from Truman's perspective, Gordon's boat, *El Tiburón Limon* was of greater importance than the selection of his half-wit brother as stand-in for the next election. He interrupted, telling Gordon of several mechanical problems that had come to his attention while returning from delivering cocaine to Nicaragua. He mentioned also a buildup of barnacles that was affecting her maneuverability and slowing her considerably. Gordon was in unusually good humor, election campaigns had that effect, and without argument or hesitation, he agreed to a complete dry dock overhaul. It was, in fact his boat, but he hadn't taken her out in years, and Truman felt as one with her, knowing every quirk.

"Ah, I have to tell you what happened," he said abruptly, his broadening smile capturing Gordon's attention. "You're going to love this! There was this skinny little woman, all strung out on crack, living on the beach down from the hotel towards town. Anyhow, she was breaking into our clients' rooms so Jesus, you know how big he is, goes tromping on down there to throw her off the beach." Truman tried to emulate an angered Jesus off to right the wrongs of the world. He wore a somber scowl and swelled his chest holding his arms ape-like at his sides, but laughter burst through when he began to stride across the office in a Jesus persona by lifting his feet as though they were weighted with lead. "So he gets down to the box where the woman lives and reaches in to pull her out." His voice broke into another round of laughter with his description of Herminia leaping into Jesus' face like an enraged cougar. He mimed both her attack and Jesus' futile self-defense until they were both rollicking. "Jesus was knocked flat on his ass," he said, "and came running back to the hotel like a whipped puppy with its tail between its legs. You should have seen him!" Truman said wiping a tear from his eye. "He was clawed from ear to ear, and his chest was no better. The poor bastard was too embarrassed to even tell me what happened."

"You see, Truman," Gordon said when the laughter dwindled, "that's a perfect example of what I've been trying to tell you when I said that we have to get serious about getting this Tweety-Bird cocaine off the streets of Limon. That woman isn't the only one, there are hundreds like her, burglarizing homes, businesses, mugging people and scaring tourists away. It's got to be affecting your business too."

"Gordy, there's not going to be a lot of tourism if half of the bridges are still down from the earthquake. The only private cars that get through are four-wheel drive so that rules out everyone who rents at the airport. Do something about that, if you need a goal!"

"Do you live in a vacuum, Truman? Don't you follow the news? That's exactly what my whole campaign is about. 'Limon Province, continually neglected by the corrupt power structure of the federal government: bridges down and a plague of crack cocaine infecting the province, and what does the federal government do? Nothing. But, R. Gordon Edward fights the lonely battle for his people. He has ordered the provinces' own Port Authority Police to do the job the OIJ won't and stamp out cocaine trafficking in Limon. He supports San José legislators who labor on a bill that, if enacted, will require equitable distribution of tax revenues among all the provinces.' It's a good, powerful message and you haven't heard a thing about it?"

“No, I haven’t, but I have had the pleasure of seeing the roadblocks. Until this moment, I didn’t know it was your doing. How can I ever thank you? While you’re at it why don’t you tell the people that you’re the guy responsible for the ‘corrupt power structure’ you complain about?”

“You’re pretty cynical. Wait till my Port Authority Police start arresting this Tweety-Bird gang. You’ll change your tune then.”

“You mean, I’m going to finally hear the last of you carrying on about this damn Tweety-Bird cocaine? What have you find out?”

“You do live in a void, don’t you? So, I suppose you haven’t heard this either, but another truck got busted coming in from Panama at Paso Canoas a couple of days ago. They found three hundred forty-four kilos of coke in it and all with Tweety-Bird markers.”

“A load that size would be going straight through.”

“That’s exactly what the driver told the boys from OIJ before his amnesia kicked in and he stopped talking entirely.”

“Of course, they couldn’t sell that much here. So, how does that help you? You said the driver stopped talking: did he tell them where he got it or who was supposed to receive it before he shut up?” Truman asked, pretending he cared. He’d found that it was better to patronize Gordon on subjects he’d become passionate about. Increasingly, finding the persons responsible for bringing crack cocaine to the streets of Limon had become his focus. Truman could not care less, but several months earlier Gordon had gone completely overboard on the subject, wanting to torture to death a street dealer who had been captured and wouldn’t give up the name of his supplier. He had argued against it until Gordon acquiesced, but he’d grumbled about it since, saying it was Truman’s fault that the ring hadn’t been broken when they had the chance. It was his opinion that as a result the ring flourished and even expanded its markets into the nightclubs of San José.

“Well, no he didn’t say anything else,” Gordon replied. “Some high priced lawyer showed up and suddenly the driver couldn’t remember a thing. I can’t let an opportunity like this slip by again. There’s a whole lot riding on the Port Authority breaking up this Tweety-Bird bunch. Can’t you see it, Truman? I’ll have them all eating out of my hands. I’ll be able to get things done in Limon – and my reelection will be guaranteed.”

“Are you talking about what I think you are, Gordy?”

“I’m talking about eliminating that damn Tweety Bird by whatever method we can. We could have had them, but no, you got all upset and we missed our chance. Well, not this time.”

“Gordy, take it easy, please. You’re getting yourself all worked up about something that doesn’t even matter. You’re going to win your election anyhow, you just said you’re a shoe-in. So, let’s not get carried away, okay? I understand you being zealous about protecting ‘your province,’ but you don’t have to go and kill somebody over it. Just because all these new dealers are running on a treadmill of violence doesn’t mean we have to join them.”

Truman understood well Gordon’s frustration. From when it was first proposed, Gordon had used all of his influence and politician’s skills to fight against submitting to US political pressure that Costa Rica increase enforcement against drug trafficking. His opposition hadn’t been because of concern for his own operation. That was hidden behind a screen of legitimacy to the highest levels in the governments of Costa Rica, Panama and Columbia. His concern had been that tougher enforcement would create a spiral of violence such as Costa Rica had never seen: it would increase risk for the traffickers, that, in turn, would boost prices, which would attract even greater numbers of them, although those who came would come armed to defend themselves from the aggressive efforts of law enforcement. Possibly more harmful than the guns, he had warned, would be the vicious circle.

It was an argument that did not stand up to the lobbying power of the US, which had as leverage the threat of withholding aid dollars. Unfortunately, Gordon's predictions were eerily accurate: an influx of new traffickers attracted by greater profits came, just as he cautioned. They brought with them enforcers armed with modern weapons and electronics, ready to battle police or anyone foolish enough to compete. The authorities had no option but to respond in kind, and within a few short months of enactment of the new measures, the sight of truckloads of police officers toting automatic weapons became an everyday occurrence.

"I'm going to offer that truck driver a simple choice: tell me where the stuff came from and where it was going or have your throat cut. Period!"

Truman gaped at him in disbelief. Gordon knew of his abhorrence of violence and it had never been an issue between them: problems had always been overcome by wit. But it looked like his ego had grown so large that he was allowing himself to violate their pledge, and that was frightening. "You're talking craziness. I'm going to watch the news, Gordy, and if anything happens to that truck driver, we're finished. I won't work with you any more, I mean it!"

"Okay Truman. Okay, okay, okay. I'll figure out some other way. Maybe, if we turn up the pressure legally he'll open up. Feel better?" Gordon eyed Truman carefully. "What else have we got?" he asked at length.

"I had a talk with my contact in Juticalpa, last time I was in Honduras," Truman said. "I told him what you proposed: another one quarter of a percent, but he held firm. He said his family expenses are enormous and he needs more money. There's a lot of truth to that, Gordy, he has a large family and pretty well supports them all. He's a good man, though and very reliable, so I settled it with an extra one-half percentage boost on his end."

"Truman, I told you not to go over one quarter of a percent." Gordon was raising his voice. "If word gets out, we'll have to boost everyone, all up and down the line. That second one quarter percent is coming out of your share, you know. That's the way it's going to have to be."

"That's fine. I expected that," Truman responded, unconcerned.

"You've changed Truman. What's going on?"

"I haven't changed. We agreed after the war that we'd do this thing, but there would be no violence. I still think the same, it's you who has changed."

"I don't mean your pacifist nature, although it's true: a year ago you wouldn't have noticed. I mean, you're different, you come in here today laughing and telling jokes. You know, in all the time I've known you, you've never joked, or laughed either. So, what's up?"

"What do you mean, 'I don't laugh?' I do too, I laugh."

"No. No you don't, Truman, not ever. So? What is it?"

"Maybe you are right, I don't know. I suppose I am a little lighter lately. Well, I feel good and at lunch you're going to be lucky enough to meet both reasons why I feel that way."

"Am I now? Both reasons? This is getting more interesting by the minute."

"They are two women I've met and I'd say they've each affected me greatly. One of them, believe it or not, is that little wildcat woman I told you about who attacked Jesus, and the other is more of a personal friend. She's an American and her name is Beth Tierney."

"A personal friend? You mean, like a girlfriend?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far, she's leaving today, but she has become a very close friend."

“Well now... isn't this something? I never would have suspected, but it does begin to explain you. That's it, that's all you're going to tell me about her, 'she's American?' Nothing more?”

“No, I think not. I'd rather you meet her at lunch and get to know her without my input. Come on, let's go. They're waiting for us.”

“Look at you, Truman, you're like a love-struck schoolboy, well, a schoolboy whose face was run over by a truck, but love-struck all the same. I'm just astonished. We've known each other since forever and in all that while you've never taken up with a woman. Hell, I always thought you enjoyed scaring them off. But now, just as I meet one that interests me, you do the same, and they're both Americans.”

Truman was caught off guard. Gordon was a well-known womanizer whose sexual exploits had a nasty way of finding their way into the press. “Beth is a decent woman, Gordon,” he answered quickly. “She's not like one of yours that you have to sneak in the back door.”

“No Truman, that's the thing, it's not like that. Her name is Sylvia, an Irish woman from Boston. She runs a country inn up in the mountains. It has been something of a long distance relationship because we're both pretty busy people, but we see each other when we can. You'll approve of this one, Truman. She's just my type, sharp as a tack in business, I mean, nothing gets by this one and very politically aware, has been all her life. And, of course, she's rich. So, you see; she's made for me.”

“Sure, but just back up one second. You said Irish? You mean a white woman?”

“Since when are you a racist?”

“I'm not talking about me Gordy, and you know it. How does a bigot like you live with himself when he's seeing a white woman? And what about your constituency? What are they going to think?”

“What's the matter with you Truman? She's respectable, that's all that matters. The fact that she is white makes her even more desirable. It puts to rest those racist charges my opponents are always throwing around. Besides, it insults white men to see me with one of theirs. Every black person knows that, so being with her is exactly what my people love to see – they'd vote for me twice if they could. Now, there's an idea!” His baritone laughter filled the room. “Let's wrap this up. I'm hungry,” he declared, springing to sit on a glossy corner of his desk. “All right, you made the delivery. I suppose everything went well?”

“No problems at all.”

“All six hundred fifty kilos were there?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn't you stop here on your way back, like you always do?”

“Well, we had this meeting set up for today, and I wanted to get back to Chauita.”

“To see your lady friend. You see what I mean, Truman? It's not like you to be sloppy like that: you've changed. You make sure next time you see me as soon as the delivery is made, the way you're supposed to, you understand?”

“Yes, you're right. I will.”

“Is the coke still in Nicaragua?”

“It is. No problem. I spoke with Carlos this morning,” Truman continued. “Everything is set. I'm leaving immediately after lunch and will be there by morning.”

“And you'll see me when you get back before you run off to Chauita, right?”

“Yes.”

“Great, now let’s go see these women of yours.”

* * *

Truman couldn’t understand why so ominous a feeling overcame him when he saw Beth and Herminia off after their brunch. It was like he was saying goodbye forever, but he would call her in San José and she did say that she would return to Chauita after visiting other sites around the country. He was just letting the emotion of the moment get to him.

Even at lunch, a series of sour notes had spoiled things. He had hoped to share a memorable lunch with Beth in the elegant restaurant, impressing her with Gordy, before leaving for two weeks of travel, but the idiocy of his brother became a source of continual, acute embarrassment. His mood slumped the very moment of Gordon’s unwelcome announcement that Leon was coming along. What should have been a pleasant dining experience became instead a series of uncomfortable moments, in which, yet another, off-the-wall comment stopped conversation in cold, embarrassed, silence. Actually, he hadn’t planned on Herminia’s presence either, but he rather enjoyed her company, particularly when she cornered the mighty R. Gordon Edward.

Herminia knew of Edward: he was the politician who sent cops out after dealers in a big reelection publicity stunt, she’d said as much on the drive up. The dealers were understandably frightened with the result that they would sell only to people they knew well, and when they did, the price was double. That was the topic she confronted him with. Truman had expected she might say something, but when she actually did, he was unprepared and almost laughed with his mouth full of food.

“I’m working with the police to get muggers off the streets and to give the public what it wants: a drug-free Limon,” he answered with a certain indignation. “I don’t know if you know this, but...”

“So why you send cops after dealers?” she asked, interrupting.

“As I said, I’m working closely...”

“Si, si, si, I know.” There was fury in her eyes. Truman feared she might launch herself as she had at Jesus. “And these, what you do, is no help to nobody. The addict, he geet hees coke no matter what you do – always. Doan you know that yet? Your policia only make it so expensive that now someone weel have to mug somebody. Are you stoopid? You no like muggers, okay arrest muggers!” Beth snickered. Gordon’s exasperation tickled Truman, but he stifled laughter and rescued the situation with the introduction of a new topic.

With brunch finished and their farewells said, he sped from town, enjoying the power of his big, new Mitsubishi and using its energy to take him quickly from the discomfort of goodbye and an inexplicable sense of foreboding. On the highway outside of town, he overtook Leon’s Range Rover, hugging the center line, and passed on the right for the chance to wave to Beth, but was unable to capture her attention: she appeared intent upon toying with her camera. He didn’t trust Leon’s driving enough to toot the horn, so he drove by smiling unnoticed at the back of Beth’s curly head.

An hour later, he was westbound on the Limon - San José highway. Driving had become automatic and his mind considered the trip ahead. In the early years following the war, Gordon had deemed it necessary that Truman accompany the cocaine on each northbound trip, reasoning that, if even the hint of a problem began to develop, he would be on hand to resolve it before it grew out of proportion. However, as the years passed and the cocaine always moved smoothly, Truman convinced Gordon to trust his men and reduce his journeys to two per year, and that he follow the drug only as far as Puerto Cortes, Honduras. It was there that it was loaded into a shipping container that would not be opened again until its arrival in Houston.

He had long ago accepted his trips not as business, but as pleasant visits with old friends. He had no doubt that this time would also prove to be both routine and pleasurable.

His thoughts drifted to memories of Beth: scenes of this day or another came to him much like a slide show of her many facets. He warmed to them, reliving joyous moments, till unbidden, came her kiss in the ghostly cacao plantation. The unwelcome reminder continued unfolding like a bad scene from a movie he had previously seen: he hated to watch it, wishing it would end, but it just rolled on. He had a strong urge to kick himself to not repeat his same stupid words: 'Yeah, it's probably not even a good idea to be here. Come on, let's get out.' He had said that particular idiocy just after he'd pushed her away. Why hadn't he told her the truth? She'd listened and understood so much, surely, she would appreciate that he hadn't kissed anyone since Lucia and it felt strange to be so close with another woman.

Was Gordy right? Was he changing? No, of course he wasn't. That was ridiculous, he'd just made some new friends and he was accustomed to him as a loner. He had to admit, grinning at the novelty of it, that one of his new friends was a crack cocaine addict and a prostitute to boot. Unfortunately, that recalled several of his own derisive remarks about such people (hell, Herminia herself) and he cringed inwardly at the level of his insensitivity. Well okay, maybe there were some changes.

"I have to tell her." It came to him like that, like a voice speaking aloud. But, no, no, he couldn't. The thought of saying anything about what he really did for a living stuck in his throat like a hardboiled egg. He didn't want to lose her friendship. Talking with her was fast becoming his favorite pastime, so why say anything? What would be the point, she'd only leave hating him. He'd heard of her opinion of drug traffickers often enough to be certain of that.

With his headlights materializing the world from the night, Truman imagined justifying himself to her by pointing out that it was foolishness for the government to think it could prevent the populace from indulging in its vices by banning them. That was a mistake as old as civilization itself and had never proven successful. The only partial success had been realized via religion and then, only marginally. He could also say that the government didn't actually want to reduce drug trafficking, because if they did, they would legalize their use. That one simple move would abolish the astronomical profit and, for that alone, criminals would abandon the trade, exactly as when similarly prohibitive liquor laws were repealed. Legalization could be followed by a publicity campaign similar to that aimed at cigarettes, and addiction would cease to be a major sociological problem. However, the most vocal advocates of strong enforcement were the traffickers themselves and the politicians who received their money. They fund programs and support stricter controls out of fear of the ruin legalization would most certainly bring to them.

"Yes!" he said emphatically pounding his steering wheel, as his imagined Beth agreeing with his wisdom. Who was he kidding? There'd be no justifying himself in her mind – the moment she found out, she'd be gone. Why did he care what she thought anyhow? He was a cocaine trafficker, there could never be anything meaningful between them. In fact, for her own good, he needed to separate from her. Didn't he? It was a most uncomfortable thought: her friendship was a most dear thing. He hadn't felt so close with another person since...

Gordon didn't get it: to keep the system running smoothly, it needed lubricating sometimes. He was great with the masses, Truman hated crowds but he was a natural leader of small units. That ability was why he had been such a good field commander, and it continued to work for him as a successful drug trafficker. The trick was to have camaraderie with his men as one who shares their concerns, as a trusted friend and confidant. Demanding dogmatic adherence to orders and procedure

was a sure way to create traitors. The half of one percent increase he gave Carlos was necessary and earned for Gordon the continued loyalty of an indispensable link.

He was driving northwest, still in Costa Rica, approaching Guapiles and making good time. Screeching tires caught his momentary attention. No problem, just some idiot who one of these days would kill himself. Repeating the sound mentally soon had him slowly shaking his head from side to side, and an ear-to-ear grin was spreading across his face. The sound was similar to the crazy noise that trumpeted from Beth's snorkel that day at the reef. He laughed aloud at the memory, marveling at her natural happiness.

The squealing echoed again, only chillingly, through abandoned corridors of his mind to manifest an image of Oscar, trimming the shrubs with broad sweeps of his machete causing gooseflesh to creep up his neck. He opened the window to sweep aside the unsettling thoughts and freshen the air. But, when he'd settled again, it all came rushing back. The squealing became the horrific scream that often woke him in the earliest hours. And Oscar, of course, wasn't Oscar. But things like that are best unremembered.

That was the problem with Beth. She kept asking these questions. There was nothing but pain and sorrow in his past. He'd left it behind completely – forgotten. Or so he thought, but then she would want to know about this or that – and there it was. All those things hadn't gone away, he'd just tucked them into recesses of his mind where they had festered. He'd start talking in response to an inquiry and not want to stop. It was that her question, whatever it might be, caused such discomfort – guilt perhaps – that there became an urgency to explain everything before she could think he had done something wrong.

After stopping to eat, he completed the drive to the border of Nicaragua at Los Chiles. He had crossed at Los Chiles routinely for many years. Still, he rubbed his square jaw as he approached, setting his mood for the officers. He was transforming himself into the powerful and wealthy man who was the Central American representative of a group of North American investors. He needed to become one with this invented personality. He was well-liked by the officials who had been relegated to this remote outpost of bureaucratic service, but he knew that the training the young ones received was improving every year. Caution and adherence to the accepted routine needed to be used each time. In his adapted persona, he flattered the border guards, customs agents and their supervisors with humorous comments about the many seals in his passport. He told them they were official proof of his diligence in overseeing the investments in their country he was there to supervise. Always, there would be some gift or another for a son, daughter or grandchild. To the officials posted in such a place as Los Chiles, the stamps they pounded into his passport were secondary: they were more interested in receiving the attentions of a man of importance.

The red brake lights on the truck ahead of him were annoying. The driver, for unknown reason, touched them every several seconds, night blinding him. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at passing on the narrow twisting road, he gave up and backed off to a more comfortable distance where the brilliance didn't burn his eyes. Crawling up the mountain behind the lumbering truck, thoughts of Beth slipped again into his mind. He could almost see her on that day when they carried lunch up the beach for Herminia, in her bikini, spinning pirouettes with the bag of food balanced on fingertips. Beth... Her tiny bikinis... She had been wearing one the very day he met her, nine months earlier. But she was more than a pretty girl in a swimming suit.

For the greater part, it was talking with her that made him feel that there was something particularly special about Beth. She brought to him a sense of ease. For some reason, passing time, talking in the comfortable, relaxed way they did

made him open up such as never before. He felt that it had to do with her innocence, her lack of corruption, that he felt so comfortable with her and somehow, safe. Generally, he avoided chitchat with clients, because, invariably it led to things that would bring on those terrible pressure headaches. He felt fine though, when he was alone. It was just when certain subjects of the past came up, talking with people, that the tension got so great that his head throbbed and his breath came in gasps. It was different with Beth. Talk came naturally. He'd opened up and spoken about things of the past, and actually felt good for doing so. Yet, even Beth, on the day he met her, had started the tightening in his neck that signaled another headache on its way. With her, it had been that damned Frazer son of a bitch and just like that, the pressure began. But they'd talked again, and again, each time more in depth, and the pressure hadn't returned.

The nightmares were another thing altogether. He never escaped them, they were always there: night after night, someone screaming inside of a dream would wake him. It was the most dreadful sound, filled with terror and suffering.

Truman drove on through the evening, arriving in Bluefields well past midnight. He slept late arising after nine, as did Carlos, the man he had come to see. He was a middle-aged family man, whose pleasures in life centered on his wife and three daughters. He also relished his roles as meddling but respected father-in-law and grandpapa to the many young ones of his flock. His wife, Anna, adored him and Carlos was a happy man. He was terrible in business, however, as sleeping till nine while operating a business that opened at five-thirty clearly indicated. If it weren't for the contracts Truman arranged for Carlos' trucking company and his careful monitoring of his business managers, the man would be selling peanuts in the street. In fact, they didn't go to the office at all the first day Truman was in town, they went to his middle daughter's second son's first Holy Communion reception.

Truman made Carlos promise that he would devote himself more to his work, particularly at the loading docks, where his presence and authority needed to appear routinely – that was all that was required of him, and he did an excellent job of it, although he needed prodding. Truman valued his personal stability and position of respect in the community and trucking industry. They were worth more to him than qualities of a good businessman: managers could handle that and Truman, who was a fine tactician, could handle managers.

They went together that night to the loading dock where they offloaded the heavy machinery cargo of a truck bound, in the early morning, for Juticalpa, Honduras. Into the depths of the truck, and subsequently surrounded by equipment too ponderous for unloading except by oversized forklift, they concealed the cocaine.

After a week of work with the business manager, Truman concluded that all was well and he could leave things in Bluefields until his next visit. The drugs had passed as smoothly as silk without being seen by anyone other than Truman and Carlos. He drove to San Ubaldo and took the ferry to the Solentiname archipelago in the south of Lake Nicaragua, a relaxation stop that was a regular part of his routine. There was a wonderful lodge with a laid-back atmosphere whose attraction Truman couldn't resist. It was in the afternoon, just after checking in, that he called Beth. They talked for more than an hour while he sat by a round table in an outdoor patio. He was surrounded for privacy on three sides by a garden of broad leaf plants. On the open side, a wide vista of Lake Nicaragua greeted his eyes, reflecting from its tranquil surface a sky seemingly created by an artist gone mad with the warm hues of his palette, while the sun slipped behind a conical volcano.

Beth teased, taunting him with a description of how she had appeared for dinner with Leon and his friend. She told how she'd gone gambling with the American, but Truman wouldn't allow his jealousy to be felt across the wire. He was happy that she had enjoyed herself, he replied.

“And not jealous?” she asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. Rather, she kept it up, adding a part about going to a warehouse with the guy, bringing tears of mirth to streak his cheeks. They talked about things – many things, but mostly individual moments they had shared. He was recalling the night they had gone to watch the turtles come ashore, when he became aware that, at moments, the sexy undertones of her voice raised his blood pressure, and another part of his body. Rather embarrassing: he needed to regain control, but she had already switched subjects, moving ahead to his work, so he had to manufacture a lie, and that spoiled everything.

He hung up saddened at his situation. He visualized telling her, and his mind gave him the most curious reaction: he worried that she would blame him for Herminia’s addiction. It was absurd, of course. He scrambled to find the words he would need for a strong defense. Looked at from her perspective, he couldn’t come up with one that held water. He felt worse.

Truman caught the ferry to Granada, and from Managua chartered a flight to Juticalpa. It was unnecessary for him to go to the crossing point at Leimus, Honduras where the drugs passed. That situation was firmly under the control of his next contact, Juan, who preferred that things remain absolutely quiet at the border.

While in the airport, Truman passed a British couple examining souvenirs. The woman was obviously angry about something. He caught a few words of it as he passed:

“– those assholes who sell this shit,” the woman griped.

On the charter flight, Truman remembered the overheard words and thought how very similar they were to those Beth had once spoken in Chautita, but she’d been talking about drug traffickers. With his finger, he traced the oval outline of the window and recalled how those words had crushed him as though with a sledge. It was a long while ago, the day they’d carried a bag of food to Herminia’s box and Beth had been condemning cocaine traffickers for the horrors they brought to her life. That meant him too: in her evaluation he was a monster. His discomfort was growing by the moment.

Hell, he told himself, shaking the feeling, if the druggies wanted to sniff the stuff, how could anyone claim that he was responsible? They couldn’t, and that was that! He reran the thought repeatedly to strengthen his conviction, because he knew Beth wouldn’t agree, not one little bit. ‘What about all those addicted teenagers?’ she’d ask. ‘They knuckle under to peer pressure and, according to you, it’s their own fault, the trafficker had nothing to do with it.’ He wondered then if this shipment of cocaine he was escorting was going to do the harm Beth thought it would.

“Well, of course it is, asshole!” he heard himself say aloud. His voice startled and embarrassed him. He looked quickly about to see if people were staring. Fortunately, no. The cabin attendant, in the back reading a magazine, looked up when Truman moved, but otherwise he was ignored.

Why hadn’t he considered that before, he asked himself in surprise. God! What an ugly thought. He could just see Herminia in her box: she’d looked like a concentration camp survivor. But the fact was that, before Beth entered her life, Herminia wasn’t a survivor, she was awaiting her death. He knew that Beth would be right too: cocaine would have been the cause. Also, she would never accept that Herminia was to blame for her addiction. She’d be right again: the damn coke was practically pushed up her nose. He could say that, if he didn’t ship it, someone else would, but he knew what answer she would have for that. ‘Let them,’ she’d say, ‘I’m talking about you. Do you want to play a part in that?’ Did he?

If Beth hadn’t happened along, he wondered, how would Herminia’s death have affected him? He knew, and he didn’t like the answer: he would have been glad to be rid of her. My God! he thought, it’s true, that’s exactly how I would have felt! He pulled his hand to his mouth and stared for a moment at the seatback in front of him. Maybe I am a cold-hearted bastard and, like Beth thinks, a person responsible for widespread suffering.

He asked himself if he might not have ended up in a box on a beach somewhere if there had been crack around when he was a teenager. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps. And, if he had, whose fault would it have been: his own? What about the guy who brought it from a third of the way around the world, the guy who lived like a sultan in his own hotel and said, ‘the hell with the asshole if he’s stupid enough to use the stuff I provide, it’s his own fault’? Yeah, he thought, maybe I’d be in that box and that guy would be glad to be rid of me.

* * *

Juan’s shipping company was considerably larger than the operation Carlos had. They had started the same way, hauling farm products through the mountains in oxcarts. Then came the civil war in Nicaragua, and Uncle Sam needed smugglers to move arms to the Contras – and a little cocaine northward. When the war ended, they each had a small fleet of well-maintained diesel trucks. Juan was an aggressive businessman and expanded his operation steadily over the years. It had become one of the largest cargo shipping companies to and from Honduras’ major Caribbean port, Puerto Cortes.

When Truman arrived, the cocaine was already packed into the container it would be in when it arrived in Houston. Juan’s hands would be the last to touch it before then. He had been alone in the warehouse when he’d stowed it, then repacked the cargo, leaving it to appear undisturbed. His workers knew nothing of its existence: it was on a pallet in the deepest part of a container filled with similar loads of like-sized bags of gourmet coffee, and being loaded on a ship with thousands of identical containers. Not even the most sophisticated equipment could detect it. The weight disparity had been compensated for and to be found, the correct container from among hundreds of thousands of others would have to be selected for inspection and its entire cargo removed. That wouldn’t happen.

That night in Juan’s guest room, Truman couldn’t sleep and the reason wasn’t the usual concern about the awaiting nightmare: he was having crazy thoughts of slipping into the warehouse and planting explosives to blow the shipment to kingdom come.

The trip was not yet over and it was uncertain at that point when – or even if – he would see her again, but the thought of facing Beth caused his stomach to flip. He knew that he couldn’t go on lying to her, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell her about the trafficking, either. Why he hadn’t been plagued with any of this before, he couldn’t understand, that was troubling, but worse was that he now knew, he had to send her away and never see her again. He felt selfish and ugly.

Another disturbing thought was that, by the time he got back to Chauita, the cocaine would already be in the States. People would already be sniffing or cooking it into crack in cities and towns all across the United States. How could he face her or so much as speak with her while that was going on? But he had to, and it had to be in person: he needed to tell her goodbye.

The following afternoon, immediately following a garden party in his honor he flew to San Pedro Sula. The trip there and on to Puerto Cortes was unnecessary in his opinion, because Juan controlled things quite efficiently, but Gordon insisted. In the port, Truman leafed through shipping manifests and saw among them his container. He confirmed that it was properly directed to Vera Cruz, all the necessary stamps and seals having been affixed, and drove a jeep through the yard to see that there was nothing about it likely to attract attention. In Veracruz, Juan’s son would receive the container. He would simply remove the Honduran customs seal and reship it, manifested as cargo originating in Mexico.

He called Beth again from Puerto Cortes. Gone were the high spirits he had felt during their last conversation. He felt hollow inside when she answered. He just didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, Beth began the conversation and momentarily reversed his mood with her cheerfulness and teasing. In no time at all, he was laughing and adding his own lines to Beth’s

remembrances of shared experiences. She'd met a woman who had invited her to a fancy dinner party, she said. "And," she added tauntingly, "I'm going to wear my new dress again. Don't you wish you could come?" Before hanging up, she promised to soon return to Chauita. He was amazed when he settled the handset in its cradle that from two countries away she could ease, with just her voice, all the weight pressing upon his soul.

He was depressed on the flight to Managua. He sat with his thumbs pressed to his temples rehearsing farewell speeches. Between bouts of that, he felt foolish about demeaning Jesus and Herminia in Gordon's office. He wasn't interested in spending a day on the island. He simply boarded the ferry to San Ubaldo, claimed his car, and drove to Limon.

□ □ □

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Leon Edward strutted like a peacock into the lobby of Hotel Paradise with two women at his side, certain that every head turned for a glimpse of such a great sight: Ed Lyons had arrived. Soon he would no longer be an errand-boy, but a man with business of his own: big stuff, lots of money. He'd told the American girl about it on the drive, not too much, you have to be careful, and she'd been so impressed that she'd agreed to dinner and the other one would come too. George Dearling, the meek, bespeckled man he was meeting, would be awe-struck at his virility when showing up with the beautiful blond and the big-eyed Tica girl for him. It created just the sort of powerful man of the world image he had craved, and brought confidence to his every gesture.

Upon arriving in his fourth floor suite, he went directly to work on his brother's business that he could attend to his own affairs without delay. The first call he placed was to his San José banker with whom Gordon had dealt since beginning in the business. He was a master at filtering suitcases of cash through hundreds of bank accounts, unbeknownst to their owners, to arrive magically and innocently into Gordon's account without a trace left as to its source. He arranged their usual rendezvous, in the bank executives' parking area atop the building, where he would deliver the suitcases. Other phone calls went out to offices of a judge, police officials, politicians and assorted businessmen to arrange the hand delivery of envelopes. Each contained a sizable 'dividend' check from the Royal Caribbean Bank, most payable to other numbered foreign accounts, without the name of either party appearing in writing.

The first thing to go awry – although he didn't take it as the omen he might – was that evening at dinner. The American girl, Beth, who was supposed to be with him, stood to one side as the other pushed past and took the seat intended for her. Then she ordered George to sit, effectively isolating his date from him. It was a humiliation, made worse by George who took advantage of the seating error, engaging the woman in conversation and left immediately following the meal, chasing after her.

* * *

Leon was always on the lookout for someone to listen to his opinions and, as George was one of the very few who would, something of a friendship had developed. He tolerated the boastful chatter for the opportunity it provided him to join in on high rolling gambling binges, where chips were handed him by the fistful. However, when he encountered him at the downstairs bar a week earlier, George, woefully depressed over the breakup of his marriage, and drowning his miseries in bourbon, was in no mood to gamble, and far less to listen. He moaned that life had lost purpose and that all the world had abandoned him. He told how he had once been a programmer, a very good one he claimed, earning a king's ransom as salary. He knew computers well and could get them do just about anything. He also had several patents to his credit, but all that meant nothing, he lamented: he was a finished man. His entire world was crashed onto him, and there was no escape. He had been contemplating suicide as matter-of-factly as one might wonder the hour. When questioned as to what it was that troubled him so terribly, he replied with a sob story about his wife wanting divorce because he'd been ruined financially, a daughter he was not likely to see again and a farm that soon would be gone. His bank was threatening foreclosure if he didn't cough up sixty thousand dollars immediately, and ultimatums on his other debts weren't far behind. To get out of the mess, he needed a minimum of two hundred fifty thousand dollars and didn't have the start of it.

For years, Leon had lusted over his brother's millions, but in each scheme to slip away with some, Gordon loomed as too potent a figure – until he developed the Plan. It was perfect, except that he didn't have the necessary computer skills. He stared at his friend a long while before whispering that there was a way out for both of them. George, uncharacteristically disheveled and with stubby cheeks, wiped the spray that came with Leon's words from his glasses and squinted questioningly at him to continue. If George had the kind of ability with computers he claimed he did, then, Leon suggested, he ought to have sufficient talent to duplicate a check that would be suitable for cashing. George replaced his glasses, rolled his magnified eyes and moaned. Undaunted, Leon continued: should he have such ability, he, interestingly enough, had just the check to copy. It was of a numbered account in The Royal Caribbean Bank in the Cayman Islands, which contained millions of dollars in laundered drug money and coincidentally, he murmured, it was properly endorsed and, at that very moment, upstairs in his suite waiting to be copied.

George followed Leon up to his suite more to humor him than anything else, but once there, the sight of numerous payoff checks, in addition to a semi-cryptic receipt from a downtown bank for eleven million dollars in cash 'Ed' claimed he had just delivered, all of which appeared authentic, sobered him. Well aware that George was an intimate to San José society, he offered as additional proof a glimpse at his list of checks with the names of their corresponding recipients. George donned reading glasses and scanned the list. Dumbfounded, he sat at the desk, pulled a goose-neck reading lamp close and put a second pair of glasses over the first to study anew the checks and the paper they were printed on. "Where the hell did you get all of this?" he asked at length, looking up in a wondering gaze, with his eyes, doubly magnified, appearing enormous.

"I've told you three or four times already that I earn my gambling money as a bagman for a drug ring. Look, see there?" Leon asked, tapping a finger to the list where check numbers of two separate entries had been crossed out and replaced with the subsequent. He wiped dry his mouth onto the back of his hand and continued. "The guy that writes these checks always ends up having to void one or two. So what I want you to do is make a check for each of us using those two numbers so they'll be in correct sequence, and a legitimate one of the same number won't be showing up."

"Why do you want to go to all this trouble if you can simply take the cash?"

"Because, if I was late with it, even as little as two hours, they'd start looking for me and I'd never get away."

"Two hours is a lot of time if you ask me, but all right, how much are you thinking about for these checks?" 'Ed' suggested three hundred thousand US dollars each. It was a normal amount to be written against the account, he claimed, and not likely to raise eyebrows, yet sufficient for both of their needs. "Sounds great," George answered, "but what are we supposed to do once we have them?"

"Deposit them in your account and when they clear, give me mine in cash."

George clapped a palm to his forehead and slid it back across his dome. "Me? Why me?" he asked pitifully.

Leon offered a loose-lipped smile and passed a hand over the bulge of his stomach. "Because I'm the one with the idea and with the checks, that's why. And because I want to stay right here and not have to run somewhere to start life over," he responded, careful to speak with the forcefulness used so effectively by Gordon.

"Yeah, and what about me?" George asked with a bitter edge to his tone. "Eventually they would know who did it and come looking for me."

"Un-huh, they probably would. But, that's just it: eventually. You said you thought two hours was a lot of time. I've got a much better deal for you. You're looking at the guy who picks up the mail and this month's bank statement hasn't even come in yet. Think about it. As far as the bank is concerned, it'll be business as usual. So, the soonest that anything can be found wrong is when the next bank statement arrives, and that won't be for at least thirty days, but I'm going to do even better

for you: when it arrives, I'll lose it. It won't be until the next one that anything can possibly be discovered, and that gives you two whole months."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Sure! Easily two months, maybe more, because he hates trying to decipher the statements. Most of the checks don't even have names on them, so it's just a page full of numbers and believe me, he'll put it off as long as possible like he always does. So, you'll have that time too, plus whatever it takes to figure out that it was you, isn't that enough? And maybe, he won't even give the checks a second glance. Think about it, it sure beats suicide."

George studied him, tapping a crooked finger against a tooth. "Well, if I could get the farm out from under and sold quickly... How long will you have these?" he asked abruptly. "I'll need to do some high resolution scans, especially the signatures."

And he was in. Early the following morning, the checks were scanned into George's computer, and they agreed to meet a week later to inspect his handiwork.

* * *

"Very good. Very, very good," Leon proclaimed. The high-intensity lamp angled close to the desk's surface cast him in sharp shadows, bent close, studying George's copy under a magnifying glass. "You've done it. There isn't the slightest difference from the original. It's perfect. Let me see the other."

"They're almost perfect – only almost," George said, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. "Feel the paper. You see, it's a bit too brittle, but I'm confident they'll pass."

"That's all we need. So now, what about the signatures?" he asked, squinting through the glare of light, which illuminated each word's accompanying spray of spittle.

"Don't worry about them," George replied stepping around the desk, out of range of the splatter, "they are going to be works of art. I took the signature from every check you had, blew them up, averaged them, did rework and then re-sized them. I just need another half hour on a software package I've modified, and the finishing touches will be added. Also, I can't print them on just any printer: tonight, I'm getting access to the one we need. I'll have them deposited by tomorrow, and our money should be ready in four to five days."

"All right then, go ahead, but you'd better do a perfect job. I'm trusting you now!" With this very meeting in mind, he'd stood before a mirror mimicking Gordon's most serious tone when practicing this speech. "Don't act nervous in your bank either, they'll slip right through, just like I said, and don't worry: when the next bank statement shows up, I'll lose it right away. This won't work for me if it doesn't work for you." Gordon often said that white guys were wimps and needed a little scare now and then to keep them in line, so he had one included: "Don't forget, in case you had any cute ideas about skipping with my money, that I know where your wife and kid are. And another thing, don't use my name on anything or mention it to anyone. Do this right, and our problems are solved. Do it wrong and..." He held the pause dramatically, proud that he'd remembered to.

"Don't give me any of your shit," George replied icily. "I'm holding up my end of this deal. If you want your money, just make sure you hold up yours."

* * *

It was early evening just prior to opening time and the streets were wet from an afternoon downpour. The brake lights of George Dearling's car added red to *Casino Hollywood's* starburst of white reflected from the pavement. George was a regular from the old days when there had been just the bar and a couple of card tables in back. He was clean-cut, intelligent and often the center of lively debates that helped to make regulars of the class of clientele Brian preferred. He had also been the person to introduce him to Caroline and, as such, was indirectly responsible for Club Hollywood's transformation and phenomenal success. Only recently had he ever seen George as a sloppy drunk. He attributed that fact to the unfortunate stories currently circulating the ex-pat rumor mill that he was the most recent victim of real estate fraud. So, when he called asking for a minute of his time before opening, of course, Brian accepted.

In his fifteen years of living in the country, he had heard countless similar stories, which combined to convince him that fifty percent of the foreigners who came to Costa Rica with money to invest lost it all. Fraudulent investment schemes in reforestation projects, resorts and restaurants took a heavy toll, but, by far, real estate was the worst. Improper registration (what apparently had happened to George) was the most common method employed, although abuse of Costa Rica's misguided squatter's rights laws was another popular ploy. The law was written to offer poor people an opportunity to claim unused land by extending legal rights, that can eventually lead to outright ownership to an individual who squats on a property for as little as three months. Unfortunately, it doesn't give clear definition of 'unused', and neglects to describe what methods may be employed to gain access, or later, to remain on a property.

George confirmed the rumors, but he said that, in just the nick of time to save himself from ruin, he had negotiated the sale of certain patent rights he held. To save tax dollars all around, he had been paid from an offshore account at Royal Caribbean Bank in the Cayman Islands with two checks written to him for three hundred thousand dollars each. His bank said that they would accept the checks for deposit, but as they were not certified, refused to acknowledge them as payment of the sixty thousand needed to halt foreclosure and without payment in full, that action would be taken the following day. Brian could help an old friend immensely in his time of need and earn a two percent commission, a full twelve thousand dollars, if he would deposit the checks into his account and give George the cash when they cleared. However, he needed sixty thousand dollars in cash, immediately to stop the foreclosure, so he further asked for an advance of that amount. He had nowhere to turn, and Brian had nothing to lose, he assured him. The checks were good as gold and he could verify for himself that the account had sufficient funds. Brian flipped the checks back and forth, shrugged his shoulders and rumbled a laugh. "What do I know for a good check or a bad check? Listen," he said, placing a hand on George's thin shoulder. "We'll take these to my bank first thing tomorrow and let them decide if there's money in the account and if it's there, then okay, you'll get your sixty thousand."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sylvia's party was shaping up, she had a guest list filled with interesting names. Food and music had been arranged, and La Hacienda's staff had been filled out with additional hiring. It was going to be spectacular. She came to San José making the rounds with the checkbook and bumped into Enrique. She hadn't had his address and the police department refused to supply it, so his invitation was right there in her bag. They went for a spin around town in his car to snort a few lines of coke and chatted until his questions began to annoy her. She escaped with a silky brush-off, and found herself dropped on the sidewalk opposite Hotel Paradise, staring at the building and reminiscing the wild times she and Caroline had shared inside. It wasn't the sort of place she would ever patronize on her own, crawling with whores and degenerates, but her spirits brightened with the old memories so, with a light, lively step she went in to enjoy a drink in the bar where it had all began.

She was in the lobby, sharing a laugh with a desk clerk when she saw Mike, trying to slither out the door unnoticed. She'd caught him! He was supposed to be home getting the entrance resurfaced after the rain damage. Knowing he'd been spotted, he slouched his way over.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Well, I donno," he answered. "Having a beer, I guess."

"There's plenty of beer at home. And what about the driveway?" she snapped. "You're going to have cars falling over the edge of the cliff!"

"Yeah, there's plenty of beer at home," he snarled, "but there ain't no pretty little whores there." She riled, seeing his smug smile of satisfaction at his crudeness. "What are `ya worried about? The work's getting done. I got a whole crew a'guys out there with a bulldozer and a dump truck taking care a'it right now. How about you, wadda you doing here? Ain't ya spoze'ta be training your new staff? That's what ya told me. You was gonna hurry right back after ya paid your bills. So why don't you go home and leave me in peace for a change, huh?" He sauntered to the bar and, when she came in and settled at a table, flaunted his abuse of a young prostitute's breasts for her to watch.

She had been meaning to make amends with Caroline for months. They bickered too much and Mike had driven a wedge between them, but she was the only woman she'd ever felt comfortable enough with to relax and just be herself, and she missed her company. A party invitation she'd sent to her and Brian at Club Hollywood hadn't been answered, nor had the one she sent directly to her home. Sitting there with her drink, looking around and remembering the many moments they had shared, she resolved to call her and see what could be done to patch things up. Even though the whole thing was Caroline's fault, she would apologize for the argument and tell her it was okay to bring her horse back to the stables.

Sylvia was on her fourth drink and really feeling its effects when, without announcement, a perky American woman sat beside her and introduced herself as Beth Tierney. The young lady was from Wisconsin. Sylvia didn't think she'd ever met anyone from Wisconsin, but she filled the bill for what she would have expected: healthy-looking, blond and innocent. Wondering how she had found her way into a rat hole like Hotel Paradise, it turned out that she'd befriended a prostitute that worked there. The hooker was probably taking her for everything she was worth. And which hooker, no less? The very one whose breasts Mike was massaging. Didn't that take the cake? In Sylvia's opinion, she ought to distance herself from the prostitute before she was cleaned out completely. A trip to the beaches of the Pacific Coast didn't seem to particularly interest

her, but trail riding got her attention. Sylvia was delighted. “Well, that’s it then, you’ll have to come and spend a few days,” she insisted. They were having a wonderful time when Mike embarrassed her by making a display of his depravity. “You know that guy?” the young woman asked, incredulously. It was awful, nevertheless she admitted to being his mother.

Talking with the young lady was like a breath of spring air. Constantly shadow boxing with everyone in her life was all she seemed to do any longer. All the greedy bastards known to Sylvia were the same as her: out to get their slice of the pie by any means, regardless of the consequences to all but themselves. Beth Tierney was a pretty woman, aglow with wide-eyed naiveté. She approached life joyously and knew nothing of intrigues. She liked her immediately and Ms. Beth Tierney received a dinner party invitation on the spot, as someone safe to talk to among a room full of vipers.

□ □ □

END OF PART THREE

The Shades of Paradise
Part Four

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“The bank called while you were out,” Caroline announced when she heard Brian in his office and realized he had slipped in unnoticed. She was dressed for daytime office work with loose fitting khaki trousers, tight at the wide waistband, with suede open-toe heels. The white blouse had full, loose sleeves, and wide bands at the wrist. A high collar encircled her neck and open buttons plunged low in front between uplifted breasts. She leaned her body into the doorway from the outer reception area. Only red enameled fingertips, her head and strawberry blond hair tumbling over a shoulder appeared in the entrance. She wore a puzzled expression.

Brian looked up from the papers on his desk and leaned his heavy body into his chair, the expanding springs complaining with a crinkle. Sunlight from the window angling across his face caused him to squint and shone through his thick sandy hair, tinting it red. His arms filled the sleeves of his blue silk shirt, making it appear a size too small. Bewildered, he considered what the purpose of the call might be.

“It was the bank president,” she continued. “Very important, he said. You are to call him the minute you get in. Sorry I didn’t tell you right away, but I didn’t hear you come in. He wouldn’t tell me a thing: said it was a private matter between the two of you. What do you have going on with him that I don’t know about?”

“Nothing,” he answered, ever more perplexed. He wasn’t for long: Royal Caribbean Bank had called his bank an hour earlier to report that the two checks for three hundred thousand US dollars each that Brian had vouched for were forgeries. His bank wanted the sixty thousand dollars it had advanced to him on good faith returned before the end of the day, and until done, his accounts were frozen. For reasons of his own, the bank president didn’t want a police investigation in the Caymans, particularly in view of the fact that their police were sure to request the cooperation of the OIJ in Costa Rica. He could yet intervene and prevent it all, however, Brian must replace the money – now!

Brian went ballistic. He needed to clear himself of any involvement with forging checks especially since he was hiding from Canadian warrants, but he couldn’t take sixty thousand of the casino’s cash without it being noticed and any irregularities in the casino’s balances could cost him his license. It was a very good life he was enjoying in Costa Rica. The money was rolling in, and he didn’t have any problems with the law. If his Costa Rican residency was revoked because of this, the party would be over. And, what was he supposed to do about Frazer? He was coming by to collect a payment on the loan and Brian had just been about to go to the bank to withdraw the cash for him. Now what? George Dearling – he’d been staying in town. He snatched the phone from Caroline.

George answered on the first ring. “What is it, Brian? Are the checks cleared?”

Brian grated his teeth. The thieving bastard had the balls to be chipper! “Listen, you,” he growled, “your fucking game is up, so get your skinny ass over here with my sixty thousand dollars – RIGHT NOW. You hear me, you wormy little prick?”

“I’ll try,” were his only words. The phone disconnected.

“Dearling! Dearling, you bastard!” he shouted into the dead instrument. He called back, but he knew it was fruitless. Sure enough, the line was busy. He drove all over hell and back looking for him, stopping first at the club, just in case, and told the bar bouncer, in no uncertain terms, that if and when Dearling showed his face, to keep him right there: he wanted to see him. He made sure security in the casino was on top alert for him as well then drove all the way to the Orosi

Valley to look for him in person on his farm: his wife said she had thrown him out weeks earlier. “What do you need him for?” she asked.

“I’m going to kill the prick,” he said.

“Well, do it once for me while you’re at it. He’s been calling and coming around here harassing me every day, but not today. Maybe he’s hiding in the greenhouses. You’re certainly welcome to look around.” He did: no George. Becky even voluntarily gave Brian one of her husband’s old address books to help him. He had Caroline call every name in the book. Not one person listed had seen him in some time, basically since his finances had collapsed around him. Brian wasn’t finished: he went to every club, bar and back room in San José, and he knew them all. George Dearling was gone – disappeared without a trace.

He was extra pissed because, when the bank called with the bad news, Caroline had offered to call Dearling. She said that she would sweet talk him into coming to the office on the pretext of picking up his money; instead, he’d grabbed the damn phone from her, and now the wormy little Dearling was gone. No sense running all over town like a chicken without its head looking for him any longer. Time had run out. He hated calling the office without having found Dearling, but he had to. Caroline picked it up on the first ring and, sure enough, she started in immediately, calling him a weak piss ant and a poor excuse for a man. She never would have trusted George Dearling. Why didn’t he ask her before doing something so stupid? Blah, blah, blah.

“All right, all right,” he retorted. “Has he called? Have you heard anything?”

“No, nothing!” she snapped. “Now you see what you’ve done?”

He remembered then about Frazer: he had to be paid, and he’d soon be at the club. Brian was going to have to dig into his mad money from the office safe and he hated that Caroline would be there to know about it. Fucking Dearling, that prick would have to pay! “Call Frazer!” he growled. “Tell him to meet me at the club at four o’clock and tell him to be on time.”

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“I’m coming back,” he answered. “I can’t find him anywhere. The son of a bitch is hiding.” Did he really want to go back to the office where he’d just have to listen to more from her? “Forget it, I’m not coming back after all. I’m going to go to the bank.” His back was to the wall like never before and he still hadn’t figured out how he was going to respond to his bank’s demand for the sixty thousand. NOW, was basically the tone of that particular request, and he had to deal with it within the next twenty-four hours! He’d mortgage the club if he could, but Frazer was holding the title on both the property and new equipment. He couldn’t even explain that to the bank: Frazer had insisted nobody know about the loan, and he was a man you didn’t want to cross. He was sure of one thing, though: George Dearling didn’t have access to instant money anywhere. There was nothing to be lost by taking out his mounting anger against this bald-headed, lying, skinny little cheat who had brought the walls tumbling down around them both. If he could just get his hands on him, he’d rip him limb from limb. The man was using up valuable oxygen and returning nothing in exchange.

At the bank, he managed to get the president to agree to an additional twelve hours. Not much, and he didn’t know what he was going to do with the time. He’d ask Frazer, but he already knew the answer: he was more cold and unforgiving than any bank. He’d bail Brian out all right, but he would have to sign the entire club over to him and he wasn’t doing that, but it couldn’t hurt to ask – beg.

Caroline called Frazer several times, but he wasn't answering. No problem: he carried a pager. The message read: BRIAN NEEDS TO SEE YOU AT THE CLUB AT 4 PM. VERY URGENT. HAS TO DO WITH GEORGE DEARLING. BOSS SAYS BE ON TIME. CAROLINE

Brian didn't just open the door to enter the casino: he smashed it with both of his huge fists and it flew open, barely remaining on its hinges. A security man, on a stool just inside, leapt to his feet and faced him in a fighting stance.

"George Dearling show up?" Brian asked totally unfazed.

"No, not yet," he replied, lowering his arms and checking the door for damage.

"Fuck! Well, if he does, bring him to me because I'm going to kill the son-of-a-bitch."

"Yeah, right! Hey, there's a guy here to see you. That's him over there with the white hair. Ah, here he comes." He gave Brian a wry grin. "Guess he heard you come in."

Frazer approached smiling and offered his hand. "Hey, partner," he said. "I was in the neighborhood. What's the rush?"

Brian glanced about. "Not here, Gene" he instructed. "Too many cameras." He wrapped an arm over the other's shoulder and guided him into the bar. "Listen, I've got big problems," he said when they'd settled onto stools and ordered drinks. He explained what had happened and asked if he might be able to provide the needed sixty thousand. Frazer was sympathetic, but business was business, he said, and he couldn't do it.

"I understand," he replied. "Don't worry, I have your payment right here." He plopped two packages wrapped in newspaper onto the bar. "Sorry, it's all tens and twenties because I couldn't get anything from the bank. This came out of the safe. I don't know about the next payment, though. Maybe you'll be the new owner."

"Don't fret, my friend," Gene responded, watching as Brian unwrapped the cash and piled it into stacks of hundreds, "everything will work out." Brian pushed four thousand dollars along the bar to him, then counted out an additional five hundred and slid it over with the rest.

"There you go," he said, "four and a half grand. I sure hope you're right and I'm here to pay you again next month.

"You will," Frazer answered. "Here, take this," he said returning one hundred." Brian looked curiously between the money and Gene. "Caroline gave me credit last week," he explained. "Just make sure she marks it in the book as paid."

◇ ◇ ◇

Leon was packed and out of his room at Hotel Paradise five minutes after George Dearling called in a state of total panic. He offered the manager one hundred American dollars to change his room registration to another name, any name, just erase anything that could place him there. The manager wasn't new to the business or the workings of San José; he was well aware that Leon was connected with a source of power in Costa Rica, a source that had on numerous occasions performed the impossible for this valuable client who asked only to be forgotten. Within minutes of Leon's departure, not a trace remained in the records of Hotel Paradise of his visit and the desk clerks knew well to remember nothing about renting the suite, regardless of who asked. Dearling could wait till doomsday at Tropical Tim's bar; Leon wasn't going to show. While George cowered in a booth at the back of the bar watching the door for Leon to come through, he was in his Range Rover roaring past the national soccer stadium, on his way to Limon.

Leon's first thought had simply been to run home, but what then? Royal Caribbean Bank would call and it would be over. Maybe he could get there in time to receive the call himself. But no, Connie would never let him answer the phones.

And when the bank told Gordon about the checks, he'd know right away that it was him. He needed to tell him something. What? A story began to take form as he raced through traffic. Dearling, of course, would be assigned the lion's share of the blame. It could be a gambling debt that he had been pressuring him about. He could have Dearling forcing his way into his room... seeing the payoff checks and threatening him – with a gun. While swishing past lumbering trucks, Leon improved the story, himself more the victim with each rehearsal. Terrified over how angry Gordon would be, he squealed around a hairpin turn: the back end of the Rover skidded within an inch of a sheer rock wall. “Gordon can fix it! He has to. He has to.”

Leon didn't get halfway through his story before Gordon's first interruption. He was seated on his throne, looking down on his brother as though he was an insect. He felt like one. Gordon was even wearing his suit jacket! His gold ring tapped a steady beat against a coffee cup. Leon fidgeted with a handkerchief. “Wait a minute, Leon! I thought you always played poker in Club Hollywood, but you just said it was at the Holiday Inn. Which was it?” Actually, Leon had said that he ran into Dearling in Club Hollywood after he had been to the Grand Hotel. He hadn't mentioned the Holiday Inn, but where Dearling encountered him and started demanding money hadn't mattered and wasn't included in the story he'd rehearsed: it was the gambling debt and threatened violence that was important. He couldn't understand why it suddenly mattered which club.

“Why were you in the Holiday Inn?” Gordon asked without giving him time to think. “I thought you had been barred from there.”

Leon puzzled the problem a moment, squinting for concentration, then continued with renewed confidence. “A friend let me in a back door. I guess I should have told you that. Sorry.”

“Ah, that's all right,” Gordon answered. “I get confused on the details. Okay; so after Walston copied the checks what did this other one, Dearling, say when you told him that you were going to have to wait for a couple of days? He'd been threatening your life for cash, hadn't he?” Gordon nodded and leaned back as though preparing for a lengthy response.

Walston? Had he said that? Walston hadn't been part of the story, except as the guy who was supposed to cash the checks.

“That is when you found out you would have to wait a couple of days, wasn't it?”

“Well, yeah, um – that's right.” Leon was nervous. Something wasn't right. Gordon was seeing through his lie – but how? He couldn't understand what was giving him away. He nervously wiped a spot of his spittle from the edge of Gordon's desk with his handkerchief. “Well, we were there in Club Hollywood, as I said, when the bank calls an...”

“Just the three of you? Wasn't the girlfriend there too?” Gordon steepled his fingers with his elbows resting on the desktop and peered at his brother. “Didn't you say that she was always around watching what everyone was doing?”

◇ ◇ ◇

Gordon looked down at his brother, despising him. He'd kept it up with the grilling although he knew – knew from the moment Leon opened his mouth – that he was lying. His performance was disgusting.

“No, no, just a minute, she wasn't there, Gordy,” Leon responded, looking smug.

So, he'd finally caught on that he was being tricked and now thought he had it under control, still trying to talk his way out of it!

“It was just the three.... Hey! Hey, Gordon! Gordy, shit, please; I'm your brother!” The slug from Gordon's .38 special passed close enough to Leon's shoulder that he heard it pass before burying itself deep in the teak paneling.

He hated doing it; that paneling was expensive with each panel perfectly matched to its neighbor. It would cost a fortune to repair. And when he saw the puddle of urine dripping from Leon's chair onto his eighteen thousand dollar carpet, he regretted it even more. He could have gotten away with slapping him good and hard across the mouth. He reached quickly for the intercom, pressing several buttons until he got the right one. "Sorry if that frightened you, Connie," he spoke into the box calmly and with humor in his voice. "That was Leon. I wouldn't want you to think we're shooting each other or something." He stopped then and glared down at Leon, his expression hard. "What now, Leon," he barked, slamming the pistol onto the desk's blotter. "Do you think you can tell your brother the truth, or should I see if I can aim better?"

The next half hour was spent listening to Leon relating the details of his check-forging scheme. Gordon scratched a couple of notes, asking few questions. He could easily tell that now he was hearing the truth. He'd warned Leon, from when they were young, never to try to lie to him: he could read him easier than a book.

Gordon was careful to get the details of the desperate call Leon had received from George Dearling, having him repeat everything three times. And, twice he asked the name of the bank where Walston deposited the checks. He sat motionless while he thought. He needed to make the problem go away and quickly. If he or Leon was connected to the checks, not only would his reelection and his career be ruined, but the cocaine smuggling might be discovered as well. He reached for the phone and began making calls. "I'm going to make another call," he said after the second, directing his voice to Leon. "I want you to listen. I'll be asking questions when I'm finished, so listen up." Gordon's intimidating glare carried enough foreboding to raise a cold sweat on any man. Leon nodded, quickly and obediently, dabbing his forehead with his spittle-soaked handkerchief and watched Gordon dial.

"Hello, young lady," Gordon said into the receiver. "Tell Mr. Brian Walston there's a man on the phone who knows how to fix six hundred thousand dollar problems. Well, go on, get him! I'm not waiting all day." Less than ten seconds passed before Brian's voice sounded in his ear.

"Hello, Mr. Walston," he spoke into the receiver. "No, please don't ask who this is. Just listen, don't say a thing until I'm finished. I've just gotten off the phone with your bank. Your problem has been fixed. No, never mind about that. I told you to listen – so shut up and listen. All record of those two checks you're concerned about is already being destroyed both here and in the Caymans. Additionally, the funds to cancel a certain sixty thousand US dollar loan are being transferred to your bank in Escazu. Case closed, you're out of it. Do you understand what I mean when I say you're out of it?"

"No. What it means is that you have no memory of it – it didn't happen. Whatever paperwork you have pertaining to the checks or loan I want you to burn. That's right; burn it. Yes, the payment booklet too, everything. No record will exist anyhow –so, just forget any of this happened. Got it?" He listened again, then replied: "No, no questions and don't speak about this, to anyone. I shouldn't have to threaten you, Mr. Walston. We do understand each other, don't we?" He listened again. "I thought so. Indeed, you do owe me and one day I may want something in return." Gordon hung up without waiting for a response. "Now, did you see how much your asinine little plan cost me today, Leon?"

"Yeah, but I..."

"Shut up, Leon! That money is coming out of your allowance. Do you think Brian Walston will be foolish enough to cross me after what I've just done for him?"

"Oh, no... Hell no!"

"Why not, Leon?"

"Well... Well, you'd kill him, Gordy. The fucking guy's not that stupid."

“Take a lesson, brother.” Gordon’s words and expression could melt an iceberg. “Now get out of here, Leon. I have other calls to make.”

With Leon gone from the office, Gordon stepped into his washroom to splash water on his face and dab it dry. The dermatologist had said he could avoid the sort of blemishes that plagued Leon by washing often and not rubbing with his towel. He leaned into the mirror and worked a bit of purifying cream into a suspicious spot on his cheek. After analyzing his brother’s entire ugly tale, Gordon could see but one way to keep the situation from blowing up in his face. It had to disappear completely. The problems of money and checks had been solved easily enough: all that had been necessary was an inquiry before calling the president of Walston’s bank. Then, a thinly veiled reference to his shuffling of data to keep hidden the propriety of certain loans won his complete, undivided attention and an overwhelming degree of cooperation which sufficed to wipe clean the trail of the checks and ignore any interest on the loan. The checks were gone and Walston was silenced. There remained but one task: to eradicate a certain George Dearling and that took patience and legwork. He personally had to go to San José to contact an expert in the line of work required. This particular artist had been recommended to him on more than one occasion as professional and cautious. Gordon dialed a number. He was to ask for ‘the artist’. ‘The artist’ wasn’t in, a voice advised. Would the gentleman like an appointment? “Today, and as soon as possible,” he answered and was promptly told to be in a particular booth in the bar at Hotel Paradise at four that afternoon.

“Just sit there,” he was told. “He’ll find you.” Gordon glanced at his watch then checked his agenda. He reached for the intercom to cancel the remainder of the day’s appointments, but he must have pushed the wrong button again, because all of the lights on the little monstrosity began flashing in unison. It had been a Christmas gift from his secretary that could squawk with a hundred different sounds, tell him the local time for any spot on Earth, record messages, and sing the National Anthem for all he knew. To him, it was a confusing array of buttons and options that would take a computer scientist to understand, and the most annoying device he had ever laid eyes on. He walked to the door and shouted through it:

“Cancel everything for the rest of the day, would you, Connie. Reserve a seat for me on the afternoon flight to San José and please, get Mrs. Sylvia Henderson on the telephone.” Luckily, the call caught her at her inn only minutes before she would have walked out the door. “I have a business meeting later in Hotel Paradise,” he said. “I’ll be tied up probably until about six, so while I’m in town, why don’t we get together for dinner this evening at the Cariari? Say, at about seven?”

* * *

Gordon assumed his assigned seat in the bar of Hotel Paradise, but the strangest thing happened while he was sitting there. A man he hadn’t seen in many years, John Sinclair, suddenly appeared out of the crowd near the bar and approached his table. John would want to sit and share war stories from the old days when he was in Nicaragua with the CIA. It was not a good time to be meeting old friends. His first instinct in the situation was to greet him standing: a quick ‘hello’ could then be concluded with an unmistakable dismissal by the simple act of returning to his seat.

For his part, when Frazer saw who was sitting in the booth, he was startled. If he had known in advance that he was the client, he wouldn’t have agreed to meet. This thing was instantly transformed into a completely different contract from the one he had anticipated – worse. Edward had become a hotshot politician, and a political hit was dangerous business. Bad luck! He had wanted to slip into the booth relatively unnoticed, and most definitely did not want to be greeted by Gordon jumping to his feet and coming to him, calling out in a loud voice: “Sinclair! John Sinclair, what a coincidence to run into you! I really wish I had time to chat, but unfortunately, I’m meeting someone in a few minutes. We’ll have to get together

one of these days.” Shaking his hand, then turning back towards his seat, he called over his shoulder, “Well, see you around. Give me a call.”

Frazer was stupefied. Half the people in the bar must have seen that. He continued towards the rear and the men’s room. Luck was running on a bad streak. If something didn’t come along – real soon – to show a change, he would have to walk out. Considering the amounts he had stashed in banks around the world and his pension, he certainly didn’t need the money. He just missed the thrill – but that was no reason to go to prison. If it was just for doing someone, he could go out and cut up any poor bastard, but he was drawn to the intrigue – and, all right, the money too. He decided to give it one more go and see how it went. If something happened to show that his luck was changing, well then, okay. Otherwise, no dice.

John Frazer, or Sinclair, as he had been known through a long career with the CIA, was a confirmed believer in the power of providence. His theory on the subject was that it, the same as so many other variables in life, cycled slowly through positive, then negative. “Isolated incidences of luck, good or bad, don’t happen in nature,” he would explain, if anyone showed an interest in his theory, “it comes in waves.” He was currently on down swing, and if he had any doubts it had just manifested itself, when Gordon, ‘the perfect black gentleman’, began behaving like Texas white trash in his favorite saloon, a country yokel screaming across the barroom. It was particularly bad that he had called him John Sinclair. He couldn’t do a job while he was in a slump as deep as that. He needed a sign. He ambled again towards the booth and slid in, smiling. “My name is Gene Frazer and I’m the guy you came to see,” he said speaking from the side of his mouth. He let Edward explain his problem, then threw a price out that would be considered high in New York: for Costa Rica, it was a number of astronomical proportions.

Staring into his eyes, Gordon was well aware that a man could be killed for as little as one hundred US dollars in San José, but considering Frazer’s thirty years of experience: with him doing the job, it would be accomplished, and Gordon wouldn’t be implicated. What it all came down to was just how valuable was it to him that it be done professionally. He lifted his briefcase, opened it in front of him, fumbled about inside, then passed an envelope onto Frazer’s lap below the table.

“There, that’s half,” he muttered. “The other half, afterwards. It’ll come through my brother; you remember him?” He received a quick nod. “He’ll be staying here at the hotel for several days. Look for him. He’ll take walks through the zoo every day after it happens. The money will be with him.”

“Wait,” Frazer whispered. “I haven’t said I accept.”

“Keep the money,” Gordon hissed through clenched teeth. “If it doesn’t happen in a couple of days, pass the envelope to my brother.” Frazer was readying to excuse himself and walk out, leaving the envelope on the table, when Sylvia Henderson came storming in, literally aglow, beaming smiles at Gordon Edward.

“How wonderful to have you here in San José, Gordy!” she gushed and offered her hand and cheek for Edward to peck at. “I couldn’t stay away. Oh, hello, Gene,” she said, glancing in his direction. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t noticed you sitting there: I was so happy to see Gordy here, in the capital at last!”

Frazer was astounded. Hadn’t noticed him? Perhaps his luck had bottomed out and was starting its upswing. What a deal! “That’s okay, Sylvia,” he said, rising. “I was just on my way out. I wanted to rub elbows with the famous R. Gordon Edward, but I’m sure he’s tired of strangers constantly approaching him, what with his picture in the news more often than the President’s. Thank you for giving me a couple minutes of your valuable time, Mr. Edward,” he said and slipped from the table, attracting no attention at all.

Sylvia found Gordon irresistible: he made her feel vulnerable, and sexy. She knew he was attracted to her, it was written all over him whenever they got together, but he didn't behave like a dog after his bitch like most men. He was kind and courteous, yet radiated strength and power, coaxing her closer rather than pursuing. His reputation as a womanizer was common knowledge to anyone who read the newspaper, but rather than turn her off as it might, the story added dash and flavor to this already magnetic man. It was a strange place for her to be. She idled with the thought of convincing him to stay the night at the Cariari and spending it in his bed. A waiter was summoned, Gordon switched from ginger ale to bourbon, and they soon were engrossed in talk spiced with the thrill of deliberate seduction.

Her conversation trigger had been pulled hard by several lines of coke before arriving. Between bouts of laughter, she added animated embellishments of her encounters with the cops, in days when she'd been ready and willing to sacrifice herself on the protest line in the name of racial equality. Gordon laughed along, particularly boisterously at her outspoken condemnations of White Anglo-Saxon men – especially the Irish. He agreed with every word, loudly adding his own to her list of harsh judgments, but explained that his feelings regarding white men didn't extend to their women. "On the contrary," he said, flashing the sexiest wink Sylvia had ever seen. He found white women to be enticing, he told her, reaching to touch her hand, and this particular white woman he found to be tantalizingly beautiful, vigorous, intelligent and a joy to be with. He noticed then that their highly animated conversation was beginning to attract attention. Let the photographers come running, just let them, he thought. He felt good about the image they created. They both gave every appearance of good education and breeding, yet shared humble roots, spoke well, dressed correctly in the finest fabrics and enjoyed a high level of success. Their bodies were equally well groomed and pampered, and they had also each made major life commitments to social equality. A contented smile came to his lips. "We look well together, my dear, if you don't mind my saying so," he said with exaggerated seriousness. "Yes," he said, striking a pose, "I believe we do."

Gene Frazer liked it too. From across the bar, he watched their every movement. Sylvia Henderson walking in that way was nothing more than exceptionally good luck. The longer she stayed, the better, and it looked as though she was just getting warmed up – more good luck. The fashionable white woman pouring herself all over the influential R. Gordon Edward, in a bar crawling with prostitutes, was drawing more attention by the moment. Nobody would later remember the man Edward spoke with for several minutes before she showed up: she was the whole show. Frazer patted the thick envelope inside his vest and walked out.

* * *

George Darling didn't feel anything, he never would again. He'd be dead before his body had enough time to recover from shock and complain with signals of pain. He knew it and Frazer did too. George just stood there after the first bullet ripped through his abdomen, stunning him. He lowered his gaze to study the spreading blood and touched at it, curiously. He raised his bewildered stare to the eyes of his killer. Frazer's grin widened and he squeezed off two more rounds, low in Darling's body, keeping it on semi-automatic. He didn't want to drop him instantly with a mortal round to the head or chest: this guy was going down too beautifully.

Frazer's heart pounded wildly with excitement. Darling sagged to his knees in front of him, still locked in eye contact. Gene was getting a hard-on. He popped another into the right side of Darling's chest. The guy hardly moved. All that happened was that his right arm, with its nerves severed, dropped to his side. The excitement was too much: in total abandonment to his frenzy, orgasm and blood, the trigger finger convulsed, squeezing off a fiery fusillade. Even that was

beautiful! The left side of Dearling's skinny neck and face disappeared in pieces. The alley behind him filled with parts as the bulk of him rumbled into a confused heap of bloody meat.

Frazer disappeared after Dearling's death. He'd gotten sloppy, letting the thrill get to him plus he'd lingered too long at the scene with several people seeing him dash from the alley. He would remain close at hand to monitor the police investigation, ready to tie up any loose ends that might make themselves known. If the job was to be done right, this was an important part of it. Makeup, hair coloring and false identity together with a change of wardrobe hid him sufficiently.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY

They spoke English – it had become a faithfully followed rule, that they might overcome their Spanish accents – but when they made love: ah, that was an entirely different thing! The only language Truman could use to express those feelings was Spanish with a Nicaraguan accent rich in rolling ‘R’s’, that added emotion words alone were unable to capture. In every sense possible, Spanish was for them a Romance language.

Lucia moaned a feminine purr into his ear and whispered words of love – all in Spanish, including the purr. Truman was on his back in the big bed, Lucia on top, her breasts, lubricated by lovemaking sweat, slipping across his chest. Her dark hair encircled them in a cocoon of love filled with lingering gazes into the depths of the other’s eyes. Her kisses, although wet upon his face, sizzled like fire. They had been lying in each other’s arms basking in their passions for some while after making love. He was describing to her, each gentle word interrupted by a caress, how he was swimming, lost in the liquid beauty of her eyes, and that his love had more depth than the Pacific when the bedroom door flew open.

It was two-year-old Lucet, there to crawl into bed with them, chipper, playful and happy. Her doll face glowed with the same dark beauty as her mother’s. With her came her inseparable playmate, Kermit the Frog as a soft hand puppet, who made his entry by landing directly on Truman’s face at the same moment that her tiny hand slapped against his moist chest. “Make Kermit talk, Daddy,” she begged.

Lucia slid from the bed and headed towards the bathroom, pulling the sheet free to use as a robe and leaving the blanket for him. He watched her move across the room sexily wrapped then stand in the bathroom doorway watching with contentment the interaction between father and daughter.

Slipping his hand into the body of Kermit, he grinned a mischievous response to his wife’s wink, offered a moment before disappearing into the bathroom. “Where did Mommy go?” Kermit asked, bouncing about the bed, peering beneath pillows and under the edge of the bed.

Lucet loved more than anything how Daddy could make Kermit come to life and play with her. She could see Daddy talking through his teeth, but it was Kermit who made her laugh. Her baby-girl exuberance bubbled from her as she rolled into the blanket, watching Kermit in his desperate search for Mommy. “She went to the baf room, Kermit,” Lucet announced, breaking into a giggle.

“In the baf room?” Kermit questioned. “Is she hiding from us?” Truman watched from the bed as Lucet toddled in her bouncy way to the bathroom door and pushed it shut, letting out an excited squeal.

“Mommy can’t get ou-out,” she sing-songed, throwing the weight of her little frame against the door.

Lucia playfully pounded against the inside, begging to be released. Truman folded his arms behind his head, leaning into his pillow to enjoy the show. “Open up! Truman, open the door!” Lucia called, her voice muted.

Truman awoke from his dream, blinking at the ceiling. A broad smile remained on his lips at the lingering image of Lucet’s tiny body wedged against the bathroom door while Lucia called from inside. How beautiful it had been, Lucia and Lucet, long gone, but so alive and real! He had slept well, and deeply. Something was different. He wasn’t sure what it was. He stopped, trying to place it. Then, in a moment of dawning awareness, he knew: it was himself. Inside, something had changed, opened up. No longer did he suffer the nightly ritual of unremembered nightmares and cold sweats, followed by pacing on the patio. He’d been sleeping the night through, in peace, waking calm and groggy.

There was the pounding on the door again: Lucia was still trapped in the bathroom. No... wait. That wasn't part of the dream: someone really was knocking. It must have been real the first time, too. How long had it been going on?

"Truman! Truman, open the door," the muffled voice called again from below.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," he shouted, scrambling for something to wear. He stumbled down the stairs and opened the door to the sight of Beth waving a newspaper in his face.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Beth didn't know what to do about Truman. As if she didn't have enough problems without him turning out to be an international drug trafficker! It was weird with that between them: she wondered at times if, by talking with him, she was guilty by association. At first, he was very formal, greeting her with his stiffest Victorian manners. "A very good morning to you, Miss Tierney," he said the morning after his big admission and their blowout – she responded with like politeness.

They found that they could speak quite comfortably about things like Herminia's scheduled appointments with the dentist, for example. Beth's work or the operation of the hotel were quite acceptable subjects too, but after the first day, when Truman advised that perhaps Beth consider moving to the Pacific coast and she'd replied that it was a good idea, exactly when she would be leaving became another topic to avoid. Perhaps it was because, following his suggestion that she leave, he quickly added: "but, there's no hurry about it. If you want to stay around a while longer, you're more than welcome," or perhaps it was herself, but the packing was continually put off for later until she stopped thinking about it entirely.

She spent countless hours alone on the beach. It was wrong to continue staying at Cabañas Arrecifes and see Truman every day. She had to leave, had to; it was over. Yet, each day she was around him, she felt more that she wanted to stay and she couldn't deny feelings which, throughout all that had occurred, failed to diminish. There was no control over that; it was far too late. It was renewed every time she looked at him, even when she told herself, 'here is a drug trafficker'. She berated herself for foolishly allowing wishful thinking about a life partner to cause her to see things that were never really there. What had he ever done to give her a sign anyhow? Nothing; in fact, he had even refused to kiss her. "What kind of an idiot am I?" she repeatedly asked. "I practically had us married." On top of that, her mind insisted on re-living the horrors of being raped; day and night, it would haunt her and, of course, there was Herminia... She felt she might be losing her sanity.

It was morning, a beautiful, tropical morning – although Beth had stopped noticing if a day was beautiful or horrid. She sat in the patio dining area of Los Arrecifes with her ankle propped atop a knee supporting a newspaper. Idly while reading, she rotated her coffee cup in its saucer. She wore, white shorts with a red-white striped tank top and, atop her head, a wide straw hat completed the outfit. A light sea breeze wafted a bothersome strand of hair across her face and fluttered the pages.

Across from her sat Herminia, tentatively probing behind a bandage in the hope of alleviating an itch. The bruise below her eye remained a deep purple, almost black. Her two front teeth had been capped while those to either side had been ground down to remove ragged edges and awaited treatment at her next appointment, leaving her with the bucktoothed appearance of a pre-adolescent. Her daily battles with paranoia-induced phantoms were less frequent as the effects of drug withdrawal slackened. On the table beside her coffee cup, her journal, was being cast an evil eye: a particularly obscure idea was having difficulty finding its way to words.

Beth read the story in *La Nación* then reread it more carefully than before. Suddenly, she threw back her chair, leapt to her feet and ran from the table at full speed, practically knocking the waitress to the floor. The newspaper was still clenched in her fist when she reached Truman's apartment door and began pounding madly against it. Receiving no response, she stomped to the beach and shouted up to his patio. No answer. With increasing frustration, she returned to beat

on the door, where Herminia, whose coffee had upended in her lap, caught up with her. “What happen, Beth?” she asked, fear and desperation in her voice.

Beth spun to face her. “Herminia, please! Not now, okay? I have to speak to Truman alone. So just go away!” The wounded expression that washed over her brought an exasperated sigh from Beth. “Listen, I’m sorry, Herminia. I’ll explain later, okay?” she groaned and returned her attention to the door. “Open up, Truman! Open the door,” she shouted with growing fury and pounded again. “Truman, damn it, open this door!”

It swung open and Truman stood there, looking terrible. Was he ever a sight when he crawled from his bed! His scars creased deeper. Perhaps that was from how he had been lying when he slept, or maybe it was just the stubble and messy hair. However, when the door opened to him standing there, scratching his head and smiling a rare class of smile, it slowed her for an instant, but just an instant. She jabbed a forefinger to the lead line of a newspaper article. “He was killed, Truman! Look! Shot down in the street, like a dog!” She could feel her ears burning.

“Shot? Who was shot?” he asked, instantly alert.

“George Dearling,” she responded. Pulling on Truman’s robe, she drew him close. “He’s the guy I told you about who had dinner with Herminia and me in Hotel Paradise. The one who took me gambling – and to the whorehouse, remember? I told you. He’s also the one Herminia said was going to rob Gordon’s money with forged checks! Don’t let it be that you told Gordon Edward about that and that’s why this has happened! Maybe she made up the whole thing! He was a nice guy, Truman; really: he loved his wife and his daughter. Tell me you didn’t have anything to do with it!”

“Come in here and let me see that.” Truman stepped aside, relieving her of the newspaper as she passed. “Come on Beth,” he said, looking up from the article while yet beside the door, “you’re calling this dead man a nice guy, but to you everyone is nice. Just look at the perfect gentleman you met at that party!”

That stopped Beth midway up the flight of stairs. She turned slowly and fired a cold glare at him. “You’re avoiding my question,” she snapped.

“Beth, for crying out loud! No, I didn’t say anything to Gordy about those checks: I didn’t believe a word of it.”

“Swear it, Truman!” She could read that scarred face of his. She watched intently.

“I shouldn’t have to do this, but okay: As God is my witness, I said nothing to Gordy and positively had nothing to do with this killing. Can you believe that?”

The clarity of his gaze washed away all doubt. He had spoken the truth: she was sure of it. “Yes, now I do. Thank you for your candor.”

The newspaper articles revealed little: police were investigating reports of a white-haired man seen running from the area, however no arrests had been made and an OIJ spokesman refused to answer further questions. Truman offered drinks and they sat on his patio, speculating about Leon’s claims and their possible connection.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Caroline had never had trouble with Brian before; he'd always been as gentle as a lamb. Oh, she'd had to keep him in line, of course, like any man, but he'd been easy until all that trouble with George Dearling came along. Ever since, he'd been odd and secretive and she had no intention of putting up with that! He told her that he'd spoken with the bank and managed to convince them, since no money had actually changed hands, to drop the whole thing. That was pure bullshit: she knew banks better than that and was pretty damn sure that Dearling *did* get the money although, Brian insisted he hadn't. If that was so, then why hadn't the bank foreclosed on Becky, is what she wanted to know. He was hiding something about it and walking around with that self-contented smirk that she could only conclude was defiance. She'd been furious with him, but he wouldn't budge from his story. On top of that, he'd taken documents from the safe, and what he did with them, she didn't know. It was all so out of character that she'd started checking around for signs of another woman. The night before, Brian had stepped from the shower sooner than she'd expected and caught her red-handed examining the contents of his wallet. She was at home in Puriscal the morning after the ensuing argument, thinking it all through over her first coffee of the day. The situation was intolerable, but he did own three-quarters of the club. She would let him stew for a while, then call and convince him that he ought to apologize. On television, the morning news broadcast was beginning.

She watched in awe the grizzly report of George Dearling's murder, wondering initially if, in his rage, Brian had done it, and that was his big secret. It wasn't possible, though, and she knew so immediately. He didn't have it in him, for one, and, beside that, they were in the club arguing about her supposed jealousy when it actually happened.

Then came the bystander's remark about having seen a white-haired gringo leaving the scene and she asked herself anew if perhaps he had hired Frazer to do it, but dismissed the idea as preposterous: Brian wasn't capable of so brazen an act. Besides, if the forged checks were no longer a problem as he claimed, he had no motive.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to her that was both splendid and simple: she could easily give the police confirmable evidence implicating Brian as the contractor of George's murder, in conspiracy with Gene Frazer. If the police would agree to keep her identity confidential, she could do just that. Then, he'd be arrested and thrown in San Sebastian Prison without knowing that it was her who put him there. With Brian then locked up, frequent visits carrying food, cigarettes and clean bedding would win his total confidence. Surely, under those circumstances, he would be easily convinced to grant general power of attorney to her for the club. With that in hand, she would simply transfer his three-quarters ownership to her name, and she'd be set. It was a flawless plan, or so it seemed, but before acting, she should carefully go over the details with an expert. Sylvia, who was more than happy to escape a raging battle with Mike, drove right over.

"You're still not seeing the whole picture, Caroline," Sylvia advised. "What you're proposing to do – putting everything under your own name using the power of attorney – doesn't take into consideration two things: first, you can't sign for him to sell to yourself. You'll have to form a company that you own. And secondly, I don't think you realize just how long it takes to get things such as that done here in Costa Rica. It could take years, and you don't have that much time. Somewhere on or before the date Brian goes to trial, he'll know that it was you who double-crossed him because the prosecutors will have to reveal your name if they want the option of using your testimony. If everything isn't finished legally with the club before then, and I doubt it will, he will cancel that power of attorney so fast your head will spin: game's over,

you lose. The power of attorney is good – it could help later – but just take it one step further and you’ll have a perfect plan. You need to convince him to marry you right away.”

“Marrying me? I got engaged with him just to keep him happy.”

“Yes, Caroline, marrying you,” Sylvia insisted. “Tell him about the hot conjugal visits you’ll be able to share with him in that cold, cold prison. Tell him anything, just get him to do it.” Caroline continued softly shaking her head. “Listen to me,” Sylvia continued. “You said he doesn’t have any family, didn’t you?”

“No, he doesn’t, why?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Once you’re married, the poor old boy gets into a prison yard knife fight and loses. He doesn’t even have to know that his sweetheart double-crossed him when he dies, calling out your name, all romantic-like: game’s over, you win everything.”

* * *

Caroline wasn’t sure about the part of Sylvia’s plan that called for killing Brian, nevertheless she called her lawyer, explained as much as he needed to know and asked that he, in the strictest confidentiality, arrange a meeting with the police. In short order, an agreement was negotiated and (as he insisted) signed by a judge that guaranteed an airtight seal on her identity until one week before trial. The agreement also allowed for her attorney to be present and available for interpretations and confidential advice throughout her deposition.

Caroline began by saying that she had personal knowledge that Brian Walston paid Gene Frazer to kill George Dearling over a dispute between them involving two forged checks that bounced in Brian’s bank.

“George Dearling,” she testified, “needed sixty thousand dollars to prevent his bank from foreclosing the mortgage on his flower farm and he needed the money immediately. George had in his possession two checks for three hundred thousand dollars each that he said he had received from investors, but his bank wouldn’t accept them as payment and he was unable to cash them. Brian agreed to help George out of this bind by depositing the checks in his own account. He also took out a loan, from his bank and in his own name, for sixty thousand US dollars, so George could have the cash necessary to save his farm. He intended to repay it in full when the checks cleared, so he felt secure about handing over such a large quantity of cash, then the checks turned out to be forgeries.

“Naturally, Brian went crazy over the whole thing,” she added. “He was yelling that he was ‘going to kill that human waste-product.’ He told me to call Gene Frazer to meet him in the club because he was going to hire him to kill George. Anybody might talk that way under the circumstances, so I went ahead and called, unaware that he was completely serious. I phoned Gene Frazer as asked, but he wasn’t in, so I paged him.” After several hours of questions, it was signed and reaffirmed that her identity would remain an ironclad secret, privy only to those in that room, until one week before trial. If they had more questions, her lawyer would be contacted, and it was done.

Caroline’s testimony filled in a lot of blanks for the investigators, although some things didn’t check out. They didn’t doubt they had Walston cold on conspiracy to commit murder. That part was solid. They had the testimony of George Dearling’s wife who reported that Brian Walston had shown up at her door, demanding that she give up her husband because, as she quoted: “he was going to kill the prick.” The bouncer at his own bar, reluctant to give evidence against his employer, broke down eventually and told investigators that he had twice seen Mr. Walston in a fury over George Dearling, and once said that he intended to kill him. Members of the security team in the casino told a similar story. The page Caroline said she sent to Frazer had been recorded by the company’s computer, and the fact that Brian had met in the bar a man with white hair

and wearing Western-style clothing, was also corroborated. A videotape from casino security clearly showed him entering the bar with such a man. Two of the dancers, the bouncer and bartender also testified to that fact. Additionally, one of the dancers and the bartender swore that they saw the actual cash: “ten to twenty tall stacks of American money.” Their statements also concurred about Brian passing this money to the American cowboy with white hair whom the police suspected to be Gene Frazer. Oh, they had their man, all right!

Initially, Walston vehemently denied that he knew anyone by the name of Gene Frazer but, when confronted with the page and videotape, he changed his story. He then said that he had asked his club manager to deliver that message because this Frazer individual (whose name he hadn't recalled earlier and he had seen only once before) had turned up as a person who owed the club money, so yes, he had stopped in, but he had been there to pay off a debt and left immediately afterwards. Substantiating his claim, the debt was confirmed by club records to have existed and been canceled shortly after the paging. Walston remained unyielding in his contention that he and Frazer weren't personally acquainted. He steadfastly insisted that the witnesses were mistaken and had, as do many Ticos, confused the identity of two distinct Caucasian persons. He maintained that the man seen at the bar receiving money from him was a gambling machine salesman. This man, also with white hair (Dutch he believed, and whose name was Andre something-or-other), sold machines that had been smuggled into the country to avoid Costa Rica's exorbitantly high taxes, and business with him was strictly cash.

Several parts of Caroline's deposition, however, apart from the identity of the man receiving Brian Walston's cash, weren't checking out. One was the part concerning the forged checks. Notes were found among Dearling's possessions that referred to \$600,000 he anticipated receiving when two certain checks cleared, but investigators couldn't understand what had become of them. Something about them wasn't right. They seemed to have existed, yet vanished. The deposition taken from Caroline Steepleton stated that they bounced in Brian Walston's account in Escazu, where he had been banking for years. The bank, however, had neither record nor memory of any such checks. Another area that couldn't be independently confirmed concerned the sixty thousand US dollar loan Brian Walston was supposed to have received from his bank and given to George Dearling as an advance on the missing checks. The sixty thousand, Caroline's deposition stated, “came from the same bank,” yet there was no record of that, either. However, by a curious coincidence, the sixty thousand US dollars due on the mortgage of Dearling's flower farm was paid that day – and in cash. Regardless of the inconsistencies, Brian Walston was arrested and charged by the police with conspiracy to commit murder, based upon the considerable volume of evidence provided by those witnesses whose testimony did corroborate Caroline's deposition.

Another grave concern of the police was that, to all appearances, Brian Walston was connected with money laundering, drug trafficking, or both. Accepting drug trafficking as part of the scenario fit perfectly with the large amounts of money involved. The case was presented to the reviewing judge with a strong request to delay the bail hearing as far into the future as possible, providing them time to investigate both the holes in their case and the possible drug connection. The holes were considerable: the police reluctantly admitted that, at the moment, there was no murder weapon or murderer whom they could positively identify. Nor could investigators confirm whether the man seen in the video entering the bar, and whom everyone agreed Walston paid, was a salesman of gambling machines or a hired killer.

Additionally, there was conflicting evidence regarding Gene Frazer: his maid and several others verified that he packed and left several days before the murder for what he said was a trip to the US, but he was not listed as a passenger on bus, plane or ship, nor did immigration record his departure. The cancellation of a gambling debt, the videotape and statements of witnesses seemed to place him on the scene, but a call from an official at the US embassy threw all of that into

doubt: they were told that Mr. Frazer departed Costa Rica surreptitiously on official assignment before the date of the murder, and the OIJ's cooperation in not drawing attention to his movements would be appreciated.

The judge didn't like the drug connection. Were it not there, he would have set a high bail and released Brian, however, he was uncomfortably aware of the treatment judges who release suspected drug traffickers and money launderers received in the press. He charged the police to investigate more thoroughly the holes in their case and those related to the missing checks, and present their findings at Mr. Walston's, as yet unscheduled, next hearing. He banged his gavel: Brian's request for bail was denied and he was remanded to San Sebastián Prison to await trial. The ruling stated that although the evidence was not entirely conclusive, he was indicted for conspiracy to commit murder based upon the considerable material that had been corroborated.

When the case came to court, Walston's lawyer knew he would rip the government's case to shreds. He assured Brian he would soon be out on bail. However, a series of inexplicable incidents occurred in the halls of justice regarding petitions and data submitted on Walston's behalf: files were misplaced or lost with such regularity that his attorney became convinced the case was being influenced by unseen powers working contrary to Brian's interests.

It was.

When Caroline heard the judge's ruling stating that the evidence would be reviewed at a forthcoming hearing, she immediately called Sylvia for further advice. Sylvia welcomed the request as a convenient excuse to repay Gordon Edward his visit to San José by going to see him in Limon before she left the country again for the US. "Don't worry, honey," she assured Caroline, "I have a friend." Sylvia met with Gordon the following day to discuss the situation. She "was certain", she told him, that he must know what could be done by someone to keep Walston behind bars. It was to protect her friend, Caroline Steepleton, from a man Sylvia described as dangerously abusive and "guilty as sin." Gordon undoubtedly was stunned. He couldn't understand how it was that Brian Walston had been nailed for a crime he, himself, had committed. He could only thank his lucky stars, or more likely, he assumed, Gene Frazer, at the fortunate turn of events – money well spent! Of course, he would assist Sylvia's friend. With Walston in prison charged with his crime, the story would fade to nothingness and his reelection would go forward, unthreatened. He assured Sylvia she needn't worry. He would make a few calls to the right people in the judicial system.

As Brian whiled away his time in San Sebastian prison, feeling more frustrated by the day with Costa Rica's judicial system, he was, nonetheless, well cared for by Caroline. It was she, steadfast at his side, who made his bitter life inside somewhat closer to bearable. Besides her daily visits, which cheered him, she brought clean bedding and an air mattress into a prison that offered its inmates a concrete shelf for a bed. Jail food looked so awful that Brian didn't even want to think about the possibility of eating the slop for survival. He had a taste for good food, in man-sized quantities, and fortunately, he had Caroline. Come rain or shine, she arrived with bountiful servings of his favorite dishes which, with the payment of a small bribe, were delivered still hot to Brian. On visiting days, Thursday and Sunday, the prison yard became a large picnic ground where prisoners and their visitors relaxed in small clusters. Caroline was there without fail, laden with food, drink and books. On occasion, she braved the risk and arrived with a condom of cocaine concealed in her vagina.

As though things weren't bad enough for Brian, his past caught up with him. Officials from the Canadian embassy came to the prison to offer him 'an opportunity', as they called it. If he would agree to waive extradition proceedings, he could get out of San Sebastian and return to Canada to answer the criminal charges pending against him there. Brian didn't like the idea too much. In the first place, a twenty-five years sentence awaited him in Canada, while in Costa Rica, the maximum sentence for conspiracy to commit murder was twelve years: half the time. Another reason he didn't particularly

take to the idea was that prison in Canada wasn't anything like Costa Rica. There were no two days a week where the prisoners enjoyed a daylong picnic with their entire family. There would be no daily deliveries of fresh food either. As long as he had Caroline, San Sebastian was far superior.

Caroline saw the development as an unanticipated gift. With Canada pushing for his extradition, her arguments in favor of marriage carried a lot more weight than just promises of sexual bliss during conjugal visits. Under Costa Rican law, if a man has a child in Costa Rica, he cannot leave the country without providing support payments for a minimum of three years. In his case, if Canada became successful in its attempt to extradite him, he would have no income for the next twenty-five years, and Costa Rica required that any child of his be provided Ottawa's support until its eighteenth birthday. It seemed highly unlikely that the Canadian government would go to such lengths over a man who was already in prison. He soon became something of a celebrity within the prison population, as plans for the marriage took shape. It was to happen in the large yard, during visiting hours, with the entire prison population as witness.

As she assumed complete responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the club, Caroline moved up from small-time cheat into the big leagues. She became a cocaine distributor based on the substantial purchases she continued to make through Enrique for the club, and a conspirator to commit murder: Brian's. Also unnoticed was that Gene Frazer was tapping every source available in the US Embassy and the Costa Rican government, attempting to identify the origin of the information that led to his friend Brian's arrest.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Brian Walston's incarceration meant only one important thing to Mike Henderson: Caroline Steepleton was in need of the romantic attentions of a man – himself. He waited a couple of days after hearing the news before showing up at her house on a Monday, the only night of the week when the club was closed. She was startled to find him on her doorstep, but invited him to join her for a drink on the patio nevertheless.

"I come by to see you because big things are gonna be happening soon and I want you to be in on them with me," he said, chopping some lines, when they'd settled with their drinks at the glass-topped wrought iron table. "Patty-boy and Doug are coming down tomorrow, but the real fun's gonna start three weeks from Thursday when the 12:30 flight comes in with the other guys and my money. We're gonna go out on the town and tear San José a new asshole. We'll hit every friking club and bar there is, and have ourselves a party like never before. I'll be blasting on outta here at about eleven on Thursday morning to be at the airport in plenty of time. You've got more'n a week 'ta get ready, so why don'cha come along wit me: it'll be just like old times!"

The last thing Caroline expected was that Mike might carry a torch for her after she had thrown him over and was quite taken aback when he began trying to kiss her. She put the palm of her hand upon his chest and pushed him away – the same as she did to any man who was more forward than she wanted at the moment. Mike wasn't about to be dismissed quite so easily: he was there to reclaim the woman he considered his own. He persisted, knowing that if he could just get her started, the flames of passion they had once shared would be rekindled. He pawed at her, drawing her close, but she felt only revulsion and fought, freeing herself by shoving forcefully against him. "Get your hands off me, you worm!" she commanded. "What? Can't you behave yourself unless your Mommy's here to keep you in line?"

She was right: Sylvia had left. But he wasn't the same man since: he'd been thinking and he had a plan. Soon he'd be independently wealthy and never again have to listen to Sylvia's shit and he certainly wasn't going to tolerate backtalk from his woman! With a nasty-ass mouth like that, she was the one that needed to be kept in line. He backhanded her a good one across the mouth. Instantly, she converted into a fury, windmilling at him with her balled fists. Mike took her blazing cheeks as a sign of arousal and slapped her again, certain that that would get the blood flowing and titillate her to new heights. He'd known she liked it rough, but they'd never gone this far before. It felt good. At last, he was in control of his own destiny, like a real man, keeping his woman in her place. Caroline screeched and punched him in the pit of his stomach. All right! The redhead passions were really fired up! He grabbed a wad of that hair and twisted hard to draw her body across his leg, then pulled down till her head was on the floor. He mounted her then and slapped again, two quick ones across the face, once each direction. A trickle of blood trailed from the corner of her mouth. He grinned and bent over to lick at the blood, but she head butted his nose so hard that searing waves overwhelmed his awareness.

His focus on pain created opportunity for Caroline. As he cupped his nose with his hands, she threw her weight against him, upsetting his balance atop her. By rolling out from under, she gained freedom and sprang instantly to her feet to kick him in the groin, and again in the face. He moaned, transferring his protecting hand from nose to his crotch, and lowered to the floor in a fetal position. Caroline wasn't stopping: she jumped, landing so the heel of her shoe struck a sound blow to the side of his head. Its force jolted him to put up a defense: he grabbed her ankle, twisted it, threw her again to the

ground and remounted. With his weight bearing down through his knees onto her arms, he towered above, smiling wickedly as she thrashed futilely.

“Now I gotcha!” He ran his fingers as a comb to unsnarl his beard and hair. With a twinkling glint in his eye, he unhooked his pants and let them drop onto her then ripped his underwear open at the fly. “Now, kiss it, Caroline; you’ve hurt it,” he taunted, lifting her head by the hair to his penis cupped in his other hand. She wrenched her face to the side and spit up towards his face.

No fucking broad was going to spit at him! He looked down into her eyes and read nothing but haughty contempt and rage without bounds. Any desire he may have had dissipated and she became to him all of womanhood: bitchy, holier-than-thou cunts every one of them, just like Sylvia. He laughed twice through a sneering grimace, the sound coming from deep within his throat while wiping spit from the corners of his mouth into his beard with the back of his hand. He grabbed her blouse and pulled it with such ferocity that the front panels tore free from the rest, then to quiet her protestation, punched her in the face with a closed fist. She kicked, screamed, and bit, to prevent it, but he managed to grasp her bra-front regardless, his fingernails gouging bleeding lines into her skin. He struggled to rip it from her body, pulling it this way and that, but the fabric refused to give.

It was the bite that did it. In his struggles with her bra, his forearm had gotten close enough for her to sink her teeth deeply into the flesh. He howled and sprang to his feet holding the arm with one hand and the waist of his pants with the other wounded arm. Caroline dashed from the room, screaming obscenities, only to return moments later with carving knives clutched in either fist. “Get out! Get out! Get out of my house,” she shouted, slashing the air next to his face with the knives.

Mike stopped abruptly as he was turning around in the driveway and leaned from his window. “Fuck you, `ya stuck-up cunt!” he yelled.

“I’m going to get you for this!” she screamed from her front yard. “Oh, you’re going to pay! Just wait till I’m finished with you!” His tires threw gravel against the house and the car sped from the driveway.

* * *

Caroline meant exactly what she said about getting even with Mike. Standing in her driveway shaking with emotion, her mind began formulating plans of vengeance. Unfortunately, her revenge was going to have to be carried out without the expert advice of Sylvia. She was out of the country and, after all, Mike was her son. Caroline took her time, considering dozens of schemes searching for the most wicked, before deciding to inform on him for drug trafficking. It seemed obvious that it had continued without interruption: Mike was still buying horses, the whole valley knew that, and considering their rowdy nights in San José, his cohorts were still arriving with cash. She’d bend the truth a little bit and paint Mike as the head of the ring instead of just an errand-boy for ‘the wop’ – whoever that was. With the decision made, she knew exactly to whom she was going with the information: that nose-y little Indian who was forever pestering Mike and snooping around all over the place, Officer Edgar Vargas, Mike’s number one enemy. There was no doubt in her mind that the little Indian cop would love anything he could use against Mike. There were gallons of bad blood between those two. If there was any cop at all who would pursue Mike with unswerving relentlessness, it was Edgar and that was just what the situation needed. She enjoyed the sense of harmony to her plan: the intolerably annoying Officer Vargas used to bring down the intolerably loathsome Mike Henderson – perfect casting for the roles she was going to thrust them into. She wouldn’t even need to go out of her way: the cop was a regular annoyance in Club Hollywood. It’d be easy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Prison? Forget it; I’m not going!”

Gordon Edward’s plan was simple and easy to accomplish: he couldn’t understand the reluctance. He obviously didn’t fully appreciate Truman’s dreadful fear of prison. It mattered not that Gordon asked that he go only for visiting hours, the thought still gave him an ominous feeling. Truman looked through the glass wall behind Gordon’s desk at the freedom the seagulls enjoyed, riding air currents above the harbor. “Send Leon,” he suggested, “he’s the one that caused the whole problem.”

Gordon had also been staring at the harbor, his hands clasped behind his back. He spun quickly to face him. “Leon’s out of the business,” he answered brusquely. “I’ve fixed him up with a little used car importing business. No, I’m sending you because while you’re there with this Mr. Brian Walston, you’re going to look around for the truck driver that was arrested with that load of Tweety-Bird cocaine down at Paso Canoas. You must remember him; don’t you?”

What was Gordon getting at now? Of course, he remembered. His brow furrowed as he nodded.

“Well, he’s still in there. It’s important to talk to him now, while we can get in discretely as Walston’s visitor, and since you were so concerned I might send a couple of thugs in to see to him; that means you’re the man for the job.”

Truman examined his fingernails with meticulous care, picking away a bit of dirt here and there and pushing back the cuticles with his thumbnail. Gordon had appeared expectantly pleased, laying out the plan he had devised for Truman. He seemed convinced that it would lead to the information needed to capture those responsible for the cocaine plugging Limon Province, just in time to create a sensation in the press: R. Gordon Edward and his Port Authority Police Department portrayed as heroes, accomplishing what the entire federal government couldn’t, and ensuring his landslide victory. Truman didn’t find the story quite so inspirational. When Gordon explained what Leon’s crazy scheme had been, Truman’s blood ran cold: it sounded far too close to the story Herminia supposedly invented. Not only that, but the whole fiasco had driven this guy Walston to murder and come dangerously near exposing the entire operation. How could Gordy be so pleased? They were already at heightened risk because of all the American DEA agents snooping around all over the country, without Gordon’s own brother doing their job for them. Truman had been toying with the idea of retiring since meeting Beth – it was beginning to look like this was the right time. He’d mentioned the thought to Gordon and received a nasty glare in return. ‘Not yet,’ he’d said in tones that were explicit in saying that the subject was closed to discussion, ‘I’ll tell you when.’ There was a side to Gordy lately – like just then, and earlier the joy he’d shown over the murder of Leon’s co-conspirator – that worried Truman, immensely. Although he didn’t believe Gordy was involved with what had happened to her and Beth, as Herminia maintained, Truman had been doing a little checking up on Mr. Mike Henderson and recently made the shocking discovery that he was none other than the son of Gordon’s new lady friend – and that complicated matters considerably.

“I’ve been doing a little bit of checking up on this guy, Brian Walston,” Gordon announced, interrupting his thoughts at a coincidental moment. His inquiries had uncovered that Walston sold cocaine in small amounts to customers. That didn’t particularly interest him. What did, was that the reports he’d received mentioned the brand name of the coke he sold: Tweety-Bird. He wanted one simple thing: the name of his supplier. The man owed him a favor, a big one, and it was time to collect. Walston didn’t know the identity of his benefactor, but he would know he was speaking to the right person, Gordon said, if Truman told him that he represented the man who made two pieces of paper disappear, and that he was prepared to

help again: the right response could possibly get him released from prison. Truman was also to get as much information as he could concerning the current situation with the case, so Gordon could know how best to help. Truman was to ask plenty of questions but, if the girlfriend, Caroline Steepleton was there, he was to keep her from overhearing.

Gordon's excitement mounted as he explained the second part. During visiting hours, he said, the prisoners were released to the exercise yard. "You'll be amazed when you see it," he said happily. "Even children are permitted and you'll see them running all over the place like in a schoolyard. You won't even feel like you're in a prison." Truman smiled at the vision and wished he hadn't: it seemed to encourage Gordon. "You've got to take advantage of that and find that truck driver. You'll be able to talk with him without anyone being the wiser." Truman was to offer the man his freedom and a good-paying, permanent job in exchange for the name of the shipper. "We'll shut them down at both ends simultaneously," he said, slamming his fist into his palm. "We'll get Tweety-Bird's source and distributor! Victory shall be ours!"

He didn't share Gordon's excitement; nevertheless, he agreed to go and left Chauita well before dawn for the drive to Limon and his flight to San José. It was after eight when he was finished with the waiting in line, inspections and formalities to find himself, finally within in the large prison yard. Regardless that Gordon had prepared him, it was a shock to find the entire exercise yard a sea of blankets with family groups relaxing and children darting to and fro. A concession along one wall offering hot food and cold beverages was doing a brisk business and prisoners wandered through the milling throng peddling handicrafts. The guards mingling among them, he noted, were armed only with nightsticks and whistles; the only firearm present were atop the wall.

With only Beth's description of Brian Walston to guide him, Truman began searching the multitudes for a big gringo with sandy hair and, she had added, twinkly eyes. He found him ten minutes later sitting on a serape in the shade of a guard tower. An exquisitely beautiful redhead rested her head on his lap. On the blanket was an uncorked bottle of French Burgundy with crystal stemware and enough food spread before them for a dozen people. They seemed lost within one another, oblivious to their surroundings. Truman hated to disturb them. He shuffled his feet, cleared his throat, and not receiving any response, said at last: "Mr. Walston? Mr. Brian Walston?" Walston looked up, squinting into the bright sunlight. Remembering Beth's description of a sunbeam passing through the hole in his ear, Truman squatted beside their blanket.

"Who's asking?" Walston responded. A soft chuckle mingled with his words removed their rough edge.

"Mr. Walston," Truman began, quite uncomfortable with what he had to say, "I've been sent by a friend who would like to extend his helping hand once again. He said I should remind you of two pieces of paper he caused to disappear."

Walston was on his feet amazingly fast for a man of his size, upsetting the redhead and canceling the need for the remainder of the rehearsed speech. He smiled a welcoming grin that made him appear boyish for his rosy cheeks while pumping Truman's hand energetically. "Allow me to introduce my fiancée, Caroline Steepleton, Mr...? I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

The woman smiled, but it was false. Truman knew well the look that washed over people's faces at the sight of his scars: this wasn't it. The expression she wore bordered on hatred. He knew who she was, but what could this woman know about him that she should give him such a cold, penetrating stare? He let it slide. "Good morning, Miss Steepleton," he responded formally, inclining slightly his head. "Mr. Walston, if you would like to discuss how I can help you get out of this place, I will need to speak with you in private. Would you join me for a walk around the yard? Excuse us please, Miss Steepleton, I'll bring him right back, I promise." She glowered at him with a look of pure loathing as they left to pick their way through the busy yard while Truman laid out Gordon's request.

“That’s Flavio, our reigning queen,” Walston said chuckling as a prisoner with cut-off shorts and a halter-top passed, “he is going to be flower girl at our wedding.” His smile vanished as he stared long and hard at Truman. “I don’t give people up,” he said, “but I assume you’re not law enforcement, and it is true that I owe your friend an enormous debt. All right, I’ll tell you, but wherever this goes, keep my name out of it.”

Finding the truck driver later wasn’t as easy as finding Walston: his forthcoming marriage combined with his size and light complexion made him stand out in the prison population. The truck driver could be anybody. Truman had to ask various prisoners and guards before finally locating the man, sitting with a peasant woman who appeared older than the infant cradled in her arms might indicate.

* * *

“I have good news and I have bad news,” he reported when he returned to Gordon’s office.

“The good news first,” Gordon urged, shinning his politically perfect smile. He stood in his office, resting his backside against the desk, arms folded over his chest. He had a relaxed appearance, tie loosened and suit jacket hung over the back of his chair. There were few people that saw him in such informal posture.

“The good news is,” Truman began, “that Brian Walston told me where he buys his cocaine. He gets it from an OIJ narcotics officer by the name of Enrique Segovia. Walston said that this cop has been selling to him for years. He is in charge of anti-narcotics operations at the Paso Canoas border crossing. Apparently, he underreports the amount confiscated and sells the rest.”

“Enrique Segovia, huh,” Gordon said. “Yes, I think I’ve heard that name somewhere. We’ll see. That is good news, Truman, great news! Let’s hear the bad.”

“The bad news is that the truck driver doesn’t trust you and isn’t the least bit interested in your offer. He said that he already has some very good legal representation that is helping him out just fine. He seems to think that he’ll beat the case in court and doesn’t want any more trouble.”

Gordon paced the length of the office, turned and looked hard at Truman. “Damn!” he said, “I was afraid he would say something along those lines. Word has it that he’s receiving inside help in the courts, so the bastard is probably right in figuring he’ll be out soon. This is terrible: I’ve been trying to find out who it is behind him, but I can’t get anywhere. Well, at least it’ll be good to close down that cop. We’ll get a lot of yardage from it in the press, but he is just the middleman who sells to our street dealers here in Limon, not the one I’m really after. So tell me, Truman,” he said seeming to mentally switch gears, “what did this Walston guy have to say about his case? Is he crying the blues about being wrongly accused?”

“He sure is. He said that the dead guy, George Dearling was his friend. He believes that maybe Dearling’s own wife did it. She was the only other person he could think of who stood to gain anything by his death.” Truman had trouble getting that out without his voice or expression revealing that he had no difficulty at all calling to mind another person who stood to gain from Dearling’s murder. “All he wants, he said, is to be released on bail and to get the case into court as soon as possible. His lawyer has him believing that they can beat it on technicalities. He said he just wants the opportunity, but his lawyer contends that someone in the judiciary is messing with him and that’s why he’s still locked up. He asked me to be sure to mention that assumption to you and ask if you could help get whomever it is off his back, legally speaking. He seems to suspect the one causing all of his difficulties is Enrique Segovia, this same dirty cop.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

It was several hours after Truman left for San José, while Beth was changing the dressings on Herminia's face, that a forceful knock sounded at the door. With a roll of tape in one hand and gauze in the other, Beth paused to share a look of surprise with Herminia's image staring back at her in the mirror. Hotel staff never came to the room when either was in, rather they waited until they had left for the beach or breakfast. Frozen, they glanced from the door to one another – the knock repeated, louder and more demanding. “*Ya voy*,” Beth called out, going to the door and opening cautiously. There, before her, were two uniformed men and a woman. The one who spoke stood centered in the doorway while the others each pressed a palm to the door as it opened, preventing it from being closed. Their other hands, she noted, held the butt ends of holstered pistols.

“Señorita Beth Tierney?” the man asked.

“Yes, I mean, si.” That was the extent of her ability to speak. At the sight of them, she had felt herself caught in the grips of a new emotion developed during the FBI investigation at her office and which applied exclusively to police. It had nothing to do with respect for a person doing a difficult, dangerous and necessary job. It was much more closely related to stark terror and deep suspicion, although it ran deeper.

“Policia. Your passport, please,” he requested stiffly. Beth crossed to the dresser where her bag lay. All three officers followed closely, passing Herminia without so much as a glance in her direction – she could have been a piece of furniture. Beth watched herself in the mirror as her trembling hands fumbled through her bag. She needed to calm down and consider her every move. How many times had she berated herself for her naiveté in her dealings with the FBI?

With her identity confirmed, the officer doing all of the speaking, tucked her passport into his jacket, lifted her bag from the dresser and told her that she must go with them, nothing more, no explanations. They escorted her from the room with the English-speaking officer leading and the others close to her side the whole distance to the parking lot, as though they expected her to run. In the car, all of her questions were met with silence, and she was told nothing other than they were taking her to OIJ regional headquarters in Limon. “You may ask questions there.”

* * *

“Señorita Tierney, did you participate in a conspiracy to defraud the government of the United States?” the interrogating officer asked, using good English. He was calm, mannerly, and oh, so professional. He peered accusingly over the tops of his glasses, waiting for her answer. He looked to her like a kindly college professor.

The FBI told her the case was closed. Would she never be left alone about something she hadn't done? She was in a small upstairs room with concrete walls and its only windows a row of narrow openings adjacent to the ceiling along two walls. It was daylight and a few beams of sunshine found their way in, yet the lights were a necessity. A bookshelf covered an end, otherwise the room was bare of furniture, save a long table and the chairs gathered around it. Beth sat at one end, a tape recorder pushed close in front of her. Additionally a stenographer sat at the far end of the room. The others around the table were: the man in a shiny ill-fitting suit, asking the questions and three uniformed officers, one of whom she recognized. He had the loose-skin face of a basset hound and his name was Enrique something-or-another. He had been a guest at Sylvia

Henderson's party and she had also seen him at Hotel Paradise. Herminia had pointed him out and alleged that he sold cocaine. Introductions were not extended. "No," she answered, "I never did anything like that in my life!" How dare he?

"No? Is it not true that you were fired from your last employment for participating in such a fraud?" he asked. His voice rose in pitch suggestively, expressing his grave doubt as to the honesty of the awaited reply.

"If you know enough to ask that question, then you should already know that I didn't do it. I was set up." The hurt indignation of being used by Mr. Anderson in his scheme returned with a wave of grief: she had trusted him and been his most dedicated and loyal employee.

"All I know, Señorita Tierney," his voice implying accusation, "is that your federal government is continuing to investigate the incident and coincidentally, you have chosen the time of that inquiry for your travel to Costa Rica. Tell me: are you in here to avoid prosecution in the event your culpability is uncovered?"

"I told you: I have already been cleared of any involvement with that case. The federal officer in charge told me so personally! Check it out; just call the FBI and ask for Agent Fred Rogers." She surprised herself by practically barking her answer with puritanical indignation, but tears were close, and she wasn't going to let that happen. Not now!

"It's so strange, Señorita Tierney," he asserted, continuing in the same theme, looking all the while accusingly over his glasses. "The senior officer who provided us with this report completely leaves out any mention of removing you from suspicion. Let's let that go, for now."

He was being compassionate, momentarily freeing her from confronting her unquestionable guilt. Beth felt like a bull facing a matador, with the entire roomful of people watching on while this man abused and insulted her. They looked from one to another with knowing gazes at his implications, her denials only causing faint smiles and scribbled notes.

"Let's move on to something else, shall we? You were recently a guest at Hotel Paradise in San José. There is a fairly risqué atmosphere to this place, for a woman alone, wouldn't you say?"

Beth pursed her lips and nodded shortly. "Well, yes, I guess there is," she replied.

"What did your friend, George Dearling think about you staying there?"

"He never made any comment about it. All he ever said is that..."

"So, you admit that you knew George Dearling?"

The abruptness of the question startled her. She hadn't denied knowing George. "Well, I only met him briefly," she said. I..."

He'd been standing, pacing as the questions flew, but he'd suddenly stopped and leaned onto the table, both palms flat, to face her. "Briefly? Was not George Dearling your escort at a recent society dinner party?"

Her eyes flicked to the side towards the officer who had been at the same party. There was not a glimmer of acknowledgement. "Oh, that! Well, we sat together for dinner, but you see..." It was all coming out wrong, he wasn't giving her a chance to say anything.

"Oh, so you just sat together? George Dearling's wife, Rebecca Dearling has identified you as the woman her husband has been seeing during a troubled time in their marriage."

"I..."

"She says, and her story has been independently confirmed, that you and he were intimate, went on a drinking and gambling binge together, and ended up in a brothel. Would you care to tell me again exactly what was your relationship with George Dearling?"

“I had dinner at the same table as he,” she answered. “Then we played roulette in a casino, nothing more. I hardly know the man.”

“Is that so? Very well then, which casino would that have been, Señorita Tierney?”

“The casino in Hotel Paradise,” she retorted. She wanted only for him to finish. What could they hope to get from her? Nothing, yet he continued.

“Was your relationship with him sexual?”

He was tapping a pencil against his small notebook. It was held poised between each tap, ready for use should any word slip out wrongly. It was all for effect and she knew it: the tape recorder was getting every word. She was pleased with herself for that awareness. “Sexual? No, absolutely not!” she snapped. He had a way with his tone of inferring evil intent more forcefully than did his words. She looked to the other faces, for one to intervene and stop the horrid and improper insinuations. They looked blankly like curious college freshmen watching the dissection of a frog – her.

“Do you admit to visiting a house of prostitution with George Dearling?” he asked, rising slowly from his chair.

Pushing himself up with his hands on his knees, his head was inclined forward. At the word ‘prostitution’ he snapped his head up, inches from her, face to face. It was all very dramatic. It would have been comic, was it not real. He seemed then to shrug and amble away, leaving behind her answer, without regard. His body language spoke for him, saying: ‘Ho hum, another lie.’ “Yes, he took me to one, but so what? I had never seen one before and was curious to see what it looked like.”

“Oh, that’s how it was!”

What was that supposed to mean? He’d already said that he’d confirmed they were there.

“Have you been consorting with a prostitute, a known drug addict?”

Oh, so that was it: absolute proof of her lowly character! He just stood there rocking on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back and cast his gaze knowingly around the room. There was whispering at the end of the table. “Who my friends are is my own business,” she snapped.

Her anger didn’t faze him, even slightly. “The truth is that it was you who took George Dearling, a married man and the father of a young girl, to this house of prostitution, rather than as you would have us believe, ‘he took you,’ isn’t it?”

“How dare you! Who do you think you are, speaking to me like that? I had never been in one of those places in my life before that night! He took me! And none of this can be useful to you for finding his killer!” He was doing it again: rocking on his heels with knowing stares to the others. Tears began to well into her eyes. She fought to contain them.

“You assume a position of indignation Señorita Tierney, yet your close companion is a professional prostitute, and the hotel you selected while visiting San José is Hotel Paradise, a hotel hosting prostitution, a twenty-four hour bar and a casino. I suppose you will also want us to believe that you weren’t aware that George Dearling was a married man with a young daughter? Señorita Tierney, please, we are investigating a serious crime here: murder. I need you to trust me enough to provide honest answers without regard to your pride so we, the police, can better function and capture a murderer. You may resume your position of piety in public when we are finished, if you wish, but I need the truth.”

“You are a very rude man. Yes, I knew he was married and that he had a daughter. He was very much in love with his wife and wanted desperately to win her back.”

There was a false look of trusting confidentiality on his face with a matching smile. “You do know that somebody shot him dead?” he asked, talking as a shocked personal friend might.

“Yes, I read it in the news,” she replied, waiting for the change. There had to be a good one coming.

“Hadn’t you heard about it before then? From a friend, perhaps?”

Beth looked at him without expression. His question was ridiculous. “No.” That was as much of an answer as she felt he deserved – one word.

“How long have you known Mr. Darling?” he continued.

“I just met him several weeks ago.”

“Where did you meet him?”

The man was relentless, but Beth stayed right with him trying to maintain a clear head. “Hotel Paradise,” she responded, a bit more curtly, “like I just told you.”

“Ah yes, you did. And who introduced you?”

She tensed internally. Did she want to mention Leon and open that can of worms or lie? He glared at her for an answer. “I met him at the bar,” she lied. What else could she do? She’d feared it would come to this, with questions about who introduced her to George Darling. Could it be that this crooked cop who silently stared at her and sold cocaine was involved somehow with Gordon Edward and Leon? Maybe he was there to be a silent threat to her to keep her mouth shut about such things. What might happen if she answered truthfully? What might happen if the others knew she lied? She just wanted out of there, and as soon as possible. She looked longingly at the door.

“Who killed him?”

And if she knew that, did he suppose that she would just tell him? “I don’t know.”

“Why was he killed?”

He was dizzying. She needed not to let the rapid-fire nature of his delivery affect the time she took to consider her answers. “I don’t know anything more about his killing than appeared in the news, but I thought that you had already arrested his murderer. Why don’t you ask him?” She let her voice reflect a little her feelings.

“Thank you, Señorita Tierney, we shall. Do you know another American man by the name of Gene Frazer?”

“Well yes, I do, I’ve met him.” Instantly remembering that a bystander mentioned a white-haired man running from the scene of George’s murder, she wished she’d lied about that too. She hadn’t thought any of this through. If only she had known she was going to be questioned. Perhaps there wasn’t this need to lie. She hated it; it went contrary to her every instinct. Yet... Her gaze took in the unforgiving faces, not missing the droopy one belonging to an officer who sold cocaine and had seen her with Frazer. How had she gotten into such a god-awful mess?

“Where is your friend Gene Frazer right now?”

“He isn’t my friend and I don’t know.”

“Is he in Costa Rica?”

“He could be on the moon, for all I know. I told you: I don’t know where he is.”

“Need I remind you of the need for cooperation? Now please, when is the last time you spoke with Gene Frazer?”

“Several weeks ago, but that was the only time I met him and I haven’t seen or heard of him since.”

“What is the nature of Mr. Frazer’s business?”

“He said he was retired from a career of service with the US government.”

“In what capacity did he serve his country?”

Having knowledge of the CIA or its agents wasn’t going to go over too well. “I don’t know.”

“I see,” he answered, as though her response had been pivotal. “And what is your relationship with Gene Frazer?”

“I don’t have a relationship with him. I told you I met him only once and then for only a couple of minutes.”

“I see,” he repeated, “much like your relationship with George Dearling. Gene Frazer has left his apartment. Where did he go, Señorita Tierney?”

“I thought I had made myself unmistakably clear: I know nothing about the man – nothing at all!”

“Brian Walston,” he asked abruptly, “how about him? Do you know him, too?”

They had to already know. The one at the end of the table, after all, was at the same party. “Yes I do.”

“Is your relationship with him sexual?” he asked, staring hard, directly into her eyes.

“No! This is getting tiring, officer. My relationship with Brian Walston is not sexual! I hardly know him,” she rebutted angrily. “And you listen, my sex life is none of your business, but if you absolutely have to know, I am not having sex with anybody.”

“You listen, Señorita Tierney,” the investigator commanded, fixing her with a steady stare. “Sex and sexual relationships are the motives for more violent deaths than war. You were in a house of prostitution with a married man who has been murdered. You also are acquainted with the two men we think are responsible for that murder. Moreover, I have testimony that states the murdered man was far more closely involved with you than you’re admitting. Everything about you is my business, and I intend to know it all. To continue: what is the relationship between Gene Frazer and Brian Walston?”

“They’re friends,” Beth replied, as curtly as she could muster. Somehow, the room was beginning to feel smaller. She felt closed in, hot, angry, and defensive. She breathed deeply to overcome it.

“Friends? You have just stated that you hardly know Mr. Brian Walston, or Mr. Gene Frazer, yet you now claim to know who their friends are. Previously, when I asked you about your relationship with Mr. Dearling, you stated...” He went to the stenographer and glanced to the line she indicated, “that ‘you ate dinner at the same table and gambled with him, but hardly knew him,’ yet in this very room we have an eyewitness, Officer Segovia, who knows better.” Beth’s gaze followed his pointing finger to the end of the table. The cop who supposedly sold stolen cocaine smirked in her direction. “Officer Segovia saw you on another occasion, at this society dinner as Mr. George Dearling’s date. He also observed you enmeshed in an intimate conversation with Mr. Gene Frazer, another man you ‘hardly know.’ It’s my duty to inform you about our laws, Señorita Tierney. In Costa Rica, it is a serious crime to make false statements in an official investigation. Now, once more: how do you know that Gene Frazer and Brian Walston are friends?”

“Their friendship was obvious. Brian Walston lent him his car and Gene Frazer even identified Brian Walston as his ‘good friend’ while we were talking.” Beth was surprised to see her inquisitor actually make an entry into his notepad.

“Are you familiar with the gambling machines Mr. Brian Walston maintains in his establishment, Club Hollywood?”

“Well, yes I am, I’ve played on them.”

“Who is the person he buys those machines from?”

“I don’t know anything about the sale of the machines, I hardly know how to use them.”

“What were the state of George Dearling’s finances?”

He pulled the ‘looking at you over my glasses’ thing again. Cute. Now what? Should she mention what George had said about his problems? No, but saying nothing went further than just protecting Truman: it didn’t take a genius to know that a person who was witness to such things could easily be in grave personal danger, particularly with politicians and corrupt police involved. Should one of those questioning her believe her to be able to incriminate him, things would undoubtedly go very bad for her, very bad indeed. “I don’t know anything about Mr. Dearling’s finances,” she asserted, and added for emphasis: “I hardly knew him, remember?”

“Yes, Señorita, we can see how little you were acquainted. Where did Mr. Dearling get the sixty thousand dollars he used to stop the bank from foreclosing on the mortgage of his flower farm?” he asked.

“How would I know about that?”

“How, indeed? Please answer the question.”

“He never spoke to me about money,” she answered in disgust, principally because he was asking just the things she *did* know and she hated being pushed into a corner she had to lie her way out of. Additionally, the questions and their significance to the interrogator were frightening her; all she wanted was to get out of there. “Until this moment, I didn't know he had a mortgage, a farm, or sixty thousand dollars, either.”

“You didn't? How much money do you think he had?”

“I don't know anything at all about any money he had or might have had,” she snapped.

“Our investigators are trying to locate two checks for three hundred thousand US dollars each, payable to George Dearling,” he said, folding back a page in his notebook. “What did Mr. Dearling do with those checks?”

Herminia had been right about the checks all along! Had she been right about everything? “I don't have any knowledge of the checks you're talking about,” she lied again, and begged God the questions would end. She was beginning to feel that she might vomit or faint.

“Did George Dearling speak with you about the checks or the six hundred thousand dollars he expected to receive?”

Oh, how she wished he would stop going on about those checks! “No,” she answered quickly.

“Maybe you're right,” he relented. “Maybe you don't know anything about the checks. But, what about the cash, the six hundred thousand dollars: where is that?”

“I told you, I don't know anything at all about his money or those checks.”

“Did this six hundred thousand dollars come from illegal drug sales or from money laundering?” he persisted, unwilling to move off the subject of the checks.

“I repeat, and please hear me this time: I know nothing about George Dearling's money or the checks you claim he had.”

“Did you participate with George Dearling in laundering money from illegal drug sales?” he asked, pointedly.

“No, damn it! I don't know anything about drug sales or money laundering, at all, and stop trying to suggest that I'm in any way connected with any of this. I'm not! I'm just a tourist trying to enjoy the beauty of your country.” She hoped desperately that he would move on quickly: she never was a good liar and guessed this man was a professional at spotting one.

After the first time through, they fired the same questions again. This time though, they came from every direction, first from one officer, then another, in rapid succession. She forced herself to insert pauses for thinking space and to slow it down, but the strain on her nerves was tremendous. The grilling terminated with a stern warning not to leave the country without their permission. Any attempt to do so, she was told, would result in her arrest. She was to call a number they gave her, in the event that she could supply additional information relative to the murder of George Dearling or any information at all about the checks.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

It was great to be on the road. There was a sense of freedom for having escaped everything behind, while not yet having to deal with anything ahead. For Mike, what he was free of, regardless of whether he looked ahead or back, was always the same: Sylvia! Cruising the highway, with nothing in his hair but the wind and great tunes rocking from the stereo at full volume, was just this side of perfect. He accelerated into a turn, thrilling to the feel of the car teetering at the very edge of its limits. He was alive and feeling good. No Sylvia. No bitching. No problems: *pura vida*, like the spics were always saying.

He'd had it with bitches. His whole life he'd been like a saint, restraining himself from evening up the score for all the bullshit he'd taken from Sylvia year in and year out. All he'd ever done is spend his days working like a dog for her, and never once had she shown an ounce of appreciation; all he ever got for all his labor and concern about her well-being was bitching and more bitching. Well, she was going to get hers, real fucking soon. Then along comes Caroline, a broad he really digs, and what happens? No sooner does fancy-ass Brian Walston start strutting his stuff than she fucking takes off and goes with him! Bitch! Well, he'd given her a taste of something to think about... Even the little whore that he'd invited to free party after free party and treated like a princess had stabbed him in the back, robbing his shit. Fucking self-centered cunts, every one of 'em. He'd never met one yet that was any different. But now, Sylvia had crossed the limit of his endurance with her fucking nigger boyfriend! That was the last straw! From now on, he was going to do things his way and take care of good old number one. And that nigger was going to pay! They'd see, he'd make 'em all see.

Mercifully, Sylvia was out of his hair at last, having left for New Mexico the week before. He'd had to truck another horse to Limon so's she could make bucks with her friends in Kentucky while he did all the work, as usual, but with that done, he'd spent his time at home thinking and planning. What if everything the whore said was totally true, he'd wondered, and the nigger really was moving barges full of coke? He'd been able to think of little else since he heard of it but, without Sylvia around bugging him every minute, he'd been able to formulate a plan. Initially, as he always did, his thoughts had included her, but why, he'd had to ask. If a load could be heisted and he did it on his own, he stood to make the grand-daddiest score of his entire life and at the same time, he'd be giving the nigger a fucking like he'd never forget. It was all so perfect! He would be able to say adios to Sylvia, too. Wow, what a thought! He wore a hole in the floor, pacing the patio and pondering how to know for sure if the Chiquita's story was true or just bullshit. He'd need to know a lot of other stuff too, if it was true, like when and on which barge he moved his shit. Then he'd have'ta know how many guys he'd be up against, figure out the best place to hit and the best way to go about it. It was definitely an idea worthy enough to, at least, get the information. He realized if he was gonna go for it, he would need guys he could trust with him and someone who knew about barges and how waterfronts work. He had just the guys: Patty-boy and Doug. If anybody knew his way around a waterfront, it was Patty, and if Dougie was with him, nobody would ever get the drop on 'em.

* * *

Patty was the first to emerge from the exit at the airport. As soon as he cleared the door, he plopped his bags to the floor directly in front of the doorway and began scanning the throng behind the barriers, all craning their necks for a first glimpse of whomever they waited for to come out of the arrivals gate. When he was a teenager, and about a hundred pounds

lighter, Patty-boy worked on boats that left from Boston for the rich fishing to be had out on George's Banks. Later, he did a couple'a years in the coast guard before he was thrown out for taking as a girlfriend the ten-year-old daughter of some Navy officer in Norfolk. Patty-boy understood boats, docks, and all the things about them that Mike didn't. The big man with the black beard, obstructing the busy exit, while the mob streaming from the door struggled for a way around him and his bag, was a sight to see. "Hey, hey, hey, Patty-boy! Over here, man," Mike bellowed, startling the people in the crowd around him, many of whom were already wary of the hairy, rough-looking man in their midst. He snarled into the face of a gawking man close to him, who quickly turned away.

"Yo, Mikie," Patty yelled back, stumbling with his bags. Doug wasn't far behind: he came through the door fast and ran headlong into a logjam. He collided with a woman, toppling her over Pat's fat backside as the big man bent to retrieve his suitcase. The woman hit Patty with such force, that he fell forward just as the woman tripped against his overturned bag and also went down, landing, none too graciously, on top of Pat. Mike roared with laughter, sending several people near him running protectively into the crowd.

Dougie was a real good shit: he and Mike had been friends since the old days in South Boston, even before they'd joined up with all the others. He was one of the few people in the world that Mike almost trusted. His light weight made him almost as lightning fast on his feet as he was with a knife. His skill with knives once saved Mike from the sneak assault of a beer bottle-wielding enemy, and had also earned for him the cockroach tattoo he wore proudly on his cheek: it was his badge of honor for severing the jugular of a punk whose street name had been Roach. Mike flashed him a smile amid his thoughts, watching and laughing as he worked to free Patty from the growing tangle of people and luggage. Since Mike left Boston, Doug had gotten pretty tight with Patty. He didn't see the connection 'cause they got on like a couple of old women, but it worked for them and they always covered the other guy's ass.

"I've got me a plan for the biggest heist of cocaine you've ever heard about and I wanna cut yuz in on it." Mike explained as he drove from the airport towards Puriscal: "I don't know zactly how much coke is gonna be in the shipment, but the information I got on it, says there'll be hundreds'a kilos. Would yuz be interested in getting a cut of twenty percent each, out of a load that size?"

"How many guys we gonna be up against?" Doug questioned quickly.

"Where's the coke gonna be at?" Pat asked simultaneously.

Their excitement at the prospect sounded clearly in their voices, making a direct answer unnecessary. "Easy guys, easy!" Mike soothed. "One thing at a time. If you're in, then I got a lotta homework for yuz to do so's we can have the answers. All I know so far is that once every three months a load'a cocaine comes in on a log barge to this nigger down on the coast. But this ain't no ordinary nigger: this one's a heavyweight politician who runs the whole damn Port Authority. He's in charge of the fucking coast guard, and maybe he's even got them involved. I want you two to go down to that harbor and see if you can figure it all out. You know the sort of things. Just go, watch, then come back and tell me what 'ya find out. Don't fuck with those guys or so much as let them know you're around. Then, in three months when they try again, we'll be there waiting for 'em. I can't go wit'chas 'cause I gotta stick close'ta La Hacienda so's when Sylvia calls I'll be there to tell her some bullshit to keep her happy and she'll stay away long enough for us to do what we gotta do and get our asses outta here. Also, the other guys are coming down with a load'a tuna cans and I gotta be here for that. That there's gonna be our money to buy whatever hardware and anything else we need to do this job right. So what do 'ya think? `Ya wanna go on down to the coast and check it all out?"

"Fuck yeah!" they chorused.

“I knew it! I knew I could count on you two; youze guys are the greatest! We’re all going to be rich! Hey, make sure to get your asses back up here on Thursday three weeks from now, when the guys show up. I’m gonna take ‘em out for a good time and with you two here, the three of us can be celebrating the start of our own deal without the other guys suspecting thing: it’ll make it all the more fun.”

* * *

They took a room on the waterfront and hung around bars near the coast guard installation – on the lookout for sailors with the shoulder patch worn by those who are assigned to a ship – located the agency that represented the tugboat operator, and learned that there was only one company that received hardwood logs. The former stable boy Mike sent with them as interpreter had only a limited knowledge of the Port of Limon and its tempo, from the days when he’d accompanied horses on sea voyages, but he knew someone who understood it better than anybody: the old man who had sailed with him as deck hand. He charted the movements of the planets among the stars, the hour the moon would rise and set, its phase and the level of the tide in the harbor plus or minus an inch at any given moment. Maybe he could help. They drove the single lane through the salt flats to his home on stilts among the reeds, bringing with them whiskey and beer on ice. From his front porch, the old sailor had watched every boat that came and went through the shipping channel for more than twenty years and recorded most of them. Log barges, he told them, arrived randomly throughout the year and the coast guard was just as unpredictable. However, there was something odd concerning the movement of the coast guard cutter: like any vessel of its size, it came and went on high tide – except occasionally – when the cutter got underway at dusk, regardless of the state of the tide and, more or less, at the same inopportune hour, a tug would arrive with a log barge. He could recall occasions when the tide was so low that the cutter barely slipped through the narrows, and sure enough, just after she cleared, a tug entered with a barge. He’d seen it happen more than once and wondered about the shared insanity of two captains. By checking old calendars, they found that it wasn’t ‘occasionally’ that the cutter departed and a tug entered just at dusk: it was with precision, every three months – on the tenth – most unusual in a country where nothing happens with such punctuality.

They went to the tugboat company office, but no information was given them. Files were kept in a locked cabinet in their second floor office of a building with its own night security guard. Then, at the start of the second week, they spotted two sailors with sea-going shoulder patches: Machinist Mates, third class, snipes to all who go to sea, and well known for gossiping as they crawled over pipes with an oil can in hand.

“I was in the Coast Guard, in America – see? I’ve put on a few pounds since then!” Patty said, displaying a faded and distorted USCG tattoo on his huge upper arm and laughing at how the letters had spread. Alfredo translated for the fascinated sailors and, when understanding came, they beamed and exposed their own markings. For the price of a few beers and a couple of hours of drinking, they were treated to a litany of the sailor’s exploits in addition to learning that they were members of the relief crew which would take over on the following Tuesday – the tenth!

Patty entered the office of the company that received log barges, pretending interest in the purchase of raw lumber. A young woman told him in surprisingly good English that all sales were handled through their office in San José. “But, I’m just interested in a single log, if I can just wander around your yard I’m sure I can locate one that suit my needs,” he said. “Or, perhaps better still, I can come down when a barge arrives and look them over as they’re unloaded, then go to the sales office for the paperwork.”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’m allowed to... Oh, just a minute, that’s Señor Garcia’s car. You can speak with him.” A white Mercedes Benz pulled into the executive parking slot in front of the building and a mustached man in a tailored suit wearing dark sunglasses stepped out and ran fingers through his hair.

“That’s okay, Miss,” he replied. “I think I’d be better off ordering through the sales office like you said,” and quickly departed.

“No, you’re not going in there!” Patty demanded, pulling Doug’s sleeve to restrain him when he’d been told what transpired. “What are `ya, stupid or something? You go in there, you’re gonna tip ‘em off that we’re snooping around.”

Doug jerked free his arm and spun to face him, a knife in his grip. “Keep your fucking hands off’a me,” he hissed.

Patty looked from the blade to his eyes, then smiled. “Put that thing away, before I squish ‘ya like a grape. We’ll come back tonight and copy everything we need: the place ain’t even alarmed.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Herminia was asleep when Beth returned to Cabañas Arrecifes. She stood in the doorway and watched Herminia's gentle breathing, regretting that she was far too keyed to enjoy the comfort of such placid sleep: if she tried, all she would do was toss and turn. Outside, a crescent moon lifting herself from the Caribbean beckoned with a soothing glow. She could use some soothing, she thought, leaning her back against the opened door. In the course of just one year, the career she'd studied and worked so hard for was destroyed, she'd been accused of embezzling the US government and then, when she'd thought she had left all of that behind and made a new beginning for herself in Costa Rica, it started all over. She got swept into Herminia's theft of cocaine profits then beaten and raped for it while Truman turned out to be an international drug trafficker. As if that wasn't enough, now a friend had been murdered and she found herself a suspect, not only in his murder, but also apparently of laundering drug money and who knew what else... Yes, she most definitely could use some soothing. She quietly clicked shut the door and strolled the path to the beach.

From behind, a shrill noise startled her. She turned and saw nothing in the gloom of palm shadows. Suddenly, there it was again, from above. She smirked and shook her head at the fear the sound had awakened in her, when she saw Truman in the bluish light of the moon, on his patio whistling down to her.

"Want to get drunk?" he asked. Evidently, he was well down that road already.

"Do I ever!" she whispered hoarsely, through the night. "Open up, I'm coming."

The moment his door opened and there stood Truman, greeting her with his own, original, crooked smile, she began to feel better. His hair was badly ruffled, his eyes bloodshot and his equilibrium wasn't the best, but his dimpled genuine smile radiated a warm invitation to the comfort she always found with him.

"Hi, Bef," he slurred then chuckled at his lack of verbal control. "Please forgive me if I appear a mite tipsy. Some day today, huh? I have to spend it in prison and I hear you've been hauled away by the police! Come on in here and tell me about your great escape."

"Truman, don't joke: it was horrible. They kept asking about George Dearling and I had to lie about how I met him: it was Leon who introduced us and I didn't dare mention that. Then I had to lie again about those checks and George Dearling's money problems too. This horrid detective kept saying the most terrible things, and all I could do was keep lying. And there was this corrupt police officer there, too: Mike Henderson's friend. I was so scared. Now, I'm almost a criminal. The police said that, if I try to leave the country, I'll be arrested." Her tears, which she had so valiantly withheld throughout, flowed freely, dripping over her cheek steadily as she blurted the worst of it through unrestrained sobs.

The potted palms at the patio's edge stood motionless in the still of the late-night air as they hashed over the astonishing events of the day, and Beth related the whole sordid tale of her problems with the FBI. Truman ran to the closed bar for another bottle of Flor de Caña and mixed cuba libres. They sat close, in matching wicker chairs with the softness of yellow lamplight casting a warm glow over their faces, and spoke in conspiratorial whispers while an endless selection of salsa music, blended with the static of another far-off station, played over the speakers. They reviewed the questions she had been asked, then their implications. What was really bad, Truman contended, was that any direction the police investigation went, whether it was strictly the murder, the laundering connection via the checks or drug smuggling, Beth could easily be

considered by the police to be an important witness, something she dreaded, particularly knowing that one of the investigating officers was Enrique Segovia, the cocaine-selling cop that coincidentally Truman had learned of that same day in prison.

The long period of silence, staring dumbly at one another while considering the implications, was eventually broken by Beth. “Truman, why don’t you get your nose fixed?” she asked lazily. She had found her gaze locked upon it while contemplating her situation and the question formed spontaneously. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked that. It just slipped out. I don’t want to upset you again, Truman.”

“You’re not upsetting me, Beth,” he assured her, chuckling quietly. “It’s okay to talk about my nose.”

She cocked her head then, studying first one profile then the other. She didn’t know much about it, but it seemed that it should be possible to return it close to its original form. “Well then, why don’t you go for plastic surgery,” she asked.

“Plastic surgery? For what? To look good? Gordon Edward needs to look good, not me,” he answered, running his fingertips along the furrow that crossed his nose.

She followed the motion trying to picture the nose straightened and the scars erased. Al Pacino came to mind. “Well, you should look good, if you can,” she insisted.

“What do you mean, ‘if I can?’” he asked, heartily laughing. “So you think I’m a hopeless case, do you?”

Beth giggled. In her estimation, Truman’s ruined face had more than sufficient masculine charm without any changes. He had a point.

“Maybe I don’t do anything about it, because I don’t deserve to look good,” he said, suddenly soberingly serious. “These scars on my body were put there by people fighting for something they believed in. They risked their lives and often lost. And, you know, we weren’t always playing fair, Beth. I still wonder if I was on the right side. I guess both were just as right as they were belligerently wrong if you really think about it, but the end product of the turmoil my country went through is, for me, these scars and I don’t feel I have the right to erase them.”

“Truman, Truman,” Beth lamented. “You know what? On the inside, you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever known. You do a great job of hiding it most of the time, but you are. I can’t, for the life of me, understand how this wonderful man can do what you do for a living, but in spite of my best efforts to the contrary, I’m falling in love with that part of you. I wish only that you would let it live again.

“Nicaragua was badly scarred,” she continued. “Do you think the country should be left that way, as some sort of poorly conceived war memorial? Well no, they shouldn’t and they’re not, you know that. And what about judging Nicaragua guilty for having survived the war, and accepting that guilt as permission for it to be corrupt? That’s what you’ve done to yourself by continuing after the war with the drug smuggling and not fixing your scars. The fact is, you feel guilty for surviving the war because so many others, including your own family, didn’t. Think about it Truman; it’s true.”

“I have been thinking about it, Beth, more than you can imagine, but that philosophy just won’t work. I just can’t accept myself as a victim.

“But you are. You’ve let yourself walk around since the end of the war as an emotional zombie inside, and burned and scarred on the outside. That’s how you can deal in cocaine without a thought for the people who end up using it. You stopped feeling, and just let yourself sink until you became as corrupt as the regime you hated.”

“I’m not Nicaragua, I’m me.” He paused thoughtfully, apparently considering what she had just said. “I think this is as good a time as any for you to know who I really am. I haven’t told you everything about myself. I should so it will be easier for you to understand why leaving here is your best choice. I’m afraid for you, when you say you’re falling in love

with part of me. You can't be allowing that to happen, not even with a small piece of me. Please don't do that to yourself, or me, it would only lead to more trouble. Some of what I've done is terrible, really terrible. I killed a man once, and his young son too, and dreamt about it every night since – although I didn't know that I was until just recently. The fact is, I thought I'd almost forgotten about it. I'd always wake up knowing that I'd had a nightmare, something horrible, but I couldn't remember the dream except for this dreadful scream that woke me. Fear of falling asleep and hearing it again used to keep me from going back to bed for hours. Then I met you."

Beth smiled widely at this, but her mind continued to reel with his words – *Truman had killed a boy?*

"No, really Beth, this is true. Do you remember how you once said people should, 'take their past out and look at it'?" She nodded. "Well, you and I, we talked about almost everything and in order to explain how things were, I've had to be honest with myself about stuff I'd whitewashed for the comfort of my memory. Speaking about it with you and trying with all honesty to be accurate is, I'm sure, what changed the dream. Anyhow, a short while ago, after one of my talks, running off at my mouth about the war and everything, I was wakened by the screaming, as usual, but this time I remembered: it was that boy who had been in my mind all these years, crying out for his father I had just killed. In the dream, he would come running at me with his machete and his screams became one with the blast of my gun going off. It ended with this image of the boy, outlined in sunshine, falling on me with his blade. That was the last time: I haven't had a nightmare since. Until this moment, I've never so much as mentioned to another soul what happened that day. I'd like to tell you about it, if you are up to listening."

"Whether I am or not, I think I should hear this. Go ahead."

* * *

1984: following a successful raid on the communications intercept facility near Puerto Cabezas, Truman and the three platoons he led were moving fast through the pine forest of the coastal plain near Maniwatla to escape the Sandinistas chasing them, when they ran directly into a second column closing in from the west. With his men scattered or dead, Truman found himself alone and wounded, a bullet in his chest and his right lung filling with blood. He made it to refuge in a dilapidated barn and was calling for the American helicopter on a portable radio, when a man's voice rang out in the local Indian dialect: "Put down that radio and turn around slowly!"

Truman turned to find that he was looking directly, up the double barrels of an ancient shotgun, into the eyes of a Miskito Indian. "I've been shot," he groaned, indicating his blood-drenched shirt and hoping his use of the native tongue would help. "I'm calling for medical help, that's all." He staggered to his feet then sank again to his knees, the movement used to disguise slipping his right hand from the wound to the .45 automatic tucked under his shirt at his waist.

"Get up from there, you Contra filth," the man commanded, waving the barrel upwards with his words. "On your feet!"

Truman waited for the barrel to wave the second time. Rolling to the left, he pulled the gun from his waist and fired three quick rounds. He crawled to the body, exhausted and coughing up his own blood across the dying man's face. The pounding of running footsteps penetrated the fog descending over his mind a moment too late to react. The barn door burst open, throwing a beacon of sunlight across his eyes.

"Popi!" screamed a boy of approximately twelve years of age. Silhouetted in sunlight, he stood motionless in the doorway, taking in the scene of Truman lying across the body of his dying father. "Popiiii!" The scream continued as he raised his machete over his head and charged. Truman fired twice. Sheer willpower and momentum of the boy's body

brought the machete blade down on Truman, its intended target. The blade cut deep across his face slicing the bridge of his nose in half and cutting a swath below his eye.

* * *

“My God, that’s dreadful! It’s a testament to your strength that you are still alive and sane. You know that, don’t you?”

“I suppose it’s a testament to something, but whatever it is, I don’t think it’s anything positive, like strength or sanity.”

She didn’t answer, but wondered if, behind the unforeseen events that changed the direction of one’s life, there was reason and if there was, what reason could there be behind their abysmal situations? Could it be God that placed a man and a boy in a deadly face-off, and turned someone like Truman into an international criminal? “Didn’t you ever feel guilty about breaking the law?” she asked.

“I’ve always felt that the law was wrong. After all, how can a free and open society like your country’s hope to banish recreational drugs when it should be evident to anyone who thought about it, that it’s impossible. Even in prison, the most strictly controlled of societies, drugs are readily available. So, if the task of the DEA is an impossible one and every intelligent person knows it, why does the US government increase its budget and scope of authority annually? Honestly, I don’t understand it. Gordon claims it’s because the DEA has become the most effective tool for intervening in the internal affairs of other countries, aiming towards building a global empire. I don’t know about that, but I do know how remote it is that any of his cocaine will ever be intercepted.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

“I am: it won’t be found. As I see it, the US could put every second man in uniform and Gordy would still get all the cocaine he wanted into the country, no problem at all, unless of course they were willing to shut down the economy to stop him.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he ships by sea. Do you know that through one port alone – Houston, for example – as many as ten thousand shipping containers may arrive in a single day, not to mention other classes of cargo? There is such volume moving through US seaports that it can best be pictured as a wide, swift river of goods flowing into the country. Gordon’s shipments are the equivalent of a single drop of water mixed into that flow just once every three months. To check all those millions of tons of cargo sufficiently well to find it, the Customs Service would have to multiply its force by a thousand, and even so, there would be such a backlog as each container was unpacked and checked into its far reaches, machinery opened and internal voids inspected, liquid and grain cargos filtered, that commerce in Southern Texas would grind to a virtual halt. It simply can’t be done. In practice, only potentially suspect cargo (usually identified by dissatisfied snitches) receives anything more than a quick scan of its manifest. If you’re doing it right, and Gordy is, it takes only a few people to move tons of drugs – and with the profit involved, those few can easily be kept very, very content and therefore quiet. Think about it: your government spends billions of dollars in its ‘War on Drugs’ and the only visible results are that the street prices have risen higher than an equivalent amount of gold, the world’s most sinister people have rapidly become its wealthiest (easily affording sophisticated aircraft, electronics and weapons that most governments cannot) and addicts, even of moderate income, are unable to afford their habit without resorting to crime. Well done! No, it’s not violating an ill-conceived campaign by the American government that bothers me, it’s the ruined lives.”

“Truman,” she said cautiously, “you said you wanted to tell me everything.”

“I do: I think it’s best.”

She hated to do this to him, but there was no backing from it now. “Would you tell me, then what happened to your wife and children?”

“Whew! You don’t pull your punches, do you? All right; I will.”

* * *

Truman had been looking forward to the first two weeks of June 1986 for quite a while. He was going home to Lucia and his children for a well-deserved rest. There was a new young son he had never seen and, of course his two princesses. Lucia had written about a young cousin of his having earned ranking as a world-class runner. Running in the thin mountain air of Jinotega had given the lad the lungs of a champion. He was marrying Maria Angela Muñoz, a girl Truman could only picture as a tiny thing, far too young to be someone’s wife. If all went well he would be home for the wedding. A dose of the world he had left so long ago, where there were wholesome things such as sports, festivals, and family, might be just the thing to put him back in touch with the human part of himself, seemingly lost in a life that had become nothing more than never-ending danger and brutality.

It was the second of June when he jumped down from the back of a large Soviet troop transport, into the open-air market beside the highway, at the eastern outskirts of Jinotega. He watched the truck lose itself, as it bounced away towards Managua, in the thick cloud of dust and black fumes it trailed. The thought came to him that he might have lost the contents of his pockets. He felt quickly through his Sandinista corporal’s uniform to ensure that his forged Sandinista identity card and leave papers were still with him. They were; with a puff of air between pursed lips, he blew away the worry.

There were some notable changes since the Sandinistas had come to power, but the market remained the same confused bee’s nest of activity as always. He sat on a curb leaning against a stall that sold Bulgarian shoes and Russian jeans, and allowed a shoeshine boy, dressed in rags, to clean the mud from his boots while he studied the market. He found comfort in the normalcy of ox-drawn carts loaded with produce, picked coffee beans, sugar cane, and women with bundles balanced on their heads weaving their way through the crowd. The changes, however, were disturbing. The Sandinistas were poisoning the minds of the people with communist propaganda. Plastered on every available wall were posters featuring the symbolic logo of their movement: a silhouette in profile of the legendary Augusto Sandino, wearing his trademark wide brimmed cowboy hat. Elaborate full color murals depicting farm and industrial workers at their labor with AK-47’s slung over their shoulders, had been painted to cover the entire sides of buildings. At the opposite side of the square, where the rag-tag fleet of buses serving nearby mountain hamlets used to line up, were parked a long, double row of jeeps, tanks and armored personnel carriers. He found himself calculating where best to place charges, of what size and timing, to take out the maximum number. He shook his head to erase the thought: he was there for family, not war.

He made his way to his parents’ home and fell into Lucia’s arms. She cried, kissing him and running her fingers over his scars. The next three days, he hardly left the room where Lucia and the children had been living for four years with but brief visits from him. (Her parents’ estate had been overrun by an angry mob, the day after the Samosa family abandoned Managua. By sheer good luck, they escaped physical harm hiding in a cornfield while their home was ransacked and burned, eventually fleeing to Miami via the payment of many bribes. A Sandinista committee then divided the property among the families whose farms it had been for generations.) When he did emerge into the busy happy home, with the love of his

parents and grandfather embracing him, the sounds of his children in his ears and Lucia's tender warmth through the nights, it seemed a beautiful dream. He blocked the war from his mind, refusing to discuss it with anyone.

The young cousin's wedding was held on June 13, 1986, in Jinotega, at the Catholic Church of Los Angeles. Truman was across the street in the sports field behind the high school helping to erect tents, when the bells announced that the union had been blessed. Later that evening, more than one hundred-fifty people were seated at the long tables under the tents, finishing their main course, when Truman's mother leaned to him and whispered in his ear. "Look Truman, it's your cousin Raul, Hilda, and their boys. I'll bet you haven't even seen his two little boys. They always remind me of the two of you when you were youngsters." Truman stole a glance around the ample bulk of his mother to the area of the other table where she was looking. There was Raul, tilting back his chair as he had always done and his arm draped loosely across Hilda's shoulder. Two small boys beside them squirmed restlessly in their chairs. They did remind Truman of himself and Raul when they had been like brothers to each other, but what really riveted his attention was the insignia on the collar of the uniform his cousin wore and its matching shoulder patch. He was instantly livid with the arrogant bastard, sitting there like a sultan wearing the hated symbols of the Sandinistas, whose officers cowered before their Russian and East German overlords while the People lived under martial law. Jinotega's marketplace had converted to a military motor pool for communist armor, Soviet teachers taught Russian and distorted versions of history in the schools, and everywhere people scurried from door to barricaded door, avoiding patrols of soldiers. Yet, there he sat among their family wearing the gold braids of the nation's slave masters.

The next thing he knew, his mother was on her feet, pulling at his arm. His sister and aunt were quick to join her, urging him to greet his cousin. "Mommy, no," he begged, trying desperately to get them all back in their seats. Raul was sure to be well aware, that he was also known as Comandante Cobra, one of the Sandinista's most wanted Contra commanders: his uniform said he was a colonel with the *Batallón de Lucha Regular*, and the BLI's primary mission was searching out Contras. "You don't understand. No, please Mommy, let's just sit down!" It was too late. Raul had noticed the commotion, and was staring slack-jawed directly at Truman. It seemed by then everybody was in the act of 'let's get the boys together again.'

"Go on. Go on, shake your cousin's hand, Truman!" was all he could hear. As unseen hands shoved him numbly across the distance that separated them, the cousins' eyes riveted.

"You're looking well, Raul," was all Truman could think of to say when he found himself standing in front of him, his hand extended by others holding his arm.

Raul's cold stare broke into a wide grin. "Well you look like shit, cousin. What happened to your face?" he taunted, then smiled again, looking from side to side for approval.

He knew perfectly well: Comandante Cobra's military record would be common knowledge to someone in his position. Sprinkling applause grew to cheers and whistles from all sides when Raul reached up and accepted his cousin's proffered hand. Truman wasn't sure if he actually did mumble something about having been bitten by a snake he intended to kill before he was pulled away from the table, but later told himself he had. He found himself being guided towards the exit, his grandfather's arm encircling his shoulder. "Truman, now you listen to the advice of an old man. That boy, Raul, has changed: he can't be trusted, son. He'll get you arrested as sure as we're standing here. Now, you kiss your pretty wife good-bye and get out of here. I'll keep Raul busy as long as I can. May God travel with you."

The lumbering Russian MI-24/HIND helicopter fired the first of four rockets through the tent canopies at 10:53 PM, June 13, 1986. Twenty-four people including the wives and children of both Truman and Raul died immediately. For another eleven, death came slower. The explosions echoed between the mountains enclosing the valley, reverberating for almost an entire minute. The white burst of the blasts and the orange flames afterwards reaching skyward were visible for miles through the clear evening air.

Truman saw them and heard the time delayed thumps from a ridge northwest of town. He was desperate to turn back, but his companions wouldn't allow it. His presence in Jinotega following the attack could only lead to more and greater harm coming to her. He stared mutely at the flames, restrained in the arms of his men, praying that his family had survived and vowing an eternal curse on Raul's soul.

* * *

Truman had to stop: he was shaking with his tears. Beth was crying too. "What ever became of Raul? Where is he today?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. "That was the last time I ever saw him. I've heard he went to Cuba. He certainly couldn't have gone back to Jinotega. Well, I haven't gone back either, I guess I'm avoiding it too. For me, it's as though, as long as I don't ever go back and see with my own eyes, Lucia and the kids and everyone else will be right there, where I left them. If I do go, it won't be like that: they'll be dead, won't they?"

"They already are, Truman. You have to face it." She was sobbing as she stared at him wondering how he had endured so much. "What about Raul? What would you do if you ever saw him again?"

"I'd have a lot of trouble keeping myself from killing him."

"Can't you forgive him? You know the pain he must feel, Truman? It isn't just you who suffered. You have to know he couldn't have wanted that to happen."

"I don't think about what he might have wanted, or care. But, forget about that for a minute: there's one more thing I should tell you. It's something I lied about even under oath.

* * *

At a scheduled meeting with Louis Tand in the Caribbean coast town of Puerto Cabezas in February of 1987, Truman immediately recognized the man who accompanied him. The slope shoulders, cowboy hat, boots and East Texas accent were unmistakable. The only change apparent was that his straight white hair had been cut shorter so the ponytail just reached to his shoulders. He could see that John Sinclair didn't recognize him, despite Truman's brief, "we've met before: Managua 1975," during introductions.

They had come with orders to sabotage a factory by the name of La Palma located in Cucarrajil, close to Bluefields. They had intelligence reports from insiders, high altitude air surveillance pictures and night vision photos taken from outside the perimeter, showing that the factory was not what it appeared to be. The Russians were using it as a cover for heavy weapons moving inland from the port facility at El Bluff. Most of the arms went up the Rio Escondido to Rama, but others were stored at the La Palma facility.

La Palma was constructed with high ceiling warehousing on the ground level. The factory and work areas were above, on the top three floors. The 300 workers who arrived each morning had to climb two long wooden staircases that doubled back and forth up two sides of the building. Surrounding the five-acre grounds was a chain link fence ten foot high

and topped with razor ribbon. Guard towers stood at the rear corners of the property. Another protected the main entrance and nearby buildings. Flood lamps mounted on each lit the grounds at night, and a jeep with three guards made continuous rounds along the inside perimeter, then circled the cluster of buildings near the main entrance before repeating the cycle. It stopped frequently in its rounds so the two soldiers could inspect the fence for holes or anything suspicious around the buildings.

Recordings had been made of the radio chatter between the sergeant who regularly drove the jeep for night patrols and the security office at the main entrance. By voice print comparisons, a US Special Forces staff sergeant who spoke virtually identically had been located. Remarkably, he was pale, with red hair and freckles, a half Polish kid who had grown up in Spanish Harlem and whose Spanish was fluent and without a typical gringo accent. The plan called for a small squad to move in quickly when the jeep passed and cut the fence below the northwestern tower, then ambush the jeep when it returned, using silenced 9mm automatics. To cover any noise that might be heard from the tower during the attack, they planned to whistle, shout, and laugh loudly. The well-known voice of their sergeant would then hilariously suggest to those in the tower that they come down for a moment to enjoy the sight of his companion running about with his pants down, slapping his backside: he had stopped to relieve himself in the shadows below the tower and, lacking paper, had, in the dark, wiped himself with leaves covered in fire ants.

The tower and the jeep would then be theirs. Sharpshooters and spotters, including Truman and John Sinclair, would climb up to oversee the remainder of the operation. Incendiary bombs would be placed in the back of the jeep, one on each round of the jeep. They would be arranged around the buildings to produce a fire of sufficient intensity to completely destroy the stockpile estimated to be inside. There was sufficient time for the bombs to be put in place, to make good their escape, and detonate them before the first work shift began at seven in the morning.

With the exception of several delays, the operation went as planned. Truman was in the tower at 6 AM when the last bomb was tucked under the canvas in the back of the jeep. The sun had been up for close to half an hour, and shadows were disappearing from the west side of the main building where the last bomb was to be placed. He had wanted the timers set for six o'clock sharp, but with the delays, he ordered them set for 6:15, cutting dangerously close their window of escape. With everything in place, they crawled back through the hole in the fence and began to put as much distance between themselves and the factory as they could before the fireworks started. By 6:20, they still hadn't heard anything and by 6:30, Truman was frantic. If they weren't already, workers would soon be pouring into the building. He began to hope the timers had failed. The Special Forces staff sergeant had been the one in charge of setting the timers. Truman ran this way and that to locate him, and when he did, he grabbed his jersey. "The timers: what happened?" he growled into his face, their noses close to touching.

"It's not 7:01 yet," he answered, appearing puzzled.

"7:01? 6:15 is what I said! What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about I don't take my orders from any spic. I kill spics, that's why I'm here. This is a CIA operation. John Sinclair has been in charge from the beginning. He says 7:01 – 7:01 it is. Talk to him, spic!" The butt of Truman's M-16 clipped him neatly on the left temple and he dropped like a rag doll at his feet. He grabbed the portable radio from the sergeant's waist and began screaming warnings in Spanish into it.

"Evacuate the building! Everyone out! The building is going to explode! Everyone out!"

"¿*Quien habla? ¡Identificarse!*" a scratchy voice called from the radio.

“Soy Comandante Cobra con la Fuerza de Democracia Nacional de la Provincia Atlántico del Norte (I am Comandante Cobra of the National Democratic Forces of the North Atlantic province)...” was as far as Truman got before he was knocked to the ground with a crushing blow to the back of his head.

“This is war, asshole!” the East Texas drawl sounded through the fog of pain. “See that smoke? That means there’s nobody left alive for any bleeding heart to save. It also means you’re as guilty as I of killing three hundred civilians. Congratulations, the mission was a stunning success!

“Now, if you don’t get on your feet and start running, I’m going to leave you here with a little hole in your forehead and the back of your fat head splattered across that tree behind you. What’s it going to be?”

Truman ran, leaving behind the last small fragment of his humanity. The Sandinistas couldn’t catch them, but what did catch him that day, running through the swamps towards Kouna, was a cold realization: he, Truman Herrera, wasn’t a patriot who had done horrible things for his country, things that war made necessary. He had sunk to the depths and evolved into an equal with the white haired monster splashing next to him; and yes, now an equal with Raul.

* * *

“Sorry, Beth,” Truman rasped, sucking deep breaths to regain his composure. “I don’t know why, but it was important to me that you know what I did that day, because that was the day my soul died. I stopped rationalizing away the truth, and accepted personal responsibility for that man and his son and the three hundred unarmed and innocent Nicaraguan civilians – my countrymen, people working to feed their families.

“It’s your friendship that has caused me to look honestly at the things I’ve done, kept conveniently locked away in my mind. I can never thank you enough for that. It’s because of you that I’m beginning to live again. Now there’s this woman, Herminia, for me to see every day. Can you guess what I see when I look at her? I see thousands in the United States just as bad off as her, addicted and their lives a ruin. I did that: I destroyed them all. I feel such guilt, you can’t imagine.”

“So now what, Truman? You can’t go on as you are. You have to get out of that business and try to make a life for yourself. You certainly can’t let yourself continue to transport cocaine. And that’s not all, there’s another thing you have to do,” she replied gravely.

“There is?” he asked. “What’s that? Isn’t quitting enough?”

The way he looked at her, she read such innocence in his face despite the scars that she felt a strong urge to hold him to her breast. She knew quitting was next to impossible: how could he ever hope to get away far enough from Gordon Edward? But he could face up to his past and begin to feel whole again. “No it’s definitely not, you also have to go to Jinotega,” she counseled, nodding her head, eyes locked on his. “You have to go back there and let the past be buried. It’s something you absolutely have to do.”

He fixed her with a strange, disconnected stare as though he wasn’t there with her. “I couldn’t face my family when the war ended,” he said quietly. “Not anyone, not even myself. I just left things the way they were and tried to put Jinotega out of my mind.”

“You mean your parents think that you were killed – still?”

Without a word in answer, he stood and tipped his head back to the stars.

Her mind spun, not finding anything solid for its anchor. Her whole world had been torn asunder again. They returned separately to their wicker chairs, first Truman who busied himself with a freshly prepared drink, rattling ice cubes in

his glass. The chairs remained where they had been, drawn close, yet they sipped their drinks with their eyes failing to connect and fidgeted uncomfortably. Truman could only be wrestling with thoughts of family and home, while she struggled with an uncomfortable awareness that their moment of final separation was soon to be upon them, and who (besides perhaps an occasional letter from Herminia) would there be that remained in her life? Truman was a drug trafficker, true, but would she really have chosen differently if his life had been hers to live? If only...

“Truman! Wait! Wait just a minute,” Beth whispered excitedly, her eyes popping. “I’m getting a great idea here. Listen to this. Just listen: let me see if I can get this right, it might be good. I was just thinking about how you need to go back to Jinotega. What was important to me was that I really want to be with you when you go, but there’s the damn police order that says I can’t leave the country. I was thinking about that, and about how much I don’t want to end up as a witness in a murder trial who has to lie to protect her life, or worse yet, a key figure in a colossal political corruption exposure with cocaine smuggling overtones. Running around in my head were ideas of crossing the border illegally. I thought that, if I made it to Nicaragua all right, then I’d eventually have to go to the US Embassy because my entry into Nicaragua wouldn’t show in my passport, and I wouldn’t be able to leave again.

“It occurred to me then that, when I went to the embassy, I would have to go alone because you wouldn’t want to be that close to the authorities. Then it hit me: do it! Go to the authorities! It’s the thing to do! Think about it, Truman. If you went to the US embassy with the kind of evidence you have, they would accept you into the Witness Protection Program. You’d be safe, and out of the cocaine business!” She looked hopefully at him.

“Nice try, Beth, but that’s impossible. First of all, crossing the border illegally is highly inadvisable. The border guards from both sides shoot first and ask questions later, because of paranoia left over from the war when incursions were for the purpose of sabotage or assassination. Secondly, I would never turn informer on the people I’ve worked with for so many years. I’m very close with them, and they’re not just sole individuals: they have families – hell entire communities – that rely on them.”

“Truman we’re talking about drug traffickers here.”

“You’re talking about drug traffickers because that’s a label that fits what they are to you. You don’t know them personally. I do: they’re not some class of monsters, they’re genuine people who care for their families and neighbors and want only to do good for them. I don’t need to do anything against friends like that, Beth, I can just quit.”

She felt her eyes widen in doubt.

“Oh, Gordon will blow his stack all right,” he responded to the dubious gaze, “but if I wait until after he’s won his election, he’ll get over it soon enough. You know, he’s been like a crazy man lately because of this campaign and the big to-do he’s created over this Tweety-bird cocaine in Limon, but that’s only because he truly does care about his constituency. Herminia’s belief that Gordon was responsible for what happened to you and her is beyond possibility. Do you know why he insisted that I go to the prison today – oops, yesterday?”

“Why?”

“Because, he wanted me to know that he has no intention of resorting to violence, even about something that means as much to him as looking better in the public’s eye than the federal government.”

“So, that’s it, you’re just going to quit?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m going to do.”

He spoke as though he was convinced he could just walk away from it. That seemed as unlikely to her as the saintly qualities he was telling her belonged to Gordon Edward but, if he actually could do it as easily as that, great! “Okay. When?”

“Well, I have to wait until after the elections, like I said. Then, I’ll see, when the moment is right, I’ll do it. But you – you don’t have time to wait. Any day, someone could decide that you should be put in protective custody and, just like that, your goose would be cooked. I’ll tell you what: I’ll take you to Nicaragua with *El Tiburón Limón* and, once we’re there, an immigration officer friend of mine will be only too happy to stamp your entry, and you’ll be safely on your way home.”

It was a sensible suggestion and undeniable that the sooner she left, the better, but a picture came to her mind of standing on a dock somewhere in Nicaragua and watching Truman disappear from her life and, try as she might, she couldn’t stir up positive feelings for the idea. She simply wasn’t ready for that. Truman’s cheerful smile when talking about leaving her in Nicaragua made up her mind for her: she was staying, and that was final! They reached a compromise in which Beth would remain to see Herminia through her final dental appointment, and Truman would later arrange for a cosmetic surgeon.

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Day one passed, then day two of the countdown to the date Truman would be taking Beth away – out of his life, gone. He spent them keeping up the pretense that he believed in what they were doing. He had to or, he knew, she wouldn't leave, but the effort required for his performance was taking its toll. His nerves were shot and his face muscles ached from the continuing need for smiles that were artificial from the start. How he wished life was different and he could just sweep her into his arms, hold her to him and never let go, but she had to go: he'd seen far too much of Costa Rican justice to allow her to do anything else. He'd told her that he would quit, and even went so far as to say that, when he was done with the business, he would contact her and perhaps they could meet somewhere for a reunion – but Gordon would never let him just walk away unless there was somebody who could step in and take over where he left off. There wasn't, and if he began training someone, Gordy would put a stop to it before it even got started. There would be no quitting – or visiting her later, either. When he dropped her off in Nicaragua, it would be his last time to see her, yet he dared not let her know that, or see how devastating her leaving was for him.

Day three brought reprieve in the form of an announcement by Herminia's dentist that her appointment, which they had anticipated to be her last, was rescheduled for three days hence. He was delighted when he returned from jogging on the beach with Jesus and Cecilia gave him the news, but he quickly admonished himself when the thought of the police showing up to collect Beth entered his mind. He'd have a serious conversation with her concerning facing up to what must be, as soon as he'd showered and had breakfast. She should leave immediately and he would tend to the arrangements for Herminia alone. He jogged up the stairs taking them two at a time. Under dome-shaped covers, breakfast waited for him on the patio. As was his habit, he went to the table to wash down a vitamin with an entire glass of orange juice taken in a single swallow. The juice never made it into his mouth. It poured down the front of his turtleneck, as his gaze froze on the headline of *La Nación* folded beside his plate.

TWEETY-BIRD COCAINE DOUBLE MURDER SLAIN OIJ OFFICER IMPLICATED

It was unbelievable. Everything Gordon had said about sending him to the prison because he was unwilling to resort to the use of thugs had been a blatant lie. Both the truck driver and the OIJ officer he had informed Gordon about had been assassinated. How could he now deny that it hadn't been him who ordered them executed? It was right there in the paper: 'Captain Flores of the national police stated in a press release that the OIJ was working closely with the Port Authority of Limon Police Department in its ongoing investigation of the slain Officer Enrique Segovia for cocaine trafficking in Limon Province.' There had been no ongoing Port Authority investigation of Segovia: when he mentioned the name to Gordon, he had barely recognized it! Additionally, the Port Authority Police were being publicly credited with beating the feds to the source of Limon's cocaine: exactly Gordy's stated goal and Captain Flores was Gordon's man in the OIJ, on his payroll for years. No, Gordon's name was written all over it, and he'd used Truman to accomplish the deed. Nor had he any intention of helping Walston, either. All he had been after was information for his own political gain, and to hell with everyone else: they could all rot in prison or be brutally killed for all Gordon cared.

Beth was down on the beach with her towel: he and Jesus had jogged by her only minutes before. Truman knew that the moment she set eyes on that article, she would assume he had been a willing participant. He would be seen by her as a murderer, directly responsible for the grizzly deaths of two more people. She'd never believe he'd been telling the truth with the account he'd given her of his visit with Gordon. He'd be a liar for that and for his assurances that Gordon was strictly a non-violent guy. His first instinct was to race down the stairs and grab her copy of the paper from her table in the patio before she had a chance to see it, but she had to know regardless of the consequences. He was anxious to read every word, but Beth needed to see it too, and form her own opinion. Resolutely, setting himself to the task, he picked up his paper and, passing her table, her copy as well, and set off down the beach, a stain of spilled orange juice darkening his clothes from throat to between his thighs.

"I thought you would want to see this straight away," he said, his somber tone quickly quieting Beth's teasing remarks. He said nothing else, and seated himself in the sand beside her towel to give her time to read in depth the article and wait for her dreaded reaction. She'd completed but two paragraphs when she spoke.

"There, you see? Now, are you still going to wait until after his election to quit?" She was looking at him with that determined set to her features that said she intended to have her way. There had been no hesitation: she wasn't doubting him in the slightest. She melted his heart with looks like that. Leaving her in Nicaragua could prove to be one of the most difficult things he would ever do.

* * *

It was late Friday afternoon when Truman met with Gordon Edward in his office overlooking the harbor. His secretary prepared coffee and ordered food sent up. Truman accepted the coffee in silence and waited for the door to close behind her before he spoke. He was standing, leaning with an arm elbowed on the bar, the other free for speaking. He was totally enraged with Gordon, but he knew full well that, if he hoped to get anywhere, that was not the emotion for opening a subject as explosive as quitting. He wanted to avoid an ugly scene and the words he had rehearsed a dozen times on the long drive from Chautita were the perfect approach, but standing there, they all just slipped away. He was left without a speech and unsure of how to proceed.

Gordon assumed his usual relaxed mode when around him. He draped his suit jacket over the back of his chair and came around to rest his backside against the front edge of his desk, arms folded over his chest, waiting to hear what Truman had to say.

"Gordy," he began, feeling like a wired bundle of nerves, "did you know John Sinclair is back? He showed up at my place a number of months ago, calls himself Gene Frazer. He said that's his real name and he's using it now because he's retired here, in Costa Rica. What do you make of that?"

"What is there to make of it?" Gordon questioned. "He's retired and living here, so what?"

"I just don't like it," Truman said. "Why would he look me up? Tell me, Gordy, did you know that he was here?"

"As a matter of fact, Truman," Gordon acknowledged, "I saw him when I was in San José, a couple of weeks ago."

"Just before that American man was murdered. Is that why you went to San José? To see him? Did you have some business with him?"

"Forget about him, Truman: he's out of the picture now. His being here means nothing." Gordon spread his arms, hooking the heels of his hands on the desk's edge behind him. His face grew tense, as if a dark cloud had passed over it. It was becoming apparent that a scene was unavoidable.

“Nothing? I saw on the news that the guy was killed by machine gunning,” Truman said, shifting gears. “Did you see that?”

“I thought you didn’t follow the news... Yes, I saw that. Is that why you wanted to meet? Are you suggesting that I had Sinclair kill him? Don’t be ridiculous, you already know that Brian Walston was responsible.”

“Well, that’s what everyone besides Walston is saying, all right, but it sounds to me suspiciously like Sinclair’s work, and the police are searching for someone who fits his description.

Gordon began to pace the width of the office, then stopped and, without turning to face him, asked in a snarl: “Exactly, what are you getting at, Truman?”

Truman hesitated. He didn’t want his temper to boil over and to lose control. A fistfight might feel gratifying, but wouldn’t accomplish a thing. Maybe if he approached it from a different angle. “All right, Gordy, let’s not argue. Forget that for a minute, okay? There’s more going on I don’t like, for example, DEA agents working from the US Embassy running all over the place. These guys are hard asses and they’re everywhere. As you well know, we have them here in Costa Rica now, and they’re real big time in Panama. I’m hearing about them from my people in Nicaragua and Honduras, too. You can’t buy these guys, Gordy, not unless you offer them a damn fortune.”

“Don’t you believe it, Truman,” Gordon replied. “I found a couple who like our money very much. Okay, they’re expensive, but we get good information. We even have one or two on the inside in their headquarters in the States, too. Don’t you worry about the DEA; I’ll take care of them. What bothers me more is this shit the US is trying to get Costa Rica to accept, this time about sending US military troops here. Here, in Limon supposedly to combat drug trafficking! We’ll have to wait till after the elections to see if new government actually knuckles under to political pressure and accepts the proposal. Imagine, Truman? The US army right here with authority to arrest – it’s a goddamn invasion! How would they like to have Costa Rican soldiers walking US streets, arresting their citizens inside their own borders? I’ve already prepared information sheets about the proposals, and sent one to every elected official. It’s going to be in the news later this week, too. La Nación is going to present it to the public essentially as an armed offensive. We’re hoping to stir up enough public outrage to put a stop to it before it gains any momentum.”

“I don’t like it, either,” Truman concurred. “That’s probably what is going to happen, though. You know, the moment they catch wind of what you’re doing, the Americans will threaten again to withhold aid and impose restrictions on trade, and you won’t be able to keep a vote. Come on Gordy, face it: we can’t continue to operate under those conditions.”

“Truman, you have to...”

Who was kidding whom? Avoiding the topic of the murders was wrong: it was what had brought him there. He cut Gordon short. “Gordy, we have to talk about the truck driver, you know the one I mean. The one I went to see in San Sebastian who, two days later, was iced by someone.”

Gordon resumed pacing. “Now listen here,” he said, stopping to gaze steadily at him, “I couldn’t just leave it the way it was, Truman. I needed to know who was behind this damn Tweety-Bird coke, and I thought that someone else might have better luck with him than you had. My instructions were to get him to talk, that’s all. Apparently, the guy wouldn’t and things got out of control. Forget about it: it’s just one of those things.”

“God damn it!” Truman pushed himself from the bar to meet Gordon in his pacing trail and glare directly into his eyes, only inches separating their faces. “Killing another human being has become, ‘just one of those things’ for you? What’s happened to you, Gordy? Tell me the man raped your mother, that I would understand. This? No! Damn it, I told you it would come to this ‘Oh no, not us,’ you kept saying. Shit, I won’t stand for it! The cop that was murdered is the same

one Walston told me about: I hope you're not going to try to tell me that was an accident, too. The man didn't accidentally get piano wire wrapped around his neck. I told you long ago: I will not be associated with killing. This is it. We're finished!"

"Finished? What are you getting at, Truman?"

"Just that: it's time to quit. I can't do it any more, Gordy. It's not just the killing, or even the US Army. It's me, I can't do it any more. I'm out – retired. I came here hoping you would see that it's time, and agree to retire too, but I think you've gone too far. Something happened to you along the way, and suddenly you're a person I no longer know."

"Now, just a minute! Things are finally starting to come together in a way that can be very good for Limon. The province needs me and I need the money we make to continue. Look at what I've done so far. I've built schools, brought in more jobs, got the highways repaired, and now I'm fighting the crack epidemic. You can't allow yourself to get all soft in the heart over the life of that truck driver and some corrupt cop. They're nothing, Truman. You have to see the big picture here. Do you realize the impact news reports of those killings had on public opinion? I didn't even get my hands dirty in this at all: it was taken care of by political supporters.

"I need to know who's supplying the kids in Limon, so I can cut it off. That truck driver, if he'd talked, might have supplied the information we need. He'd be alive today, and with a good job, too. He made his own choice. The cop? Don't even ask about him, Truman. That son-of-a-bitch was dirtier than a ten-foot high pile of cat shit, plus he was selling to some of the dealers right here in Limon! The world is a better place without him.

"I'm the best hope this province has for a bright future, Truman, and I'm going to make it happen. I was just a fisherman, now look at me: I'm where I was meant to be, leading the black people of Limon to equality and justice. You're needed in all of this to hold up your end of the operation, so I can go forward. No, you're not quitting on me, Truman."

"Gordy, just listen to yourself! What kind of an egotistical hypocrite have you become? You talk about cutting off the crack in Limon, and turn right around and supply it to the kids in the United States."

"You can't be serious, Truman. Do you really want me to give a rat's ass about the United States? Have you ever had a look at the US – Mexican border? They have enough fences, razor-ribbon, watch towers, attack dogs and armed Border Patrol agents deployed along there to make the Iron Curtain that divided Europe look like a playground enclosure. Three million of their citizens are locked behind bars – that's practically the entire population of Costa Rica. And they call that the 'land of the free'? How about a history book, have you never read one? I won't even ask you to concern yourself about black people; that's our problem, but shit, you're Nicaraguan. Has there ever been a period in Nicaraguan history when *las Imperialistas* haven't been happily raping your country? I know the answer: no, there hasn't, and what about Panama, Cuba, Chile, Venezuela, or Costa Rica for that matter. Where did William Walker come from, the man who wanted to make himself king of Central America? The United States, of course – where else? They've even sunk to the level of grabbing street kids from the sidewalk, so they can remove and sell their organs to keep another privileged pig alive. You're goddamn right: I'll sell cocaine to the kids in the United States. And feel good about it, too!"

"Don't try to feed me that crap," Truman snapped. "I was spoon fed that same type of logic by the Samosa government and by the United States too: 'the sad history of Nicaragua justifies these things we're telling you to do. Now, go out there kill and destroy in the name of righteousness,' they told us – and I bought it! Well, I'm not buying it this time. Not your shit, that's for sure. Kids are kids no matter where they're from. There's not even a hint of justification for what we do: it's wrong and it's bad. Admit it. At least be honest, Gordon, and admit what it's really all about – yourself. You want the money so you can be rich and powerful, and people will glorify you. As if you don't glorify yourself enough, already. I'm

not saying I'm any better, just that I've finally faced the truth. You can't justify what we're doing, no matter how you twist your logic. Let's close it down. Please, Gordy."

"Close it down? Are you serious or are you just out of your mind? You think you're quitting on me? Like hell you are!" Gordon was shouting directly in Truman's face. "You'll quit when I say you can, and not a day before! And, if you try to leave before I say you can, you'll leave all right, but you'll leave dead!"

"That's it? That's how you think now, Gordy? When someone won't do what you say, your answer is: kill. How many times have we talked about that sort of thing? It was always 'them, the bad guys in the trade', out there, killing people. We would never do that, we swore to it, remember? You had that truck driver knifed in the prison. And the cop I identified for you and was murdered the morning after the truck driver: that was you again! No, no more for me, I quit!" Truman shouted his closing sentence over his shoulder, slamming the door as he left. It wasn't closed but a moment before being torn open again.

"You just make goddamn sure you're here on Tuesday for the next load, Truman," Gordon bellowed at his back. "Go ahead, be pissed off if you want, just be here when I need you. I'm going to be checking up on you. You don't walk out on Gordon Edward, you hear me? You try it, and it will be the last thing you ever do!"

□ □ □

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Officer Edgar Vargas sat in his study feeling awful: it had been a bad week, very bad indeed. He leaned against the seat back, tipping his chair to stare at the ceiling, and blew a thoughtful jet of blue Havana cigar smoke upwards, savoring the rich flavor duplicated by no other cigars in the world, and watched it disappear through the vent. He may not have approved of or even liked Enrique Segovia, but his grizzly murder had shaken him deeply nevertheless. He'd spent hours in quiet deliberation and prayer for his soul's safe deliverance to the Lord. Fellow officers, many of whom had shunned him for years, were approaching him and, as Enrique's partner, offering him their condolences. The funny thing was, he found himself feeling a great sense of loss and gratefully accepting their sympathies, although the partnership had been a farce from day one. He wondered whose idea of a joke had been that particular assignment. He assumed it was someone's misguided attempt to bring him into the fold of corruption. If so, it had been a fool's errand: his soul wouldn't be bought for a handful of golden coins! Never had they cooperated in a single venture, with the exception of an unwritten or spoken pact of mutual non-interference. Yet, for Enrique to end up garroted with piano wire by someone in the back seat of his car was ghastly. It had to have been somebody he knew and trusted well enough to have in his car. Someone in the department would be Edgar's bet but, regardless of who the murderer was, it was undoubtedly in some way associated with his up to the ears involvement in corruption.

He blew another cloud of smoke, with anger the driving force behind the blast. The night before Enrique's murder, a man under arrest in a case Edgar had been deeply involved in was also brutally murdered. The man had good legal representation, but had still been facing almost certain conviction with prison sentence of ten to twelve years. He wasn't a professional, just an underpaid driver manipulated into smuggling cocaine across the Costa Rica - Panama border. His arrest had come as the result of a tip slipped to Edgar because the cocaine came from a new Colombian lab making inroads in its competitor's marketplace and using the distinctive image of the cartoon character Tweety-Bird as its logo. Edgar had been working closely with the man unbeknownst to his attorney, trying to strike a deal for reduced sentencing in exchange for information as to who was the supplier and where the cocaine had been loaded. As the date of his trial loomed ever closer, his loyalty to his attorney had begun to waver. Edgar had felt so close to a major success in his career that he could have almost touched it, but just then, at the point when the man's resolve began crumbling, he'd been stabbed inside San Sebastian prison. Edgar's high hopes to have been the principal figure in breaking a cocaine ring all the way to its source were, with one act of violence, dashed to bits. He slapped the desktop in frustration, wondering if it wasn't possible that the murder had been perpetrated by some racist within the department who had caught wind of what he was up to, and would find it intolerable for an Indian to succeed where Ladinos had failed. He needed to figure out his next move.

He decided that he would trespass on the homicide division's jurisdiction, and investigate the murder himself. It would have to be done without official sanction, which would never be granted him anyhow. The case would undoubtedly be taken from him and reassigned to someone intimate to the inner circle, the moment its potential magnitude was realized. He would act quickly and, should any questions arise, he ought to be able to justify himself to his superiors by explaining that the murderer's identity might yet lead him to the traffickers he sought.

CHAPTER FORTY

In the long drive from Limon to Chauita, on the empty highway paralleling Caribbean beaches, Truman agonized over planning an escape that wasn't life threatening. All he got for his efforts was confusion and despair, but it was clear that it came from fear of the dangers posed by the choices available. It was obvious from their conversation that Gordon would never consider quitting: he needed the money from drug smuggling to support his ego and he had gone so far as to allow his greed drive him to murder. Yes, he murdered the truck driver and the police officer, and, Truman realized in chilling awareness, he would willingly murder again if he felt anyone, particularly himself, stood in the way of his drug trafficking. The deeper he thought about it, the more he knew that running in the hope that he might find, somewhere, a safe haven was more than his best choice: it was his only hope. It was a fearful truth, but the only other option (continuing with Gordy) meant sinking back into the pit. His mind – for the first time in so many years – was clear, and he knew what he must do. Then, if by some miracle he survived, which he doubted, he would need to begin living honestly.

The long conversations with Beth had freed his mind from his self-built prison of guilt. There were moments when he felt so free because of her, that he wanted to shout or dance or sing. She was already at risk. Gordy had a pretty good idea of how he felt about her and, considering how he had allowed himself to change, he couldn't put it past Gordy that he would in some way harm Beth to get at him. It would work, too. He was hopelessly in love with her. He had to get her to leave now, so he'd have time to create the image that they had a falling out before he made his move, but he realized suddenly that the next load was arriving on Tuesday and it was too soon to make the story believable. What was he to do? He couldn't put Beth at risk by running out immediately, nor allow himself to deliver another load of cocaine. He could fake the delivery and throw the whole damn load in the sea! 'It's where the shit belonged anyhow,' he told himself in a momentary flash of brilliance. It would be weeks before it was discovered that something had gone wrong: Beth would be safe from Gordon's anger and himself long gone and hopefully well hidden. He realized that an important point to stress with Beth would be the need not to be seen together again, just in case the threat to keep a close eye on him was carried out. He pulled into the driveway and she was there, caught in the beam of his headlights – waiting for him.



Truman had also weighed heavily on Beth's mind. The moment was rapidly approaching when she and he would part company forever and, with the passage of every hour, the foreboding she felt for it grew. Could Truman accomplish anything in his attempt to quit, or would his temper boil over and bring all hell down upon himself, for facing Gordon Edward after he used him to commit murder? All afternoon and evening, questions and visions of the things that might go wrong had dominated her every thought. Where is he just now? What might be happening with him this very minute? Did they have a huge fight and kill each other?

His car returning safely eased at least that dark cloud of worry from her mind. He joined her in the parking lot, silencing her with a finger pressed to her lips. "We can't talk here," he whispered, fear in his eyes.

"Come to the beach," she responded, taking his hand in hers. "We'll talk there, besides there is something you have to see."

The tide was low, exposing a wide expanse of smoothed sand. Not a soul was to be seen up or down the miles-long beach. She scanned the sky. The rolling bank of clouds that often descended from the central mountains was absent. In fact, there wasn't a cloud to be seen: they could walk and talk without fear of being caught in a typically sudden deluge. Then, when he'd finished explaining what happened to create such paranoia, she'd get him to open up about his feelings. Did the idea of irreversibly separating sit as well with him as his cheery smiles seemed to indicate? If it did, she had to let him go. If it didn't – what? Yes, what then, Truman? She needed to know.

With the moon yet below the horizon, the sky was inky black. The Milky Way was aglow as a distinct, meandering band of luminous cloud flowing through the darkness of space. Seemingly pinned atop, the constellations stood out as brilliant specks. Truman knew them all. He could almost make her see them by playing a colossal game of connect the dots until the images of the Ancients became apparent. On her own, all she ever saw were stars, beautiful points of brilliance, by the million. This particular night, they seemed to have swallowed the Earth, their shimmering image reflected from a thin film of water left by the final feathering nudges of waves. Barely discernable in the immense mirror they stood upon, was the dark silhouette of palms lining the beach and opposite, the churning foam gave off an electric-green glow, generated by hundreds of thousands of luminous micro-organisms alive in the breaking waves. “Ohhh, what a beautiful night!” she sighed, breathing deeply its freshness.

In the darkness, he was reduced to little more than a shadow, but light wasn't necessary to know that, in his anxiety to speak, he was blind to the majesty of his surroundings. “Wait just a minute,” she commanded. “Before you talk about what happened, there's something I want you to do.”

“What?” His voice carried the stress of impatience.

“I want you to feel where we are.”

“Huh? I don't understand what you mean.”

“You will, I promise,” Beth hugged the length of his arm. “Now, do this,” she urged, tilting back her head and filling her lungs with night air. For a long moment she held the breath then, with a drawn-out, sigh of satisfaction, she released it. “Do exactly that,” she instructed. “Stand still, tilt back your head, inhale slowly and inhale deeply through your nose, hold it, then exhale with an loud sigh.”

“Beth, I don't think now is...”

“Come on now Truman, there's plenty of time to talk about Gordon Edward. Just do it.” She watched his shadowy figure inflate once, then face her expectantly. “You need to do it a couple more times, only relax more and let me hear your sigh at the end. There, you felt it that time,” she said, hearing his respiration become deeper and of longer duration. “It's more than just refreshing, right? There's a kind of cleansing going on.”

“Yes, I have to agree: that's a refreshing feeling,” he answered. “Gordon...”

“Wait Truman, just another minute. I want to show you some magic. Look around at how the beach is reflecting the stars. See them?”

“Oh, okay,” he said, freeing himself from her grasp to spread his arms wide and slowly rotate. “Yeah, I see what you mean. Wow, what a fabulous sensation; stars above us, below us; all around. Yes, it's great, Beth!” His dark form continued to revolve.

“Un-huh, now you're starting to see. Okay, watch this!” She spun away, across the beach, her feet slapping the wet sand. At each footfall, hundreds of luminous plankton mixed into the sand radiated a starburst, fading slowly to leave a glowing trail where she had danced. “Look Truman, I'm Tinker Bell!” she shouted, completing a wide loop around him, then

returning to hold his arm. “I was feeling really glum, worried crazy about you – then I came down here and discovered how magical it is tonight. I know the news you have will be bad but, hearing about it in this enchanted setting, I just know it’s all going to work out all right. So, go on, tell me. I get the feeling you’re not very positive about it.”

“I’m not the least bit positive,” he said and related the salient points of his meeting with Gordon. “I don’t know how or when he changed,” he continued, “but somehow, Gordy has come to accept murder as a solution to problems. ‘Just one of those things,’ is what he called it. I pleaded with him to take this opportunity and quit with me. He wouldn’t and never will. In fact, he threatened my life if I should try to. I’m afraid he leaves me with little choice: I will have to try to slip away when he least expects it and hope I can disappear well enough.”

They walked slowly as they spoke; she leaned against him, his arm rested lightly about her, and his toes kicking at the film of reflective water, creating sparkling showers. Beth glanced to him. “I was afraid of that... Have you thought about where you will go?”

“I’ve long had a refuge arranged in Bulgaria just in case, but Gordy set that up with me, so it’s out. The United States would be my best choice: because of his anti-American bias, he has very few contacts there, and my friend’s son told me last year that, should I ever need it, his cousin in New York could provide a complete new identity. It’s a big country so I’ll have a lot of options for where to live.”

“Let me help you choose a place. That way, I’ll be able to find you later. Tomorrow, we can go on-line and I’ll...”

“Tomorrow you’re leaving!” He’d stopped walking to face her. “You have to get out of here right away. Gordy knows you and I are close and, before I can leave, I have to give him the impression that our friendship ended badly and I no longer care about you. I don’t want him to come looking for you too. No, you have to get out of here right now and, from this point forward, we have to be careful not to be seen together.”

Not seen together again and tomorrow taken away from him for all time? The entire force of her will seemed to scream: ‘No!’ She loved him: yes, she loved him, undeniably, and no, she didn’t want to live without Truman. Every day of her life would be spent wondering where he was, and how, or if he was even alive, and she wouldn’t even know his name. If they were both to live through it all, she wanted them together, but how did he feel about her? “I have a better idea, Truman,” she said. “Whatever has to be done we do it together, because.... Well, because if you disappear, it’s forever: no more Truman Herrera – anywhere – and all contact with your past, cut. I don’t want you to go away from me and I don’t care what name you have, I just want to be with you – always – the remainder of my life. So, what do you think of that?”

He placed his palms behind her shoulders and pulled her inches close that he could see her, peering deeply into her eyes. He held her for a quiet moment, studying her before speaking. “Are you sure, after all the things you know I’ve done, that you want to be involved with me?” She kept her gaze latched to his, nodding assent. “You have to realize that my life isn’t going to be anything similar to how it is now, and there will always be the risk that I will be found.” He spoke slowly and sincerely, holding steady his gaze into her eyes.

“I’ve never been more sure of another thing, Truman! How do you feel about being involved with me?” She used the finger of a hand trapped between them to tap his chest for emphasis.

He glanced down to it. “I feel like this,” he said and slid her entrapped arm about his neck and gathered her in, warm against him. With his thumb lifting her chin, he tilted back her head and out-of-focus-close, breathing her air, he kissed her fully on the lips.

“Oh! I see! Like that, huh? Well, I was only curious, but I loved your demonstration. Could you show me again, please?” Her heart raced madly and her knees felt rubbery. He kissed her again, and this time the passion she returned to his

lips was equal to his own. She let herself melt into his arms, her lips to the base of his neck and her arms encircling him as he bent and lifted her from the sand. High on the beach near the palms where, below the surface, dry sand retains its heat, he lay her down.

Settling beside, her head cradled into his arm, he leaned close above her face. "I've forbidden myself to so much as think that this would ever be," he said, sighing, and looking long into her eyes. "Holding you this way is a fantasy come true, but I shouldn't allow either of us to do this. I should insist that you leave this very minute. But I can't. The truth is, I want you very much, enough even to agree to your crazy idea."

"Really, Truman: you'll take me with you?"

"I must be out of my mind to say this, but if after everything I've told you about me and all we have been through, you want to be with me, yes, of course! I love you! I love you more than you can imagine."

"Take me, then," she whispered.

"Mine? You're mine?" his voice as gentle as the lingering kiss that followed.

"Yours," she affirmed, speaking with breath alone, to be felt upon his face.

His lips parted and, with a feathery touch, traced their way across her cheek to an earlobe. "Mine?" The question was whispered between gentle pinches of the ear's edge between his lips, sending her chilling sensations from her head to toe.

"Yours, all yours," she moaned, inclining her head to offer more of herself. He kissed a slow trail from the ear to the nape of her neck. The fingers of her hand combed through his hair as she rode the passion sweeping her. His shoulder was before her; she mouthed its flesh, tasting him, as kisses traced a path to her chin.

"Mine?" he asked again, lingering in the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Yours, Truman..." Her arm slipped from his shoulder to lie limp in the sand, his hands sliding over the curves of her body. Paralyzed, her eyes opened to a myriad of stars while the fire of her very being trailed his caresses across her trembling body..

A button opened and the skin below became electrified by his kiss. "Is this mine?" he asked, drawing circles with a fingertip on the moist, exposed flesh.

"Yes," a throaty whisper answered.

Sliding his fingers, kiss and question to the next button, it opened ...

"Also yours..."

The next.

"Yes..."

"yes..."

"yes.... Ohhh... Truman." Her nipples drew into tight knots of desire. "Kiss me there, Truman!"

"Shhh, don't talk, just feel." He grazed his lips over the swell of her impassioned breasts, then drew the nipples wetly into his mouth, toying them with his tongue and drawing them deeply into his mouth. Sliding to lie fully atop her, he encircled her in his arms and began to kiss her eyelids, cheeks and lips while, against her lower belly, his penis surged with his pulse, their eyes locked. "Beth, my Beth, I love you so," he said drawing a finger across her forehead and touching the tip of his nose to hers.

She launched her face at the flesh of his neck, sucking him in with a kiss that originated from within her depths. Her breath came in pants, moist upon his neck. "And I, my Truman, love you and will for all of my life." She kissed the ragged

scar crossing his nose. He lifted himself from her and ran fleeting scrapes of his fingertips the length of her body. Chills rose to the surface of her flesh. He hooked a finger under the hem of her panties and slid it along through her pubic hair and lightly grazing the side of her labia. She lifted her hips towards him for more as the finger found the hem of the other leg and tenderly brush the other side. She literally ached for him as, with agonizing slowness, he rolled her underwear the length of her legs and tossed it aside. He entered, filling her with ecstasy, staring into her eyes as she looked back, consumed with loving fervor that required no words and promised, rather, something better. While deep into her center, he deftly nibbled at an earlobe, his breath moistening the nape of her neck. She murmured skywards words to convey a lifetime of amorous expression, but they were lost together to a sea of feelings, far from this earth, somewhere amid the stars.

* * *

“I was afraid that your meeting wouldn’t go well, and all day my thoughts were of what that might imply for you, me, and Herminia too,” Beth later said, lying naked, in their tangle of arms, physically spent, yet spiritually vibrant. “I spent a lot of time today talking with her, and I can’t just leave her here without either of us: she’ll just end up living in a box again. I concluded that, should you decide to escape from Edward, I would ask you to first provide some help for her. I would like to be able to tell her that there is at least hope for a decent life, but she needs a private treatment facility. And to have a real chance, she should have the possibility of schooling or maybe training for some sort of trade when she comes out.” With the moon peeking above the horizon there was just sufficient light to see his eyebrows rise at her suggestions, as he readied to speak, but she continued before he was able. “You promised to help,” she admonished. “Herminia’s never had a lucky break in her entire life. With an opportunity like that given to her, she’ll do well, Truman, I just know it. She has the talent and the ambition: all she needs is a chance and professional help to prepare her for it. It’s important for me that we do something for her, and I think it ought to be for you too.” With her hand to his chin, she turned his face to her and peered deeply into the darkness of his eyes while tracing a finger the length of the scar on his cheek.

“Your first concern, among all the things we have to worry about, is Herminia? You are truly amazing.”

“Yes, Truman, my first concern is for her. I love her as a sister and can’t leave her without friends or hope. She’ll kill herself with drugs unless her world changes from the way it has treated her to this point. Besides, when I suggested a drug rehab program, she refused until I said that you promised to pay for schooling or vocational training, if she would commit herself. Truman... Truman?” She searched his face for a sign. There! Victory! On his cheek, she could see the shadow of a dimple. He was smiling. She squeezed his hand.

“Go on, Beth,” he urged. “Somehow, I know there’s more to this.”

She sighed. “Well, okay. There’s another decision I made today that fits perfectly with helping Herminia: it will take a little time to make these arrangements for her and I’d like to put it to good use to see if we can find something that would send Mike Henderson to jail. He’s not getting tuna cans filled with money because he won the lottery. Let’s find the reason, get the proof and turn it over to the police.” She squeezed his hand again for emphasis.

“Beth, you don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re not professional investigators. Leave it to them: we can send them the information about the tuna cans and they’ll take it from there. But Henderson isn’t what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to get you safely to Nicaragua right away; today. There’s another shipment of cocaine arriving on Tuesday. I would have liked to be out of here before it came, but with so much to be done, it’s simply not possible. I cannot and will not participate in getting that cocaine through so, while driving back, I decided to pick it up as usual, only dump it in the sea instead of delivering it. It will then be at least two weeks before Gordy knows anything went wrong: plenty of time to

do what needs to be done and still get out of here alive, but you can't be here. You never know what's going to happen and it could get very dangerous for anyone who even knows me. And don't forget, the police could show up at any time looking for you. The time for you to leave is right now. I'll take you to Nicaragua in the morning and join you there as soon as I've taken care of everything. There's more than just Herminia's arrangements to attend to: I want to sign over the hotel to Alberto and Cecilia too, and that will take some time."

"Truman, how do you feel about me?"

"You have to ask? I love you, and I'm sure you must know that I have for months."

"If you love me, then you should want to be with me."

"I do want to be with you; more than anything, but..."

"No, stop right there: no buts. I don't think you and I should go different directions – especially now. Something could go wrong and you wouldn't be able to turn back to look for me, and I'd never be able to find you. I love you, Truman, and I want to be with you all the days of your life, even the dangerous ones. If you throw that cocaine in the ocean, I want to be right there with you. Don't you want me?"

With the back of his hand, he caressed her cheek while fixing his dark eyes upon her in a steady gaze. "Yes, of course I want you."

"Good. Then you'll understand why I'm not running out of here – not just yet, anyhow."

"Go ahead, I'm all ears."

"When I leave, I'm going with you, mister. I don't want us to separate and maybe never see each other again but, before leaving, I really want to do whatever it is we can to get Mike Henderson put away for a long, long time! Maybe we can't do anything at all but we have to at least try. You and me, together!" She glanced at him from the corners of her eyes. His amused expression left her undaunted. "Why we're going to do that," she continued, "is because I can't stand the thought of that bastard walking around free as a bird, and you know perfectly well he will too, unless someone does something and nobody else cares. I still feel his stinking beard scratching my face when he licked me, with his two friends holding me down and laughing. And the rest is even worse. I can't just walk out of here and leave him free to rape again."

"I understand completely and hate the bastard too, but there's nothing we can do other than have him beaten to within an inch of his life. That I am ready and willing to do, but you said I shouldn't harm him physically. I haven't, but I couldn't just let it drop either, so I've done some checking up on the son-of-a-bitch. Do you want to hear what I've just learned?"

"Yes, of course. What?"

"Michael T. Henderson is an aeronautical engineer with Lockheed Aircraft. He lives in California, has a wife and two children and is not, in any way, missing. You have ample enough reason to want to stay and discover what those tuna cans are all about and I share your feelings, but it's just not possible, Beth. We're simply not trained or equipped. Consider this: if he's living here under a false identity, it's very likely that he's a drug forwarder for the Mafia or some such thing. You can't fight an organization alone. Entire governments haven't been able to beat them. Trying would be suicidal, and we do want to survive to make a life for ourselves, don't we?"

She leaned her forehead to Truman's chest and squeezed back tears of frustration, her mind spinning with rage and hopelessness. It was all so unfair!

"Let me make the arrangements for Herminia," he said. "I have to remain here to transfer the hotel into Alberto and Cecilia's names and build the belief in Gordon's mind that you are out of my life, so my plan is take you to Nicaragua where

you'll be safe, and then, like I said before, we'll turn the information about the tuna cans over to any police agency you want."

"No! I told you I'm not leaving here alone, and I have to be with Herminia when she goes into a treatment center. You just finished saying that, after you throw the cocaine in the ocean, you'll have at least two weeks before Edward finds out. So, I don't have to go right away because of him; I just have to not be here if the police come back, that's all. I'll just move into a different bungalow and register under a false name, how's that?"

* * *

Scattering its gentle light in an ill-defined line across the swells, a crescent moon ascended over the Caribbean and shone from the wet skin of Truman and Beth as they swam and played, naked in the surf. Refreshed, they ran from the water into the chill, late-night air, shivering and clinging for warmth. They dried with their undergarments then slipped their outerwear over bare skin and settled again into the sand, snuggled to one another, vibrantly alive with the shared joy of liberated love.

For the hours of darkness that remained of their magical night, they planned and worried and planned again, while simultaneously exploring the uniqueness of their bond. The strange mix of danger, romance, intrigue and love filled the hours and made them slip by unnoticed. Lengthy embraces would be broken when sudden awareness of yet another potential disaster would cause one to stare into the other's eyes at arm's length. It was in such a moment as that, with realization paralyzing movement, their minds turned inward in search of answers and their jaws hanging slack, that Herminia found them.

Having awoken alone in the room, she had made her way to the beach for sunrise. Her contemplative, barefoot stroll along the shore brought her to them. A pile of wet underclothing needn't have been there for her to know of her friends' changed relationship. Delighted, she begged that they not move, and off she ran. It was Herminia's turn to provide room service on the beach.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

One hour into Officer Edgar Vargas' investigation of the truck driver's murder within the confines of San Sebastian Prison, he was so stunned with his discovery that he had trouble drawing his next breath. He had been checking the murdered man's visitor lists when the clerk, who hovered protectively over each file Edgar studied, related an unusual incident of a week earlier. A visitor who had signed in to see one Brian Walston had asked among the guards for help in locating the prisoner whose file Edgar held. At the mention of the name, Edgar turned to Walston's visitor's list for on the day in question and, understandably enough, there was the name Caroline Steepleton – and one other: Truman Herrera!

He sagged into the administrative office chair, his eyes frozen in disbelief on the log entry. Truman? Truman Herrera! Could this be the cousin of Edgar's closest friend, Raul Herrera? But *that* Truman was dead: killed in the war. Still, he found it impossible to believe that someone would actually select the name Truman Herrera as their alias when on a mission of murder because Truman was none other than the infamous Comandante Cobra and his name was as far from inconspicuous as could be. But, if this wasn't the real Truman Herrera, then who, he wondered, as he photocopied two separate 'Truman Herrera' signatures from the prison's entry and exit log book. The enigma took on a strange twist when the descriptions provided by several guards who had spoken with the man triggered memories of photos he had long before studied of the war-ravaged image of Comandante Cobra. So, it must be! A face such as the guards had seen could only be his! Raul's cousin must indeed be alive and, for unknown reasons, here in Costa Rica, visiting two men in San Sebastian prison.

He leafed through the prisoners' files, his mind swirling, trying to understand the meaning of it all, while his heart ached over knowing that bringing to Raul this news that his cousin is alive would bring into the life of the man he secretly loved, not joy for having found his long-lost cousin alive, rather heartache for what Truman appeared to be involved in.

Edgar was a barefoot boy of twelve struggling with his studies of the Spanish tongue when Raul, then in his college years, appeared in the village and began talking Edgar's People about their rights. Rents need not be paid to their landlords with their crops, Raul insisted. Those could be sold through newly formed campesino owned cooperatives, profitably enough to pay the rents in cash, purchase the next season's seed and put a little aside for emergencies. He spoke also of a nationwide campesino movement forming to protect them all from any reprisals their landowners may attempt. Edgar eagerly sought the companionship of his new personal hero who brought dignity to a People forever stooping their shoulders in deference. And oh, how Edgar admired Raul's echo-deep voice and strikingly macho, pencil-thin mustache! He prayed fervently to the Lord that he too could have such a one, but God punished his vanity and throughout life nary a hair sprouted from the skin of his upper lip. Camaraderie was born between the lad and his idol that grew steadily through the turmoil of Edgar's college years when the streets of the capital filled with protestors and riot police. In the center of the melee, defying the immense power of the Samosa regime, would be Raul, with the charisma of a Greek god and a voice to match, speaking of a new commune-ized Nicaragua built by the hands of the people: a Nicaragua where all the land would be owned by everyone, equally, a brotherhood striving for the common good without the greed of capitalistic competition. And of the cheering thousands, the most enraptured of all was Edgar.

Through the war years, he served as Raul's second in command, and they each saw to it that the other survived. Survive they did, but not untouched: Raul came away with the worst possible of all wounds; the loss of his entire family by his own hand. And now, because of this news of Truman's reappearance, Edgar would be forced to reopen that horrific hurt.

Raul had been home on leave when it all happened and uncommunicative on the subject when eventually he returned to duty. It was a pain that Edgar felt in the very air surrounding Raul, a pain that would only increase when he attempted to pursue the subject in conversation. The incident remained taboo, never discussed, as though it had never happened. They simply continued about their business of searching out Contra units, until the US discontinued its flow of arms and ammunition and the Contras, without bullets, fled, and the war was over. But, not for Raul; the memory of the rocket flashes in the night stayed with him through every moment; Edgar could see it etched onto his face, and its weight upon him expressed in lethargy. He could do nothing to alleviate the awful burden his friend endured in silence, but stay steadfastly at his side as an emotional anchor. Undoubtedly, it was that crushing guilt, endured heroically, and the fact that his beloved homeland lay in ruin around him that combined to bring about Raul's decision to leave Nicaragua forever. It grieved Edgar to see Raul go but, for him, it was right. In Nicaragua, there remained nothing for Raul but sad memories and reminders of all that had gone wrong with life.

Raul left for Cuba expecting to live the remainder of his life in a dull, but peaceful manner, enjoying the stability and unhurried pace of a worker's paradise. It was supposed to be comfortable for all; not luxurious, he knew that, but with the basic necessities provided for all. That's what he'd always believed communism to be and what he thought he had fought to establish for the people of his own country. He had, himself, delivered any number of speeches in which he offered his first-hand descriptions of the idyllic Cuban life he had witnessed on a trip to the island, and used them to urge people along in their struggle to establish a similar system in their own country. The passion with which he delivered them that made them so effective came from his personal conviction that every word was entirely true. What a crushing defeat he felt when the realities of life following the war turned out so entirely different from his dream.

He got his promised job in government, all right, but rarely was he paid, usually receiving only another elaborate excuse as to why there was no money 'this week.' He lived in poverty and desperation. People, he later claimed, who used their minds or expressed any opinion contrary to government policy, were arrested and locked away. Nevertheless, the community of foreigners in Havana was riddled with agents and organizations plotting rebellion. Although Raul didn't participate in any of these activities, he may as well have been in charge of them all, for the attention the police paid to him. His background as a Sandinista officer in Nicaragua carried no weight in Cuba. If anything, it only brought him more troubles because the secret police considered anyone with revolutionary experience to be a likely subject for the counterrevolutionaries to recruit. Informers were everywhere. Ordinary conversation carried with it the element of foreboding that a slip of the tongue could cost one's liberty.

When Fidel Castro permitted the mass exodus, thousands chose for themselves and their children an incredibly perilous voyage aboard anything that could float over continuing to live as they did. Raul left with the rest, climbing aboard a rowboat. He was one of fifteen people in a craft designed for five, yet miraculously, all fifteen made it. They spent three days on the water, skin broiling to blisters under the sun, before a US Coast Guard cutter plucked them from the sea and delivered them to a refugee center located at the US Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Shortly after Raul departed Nicaragua, Edgar too emigrated, but to Costa Rica, and was accepted into the national police department. It was years later that a message arrived from Raul stating that his emigration to Costa Rica would be approved if a sponsor and employment could be found. Would Edgar be able to help? What a question! Of course he would,

and he did. Yet even when reunited in Costa Rica, years after the tragedy of his wife and children's loss, Edgar religiously avoided mention of wartime events. He would now have to break that decade-long silence and reawaken, for this dearest of friends who had suffered so greatly, the darkest day of his life. It was unavoidable.

Walston and the dead truck driver had two important things in common and neither was good. One was murder: the truck driver was a victim of one, and Walston had been denied bail while awaiting trial for ordering the elimination of a man who purportedly dumped six hundred thousand US dollars worth of bad checks on him. The denial of bail was not a good sign for Mr. Walston, particularly in view of another intriguing aspect of the case: the murder conspiracy case the OIJ had against him was so weak that his continued incarceration seemed illogical.

With Walston's case file highly suggestive of a trafficking or laundering connection, his other common denominator with the murdered truck driver appeared to be cocaine. Yet, Edgar knew well the ways of traffickers, and Brian Walston, whom he had ample opportunities to observe, had never shown indicator one. There was another item of significance: a mystery informer. Someone, who wished to remain anonymous, had provided a considerable amount of incriminating information about Mr. Walston. Leaning against the wall of his study at home was the 'Caroline Steepleton' work board and along its bottom edge, he had long since drawn a sketch of a spider's web with three figures ensnared. The first represented a man he'd learned of through a background inquiry of Caroline with the Canadian police. Her problem with him had at first appeared to be a straightforward case of abuse at the hands of a boyfriend. But when he pieced together the elaborate betrayal of her former husband and saw the striking similarity of the situation with the boyfriend, he'd made the sketch. Michael Henderson followed soon after. And now, it was beginning to appear that a fourth victim had been snared by that web; he would have to have a little talk with Mr. Brian Walston before leaving the prison. Following that interview, he faced the extremely unpleasant task of delivering to his friend the stunning news.

Brian Walston knew Edgar well and wasn't pleased to see him in the least. He was aware of Edgar's partnership with Enrique and, apparently because of that, completely refused to supply any information about his visitor or anything else. "Sorry, Vargas," he said. "I have nothing to say. You have your agenda and I have mine, and helping hard-ass cops isn't part of it." He insisted that his visitors were none of Edgar's business, period. As far as the two recent murders were concerned, Walston couldn't be happier. Enrique Segovia, he claimed, was one of the persons responsible for the court's refusal to hear his request for bail: a little fine-tuning with piano wire was exactly what he needed. Edgar's suggestion that perhaps his girlfriend, Caroline, was more to blame for his problems than Enrique enraged Walston, and put an end to the interview. In fact, guards had to rush over to prevent blows from being exchanged.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“Let me see that.” Raul took the paper with the photocopied signature into the light from the window, and gaped at it in wonder. He remembered being, what, nine or ten years old, and sitting with Truman at the stone table in the garden, trying out countless distinctive ways of forming their signatures they would use the remainder of their lives. And there it was before his eyes: the very same scribble Truman had settled upon, matured but, in fact, little changed from that day to this. Truman, more brother than cousin, was alive and only days before had been in San José! He could have shouted with delight!

Raul’s post with the Nicaraguan embassy was to locate war refugees living in Costa Rica, and offer them the opportunity to return home with full amnesty and the right to claim a plot in Nicaragua’s ongoing land redistribution program. Upon seeing the signatures Edgar had copied, he determined to search for and find Truman and to enlist him in the program, so he too could return with his head high. It was a moment of rapturous joy, however there sat Edgar, morose and sullen, staring at him, with fear clearly written in his eyes. Raul was well liked and had many acquaintances, but Edgar was his only true friend, yet he often failed to understand him. If he didn’t know with complete certainty that Edgar was incapable of such a thing, he would have long ago concluded that he had had an affair with his wife. Hilda had been close with Edgar and, when she and Raul’s two boys perished in the worst tragedy of his life, it seemed to affect Edgar possibly more profoundly than it did himself: any time the subject had even come close to being mentioned, he had stared at him with doe eyes welled up with tears, and quickly departed, or switched conversation to an unrelated something else. And now, since arriving from Cuba, that same evasiveness seemed to apply to any talk of the war. There were no boisterous nights sharing heroic stories with Edgar; all he would ever talk about was his police work. But that was fine, because Raul enjoyed hearing about the people he chased and the crimes they had committed – often joining him at his favorite Hotel Paradise booth for a beer and the latest stories of who did what to whom, and for how much – but Edgar’s unending stream of complaints about racism and corruption in his workplace often wore thin, leading to an early departure.

* * *

The rising sun was making dark silhouettes of the mountains to the east, and Raul didn’t want to miss sunrise, but he couldn’t greet it before freshening up with a steamy shower, a shave and preening to perfection his hair, mustache and any wayward strand about the ears or nose. Raul had inherited from his grandfather dark good looks, typical of the family, and his share of Herrera charm, which he maintained with pride, feeling dirty and uncomfortable at the first sign of stubble or rumpled clothing. With his dark hair combed back to slick and gleaming, he selected for the day a new brand of cologne, which he splashed on liberally, not for additional sex appeal, of which he had considerable, but because he liked the freshness it gave to his skin and the faint whiffs he caught from time to time throughout the day. He wrapped a thick terrycloth robe around his body and returned to the mini-balcony of his apartment, where he eased into a canvas-back chair to enjoy the changing colors of the sky. The entire night, he had been awake with memories of Truman and with the difficulties of adjustment to the apparent fact that he was alive. He had even taken trips into fantasy with whimsical thoughts of the lives they might have led, if only...

For reasons Raul would never be able to fathom, Truman had been led astray when they were at university together. He began to accept the propaganda of the murdering, ultra right, ultra corrupt, Samosa dictatorship that ruled Nicaragua with its dirty iron fist. Raul loved his cousin as no other person, and did what he could to help Truman understand the error of his ways, but that only led to argument. They reached an agreement not to discuss politics and Raul did, discreetly, what he could to protect him. But after graduation, they went their separate ways, and Truman's took him directly into the waiting arms of the American CIA.

Edgar had told him Truman was possibly involved with criminal activities again, here in Costa Rica. Raul wondered at that. Had Truman allowed himself to be led astray again? But then, who was he to talk? Hadn't he also been led along a primrose path of ideology, except in the opposite direction?

When they left home together for university, Truman was in pursuit of a business education while Raul studied biology, botany and agriculture. While still a freshman, he became active in country fairs and with programs run by Jesuit priests and farmers' cooperatives, bringing new ideas to rural areas. Additionally, the new political party, the FSLN, or Sandinistas, was doing something that had never been done with these groups. It was helping them organize on a national level, to form a united front against policies long practiced by wealthy landowners and government, which favored the rich and forced the poor from the land. Raul was quick to join the party and actively worked throughout the country, forming new groups in rural areas. He was a persuasive talker, who gave strength to the fledging Sandinista party by using his talents to convince poor campesinos their only hope of survival was through organized action in support of their rights. Isolated successes brought widespread attention and growth to the Sandinistas, primarily among the country's poor, the overwhelming majority of the population.

The Samosa government reacted quickly, responding to the demands of influential landowners and businessmen who wanted an end to the campesino's demands and strikes, and realizing the danger the Sandinistas represented if they continued to experience growth. Riot police were called out to disperse the demonstrations and, when they grew even larger, their response became harsher still. Organizers were hunted down and imprisoned. Violence became routine. On campus, the students in support of the Sandinistas protested constantly and organized a clandestine party with secret membership. They met in hiding to print posters and leaflets, organized demonstrations and hosted revolutionary speakers at passionate street rallies, defying the police while surrounded by thousands of cheering supporters fired with the passions of the truly just. Raul's grades slipped as he devoted the majority of his time to party activities.

Between his third and fourth years, he visited Cuba and East Germany. In Cuba, he toured sugar cane cooperatives owned and operated by the workers, in cooperation with the government. The American corporations, which had owned the plantations prior to Castro's revolution, taking astronomical profits to the United States while paying the workers slaves wages, were gone, ejected from the country. In the tour, headed by an official from the Ministry of Information, Raul saw how the workers received free medical care for themselves and their families. The government provided housing and saw to every need of the working class. They weren't left ignorant either. Political awareness lectures were offered to the workers regularly and, judging by the packed audiences, it looked as though they were very popular. Raul left Cuba convinced that Nicaragua too could thrive under such a political system.

In East Germany, courtesy of another Ministry of Information tour, he saw trainloads of crops that were the property of the people without any middleman involved, who previously got rich skimming the profits that rightfully belonged to the farmers. The crops, explained the government tour guide, belonged to all of the people equally and would be distributed in government stores at a fair price. He later attended a slide presentation in Berlin, offered by another political officer whose

Spanish was as good as his own. The officer knew Nicaraguan history better even than Raul or any of his companions. The Samosa government, he contended, was just the latest manifestation in a long history of United States manipulation and imperialistic exploitation of their homeland. It was thrilling to see that influential people from other countries understood so well their plight and sympathized. The young men and several women in his group returned to Nicaragua determined to bring the Sandinista party to power and drive *las Imperialistas* out. The knowledge that there existed a brotherhood of other governments overseas armed them with renewed confidence for eventual success in their struggle.

In the first six months following graduation, both he and Truman were married. Raul had met his bride, Hilda, when they were but three years old. She had matured into a beautiful woman who gave him steadfast love and supported him in his revolutionary activities. His new father-in-law was also the second commissioner of the Jinotega Sandinista Party. This was supposed to be a secret and he'd deny it if asked, but everyone knew anyhow. Raul was his right-hand man and a powerful force within the Sandinista party on his own, from his activities in Managua and the organization of new groups elsewhere. Three American graduate students from NYU, actively involved in the Sandinista Party, were guests at his wedding, making him feel important among the provincial folk of Jinotega. Americans (who weren't capitalists) were rock and roll, sunglasses, Levi's jeans, and just plain cool.

Things were heating up rapidly. There was a sense of explosiveness in the air. Raul was excited about it and anxious for the balloon to pop. Visions of Nicaragua, free of the heavy hand of dictators and imperialists, seemed as a glimpse of heaven on Earth to his young mind. One night, at the height of the pre-revolution tension, Truman revealed that he was leaving to continue his education in the United States. Raul was thrilled for him, having been deeply concerned for his safety. There were elements within the local FSLN, more vocal all the time, which advocated violent action against the family he had married into. Even if the violence didn't occur, Raul knew in his heart of hearts that the corrupt fat cats were going down. The Sandinistas, with the support of the proletariat, were marching forward to build an egalitarian new society for Nicaragua, and Truman and his bride would be safe in the United States.

For the remainder of that night, politics hadn't mattered. He could still hear the walls reverberating from the Beatle songs they sang together at full volume, while hopping from bar to bar. Several weeks later, Raul accepted a position at FSLN headquarters in Managua so that he would be where the exciting action was about to begin.

It would be twelve years before he laid eyes on Truman again, and what a tragic meeting that turned out to be! What had happened with Truman in those intervening years, he had so often asked himself, that converted him into the hateful Comandante Cobra? There had always existed such love between them that Raul had never thought that politics – or even war – could touch it. Yet, that June thirteenth on the night of his young cousin's wedding when he looked into Truman's eyes and saw there not love, but the cold fury of Comandante Cobra, he knew that to save him, he would have to have Truman arrested, if he didn't, one horrible day there would be the inevitable battle and in a hail of bullets, he would be killed. But, things had gone wrong, so terribly wrong, and in a perverted way, Comandante Cobra had his day, claiming victims from their own family.

He'd gone over the details countless times, and it always came out the same: true, the missiles had been fired from a Sandinista helicopter nevertheless, Truman was as guilty as if he had helped pushed the button. What did he think he was doing, coming to Jinotega when it was home to a full garrison of regular troops as well as a Sandinista training center? What a price to pay for one man's poor judgment: thirty-five dead and twenty-seven others forever maimed. He never doubted anything would have turned out differently had he not reported Truman's whereabouts: someone else certainly would have.

Raul fired up a cigar and, in a thin stream, blew smoke into the morning air. He was certain that he'd forgiven Truman long ago and put the blame where it belonged: squarely on the shoulders of the American CIA. But then, the world, including Raul, had presumed Truman to be killed in action; what now, that he was resurrected? Portraying himself as blameless had come easily but, would it remain that way after he located Truman and heard what he had to say? Several more thoughtful puffs soothed him. He pictured Truman and himself reunited. It seemed so impossible; yet, that *was* his signature. He *had* to find him! But how would he feel then? Would he be able to continue telling himself that he'd done the right thing, turning Truman in for arrest? At the time, and up to this very moment, it had seemed the only, and additionally – for everyone involved, including Truman, himself – the correct thing to do. It had been, hadn't it? He'd always told himself so...

* * *

It had been a simple thing to do. All anyone needed do was post a few soldiers around the sports field so that Comandante Cobra couldn't run, then walk right up to him and announce his arrest. He should have mustered a few soldiers off of the street and done it himself. But he hadn't. He'd not wanted to infringe upon the local commander's authority, especially with the arrest of a figure as notorious as Comandante Cobra. So he'd called Sandinista headquarters and insisted speaking with the commanding officer, an arrogant bastard. Raul recognized the type: Soviet trained and insecure before his Russian masters; so anxious to prove his effectiveness that the lives of Nicaraguan civilians were readily disposable. "Sorry to wake you, sir," he remembered pronouncing respectfully before identifying himself and proceeding. "I'm calling from Jinotega. Are you familiar with the location of the Catholic Church of Los Angeles?"

"Yes Colonel, I am. Is that why you've called me from my bed? Surely you can find someone else to give you directions," the contemptuous shit retorted.

Had Raul's accent not been local, but German or Russian he'd have been groveling. He'd hated him at his first words as fervently as he still did. "Please sir, I'm calling to report that the Contra, Comandante Cobra, is here in a large tent behind the high school, directly across from La Iglesia de Los Angeles. He's alone and unarmed. An easy arrest and, I suspect a fine feather in your cap, if you act quickly."

"Err, what did you say your name was Colonel?" The voice had lost its rudeness.

"This is BLI Colonel Herrera speaking, sir."

"With the BLI? Are you certain, Colonel, that this man is Comandante Cobra? I find it difficult to believe that he would just walk into Jinotega central."

"I am entirely certain. I have no difficulty recognizing Comandante Cobra, sir: unfortunately, he is my cousin. It was not more than twenty minutes ago that I saw him with my own eyes." Abruptly, the receiver on the other end was slammed into its cradle.

Raul was still sitting at the desk in the FSLN office across the street from the Hotel Rosa when the shock wave of the first explosion struck his chest. Its force pushed the breath from him in an involuntary gasp and lit the room with midday brightness. He raced to the open door and braced himself in the doorframe, as one rocket after another screamed and its reverberations pounded the air. Above that ghastly noise, his own screams were heard by nobody. Within what might have been hours or minutes, two soldiers grabbed him under the arms and dragged him from the doorway, where he'd collapsed. They pulled him through the street, to the lawn in front of the bank where the hovering helicopter waited. In quiet moments, he could still hear the sound of the blades drumming the air in cadence with the footfalls of black silhouettes running before

the flames as he was lifted, ever higher, in a slow arch towards the south and Managua, leaving behind the dead and the dying.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Edgar walked through the bar entrance of Club Hollywood, something that, in itself, can produce an uncanny feeling of stepping into another dimension. All senses are assailed. The light suddenly diminishes to a dull gloom of candles behind red glass, while dizzying and blindingly bright narrow beams play over the bodies of nude women dancing on tiny stages. While the eyes are thusly accosted, a strange scent of burning incense blended with the odor of liquor, stale beer and perfume brings one to the threshold of a sneeze. Music accosts the ears at a level of volume totally unexpected from the other side of the heavy velvet curtain drawn across the door.

Edgar had been there often enough to brace himself against the sensual onslaught, but he hadn't prepared himself for what else he saw when his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom. He had to look behind him to see if anyone was following: he couldn't believe that Caroline Steepleton would be shinning her radiant smile and making such a coy motion with her finger for his benefit. To describe her behavior towards him in the past as cold-hearted and vile would have been an understatement. Hardly a week went by without her throwing an icy remark to or about him. Yet, there she was, perched on a bar stool wearing an off-the-shoulder white dress that accented her figure, smiling and beckoning to him. He approached warily.

"Hello Edgar, you big handsome cop, you!" she said, pursing her lips to kiss the air in his direction. "I think that tonight you're finally going to buy me that drink I've been waiting for years to get."

Edgar eyed Caroline suspiciously: something mighty strange was up. He wondered, noticing the fresh scratches crossing the swell of her bosom, if the remarks he'd made to Brian Walston when he'd questioned him in the prison yard might have induced him to think that she may have made some kind of deal behind his back with his investigators. Then again, Caroline wouldn't be calling him 'a big handsome cop' if she had fought with Brian over doubts Edgar had planted in her fiancé's mind. No, it had to be something else. He suspected that she was right: he probably would have to buy the harlot a drink if he wanted to find out what was up. "Aren't you even going to give me a hint?" he asked, ignoring the kissing greeting as he climbed onto the stool beside her. He rested his elbows on the bar and leaned towards her, fixing her in his gaze. "I'd hate to buy you a drink, only to find out that you want a parking ticket fixed."

"Edgar sweetie, I know better than to ask you to fix a parking ticket. You're far too clean-cut for something as devious as that, aren't you? A man like you wouldn't dirty his hands fixing a parking ticket for a lady! No, it's nothing like that, don't worry. I have something for you that you want very much. It's a gift to show you how much I like you. I'm offering you Mike Henderson's balls on a silver platter. Now darling, I think I would enjoy a piña colada."

Edgar allowed his gaze to pass over her figure. She was beautiful and she disgusted him. She reigned over Club Hollywood like the queen of Sheba while Brian Walston, the trusting fool, sat in prison so she could be that queen. Whoever it was that said the devil wears the disguise of the most beautiful must have been well acquainted with Caroline Steepleton. She was a cokehead, he knew that, he had seen her dancing eyes announce that fact many a night. Besides evil, she was also clever: he knew that well from the victims strewn in the path of her life, and now Mike Henderson, or whatever his name, had become the latest of her lovers to be offered up upon her satanic altar. He felt extremely uncomfortable about it, but opted for a snap decision not to be overly fussy as to the source, if indeed what she had to say led to a solid case. He could at least

listen. “Bartender,” he called out, “a piña colada please and a tonic water with a twist. All right, Caroline,” he said, pulling a notebook from the pocket of his chamarra, “let’s see what you have.”

She began with a story of a party at La Hacienda when Kevin, a close associate of Mike spent several hours with her on a chaise-lounge alongside the pool. He, incorrectly, she insisted, surmised that she was privy to the fact that Mike trafficked in cocaine and he began talking about it in detail. He told how he and his friends had earlier muled Mike’s cocaine back to Boston on their person, until one of them was caught. “I’d always thought it strange,” she said, “that Mike, a man who knows nothing about horses or work, suddenly began a business of shipping horses out of the country, until Kevin practically said that Mike had switched from mules to horses, and the cocaine was being shipped up to the States with them.”

Edgar had been listening attentively, but he paused her there and jotted a series of notes, although unconvinced. “You’re saying that this man Kevin only hinted that Mike might be smuggling cocaine with these horses?”

“I know; that’s pretty weak and why I never gave it another thought until one day, when he was drunk, Mike talked about a horse dying at sea and its handler needing to dissect the digestive tract to remove something: obviously cocaine. Another time, while we were dating, he bragged that his friends bring his money back to Costa Rica packed in tuna cans.”

He considered Caroline’s information carefully. It sounded too elaborate and far to close to what he already knew and suspected to be a hoax, but horses’ stomachs and tuna cans? That was creative work. Mike? No, never. He had assumed Caroline to be the intelligence behind him. Well, perhaps she was, he thought, and informing on him was her way to eliminate him from her team – but that couldn’t be because, the moment he became aware of her treachery, Michael would give her up. Despite the airport fiasco and orders that he not harass Mike, his friends were a different matter: their suitcases had been checked upon departure and arrival, and yielded up nothing more than swimsuits, sunscreen and clothing. Whether there were also a couple of tuna cans, he couldn’t say: they wouldn’t have been looked at twice. Perhaps they had been there, perhaps not. “This all happened some time ago, while you and Michael were dating. A lot of things can change in that time.”

“That’s true,” she said, “but I know for a fact that he’s still shipping horses to the States, you can check that out with any farm around Puriscal. And his friends are still showing up with cash. You can check that out, too. I told you I was going to give him to you on a silver platter, so here it is: if you want to catch him red-handed, all you have to do is be at the airport on Thursday. His friends will be on the 12:30 PM flight carrying tuna cans filled with his drug money. He told me so himself. Oh, and by the way, Michael isn’t Michael. His real name is Shannon.”

* * *

The reservations checked out: three men booked and seated together were joining the aircraft from the Logan International connection. With Michael Henderson his target, Edgar couldn’t order a back-up team of the OIJ, but that problem could be circumvented by requesting the assistance of customs officers and airport police who reported, not to the OIJ, but to Port Authority headquarters in far-off Limon. His intention was to remain out of the picture altogether and watch from his car as the travelers were allowed to pass through customs unmolested, so their ringleader could be captured with them in his car. Edgar would simply follow. If the tuna cans were found, he would be vindicated and have the pleasure of dragging his man into headquarters on a charge that would stick, and if the cans weren’t there, no one would be the wiser that he had been involved.

It looked good, but was he fooling himself? The OIJ would like nothing better than an excuse to fire their token Native American. The truth was, he might lose either way. If it all went well, his OIJ bosses would be enraged with him for giving the arrests to the Port Authority cops and, if the suspects proved to be innocent, his name as the instigator could still

come to the attention of his supervisors with his probable dismissal from the force the result. No, either way, he would be risking everything but his faith told him it was the right thing to do.

The following morning, with his heart in his throat, Edgar watched from the confines of his car at the side of the highway, as a customs agent opened the trunk of Michael's car and began to check luggage. He wondered who was in the worse situation: he or Michael. Edgar had avoided answering the phone, but the machine hadn't and, by the time he'd left home, there were already four urgent messages for him to report to the captain's office. The police radio in his car was worse with calls going out to him repeatedly – he'd turned it off. It was down to the wire: either he bring in Michael Henderson with irrefutable charges, or he was finished as a police officer. The four suspects, standing beside the car under the watchful eye of customs agents, obviously shared his anxiety, lifting themselves onto their toes and stretching their necks for a better vantage. Bag after bag was carefully searched and its contents dumped into the trunk without apparent success. Frowns of worry among the four gave way to exchanges of confident glances as the inspecting officer dropped his arms to his sides and slowly shook his head from side to side.

That was his cue. Edgar stepped from his car and approached, smiling triumphantly at the widened eyes of the suspects, then dramatically removed from the pocket of his chamarra a can opener, twirling it jauntily. He leaned over the opened trunk and, from amid the tumble of clothing, lifted up a tin. "Well, well, what do we have here?" he sang, enjoying to the fullest the sight of the faces of self-appointed tough guys washed over with fear. "Hummm, tuna. You like tuna, don't you Michael? This must be yours. Let me open it for you."

It was beautiful, his moment! Michael, transfixed, incomprehensibly baffled that he could even be there, watched as the can opened and the edge of a folded stack of US currency fluttered in the breeze!

Edgar knew even before the arrest that he would have only a weak link connecting Michael to the tuna cans but, if he could get him alone before lawyers were called in, he felt that he could squeeze out a confession. That and fingerprint identification of him as Shannon Henderson were his only hopes. He had thought it through carefully and requested that, if hidden cash was uncovered, he have an opportunity to grill Michael in the airport security area before he was transported to OIJ headquarters. In the event that his questioning was unsuccessful, there were still the charges against Shannon in Boston to incriminate him, but the fingerprint results wouldn't confirm the identity until after he had been run through the ringer and fired. Still, it was the right thing to do and he would do it with his trust placed in God that, when Michael's identity became known, they would see their error and reinstate him.

Edgar selected the high security interrogation room for dramatic effect, not because Michael represented any grave danger. He let him sit alone in the locked room for as long as he dared, with the limited time available before the OIJ arrived. "Michael," he began, "Your case presents an interesting dilemma for me. Therefore, I've arranged for us to have this chance to talk in private. The light is on in the room on the other side of the one-way mirror so you can see that there isn't anyone over there to hear us: we're alone. There isn't another officer here to act as witness and, as you can see, there's no stenographer either. I did all that because I've devised a little plan to help us both, and I wanted to present it to you in private. You should also be aware that I haven't called your attorney yet, either.

"What we're looking at here," he started his big lie, "is a choice between two ways for me to handle this. I'll leave it up to you. I'm sure you can see that I have you cold on cocaine smuggling and money laundering. There is no way you can twist free from those charges. I've just spoken with your trusted friends, and all of them have rolled over on you. Each wants to be our star witness against you in exchange for his own freedom. I have only to consider which will make the best

courtroom appearance, that's all: you and the others will be tried. You should also be aware that I have complete information about the horses you ship to the US with cocaine in their bellies." He stopped to savor the pain registering in his face. "Oh, you needn't be so startled. I thought you would have guessed after last night that I was only trying to confirm information that is already well documented by American authorities. They have it all: even about the horse that overdosed and died at sea."

He was delighted to notice a visible shudder pass through Michael's body. Edgar had to come to grips with the fact that it would be necessary to lie, but a lie to the likes of Mr. Henderson along the road to justice was at worst a venial sin. He continued without interruption.

"My only problem right now, Michael – and why I'm talking to you privately – is just exactly what am I going to do with you. The American police, who supplied us with this information, have asked me to call the authorities at the U.S. Embassy and inform them the minute I have you in custody. They seem very eager to get their hands on you, Shannon Henderson. It appears that you are wanted for murder in Boston. It's useless to deny it: your fingerprints will soon confirm your identity. Now, if I call the embassy, they will want to press for extradition before we proceed with our case against you.

"My bosses are going to say to me: 'Edgar, maybe this case is going to be difficult to prove. It will require a lot of our time gathering the facts we're going to need in court. If we give this Shannon Henderson over to the American authorities, he'll easily do forty to fifty years; here he'll only do twelve, and then only after an expensive and lengthy investigation. Let's turn him over to the US authorities,' they'll say, 'and be done with it.'

"Personally, I would hate to see all of my hard work be wasted, but I'll let that be your choice. What it really comes down to, for you, is a question of where you want to be incarcerated: here or there. So I'll tell you what, Shannon: if you lay it all out for me in elaborate detail, I'll put off calling the embassy for several days, while I put together an airtight case against you that I can present to my bosses. With that, I'm sure they will agree to keeping you in Costa Rica where you're only looking at a quarter of the time you'd be facing in the US."

Somehow, the setting or perhaps Edgar's expert delivery impacted Michael, because it seemed his bravado dissipated with hardly a fight. Only minutes into the questioning, and already he appeared to be breaking down. His complexion had gone ashen and his hands trembled with fear. The thought of having to face up to his past apparently didn't sit well. His eyes were shiny with the early moisture of tears. Edgar loved it: he finally had Michael Henderson where he wanted him. He tightened the screws, repeating that it was either talk now before others come to intervene, or he would pick up the phone. "What's it going to be? We're running out of time; tell me now," and, just like that, he began to talk!

Naturally enough, the first thing Michael tried to do was wriggle from his predicament. He began with the offer of a trade: he'd give Edgar the goods on a crooked politician in exchange for his freedom. Let him talk, he thought; it was a pleasure how Michael was squirming. He kept on with his story, saying that he had information which could prove that a high ranking member of Costa Rica's political establishment operated a large-scale cocaine smuggling ring. Edgar's ears perked a bit, but that passed when it turned out the politician he was accusing was Gordon Edward, no less: Limon Province's saint. Michael claimed Edward paid off the police, judges, the whole works. Edgar wanted the story to be laughable; however, the more Michael talked, the more it sounded as though there may actually be something to it. A totally unexpected turn of events! Edgar was shaken: he had to step out of the room for a minute to get back into the role of 'tough interrogation officer', and think.

The accusations had actually begun to sound valid, but they weren't directed against just anybody, he was talking about Gordon Edward, mister 'anti-drug' himself! Even if they were true, the word of a man the likes of Michael Henderson wouldn't carry much weight. Nevertheless, he was intensely curious to hear the remainder of what he had to say. What position should he take? Was he willing to let Michael Henderson walk free if that meant catching a fish the size of Gordon Edward? The answer was slow in coming. He examined the potential harm to society posed by each, while struggling to set aside his personal feelings (vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, he reminded himself) and arrived at a profoundly reluctant decision: yes. It would mean bringing down society's worst: a corrupt politician and probably, with a person of such influence, a fair number of rotten officials within the OIJ too. Furthermore, he would earn for himself, and by extension, for all of his People, long overdue recognition. He was getting ahead of himself; it would undoubtedly amount to nothing.

"Okay Michael, as of yet, there are no charges filed against you. Your attorney hasn't been contacted or the US Embassy. That was done so I could offer you the choice I have been talking about, but I had no idea you were going to come up with a story such as this. The law says that I can hold you for three days before I have to file charges against you or release you. I'll tell you what: if you spell out your allegations against Edward, I'll use the three days to see if there is anything to it. If there is, you walk out a free man. If not, we're back to where we started: to keep you from being extradited, I need a case to present to my bosses. This is how it's going to be: you sign a simple confession right now, we'll seal it in an envelope together with your fingerprint card and I'll keep it in my pocket. If your story checks out, I'll return the envelope to you unopened and you can burn it. That's my only offer, take it or leave it. If you leave it, I'll go directly to the office and call your attorney. I'll also be calling the embassy to get that ball rolling."

He held his breath waiting for the answer. Time was running out: soon Michael would be transported downtown and, once there, a reply would not yet be in regarding his fingerprints: no three days in jail, no confession and no blockbuster case! In fact, he might find himself without a job. Michael accepted! He began by giving everything Edgar had hoped for in the first place: a signed confession to smuggling cocaine. It was simple and lacked detail, but it was a confession, and Michael/Shannon's thumbprint crossed the signature and words of the text. He then began his fantastic revelations. "It all started," Michael related, "becuz of a whore. This one comes one night to La Hacienda, see? She was wit me; my guest, an' what does she do? She opens two'a the tuna cans and finds the cash. The bitch stole 'em. So what was I supoze 'ta do, but get it back? I wanted t'ask her a couple'a questions about what she knew, too. You know, to see what she knew about me, to be sure, kind'a an insurance. You know what I mean. Anyhow, I convince the bitch to talk. Then she starts in tellin' me this story about some Gordon Edward, asshole down in Limon. 'This guy,' she says, 'moves lots and lots a coke, like hundreds 'a kilos at a pop.' Now, I know this Edward guy is some kind of highfalutin politician, influential and all that. His name's all over the place. She tells me she was in the back seat of a car wit this guy's brother drivin'. Pretended she was sleeping, she says. The brother guy was talkin' to someone else, but she heard enough to wanna hear more. Anyhow, she ends up getting this asshole in bed and coaxes him to spill the beans. The guy tells her how his brother brings tons 'a coke – really, tons – in log barges up from the Panama Canal.

"Then she goes on t'say how this guy, Edward, is the same guy who's got control over the only fucking patrol boat Costa Rica has for the whole East coast. Says he brings the boat in ta'port while the barges wit the coke are moving up the coast. When the barges pull inta' Limon this guy sends the coast guard south so's the coke can go by another boat up north without a problem. Now tell me; how's some crack-addict whore gonna come up wit a story like that? Huh? I gott'a tell `ya; that broad was under some considerable pressure to talk the truth, too. `Ya get my drift?"

“Then she says the politician’s brother was up to his nuts in a plan to rob 'ol Edward out'a six hundred thousand dollars usin' forged checks printed by some gringo fuck.

“I was gonna go check it out for myself. What the fuck, `ya know? I might as well tell `ya, now. I was kind'a thinking about hitting one'a those barges. Just might earn a guy some bucks. Then I changed my mind. Got ta' thinkin' that maybe the guy's too well connected to fuck with. You know what I mean?”

The story fit the facts far too well for Edgar to brush it off. That American man, George Dearling, who had been murdered, was somehow connected to laundered drug money. Edgar remembered, very well, the references to two checks, together totaling six hundred thousand US dollars that were among the items still under investigation. So far, the police had uncovered nothing about the checks; they remained a complete mystery. That total lack of an evidence trail surrounding them would readily be explained, if it was true that they actually did come from Gordon Edward. Another thing that supported Michael's allegations was that Dearling was a computer programmer, fully capable of fitting the role of the 'gringo fuck' in Michael's story. Edgar knew also that Gordon Edward did indeed have a brother, one who was a well known high rolling fool who couldn't stay out of trouble. Accept the whole story as true, and you have a major politician in cocaine trafficking – and maybe in a conspiracy to commit murder. If there was anything to the story at all, it was a big, big case that he was extremely lucky to have fall into his lap.

Some time back, there had been a spectacular case blown wide open by the OIJ narcotics squad: Costa Rican diplomats were caught using their pouch privilege to smuggle cocaine to Europe. It was one of those feature cases that captivate worldwide attention, but prejudice and corruption had excluded him from the team assigned to the case. If, on his own, he could break open a spectacular case such as this, with an important politician the likes of Gordon Edward at its core, all the glory and recognition long deserved would be his and his People's to bask in. The corrupt power structure within the OIJ would also receive its just desserts – or it could all turn bad, and pursuing the case would put him so deeply in trouble that he would never pull himself out.

The longer he stayed around the airport, the closer he was to confronting his superiors who undoubtedly were already on their way. He gave brief consideration to awaiting their imminent arrival and greeting them with Michael's confession. He would be redeemed with the bosses, particularly when the fingerprint ID came in confirming his identity as a wanted murderer but undoubtedly, Edgar would be shuffled back to obscurity, listening to scum inform on scum, while being locked out of even those inglorious arrests. He also knew as well as he knew the sun would rise in the morning that, if there was any truth to Michael's story, official corruption would leak word to Gordon Edward, and the great man would gain political advantage when an OIJ investigation inevitably failed.

He locked Michael in the interrogation room, laid his folded chamarra over his arm, walked out on the tarmac to his car and drove off. A caravan of police cars and vans with lights blazing was entering the airport as he left. There was nothing to be gained by going home: at the highway, he turned towards Limon.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

“Bien, Oficial, a quien tenemos aqui (okay Officer, who do we have here)?”

“Este es Mr. Michael Henderson: el chofer.”

“El chofer?”

“Hey, hey, wait a minute; what’s going on? Don’t youze speak English?” Mike had been locked in the holding cell at the airport, twiddling his thumbs, with nothing but his thoughts for a long while. He’d been numb with fear and unable to think when he’d spilled his guts to Vargas, and the seesaw of emotions between terror and resignation had only gotten worse since. How was Vargas going to guarantee that none of the other cops connected him with these reports they’d been receiving from Boston? He’d cut a deal on good faith and given up an important politician, but it was beginning to look like all he’d gotten in return was a screwing. Now, what’s with this other cop all of a sudden coming in with one of the customs officers, yammering away in Spanish?

“Relax, Michael,” the new one said. “Just a few questions before we transport you and your companions downtown.” He sat at the table opposite and, from the top of a clipboard, released Mike’s driver’s license, the title to his car and his residency document to examine them. “Michael Thomas Henderson,” he said mechanically, while filling in a blank on an official-looking form. “Are you known by any other name; a nickname or an alias?”

“Uh, nope.”

“Civil status?”

“Whadda`ya mean?”

“Civil status: are you married, single, divorced or widowed?”

“I’m single.”

“Is this address: Hotel La Hacienda, carratera Tennis, Puriscal still correct?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Hey, what’s going on here? What is that paper?”

“This is a preliminary arrest report.”

A strange tingling sensation crawled through his guts. This wasn’t right. “Whoa, slow down a second!” he said. “No offense man, but why are you filling out my arrest report? Lieutenant Vargas is the guy that busted me.”

“Lieutenant Vargas is off the case. I am now the arresting officer. All right then...”

“The fuck, you are! I had a deal with Vargas and I ain’t talking wit nobody but him.” If the little back stabbing Indian had been in the room just then, he’d have strangled him dead, regardless of the other cop being there. “Bullshit! This ain’t right!” He pushed his chair back and stood to glare across the table at the fuck. “You bring Vargas back in here – right fucking now!”

“Calm down, Mr. Henderson. You can forget about your friend Vargas, he isn’t going to be able to help you any longer. He’s in bigger trouble even than you: as of an hour ago, he is officially a fugitive, and not even a police officer any longer. Personally, I couldn’t be happier. If you’re lucky, maybe you’ll get a chance to share a cell with him. I’m your arresting officer, Lieutenant Eduardo Montero, and I don’t make deals. Now sit your ass down and let’s get on with this!”

“Shit! So, what are you putting down there as the charges against me, huh?”

“This will be formalized when we arrive at headquarters, but you’ll be charged with conspiracy, rather than actual money laundering like the others, since none of the luggage was yours and, with them all refusing to make statements, it will be difficult to implicate you further.”

“None of ‘em said nutting? No shit? And you ain’t got other shit to charge me wit?”

“What are you getting at? Is there something you want to get off your chest?”

“No man, nutting.” If that was all the clown intended to put down on the arrest report, maybe, just maybe, his lawyer could get him out before some one’a the other cops figured out that he was the guy they’d been receiving all the reports about. “So youze ain’t calling the embassy, like right now, to let ‘em know `ya got us, or anything like that, are `ya?”

“The American authorities will be notified of the arrests in due course, unless you insist that I call them.”

“No, no you’re right man. I’m a legal Costa Rican resident; what I need them for? Just my lawyer, that’s all. Okay, what else do you want to know for that there form?”

* * *

Doug and Patty were at La Hacienda waiting for the party to begin and Mike to show up with the other guys, but increasingly worried and wondering what the hell had happened when the call came from the lawyer to say that they were all down at police fucking headquarters, under arrest for money laundering. Dougie about died on the spot, but the slick-ass lawyer real fast soothed his panic, saying that Mike was being released and they should come into town for him. They picked him up with the La Hacienda 4X4 and naturally, upon leaving, Mike drove.

When he came out of the steel-barred side door of the jail, Mike was in a fury. The fucking pig had been lying about the cops in the US getting wise to things in Boston and about using his brother’s identity, the horses and the extradition, too! But knowing it had all been a lie didn’t make him feel much better: however, it was that the Indian figured it out, others would too and he still had that damn confession stuffed in his notebook with fingerprints all over it! He maneuvered the 4X4 through the city streets to the highway that led to La Hacienda, like a madman bent on suicide.

“We still gonna try’n see if they’re shipping coke out on those barges, Mike?” Doug asked tentatively.

“You’re goddamn right, we are!” he answered abruptly. “What the hell do `ya think?”

“Yeah? Okay, well, it’s coming down in three days, man,” Doug said excitedly. “We’ve got the perfect place picked out to watch it all, too. You’re coming wit, ain’t ‘cha, Mike?”

“You bet your ass I’m coming, but I’ve got news for the both’a `ya: we ain’t just watching; we’re moving in and taking that shit. That little scumbag cop knows about everything and he’s gonna fuck things up for us if we don’t act now.”

Patty, whose eyes were always frozen in stark terror at whatever death awaited them on the road ahead whenever Mike drove, cast a steady gaze to Mike that cut through his beard and hair all the way down to his features. “You told him, didn’t you?” he questioned. The folds of flesh below his chin folded like an accordion as he nodded knowingly.

Mike flashed an open-mouthed glance towards him. “Told him?” he asked in astonished indignation. “Fuck no, I’d never tell a cop nutting. You know that. Naw man, I was talking about Shannon.” Patty looked at him without comprehension. “My name, asshole,” he said, his eyes flashing between Patty’s countenance and the road ahead. “He knows who the fuck I am and that I’m the guy that offed that kid back home. I got lucky: the stupid cop got his ass thrown off the damn police force – good for the little prick, but still, I can’t be hanging around here another three months with that shit outta the bag.” He set his jaw and accelerated the already speeding car. His back was really pressed against the wall this time. The tuna cans were exposed, three good guys under arrest, the shipment of cash lost and a cop was hot on his ass. It didn’t

matter if it was true or not about him being fired, soon enough they'd have the results of his fingerprinting and someone was bound to look through his files. And, when Sylvia found out that the tuna cans game was blown wide open, the shit would hit the fan like never before. He could keep it from her for a little while, but how fucking great if he could be gone and not have'ta see her in another of her frenzies when she did find out. It HAD to work despite the loss of the tuna cash and the limited budget they now had. One way or another, they were fucking going to make it happen. At La Hacienda, he opened the safe and took all the cash from within, then returned immediately to San José where they spent some of it buying guns from a guy who had a neat little weapons boutique in a secret room he'd dug into the ground below his home.

Driving to Limon, Doug and Pat were nervous. Mike needed to calm them down. He drove fast following the old highway through Cartago, Paraiso and Turrialba. It was a shorter route, but slower because it passed through the centers of towns; however, he knew the bypasses: they offered a rough ride, but allowed them to keep up their speed and cover the distance quicker than on the new highway. He was nervous himself and didn't want to listen to any more of Patty's tizzy-fits about what Sylvia was gonna do when she found out they'd robbed her safe. "Fuck her," he told them. "She doesn't need it anyhow, she's loaded." They were more wound up about what had gone down at the airport than he was, and neither of them had been busted. Shit, he was scared, too: up until then, he could have backed out and, maybe if everything hadn't gone to shit at the airport, he would have. There was something about going on without Sylvia that seemed altogether wrong. Well, now there was no turning back: they had to hijack that coke. Like it or not, the gig was up with her deal, and in his heart he knew that the only reason she kept him around as long as she had was 'cause, by selling cocaine, he made lots of money for her to play with on hotels. She'd be cutting him loose; that was for sure. And what then? He didn't have shit. It was now or never. Between her and that little prick-sucking ex-cop, he had no choice but to go for this, and split from Costa Rica – pronto, and he couldn't have these two out of control with jittery nerves, just when they were needed most. Mike had picked out an Uzi for himself and a pair of sweet little .38's if he needed something in close. Pat liked the black .44 and he looked good with it, too. Doug just bought more knives: guns just didn't suit him. Not much armament. They could be going up against a bunch of guys, every one of them experienced and good with their hardware. On a move of that much coke, it could even be that they'd have guys posted around like snipers. He had an empty feeling deep in the pit of his gut – fear – and he figured they did too. Shit, nobody wanted to die. He'd have to use his fucking head and do everything he could to keep risk at a minimum.

He'd seen Dougie-boy get nervous with a knife in his hand: it wasn't a pretty sight. Everything had to go smoothly without any bodies to dispose of later. Bodies bring cops. What they needed to do was get in close, nice and quiet to get the drop on them. Then they'd tie them up and leave them there. That was the way to do it, slick and neat: no bodies, no cops, just them slipping out with the coke. Then they would zip with it on down to Puerto Viejo and out of the country aboard *The Caroline*, before Edwards and his guys could recover and do a thing about it. They'd truck the stuff up from Florida to the old neighborhood and sell it with the help of the guys. They could pull it off, but he needed guys with cool heads; and by the look of them, they were anything but cool. They had to wake up to the idea that they were that close to riches beyond their wildest dreams if they would use their heads and work with him as a team, but what with Dougie dancing nervously on the passenger's side and Patty sullen and quiet in the back...

"Hey Doug," he said, slapping his palm in camaraderie upon his shoulder and smiling across to him. "What are we getting for a gram'a coke back in the neighborhood?"

"Well, you know, that depends, sixty, eighty bucks. Why?"

“Why? Remember Rodney, that tall skinny fuck used `ta hang with Itch and those guys down by Bill’s place and how he turned out to be such a rich dude? He did that ‘cause he scored on just two kilos. “Youse two are each gonna get ten times what he got, twenty kilos – minimum. Imagine? That’s a million six hundred thousand dollars for each’a `ya! So, I want you two assholes to calm down so we don’t have no fuck-ups – understand? Just be cool and listen to me every step of the way. I’m gonna check this place out and come up with a plan that’ll run like a well-oiled clock.

Three days. That allowed for plenty of time to check the place out by day and night and to get a feel for it and its routines. It also allowed sufficient time to pay a little visit to the nigger who was at the heart of the whole thing. It was humiliating for the guys to know that his mother was with a nigger, and an important matter of pride and reputation that they see him do something about it. Now, after everything he had said, he was going to have to do it, or they’d really see him as a pussy. He’d called him every name in the book and said that he was going to march right in his office and tell him straight out that, if he went anywhere near his mother again, he was going to cut his black balls off. Oh, he’d said more than that: he’d gone on and on about it. Yet, on the final day with Patty and Doug staking out the logging company, as he drove to Edward’s office to make good on his threats, he inexplicably became a complete bundle of nerves. He pulled into the lot at the side of the Port Authority building with an impressive shower of stones and squeal of tires but, as he climbed the stairs to Edward’s second floor office, his legs turned to jelly and his heart beat like a drum in his ears. A foxy black chick in a business suit sat behind a desk. What the hell could Edward possibly want with a bitch like Sylvia when a babe like that was running around his office?

“May I help you?” she asked, staring at him wide eyed.

“Where’s Gordon Edward, goddamn it?” he demanded, but his voice seemed to tremble in his throat. He felt claustrophobic, like when walking through a nigger neighborhood and from every shadow predatory eyes followed. “Just tell Edward that Mike... Aw, forget it.” He spun on his heel and ran for fresh air at the bottom of the stairs.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

It was the ninth of the month. No more debates: time was up and, appropriately enough, the sky was blackened with dense, dark clouds and rain fell as a deluge. Truman stared at the phone trying to collect himself. All he needed do was apologize for losing his temper and sound natural when he spoke about collecting and transporting the cocaine the following day. It sounded easy, but he was having an awful time adjusting to his new role as traitor and, for his first performance, he trembled all over. Stage fright? No, it was far more profound than that. It had been a long while, but he recognized the feeling: pre-battle terror – only one cure; dive into the thick of it. He rolled back his eyes, inhaled deeply and picked up the phone. “Gordy,” he said, hopefully not too cheerily, “I should have called earlier, I know, but I’ve been embarrassed about losing my temper and put it off till the last minute. There’s been one problem after another around here lately. I guess it’s been getting to me so, please give my apologies to Connie: I think I may have frightened her, yelling the way I did when I left. I’ll bet you were worried I wasn’t going to show up, weren’t you?”

“No, Truman, I wasn’t. I knew you would come through, you always do, but I’m glad you didn’t let your pride keep you from calling me. Frankly, after how our last meeting ended, I was beginning to worry that I’d have to call you and that wouldn’t have been good.”

“Yeah. Well, I guess you’re right, I am keyed up. Remember that woman I brought to lunch? Well, she caused me so many headaches that I had to throw her out of here and she went back home to the US.”

“I’m sorry for you, Truman, but I think it’s just as well for you to be rid of her. She was a bad influence on you.”

“Yeah, I suppose she was. Listen,” he said, “I wanted to tell you that I may take an extra day for fishing to unwind a bit after the delivery.”

“Fishing sounds like a good idea, Truman. I think you need the rest, I’ve never seen you so up tight as you’ve been lately. I’d thought to suggest something like that. So, without a girlfriend to go running back to, can I safely assume that you’ll check in with me so I’ll know everything went well when you get back?”

His worries were eased as he hung up the phone: obviously, Gordon suspected nothing, yet Truman had an ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach that refused to accept that all was well. Many times, he had faced danger and was acutely familiar with raw fear. This was different: it was more along the lines of a bad premonition. He ran a fingertip lightly along the scar below his eye, thinking. “Beth,” he chirped as cheerily as his troubled conscience would allow, “I think you should stay here with Herminia while I go on this trip with the boat. You can relax and have a good time. And, hey, it will give you an opportunity to spend quality time with her before she leaves for the treatment center. Yeah, that’s it! Okay then, I’ll take care of everything and you stay here and enjoy yourself.”

“Truman, you are the worst actor I’ve ever seen,” Beth replied, grinning knowingly. “You’re worried that something will go wrong.”

“No, nothing will go wrong,” he said. “I’ve done this hundreds of times.”

“Well then, if nothing is to go wrong, why shouldn’t I go along? I’d love to go on a boat ride in the Caribbean. When will I ever have the chance again? Besides, I’m sure I can be of assistance to you. Remember, we’re in this together, regardless of the consequences, okay?”

Beth's attitude sounded cavalier, but he was sure that lurking below was the same raw fear that gripped him.

"Look," he said with sincerity, a hand upon each of her shoulders while studying her eyes, "I have to tell you: I have a funny feeling something isn't right, but I just can't put my finger on what it might be."

"Okay, then," she replied in a jovial tone that Truman suspected was strictly for his benefit. "You need me to be with you all the more, just in case there really is something to that funny feeling." She kissed his cheek and smiled perkily at him. "I'm going Truman, that's all there is to it."

Her spirit was to be admired, but his anxieties denied him the pleasure her spunky determination usually brought. He shook his head, smiling weakly in defeat. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked.

"You're gonna love me. That's what you're gonna do," she answered grinning and planted a kiss on his lips, just as a tense lump formed in his throat. He held her again at arms length, saw trust in her eyes and, with his hands light upon her, pulled her close to his chest and nuzzled into her hair, squeezing shut his eyes to close out his apprehension.

* * *

They had breakfast with Herminia out on the bar patio with the wide expanse of Caribbean before them. Truman, and he guessed Beth too, looked out upon the water with foreboding, but Herminia was fully alive with a spirit of happy anticipation for the fishing trip she believed them to be off on. She chattered in Spanish about her experience on a charter boat with a friend. She remembered little of him, but a sailfish and the excitement of its catch remained fresh in her mind, although her lively reenactment did little to elevate spirits.

On the drive, Truman tried to open Beth's eyes to the unsettling reality that dumping the coke was going to put a price on their heads. New identities and traveling incognito didn't seem to offer the appealing sense of intrigue and excitement it had for her when first it was mentioned rather, as the conversation unfolded, the prospect became ever more complicated, prone to discovery and horrifying. He insisted again that she remain behind and wait for him in Nicaragua when, after dumping the cocaine in the sea, they would go there to advise his contact, Carlos that the shipment wasn't arriving and never would again. Beth found his loyalty to drug smugglers more than slightly questionable, but he owed them that, he insisted, and without hearing from him, they would soon call Gordon. When that was done, he could leave her there among friends and return to Costa Rica alone to take care of final arrangements. No, she wouldn't go for it, and argument was pointless. She spoke instead of her need to convert her investments quickly to cash and destroy her credit cards, so their movements would not be traceable.

After moving their things aboard *el Tiburón Limon* and familiarizing Beth with its workings, he left her to tidy up while he went out to shop for supplies – or so he told her: perhaps he had been overly hasty. He and Gordy had been together a very long time and only recently had he gone off the deep end. It was because of the tremendous pressure he was under in his bid for reelection while simultaneously off on one of his tangents about this Tweety-Bird cocaine that he had begun to accept violence as a tool: the rational thinking of a concerned friend could yet perhaps save him. He had to make one final attempt. He drove to his office and, as he approached the parking area, saw a bearded man run from the building, jump into a 4X4 and roar from the lot. As the cars passed, Truman saw the lettering on the door: La Hacienda. Mike Henderson? Coming from Gordy's office! That lying son-of-a-bitch Gordon! He parked and ran into the building and up the stairs. "Who was that man that just left?" he demanded of Connie.

"I don't know. Someone named Mike," she responded.

Herminia had been right all along! Truman turned on his heel and ran down the stairs. The bastard couldn't have gotten far! He'd catch the prick and give him a beating like he'd never had! He tore from parking area, leaving Connie framed in the window, looking down. Mike, he assumed, would be headed for the San José highway. There were two traffic lights and congestion that would slow him. Truman raced through residential streets at full acceleration with his hand leaned steadily on the horn, he could easily beat him. He screeched to a halt at the highway entrance, with his engine running and front bumper prepared to close it off when the 4X4 appeared. After ten minutes of waiting, he reluctantly gave up and patrolled the streets of Limon in a search that proved futile. He bought the needed supplies and returned to *el Tiburón Limon* with his resolve firmly in place: they would definitely do it!

□ □ □

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Raul always packed light when off in search of war refugees. Most of his clothes could be washed along the way: all he really needed was a couple of changes and a plentiful supply of white shirts. Women in the countryside hadn't a clue about starch, and without a tie (which he never wore) an unstarched collar hung limp in an hour, regardless of how well it was pressed. He threw the toiletries bag in back, adjusted the brown and the dark blue sports jackets on their hangers, before closing the door carefully so as not to catch them in it – and he was ready.

How was it going to feel, standing face to face with Truman for the first time since that tragic day at their cousin's wedding? Better still, how would Truman feel? Should he embrace him? Had Truman, over the years, been returned to his old self, or would it be Comandante Cobra he encountered?

How he had grieved when he heard of his cousin's death. He had so counted on his sense being restored when the war ended, and returning home to live again as cousins. But he'd been dead, and that made convenient condemning the CIA and the monstrosity they had created from his cousin. With him now alive, maybe it wasn't going to be as simple as all that. It could very well be that Truman still saw himself as Comandante Cobra, and equally possible – he thought with a wry grin – that even in his Contra role, he wasn't such an ogre after all. There had to have been some truth, some good, to the ideals they fought for, otherwise how could the Samosa government and its US backers have won Truman's support, and thousands of others like him? Although, all these long years later, he still failed to see any redeeming qualities to the Samosas.

At least there was some purity to communism's promise (granted, purity that didn't take into account the nature of the human animal), that had made an ideal world seem so possible, particularly with the streets of Managua filled with thousands upon thousands of cheering people, braving the beatings and the bullets of the corrupt system to hear him and other dreamers speak about this new world they would create. He'd actually believed, fervently believed, that the world, by its own nature, would be a garden of Eden, if just a few fascist capitalists were removed. He had been willing to lay down his life that it could happen.

Accepting as truth that greed wasn't limited to a few corrupt dictators and abusive imperialists proved harder than accepting the failure of socialism itself. When the Americans pulled out, ending it all, and the long, bloody conflict had been won, he was devastated – crushed to his very core – to see the very people who had been his idols prove by their actions that it had all been a fraud. They simply replaced the old system of greed and corruption by another, with themselves as top dogs. He dammed them for all time for sullyng so perfect a dream, but he came to realize that their greed for power wasn't so much a personal sin as a part of human nature. The odd ones were the few dreamers who believed in miracles, and they were deceived and used every bit as much as had been Truman.

Nevertheless, it was over: the war had been consigned to the history books and the dreams of a better Nicaragua, which apparently both he and his cousin had been fighting for, reduced to sad irony. There were no Nicaraguan winners, only an entire nation of losers. They'd been so intent on winning and killing one another that they'd never stopped to realize that their only true enemies were those there, beside them, providing the weapons and filling their heads with propaganda, yet they, the foreigners from both sides, returned home without a scratch. His countrymen, those who remained alive, were as fractious as before and the government as wrought with corruption. All the foreigners' war had gained for Nicaragua was

total ruination of her infrastructure and poverty, deeper and more desperate than before. Nothing had been accomplished save the destruction of a nation and he and Truman (Comandante Cobra, if he liked) had survived to be reunited.

The telephone listed in Truman's name was located in a seaside resort in Chauta, a very nice place for a Nicaraguan war refugee. They weren't particularly welcome in Costa Rica and usually could find a place for themselves only in the most undesirable of areas, laboring in menial jobs – hence his welcome reception by authorities when attempting to locate and return them to Nicaragua. He had driven the coastal highway many times; it seemed that Sixaola, on the border with Panama, was a favored home in exile for many Nicaraguans. This would be the first time for Raul to turn off into the resort community of Chauta. Would Truman be the gardener maybe, or bartender? He would make a fantastic bartender for his command of language and endless supply of war stories.

It didn't matter: Truman's life was in for a change. Possibly, he would like to claim his entitlement and return home a welcomed veteran. He'd make that available, of course, but he had a better idea: they could be partners. Former Contras and their supporters were as eligible to the refugees benefit of returning home to a plot of land as anyone (in fact, without them, the project was subject to charges of bias) but many, if not most, feared a former BLI Sandinista colonel. The embassy would be delighted to have the infamous Comandante Cobra assisting him in returning former combatants peacefully to their homeland, a demonstration of good intentions that would definitely keep the aid dollars flowing. He was sure he could enlist him, "like that," he spoke aloud, snapping his fingers. Raul and Truman united for peace: what a wonderful conclusion to an awful history! The highway ahead descended rapidly to the coastal plain in a series of switchbacks that often turned his stomach. Raul gripped the wheel securely and tested his brakes as the land began to fall away.

* * *

The resort where Truman worked wasn't an easy place to find, despite the fact that Chauta was but a tiny pueblo. He'd driven right by, twice, before he noticed a wooden sign on the wall of a building at the far side of a basketball court: Cabañas Los Arrecifes, it said in fading red lettering superimposed over a crudely drawn palm.

"*No se encuentra. Don Truman se fue a pescar*_(he's not here. Don Truman has gone fishing)," the woman at the front desk replied to his inquiry.

Don Truman? Such a respectful title wouldn't be used in reference to the gardener. She smiled, readying a pen over notepad, and continued in Spanish. "Is there any message you wish to leave?"

He smiled widely and explained about being Truman's long-lost cousin and how they had been raised as brothers. The woman appeared delighted and began firing a barrage of questions. He cut her short. "Perhaps I can wait here for him," he suggested, as his eyes absorbed the charm of the patio dining area. "It's been a long drive and I would love to have a bite to eat and a relaxing drink."

She was suddenly at his side, sweeping him to the terrace with a rush of lively chatter about which table offered the best view and mouth-watering descriptions of house specialties. "I am so pleased for Don Truman that someone from his family has come. He will be so happy. Wendy, my daughter, will prepare bungalow three for you. It is the biggest and directly in front of the beach."

"A bungalow? Isn't Truman coming back shortly?"

"Oh no, Don Raul, not today. Don Truman went on a sea excursion and won't be back for several days, but you must stay and wait for him. He would be so disappointed if he missed you."

“A few days? Couldn’t I hire a boat to take me out to meet his?”

“That shouldn’t be necessary. I’m sure he won’t leave the pier until tomorrow morning’s tide.”

“Oh, that’s great! Do you know how I can find his boat?”

“Its name is *El Tiburón Limon* and it will be at the fishing pier. Shall I call the harbormaster with a message?

“No Cecilia, thank you, I would rather surprise him. I was just wondering, could you tell me what is Truman’s job here?”

“Don Truman is the owner,” she answered giggling into her hand. “You will stay for dinner, won’t you?”

“Oh yes, definitely. I’d like the *camarones al ajillo*, please and to drink, a frozen margarita.”

“*Si señor*,” she said, “*con mucho gusto*.” At the door, a moment before disappearing, she turned and with shy hesitation pronounced: “Your cousin is the finest man either my husband or I have ever known. He has done much for us, and others as well,” and she bustled away, leaving him alone with his thoughts, cooled by a refreshing sea breeze and surrounded by a mini-paradise: Truman’s own hotel! The woman had called him ‘the finest man’! His doubts about Truman’s state of mind were swept away, replaced by a longing to rush to him and clasp him to his chest. But first, the shrimp platter and later, through sunset perhaps, a cold beer or another margarita at the thatch-covered beachfront bar. He rolled back his sleeves and loosened his top button. Sea air filled his lungs.

Except for a drug interdiction roadblock in the middle of nowhere, the drive up the coast was uneventful. His Nicaraguan Embassy credentials didn’t impress the police in the slightest; they went through the car with a fine-tooth comb, even removing the spare. He spent the time reviewing the conversation he’d had with the charming Nicaraguan woman he’d met while nursing his first drink at Cabañas Arrecifes, and whom he’d invited to join him for dinner – at least she had every right to claim she was Nicaraguan: as the child of a migrant farm hand working abroad when she was born in Costa Rica, she was definitely entitled to citizenship. The woman, Herminia Cisneros, was in dire straits with three children, no income, no place to call home and living off Truman’s generous charity. The reason her mother abandoned her was undoubtedly because she hoped to offer her daughter escape from a miserable existence of poverty, suffering the hardships of life under the Samosa regime. In the tragedy of her life, he saw a parallel to the conditions all Nicaraguans found themselves living under and the root cause of the civil war. She, he believed, was as much a war refugee as any soldier or person driven from their home. He told her that, as such, he was certain he could help her qualify as war refugee, together with her children, and claim their rightful benefits. He offered to help her relocate to Nicaragua where a parcel of land would be hers and she could raise her children with dignity. Even her lack of birth certificate left him undaunted. Public registries throughout the country had been sacked and burned, that young people couldn’t be located and forced into conscription by either side. To obtain one, one simply needed demonstrate what appeared to be an intimate knowledge of a particular town or region to someone who had probably never been there, and the appropriate documents were issued. Herminia Cisneros was a delightful young woman, apparently recovering from oral surgery, who seemed so hopefully thrilled at the prospect of a home in Nicaragua that he determined to personally see her case through every step of the process. She was obviously a person worthy of special consideration, he let Truman’s judgment speak for that. She had also mentioned a dear friend, Flavio, another displaced Nicaraguan, who lived by his wits on the mean streets of San José, and Raul intended to search him out.

Raul pulled the car into the empty lot to park at the foot of the fishermen’s dock and sat studying the forest of booms and masts. Boats of every size were tied three deep along both sides of the pier’s substantial length. And as if there weren’t enough there to overwhelm him, additional clusters were tied to buoys at either side. Which one might be *el Tiburón Limon*?

He removed the flashlight from the glove box and walked onto the pier, craning his neck and directing the beam of light to the name on each boat. He hadn't proceeded twenty steps before a watchman appeared from the shadows. The boat *el Tiburón Limon* had untied and gotten underway not ten minutes earlier, he was informed. "You can still see her," the guard said, pointing to navigational lights sliding across the water.

Damn, he'd missed him! Three whole days to wait! Raul turned towards the car, dejected, trying to decide if his caseload was light enough that he could return to Cabañas Arrecifes and idle away the three days, relaxed on the beach. He could justify the decision by using the time to begin work on Herminia Cisneros' case. It was a real shame, Truman had been right there only minutes ago. He could still see the boat, but wait – it wasn't outbound, but gliding through the glimmering reflection of lights upon the bay, on a course that would carry it to the opposite shore. He sat upon a boulder at the water's edge and watched to see if perhaps only perspective caused it to appear to be headed towards shore and it would turn seaward before reaching the other side. But just then, as it approached a darkened pier topped with a crane, the running lights, which had become a single shimmering point, extinguished. He must be stopping for fuel or supplies. That pier had to be to the left of the highway on the south of town. He could be there in minutes! He'd be giving Truman his long overdue hug this very night, after all.

He looked suspiciously at the rutted mud, stacks of logs and the gate at the entrance of the darkened yard, bent to a strange shape from countless collisions with trucks or logs and hanging from broken hinges. Such a dank and dreary place, with just a weak orange glow from a distant streetlamp illuminating the mist that hung in the air! Undoubtedly, there were rats scurrying everywhere. What in the world could Truman be after, in such a place? But he was in there somewhere and, within minutes, they would be reunited. He snatched up the flashlight, gingerly lowered an expensive and glossily shined shoe into the center of a tire track, the least muddy path through the ooze, and began to inch forward along the rut, towards the gaping entrance.

"Truman!" he shouted into the gloom, then yelled again when nothing came back but silence. He slipped, but saved himself from falling flat by slamming a foot into a puddle of muck. It slopped over the top of his shoe and the cuff of his trousers. He looked around in disgust: nothing but logs and more mud. He scraped clots from his shoes on the edge of a trunk and scanned with the flashlight the lanes between logs, searching for the best. "Where the blazes are you?" he screamed. "Hey, Trumannnn!"

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Officer Edgar Vargas studied the Coast Guard cutter through binoculars as she glided from her berth and steamed from the harbor. At the sea buoy, she veered in a sweeping turn, coming around towards the south. The timing of her departure was truly impressive: as the sleek form of the cutter receded from view, an inbound sea-going tug appeared, towing, at the end of a long cable, a barge stacked high with logs. The afternoon sun shone weakly between mountain peaks: the harbor would be in darkness before the barge was secured in its berth. If the coinciding movement of both vessels was, as Mike Henderson claimed, adjusted for the benefit of drug smugglers, it was splendidly timed indeed. He was seized with a chill, as another piece of the most thrilling puzzle he had ever pieced together fell perfectly into place. It hadn't been a difficult piece of detective work to determine if a regular connection existed between the movement of log barges and the arrival and departure of the only Coast Guard cutter on the Caribbean coast. A precise record of the movements of all vessels over a certain tonnage was maintained in the harbor master's office. By backtracking through log entries of the previous five years, he established that indeed a pattern existed and there it was, materialized before his very eyes: a perfectly choreographed water ballet.

This could lead to biggest case of his career: Gordon Edward arrested for drug trafficking by Officer Edgar Vargas, Native American of the Mayangna People. The evidence had to be irrefutable. It would be; Edgar was more than willing to wait all night if necessary, but come daybreak, he would know for sure if illegal drugs were hidden somewhere on that barge. He'd find out where they were concealed, who came for them and what they did with them. Then, he would have three months to prepare for the next: plenty of time to set the perfect trap. He could feel the excitement squirming in his belly and prickling his skin. He needed only to survive in his job until then, and Michael's fingerprints would soon accomplish that task. The brass at OIJ headquarters would ignore him no longer. Not with an arrest of this magnitude, and not with his picture appearing in news magazines. He'll be famous, Interpol would seek him out, begging that he join their worldwide force! Caution, that was to be his guideword: nothing could be allowed to go wrong. Tonight, unseen and silent as a cat, he would watch – just watch, and let no detail pass unnoticed.

The entire area in a wide arc surrounding the log yard and its pier underwent his intense scrutiny. That included water: with a rented rowboat he posed as a man fishing for a big catch, repeatedly casting between the pilings while conducting a close-up inspection of the underside of the pier. He drove past the facility several times then returned riding a bicycle, again walking a dog and, for his final survey of several holes in the fence and a staircase that descended to something, he staggered the snaking path of a drunk. The pier next to the one where the barge would be tied had suffered a fire and been abandoned. A two-story warehouse once occupied its center. A shell remained: a vacant derelict with cindered walls, empty sockets that had been windows, and a collapsed roof jutting its charcoaled timbers skyward like rigged fingers of the dead. He was a man with sufficient courage (just barely) to find his way up a burned and broken staircase, cross a floor of gaping holes which exposed the charred remnants of support timbers he trusted with his life, to arrive at a corner window. Now, in the shadows of one of those empty sockets, he was watching the slow passage of events and squirming to find, for the long hours ahead, reasonable comfort while squatted precariously atop an unstable stack of charred wood.

He steadied a hand against the burned window frame and peered at the shimmering image of the tug and barge seemingly unmoving across the wide expanse of harbor. Light faded and the orange of the clouds capping the mountains

changed to purple, then black, and floodlights suddenly colored the log yard and pier with yellowed tones; still, the tug strained against its load. It wasn't until he had eaten cold, greasy fried chicken with equally slimy fries and drank cold coffee from a soggy cardboard cup, that the barge was docked, workmen climbed aboard and guided cables from an overhead crane around the girth of the gargantuan logs. Each log was lifted separately onto the bed of a truck, transported to a far side of the yard then carefully stacked among the mountains of other logs. The truck then rumbled again towards the pier and the process would repeat. He saw no suspicious characters or activities, yet every movement was carefully recorded.

At 9:24 PM, the yard floodlights faded quickly from blinding beacons to orange, then receded to dull-red embers. Atop the crane, the operator made his way down the long ladder, then walked from the yard with his co-workers. The men gone, the yard was transformed into a region of deep shadows, the only illumination the weak glow of downtown Limon far across the harbor. Edgar dutifully jotted the information in his notebook releasing a patient sigh as he resigned himself to a long night. If the cocaine was contained within a log, it hadn't yet been removed, and anyone trying to locate the correct one in the darkened yard would be readily apparent from his vantage, also, the vast emptiness of the barge was directly before his eyes. Doubts and moments of discouragement began to dampen his high hopes. He could neither see nor hear anything but distant lights reflecting across the bay and the lapping of water against pilings. Had Mike Henderson beaten him, sending him off on this wild goose chase that would destroy his career and life? The thought was a disquieting one that caused restlessness: he twisted upon his seat and it gave way under him in a crash of charred planks. Using all his engineering skills, he reconstructed his perch and cautiously lowered himself onto it. It wiggled unhealthily, slipped a bit, but held.

Edgar pulled a Havana from his pocket and sniffed appreciatively along its aromatic length. Did he dare? He'd better not: it would be like a bright orange light in the darkened window. He settled for massaging it lovingly between his lips. His resolve gave way to the thoughts that, without its wrapper, the expensive cigar would dry out, and that there was not a soul around to see anything anyhow. He clamped the cigar firmly between his lips, lit a match before it and prepared to draw in the flame when a car door slammed, then two others in rapid succession. He sucked in his breath, snuffed the match and held himself rigid in hushed silence, the cigar forgotten.

Through the silence of night, he strained, seeking the slightest sound. The sudden reverberation of a thump in the dark came from somewhere near the foot of the pier, sending an electric shiver that sparked his entire nervous system. He listened for more: there had been that sharp sound, then nothing. Silence reigned again. What could it be? Over there, movement among the shadows of a cluster of barrels! Then, barely discernable, muted voices and the hiss of whisperm. A night watchman would be alone and carry a flashlight, not cower, whispering behind a bunch of barrels. It was Gordon Edward's men come to collect the drugs! He held his breath, afraid to move: the slightest movement could tumble his chair and give him away. His body motionless, he scanned the darkness with darting eyes and alert to every sound while his mind raced. How many were they? Three, it appeared, maybe more. Why were they at the base of his pier and not the other? Was someone else about? If so, where? Half of an hour passed, throughout which nothing changed on the neighboring pier. Meanwhile, behind the barrels, the shuffling continued, and Edgar sat motionless, afraid of movement, however slight. His backside and legs passed through stages of increasing agony, then mercifully, became completely numb.

The lights of a boat slipped in silence over the calm surface of the water, trailing a wake that widened to reach across the harbor. It approached directly towards him, seemingly growing as it neared. He hadn't been able to discern the sound of a motor; soon, however, it came faintly through the silence. Her destination also became obvious when the running lights extinguished, and she turned sharply towards the log barge. Tenderly, so as not to tumble his seat, Edgar leaned slightly forward to peer through the window and study the approaching craft. It was an old fishing boat, white, with booms

extended and its hatch cover set to one side. The after deck was long and low, close to the water, with the bridge at the bow. Faintly visible through a center-divided wheelhouse windshield, were two people. As it slowed on approach, the wake rushed ahead and began the big barge gently rocking. A man appeared on deck and, with several well-timed applications of throttle, eased the boat to the outboard side of the barge, hidden from Edgar's view.

With the engine cut, excited whispers could be heard from the threesome down amid the barrels, and they began moving in the direction of the pier where their comrades had just arrived. Edgar moaned when their hushed voices had faded to nothingness, discovering that he was only able to shift about atop his perch: his legs were lifeless lumps, refusing to carry his body. With both hands he lifted one paralyzed limb, amazed at its weight and stretched it out before him, then the other. He rubbed, but nothing happened: they were as dead to this world as wooden stumps. In moments, that changed alarmingly as they came alive, aflame with sensitivity. The tingling was rooted in his feet and pulsed upward through his legs and into his crotch. He could endure it if he remained motionless, but the slightest movement sent waves of unendurable sensations the length of both legs. He clamped his jaws rigid and sat with his arms braced against the window frame, unwilling to shift his weight. The binoculars were at his feet where, to retrieve them, he would have to bend his legs. Impossible. He watched without their benefit, grinding his teeth against the overpowering surging of fresh blood reawakening his flesh.

A man and woman made their way over the edge of the barge, onto its narrow walkway, from the unseen deck of the boat. Between them, they carried a broad plank with a coil of rope lying on it, and in his free hand, the man also carried what appeared to be a toolbox. Edgar's legs and feet were afire, but returning to life, nevertheless. His crotch was another story: completely dead. He moved his grip to either side of the burned plank beneath him and lifted his weight with his arms. A long, wavering groan sounded deep in his throat. Meanwhile on the barge, the pair suspended the plank as a scaffold to hang against the inside wall of the empty hold. The intensity of sensations continued to grip him, even as he concentrated on watching. With the woman at his side upon the scaffold, the man wielded a small sledgehammer that he beat against some metal object on the inside wall of the barge. Within moments, a hinged panel swung open. This was it! The illegal drugs were right there, inside that panel. He watched with a victorious smile growing on his face as the pair stood before the opened panel, talking and gesturing skyward. The man then left and clambered to the pier, disappeared behind a stack of logs and was lost. He reappeared moments later, scaling the long ladder up one leg of the crane. Edgar's legs, meanwhile, had become able – just barely – to endure movement.

With the binoculars now in his hands, he studied the woman's features. She was somehow familiar, but a name couldn't be associated with the face. Guiding loops of cable that slowly descended from the crane, she had a perky manner he warmed to, and a likeable smile when she jauntily waved 'all clear'. The appearance of people who turned out to be criminals would never cease to amaze him: most could sit opposite him in a restaurant and he wouldn't give them a second glance. With the cables drawing taught, she climbed from the scaffold and stood atop the narrow deck watching as a large, tarpaulin-wrapped, rectangular object inched from the tight space. It soon hung free above the deep hold and the peppy drug trafficker signaled again. Who are you? he wondered, searching his brain. He'd seen her somewhere before, of that he was certain.

Free of the barge, the object's speed increased, lifting overhead in a wide swing high above the mast of the fishing boat, then slowly lowered again towards the boat's open hold. The woman disappeared down the ladder to the boat and shortly the cable rose again from the boat hanging slack and empty. Edgar swung the binoculars, focusing on the man's back as he climbed from the crane. Upon reaching the pier, the man turned and Edgar's breath caught in his throat: the scarred features of Comandante Cobra were instantly recognizable.

Comandante Cobra AND Gordon Edward! This was going to be the arrest of the century! The prospect was mind boggling, but what about Raul? He had been so thrilled to find that his cousin was not dead and so optimistic about returning him into the fold of his life. This was going to be an even more bitter pill than Raul had imagined.

Comandante Cobra disappeared behind the same stack of logs as his comrades who were approaching from behind the barrels. Soon, the thin one reappeared, hurrying towards the barge, climbed over it, and disappeared down onto the boat to join the woman. The others then emerged from behind the logs, also making their way towards the boat. Edgar jotted quickly, trying to record every event: such attention to detail could prove invaluable when he returned in three months for the drug interception that would rock the entire nation. Comandante Cobra scaled the barge, crossed it and descended to the boat followed by the large man,. Edgar noted it all, while on the stage of his mind heroic scenes played out of their capture.

Shouting. He'd heard shouting. There, again! But, that sounded more like a woman's scream. No, he'd been mistaken, the yelling hadn't been the woman, it was a man: Edgar could see now the figure of one with a flashlight just inside the gate of the log yard, shouting as he went. No! Oh my God, no!

□ □ □

FORTY-EIGHT

Beth sat on the most forward point of *el Tiburón Limon*, her feet dangling from the bowsprit, high over the water. The afternoon sun shone gently upon her skin even as it began disappearing behind a mountain. To her left a tight cluster of pelicans floated upon the water over a school of fish, gorging themselves. From all corners of the harbor more pelicans arrived, sweeping in low. Just when it appeared that the newcomers would overshoot their companions, they would arch back on great wings and, with hardly a splash, settle into a tiny patch of open water between birds, and join the feast. This dignified dining continued undisturbed despite aerial attacks of seagulls, terns and frigates dive-bombing into their midst. Either the currents carried them or they sought safety under the boat, but soon the fish were directly below, easily visible in the clear water on either side of the boat. Oblivious of her, the birds swarmed about her head and, within arm's reach, remained stationary in the air, then plunged into the water. She had never known that seagulls had that ability to hover, but hover they did, on all sides of her. They scooped their wings, batting them madly and fanned their tails to drift slowly above the melee, tiny heads darting from side to side, scanning for the perfect morsel. Once spotted, their tail would double back below their body, and with their wings cupped, they would force air directly below, remaining fixed in space. Then, with perfect control, wingtips would fold back and the bird would plunge forward in a dive controlled by shoulder movements. They dropped into the water from all about her like apples from a shaken tree.

“Did I ever tell you about my father?” she asked when Truman came to sit beside her.

“Your father? Well, yes you have, but what made you start thinking about him?” He looked good with aviator sunglasses; Beth admired him in the brilliance of the sunlight, pondering the thought.

“These birds. When I was a girl, he and I would go down by the bay and toss bread to the gulls. They'd snatch the bits right out of the air. He was a wonderful man, but I resented him for pushing me in my studies. He was right, of course. I wonder what he would think of me today.”

Truman leaned against the rail beside her. “We don't have to destroy the coke,” he said. “We could just let it pass through.”

“Well, you're right we could,” she answered at length, “but, then we would have to call the DEA or someone to tip them off about it.”

“No, I've told you already, 'I will not turn anyone in.'”

They'd run into this wall before, repeatedly. His reluctance to agree with her that they should blow the whistle on the drug after it was out of their hands had been a thorny issue since this all began. “They're criminals. You are too, but you're repentant, quitting and special to me, or you should be turned in too. Truman, like it or not, smuggling drugs is very bad for society and, even if you don't see it that way, it is still a serious crime. I have been falsely accused, but that doesn't mean I'm ready to renounce the rule of law. It's the very foundation of society, for crying out loud!”

“That's hypocritical. If you think anyone should be turned in, we all should, including me.”

“I can't do that, Truman: I'm too selfish, I love you and I want to live with you – besides you are quitting voluntarily.”

“I’m quitting this business because I’ve opened my eyes to the nefarious effect my work has on others, just like anyone in the petroleum, weapons or plastics industries should – but if my fellow employees don’t also quit, I’m not going to try to get them locked away in a cage for years, especially if they are otherwise decent people.”

“Decent people? They’re felons. I’m sorry, but I believe if you want civilization to exist, laws must be respected until changed through due process. It’s the only way. Come on, in a free country the laws represent the will of the people.”

“True to a degree, but the public forms its opinion upon the information it receives, and that (particularly when it comes to the hysteria surrounding recreational drugs) is altered so far from reality that it’s laughable. Do you realize that Gordon has at his disposal a treasury that rivals Costa Rica’s, and that he uses it in large part to manipulate public opinion to his benefit? Do you really believe that it’s any different in the United States? These men who work for Gordy are no more public enemies than employees of Exxon – and in my opinion, less so. All that would be accomplished by turning them in would be a brief interruption in the flow of Gordy’s cocaine and the ruination of some decent people’s lives. That doesn’t feel right to me.”

“I can’t say that I agree with you, but love is trust and I will trust you on this. Okay, so we do the right thing and destroy the shipment,” she said. “And yep, I’m scared Truman, but everything is going to be okay, isn’t it?”

“Oh, this will go easily enough; what could go wrong? It’s afterwards I’m worried about. Beth, please be reasonable: run from my life while there’s still time. Here’s the keys; take my car and go.”

“Out of the question. Look at the beautiful sunset: magnificent! Come on, let’s fire up the barbecue.” Grilling steaks had been an idea designed to raise Truman’s glum mood. His objections to her participating in tossing the cocaine had been many and frequent. He’d been negative about anything to do with the trip. Playing chef over a bed of coals was something he loved on the beach, so it seemed a good sedative for his nerves while they waited for the city to sleep. She intended to get the most out of her Caribbean cruise. They would have a completely private dinner out on deck as most of the other boats were unoccupied, their owners, who arose before dawn, home resting with their families. Then as night descended and the harbor became still, they would go and pick up the load.

Beth settled in a deck chair, grateful that the broiling meat blanketed the fishy odor hanging in the air so heavily that it could almost be tasted, and contemplated possible future homes. Wyoming appealed to her as did Maine and Arkansas. She had just popped open a beer when Truman pointed to the Coast Guard cutter slicing the water on her way out to sea. It was difficult not to notice an old tug moving a log barge into the harbor that the cutter passed between channel buoys.

“Truman,” she commented idly while settled deeply in the deck chair, her feet crossed at the ankle over the gunwale, the beer propped on her stomach, “I thought you said the people on the tug don’t know about the cocaine.”

Truman was busily stabbing the steaks with a long wooden-handled fork, and looked up curiously with her question. “They don’t. Nobody at all does, just us.”

“How is it, then, that they are able to time their arrival to coincide exactly with the cutter’s departure, if the Coast Guard’s pulling out means nothing to them?”

“Gordy worked that out a long time ago,” he proclaimed. “He ordered the port captain to delay the tugs’ arrivals until sunset or later because, he told him, he needed to fulfill a political promise to union leaders. Gordy had settled a strike by subterfuge. Union leaders were asked to accept a lumber company contract that fell short of their demands, but called for workers to receive overtime pay for discharging after hours. The strike was ended and barges began arriving late.” He grinned at the success of the ploy, all the tension forgotten for the moment. Beth returned his smile.

The floodlights eventually winked out at the logging pier. They waited then for a full half hour to pass during which Truman studied the harbor with binoculars and saw nothing moving there or on the pier. Beth let loose the last line and waved a jaunty “all clear” to Truman up in the wheelhouse. The engine rumbled, vibrating the deck beneath her feet, a wash of water appeared behind and they were off, slipping away from the pier and its many boats. She remained on deck watching the reflection of lights upon the water, alone with her thoughts and allowing Truman his. Apparently, he didn’t feel a similar need. A little window slid and his head appeared, summoning her to the wheelhouse. There were things to be known if she was serious about helping.

“There’s a panel a little ways down on the inside wall of the barge,” he explained, sketching as he talked. “The hinges are welded so, when it’s shut, it’s identical with every other panel on the wall. We’ll secure lines to these two hooks here, then lower a simple scaffold down like this. See what I mean? First, we’ll have to open that. It’s secured with big iron pins that look exactly like rivets, but actually, they come loose easily with a hammer and wedge. Once it’s open, I’ll show you where on the package to hook the two loops of cable from the crane. Then, you just wait while I go out on the pier, climb up on the crane and lower the cables. I’ll bring them down very slowly. When they’re low enough give me an all clear, like you did when you untied the boat. Okay, so far?”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Okay, then. When you have the cables in place like this,” he said drawing them and pointing, “wave another all clear and get well out of the way up on deck. I’ll ease the package out using the crane. That’s the only tricky part. But, no matter what, don’t try to help if it gets stuck; you could get hurt. I can do a lot of wiggling with the crane and even move side to side. Once it’s free, I’ll lift it over the barge and lower it into the hold right here behind us. That’s why I have the hatch cover off. When it’s all the way down on the deck and the cables are slack, descend to the hold, unhook them, wave your arms again, and we’ll be done. I’ll climb down and we’ll be on our way, okay?”

“Aye, aye Captain,” Beth said saluting and smiling mischievously. “You see, you little liar, you need me after all, don’t you?”

“You’re going to be a lot of help and save me from climbing up and down the crane half the night. Yes, I need you, but I never imagined that I’d have your help to move a load of cocaine. What would your mother say?” Truman laughed and ducked the playfully thrown punch.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

“Did `ya smack him in the face?”

“Naw,” Mike answered. “I didn’t wanna give him no excuse to call the cops and screw everything up. I just grabbed the nigger by the front’a his shirt and screamed in his face. Ya shudd’a seen him, Dougie. His big nigger eyes was looking at me all white’n scared-like. I can tell ya for sure, he won’t be fucking wit my mother again.”

Anyhow, he told himself, that’s what he would have done if Edward had been in his office. He quickly forced from his mind a flicker of remembered claustrophobic terror. Naw, he hadn’t been scared at all. “Seen anything?” he asked. He stood beside the car that Patty and Doug had sat in all day, combing his fingers through his beard, and scanned the street perpendicular to theirs where the logging company had its office. Beyond the row of bushes they were behind, was vacant land until the street with the log storage yard and the harbor beyond. Up and down the street, not a thing was in motion, not so much as the wind to stir the stifling heat. It had been that way for two long, boring days.

“Yeah man, it’s been real busy,” Patty answered. Empty, plastic water bottles lay cluttered at his feet. His hair and clothes were so sodden with his sweat that it looked like he’d poured the water over his head. “The broad in the office showed up for work, there’s been a dude walking his dog who came by early this morning then a bunch of exciting hours later another guy went by on a bike. That’s it.

“Don’t forget the drunken Injun,” Doug piped in.

“Oh yeah Mike, plus one drunken Indian.”

“Come on Doug, scoot over,” Mike directed, opening the driver’s door. “I wanna drive by one last time and have another look at those barrels.” He had considered Patty’s idea of using a boat – they wouldn’t have to worry about who might be behind them like on land, and once in possession of the coke, they could just load it aboard and take it to Puerto Viejo – but he’d rejected it. They’d be better off on land. If it came down to fireworks, he didn’t want to be a sitting duck in a boat with them all on the high ground. As far as getting the stuff to Puerto Viejo, they didn’t need it: just wait till the middle of the night and drive it down the coast highway. It would be much faster, getting them quickly away from the scene, and what cops are around at that time of the morning? The collection of barrels he spotted earlier and wanted to see again was at the foot of the neighboring burned-out pier, close to the water. They could get in there without being seen from the log yard and have a perfect view of the logging pier and its yard – even to the roof of the building, should snipers be posted. The possibility was terrifying, and the hour drawing close.

* * *

At three o’clock, things started happening. A car entered the yard through the mangled remnants of a gate and parked inside. A man emerged from the driver’s side and slogged through the mud back out the entrance to stand staring down the street, first one direction, then the other. “Hit the dirt,” hissed Doug and flopped to the earth behind the bushes. Patty hit the ground beside him like a dropped watermelon and pointed his .44 between the narrow branches. Mike remained leaning against the car and looked at them in disgust, a fearful knot of anger twisting his guts. He must be out of his mind to even think of putting himself in front of professional guns with those two, but here he was, only moments away with no turning back. “You stupid motherfuckers! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he barked down.

They both looked up with quizzical gapes. “It’s one’s the guys Mike, isn’t it,” Doug asked in a squeaky voice.

“Don’t you assholes even know how to think? Even if that fuck saw us – and I don’t think he did – he would’a ignored us, but I don’t think he’d ignore two dicks diving into the ditch! Would you?” Neither answered, remaining motionless on their bellies. “Well, would you, goddamn it?” he asked again.

“No, I know I wouldn’t,” Patty answered mildly. “Sorry, it won’t happen again.”

“You’re goddamn right it ain’t gonna happen again. There’s gonna be a fortune of coke over there pretty soon and we’re gonna get it, but you fucks aren’t gonna so much as move less’n I say so. This is gonna be the real shit tonight and mistakes aren’t allowed. You got that?”

“Yeah I do, Mike,” Patty said. “You’re right, we fucked up.”

“Dougie? How about you?”

“I’m with you every heartbeat of the way, man. Tell me what to do and it’s done.”

“Okay, good. Patty, come on man, if you really mean to use that gun, next time you drop down, release the safety, okay? Now get on your feet.”

Two cars showed up a minute later and pulled in to park against the fence just inside the yard next to the first. Another arrived, then three more, one with two in it: that made eight guys. Nothing else happened over the next couple of hours except smoke began to rise from a flue through the roof, Dougie came back from his scouting mission with the binoculars and confirmed that the Coast Guard cutter sailed and a log barge was making its way across the harbor. With the growing darkness, lights came on in the building and, just as they were ready to move out and take up position among the barrels on the adjoining property, the yard suddenly was lit with the yellow glow of ancient flood lamps. Mike let Dougie lead them into a scrap iron yard on the opposite side, from where he had watched the harbor. He needed to use binoculars, but from atop a small mountain of iron, he found a clean line of sight to the pier and barge tied alongside.

He watched every movement he could capture in the field of his binoculars throughout the offloading of logs, and saw nothing that even hinted at anything unconnected with the job of moving them to various piles throughout the yard. Then it was done: the crane operator doused its lights, clambered down, the truck and forklifts were parked, and eight men filed into the building.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” he commanded scampering down and heading towards the exit. “We gotta see who leaves and who stays,” he said when Doug and Patty came alongside. They raced to the front of the property, waiting and watching as the remaining lights went out and the cars departed, one with two passengers, until all eight were gone and the yard was lost in darkness.

“I don’t like that car.” Doug said, approaching a dust-covered sedan beside the fence. He stuck his hand into the front grill. “It’s cold,” he announced, looking knowingly from one to the other.

“No shit, Sherlock, it’s only been parked here all day!” Mike gasped in exasperation. “Okay, no lights and stay in the shadows,” he commanded. “We’re going to get the car and go on down by the barrels to keep an eye on that barge all night if necessary. Let’s go, move it.”

“Watch it ya fat fuck, ya almost knocked me into the water!” Doug hissed as Patty caught up with them at the barrels.

“Shad’dap,” he whispered back between gasps of air, “they’re gonna hear, ya jerk!”

“Shad’dap? Well if `ya wanna be so fucking quiet, don’t be trying to push me into the water an’ maybe they won’t be hearing a big fucking splash. All right?” Patty straightened himself to look over the containers to the neighboring yard,

but lost his footing in the liquid oozing from a drum and prevented a fall by grabbing Doug's shoulder and quickly dropping his elbow onto a barrel top with a resounding thud. "Shit, will you watch it, huh!" Doug snapped. "What is this slippery crap, anyhow? Look, it's written right here. See, this shit comes from Edison, New Jersey. What's hazmat?"

"Hey! That's enough, goddamn it, no more noise!" Mike commanded. "I think this is far enough, anyhow. Let's just watch for a while." The yard, dimly lit by downtown Limon, was quiet with nothing moving, but from across the bay a boat approached. Mike's pulse beat harder. As it neared the neighboring pier, its lights suddenly extinguished, then maneuvered in darkness to the far side of the barge and tied up.

"Did `ya see, Mike?" Doug asked excitedly, "There's only two of `em!"

"Yep, that's all I saw, too," he whispered. It was a miracle. He snatched up the binoculars and scanned the yard one last time. Not a soul: nothing. This was going to be a lot easier than he had feared. "Okay guys, this is it," he whispered. "We gotta get around the other side'a the barge so's we can make sure they're alone and see what they're up to. Stick close and, goddamn it, keep your mouths shut." He moved off towards the neighboring yard bent at the waist, following the shadows with Doug and Patty close behind. Quickly, they arrived behind a stack of logs, in time to see a man and a woman climb from the boat and, from a scaffold they lowered into the barge, open a hidden panel. The man then made his way to the pier, up onto the crane, and lowered its cables for the woman to secure around the object hidden in the recess. It came free and swung in a high arc, over the mast of the boat, disappearing in its hold where the woman went to meet it. Devoid of their load, the cables rose again. Up on the crane, the access door to the cab opened, the man emerged and began to descend its long ladder. The woman remained out of sight in the hold. "Let's get him before he gets back to the boat," Mike said hastily. "Come on, go, go go!"

"Hold it right there, Scarface," he commanded when the man came around the end of a stack of logs. "There's a gun aimed at your back, so just raise your hands over your head nice and slow like." The man began to turn slowly about, then at lightning speed attempted to duck behind the base of a log, unaware of Doug at his side. He found out soon enough, when a knife suddenly was poised a half inch from his eye and an arm encircled his throat.

"This ugly motherfucker is one slippery bastard," Doug panted, holding a firm grip against the man's struggles. "Ya want I should cut his eye out?"

"No, we might need him on the boat, just check `em for a gun," Mike instructed. "God, you're an ugly fuck!" he said, grimacing at the scarred features of his captive.

"Who are you assholes?"

"Hey, lookie here: the spic knows how'ta talk regular English!" Pat said, directing his .44 to the center of the man's skull and sliding the safety forward.

"We're your worst nightmare, spic. That's who we are," Mike answered. "Put your fucking hands nice and deep in your pants' pockets, and walk slow back to the boat. If he tries to pull those hands out, Patty, shoot him instantly, okay?"

Patty nodded and curled his finger over the trigger. "Yeah, okay. I hope you do try something, spic," he said, "I'd like `ta see if this gun'll take off the whole side'a your head like the guy said, so just go ahead and start running."

"Dougie," Mike ordered, "get over to the boat and take care'a the broad. Don't kill her less'n ya have to. We'll be right behind ya. I wanna get outta here fast. Come on Scarface, move it and don't be trying any more cute tricks."

What an immense relief! Everything went perfectly! He couldn't contain his smile. He was rich and, best of all, for the first time ever, independent of Sylvia!

CHAPTER FIFTY

OIJ police lieutenant, Edgar Vargas knew exactly what to make of the figure materializing from the gloom at the entrance of the log yard, shouting and sweeping the piled timber with the beam of a flashlight. It was Raul! The realization struck with recognition of the all too familiar gait. “No! Oh my God, no!” he heard himself utter as he leapt to his feet. If Raul was seen before he could be stopped, it would put an end to this opportunity of a lifetime and likely his employment too. Raul might also be walking into a deathtrap! He must be stopped at all cost before his shouts were heard, or his randomly swaying flashlight seen. He dashed with all the speed he dared over the naked beams then, on flooring again, bolted through the darkened skeleton of the building. With heart-stopping suddenness, his foot found not floor but empty space, in the void of a gaping hole. Miraculously, his flailing arm encountered a burned timber and he dragged himself back to safety.

From the direction of the other pier, a woman’s scream shattered the nighttime silence, charging his movements with renewed urgency. Tripping and stumbling, he risked his neck on the broken staircase of fragile charcoal high above the water. “Oh please Lord, have Raul lose his way, don’t let him turn towards the pier!” he prayed as he gingerly leapt over another open hole. He reached land and, abandoning all thought of personal safety, broke into a sprint then, almost immediately, tripped over some unseen object and fell face forward, amid grease and debris. He was up and running before the next breath, dodging barrels and unknown dark shapes. Suddenly, a chain link fence blocked his way. Frantically, he raced its length. Was there no gate or end to the thing?

A diesel engine roared to life – the boat! They were leaving? And Raul? He looped his fingers in the fencing and pulled himself up, hand over hand, his feet scrambling for a non-existent toehold. At the top, he ignored the pain of barbed wire cutting into his palms, rolled over it and dropped to the other side, leaving behind shards of trousers and chamarra. He raced through towering piles of logs to the center lane where Raul had been bound.

No Raul in sight.

Towards the pier, he ran, trading speed for stealth as he neared. The silhouette of a man climbing from the boat became visible, clinging to the steel rungs welded onto the outside wall of the barge. Quietly, he picked his way through the debris on the pier and leapt onto a similar steel ladder on the exact opposite side of the barge. He was at the top in a flash and peeking over to the narrow deck at the stern of the barge. Ahead of him and kneeling, a large man was working loose a mooring line. This could be his only chance. As fast and soundlessly as possible, he stepped onto the deck and padded towards the man. He made it to directly behind him, when suddenly the man’s head spun to face him. Edgar’s spare pistol – the big .44 special – had hardly cleared his belt, that he punched it forward and struck the man directly in the temple. There was a hollow thunk, and he dropped like a rock upon the coil of rope. In a sweep of his gaze, Edgar took in the scene aboard the boat as every head below spun in his direction. He lifted his pistol behind a locked elbow, with his other hand stabilizing his arm from below.

“Police, everybody freeze!” he shouted down to the boat. He lined the sights of the heavy pistol onto the forehead of none other than Michael/Shannon Henderson who stood in the center of the deck with an Uzi dangling from his hand. A thin man on one knee paused in the act of tying cord around the ankles of Raul’s cousin, the drug-trafficking Comandante Cobra who sat on the deck with the woman, their backs against the gunwale. Raul was there too, backed into the corner

between gunwale and wheelhouse, squatted, his hands tied above his head to the rail. “Move,” Edgar commanded, the point of the pistol identifying to whom he spoke, “and you’re a dead man. If ever you wanted to test me, Shannon, this is your chance.”

“Fuck you, you’re not shooting me! You’re going to have to arrest me again, pig!”

“What, where’s your nerve? Okay then, lift that right hand away from the stock of the Uzi and hold it by the barrel in your left. All right, now hold the right hand up so I can see your palm. Good! Now, toss the Uzi overboard. The .38 too, it’s right there in your belt. Now face down on the deck, arms and legs spread, you know the drill. The same applies to you, Slim: face down on the deck with hands and feet spread wide.” He began to descend the iron ladder, using it backwards, facing forward to keep his pistol steadily trained on Mike, his skinny friend and Comandante Cobra who sat glaring at him. He stepped from rung to rung blindly with a firm grip behind his back to steady himself. When he’d reached the limit his none too long arm would allow, he pulled his body in close against the ladder behind him and quickly transferred his grip to the next lower rung. He began to grope with his foot for the next lower rung, when the fat man he’d left above swung down his arm and grabbed Edgar by the hair. There was a struggle that lasted but a moment. Edgar found himself without a grip and falling. He hit the deck hard, the air driven from his lungs, but shook his head against the pain and pulled himself upright. Abruptly, he was pitched forward to the deck by a blow that felt like he’d been hit by a freight train. He was unable to pull a breath. He gasped and clawed in vain at his throat. Inexplicably, Michael Henderson suddenly appeared before his eyes, mouthing words Edgar could not hear. At the side of his neck came a sudden, awful, searing pain.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

The last knot loosened and fell away. Beth tugged at the heavy tarpaulin covering the ‘package’ and it slipped to the deck. From between her teeth, she let out a low whistle: she was amazed at the sheer number of plastic-wrapped packages. Here, before her, was an easily refined product that, if legal, would be worth no more than a similar amount of coffee, not give birth to Mike Hendersons, corrupt good people or destroy so many like Herminia. But illegal it was, and each package, therefore, was worth thousands of dollars. Exactly how many thousands, she was uncertain, but at any rate, she undoubtedly was looking at a very expensive pile: a pile many, like Gordon Edward, would kill for. She counted along one side: five packages. Along the other: eight, and stacked in fourteen layers.

She cocked her head to listen. Had Truman called? No, just her imagination.

Five hundred sixty kilo packages plus an additional twenty-seven on the fifteenth level. Five hundred eighty-seven kilos. Wow! A truly impressive sight, and temptation was suddenly tangible. She found her musing turn to lust for all that money, and wondered as to the wisdom of throwing it into the sea. She saw a momentary image of Truman and herself in a mansion with butlers, a yacht and their own private plane. The sound of footsteps on deck caught her attention. “Truman,” she called up through the open hatch, “come down here and tell me exactly how much this stuff is worth!”

There was a flash of movement as someone, not Truman, leapt into the hold directly on top of the cocaine. “It’s worth a whole fucking lot, sweetheart, and it’s ours!”

It was him! The wormy little monster with the cockroach tattoo! A stiletto with a twisting blade glimmered in his hand. Terror awakened from a hundred nightmares sent electrified fingers to the very center of her being. She saw the knife, but her eyes were riveted to the cockroach tattoo. As though disconnected from her will, her hands extended in front of her, palms out to ward him off. She heard, rather than felt, a piercing wail that came from within herself and echoed in the confines of the hold. She tried to run, but her legs were unresponsive lead weights, and her feet tangled in cargo netting. She stumbled along the wall with inhuman giggles ringing in her ears, until she became wedged in a corner with her back to the wall and her arms yet before her. The skinny apparition from hell giggled again, then bounded to the deck to slash at the air between.

Beth mentally swore that she wouldn’t allow herself to be terrorized into immobility, but still she couldn’t move. He reached for her with his free hand. Suddenly, her body was alive and hers again. She’d fight the bastard to the death, but not submit. She grabbed at the hand that was trying to reach her, got it at the wrist, and pulled to upset his balance, swinging her leg at the same time in a kick at the knife-carrying arm. The monster reacted too quickly. His arm swung under her leg and lifted, dropping her on her back to the deck. She wasn’t finished: she rolled to the side and began to rise. In a heartbeat, he was atop her with his full weight. Her arms and legs collapsed from under, and she was face down on the deck with him on her back. He pulled her hair, lifting her head and pressed the cold steel of the knife to her throat. She felt it cutting.

“No more, now,” he hissed into her ear, “or I’ll slit you ear to ear!” The fight left her, and she was suddenly overwhelmingly weak. “Yo, Mike!” the tattooed monster screamed inches from her ear. “Remember the broad who don’t know for nothing about log barges or drug smuggling? She’s down here with the cocaine!”

Mike Henderson’s shaggy head peered down through the open hatch. The taste of bile came upon her tongue. “Well, well, well, lookie here!” he said. “Hi-ya, bitch. Imagine running into you out here! Bring her up, Dougie.”

Her body trembled. She was dizzy, weak. Her legs barely supported her as she climbed the rungs of short ladder to the main deck. Truman was there. Mike stood behind him, an arm around his neck and pressing a pistol into his cheek. Reluctantly, she allowed eye contact with Truman, and her heart sank when she saw the feeble smile he managed. They were pushed to the rail and forced to sit side by side on the deck. "Don't say anything," he hissed through clenched teeth. A fierce kick caught him in the chest.

"Shut the fuck up!" It was Mike the rapist and, at his side, the same cockroach tattooed slime that had slapped and leered at her. Behind them: the fat one. In his hands, Mike held a machine gun aimed at Truman although his eyes were latched on Beth. She diverted hers, provoking a sneer. "So bitch," he asked in a bantering tone, "wanna tell me some more lies or fuck first, huh? You know, we will get it on again, and ya still love me, don'cha?" She gulped against an urge to vomit and her vision spun while internally, she fought her fear – but it was a contest she was losing.

Next to her Truman moved. "You filthy bastard, you're not going to touch her!"

His voice had an unearthly quality to it as he started to rise to his feet. Mike kicked, and Truman's supporting arm was gone from under him: he collapsed to the deck with an awful thud followed by a groan, then received another hard blow to his stomach that coiled him. He began retching and coughing. Beth leaned to go to him, but the twisted knife blade forced her to sit again.

"Hey, Scarface," Mike said, his machinegun aimed down at Truman, "Dougie-boy here is anxious to cut someone open. He just loves it. The next time you move, he's gonna warm up on you and cut all your tendons, so just sit still and shut your fucking mouth. Tie them up, Dougie!" While his hands were bound behind his back, Truman remained on the deck with his knees drawn up protectively over his middle and Mike above him but, midway in the space between them, their stares were locked in mortal combat that interrupted only when a voice could be heard. "Wait a minute," Mike said holding his palm up and swinging his eyes in a slow arc around the boat. "Listen! Someone's out there. Ya hear it?"

"Truman! Truman, where are you?" the voice called out clearly.

"Who's Truman?" Mike demanded. Truman, with his hands tied behind and his ankles being worked on, offered no reply. Mike stepped close. "Is that you, Scarface?" A defiant grimace was his reply. He pushed him sideways to the deck and pressed his foot down on his face. "I said: is that you? Are you Truman?"

Beth couldn't bear it, but had to offer him the strength of her steady gaze.

The voice shouted again from the yard. Louder this time. "Hey, Truman! Trumannn..."

"Patty," Mike said, spinning towards the heavysset one, "what are you waiting for, man? Go find out who that is and bring him here. I wanna get outta here, pronto." The big man moved surprising quickly, up the steel rungs welded to the side of the barge, and disappeared into the night.

A strange silence of apprehensive waiting fell over them. The lapping of water against the hull and their own breathing were the only sounds: no screams, no gunshots, no voice calling for Truman and nothing from Mike's man.

"Who is that out there?" Beth whispered.

"I don't know," Truman hissed back.

"Shad dap!" Cockroach-face pushed the side of Truman's face with his hand and shot an evil look in Beth's direction. "You too!" he demanded.

Beth was surprised with herself: she was afraid, but lucid and alert. It wasn't like last time when she had cowered, fearful any expression other than total submission might be read in her eyes, angering him that he would hurt her again. Not now. She knew that, with the slightest opening, the slightest opportunity, she would act. There'd be no hesitation, but she

wasn't suicidal either – not yet, that might come later, but surrender would not. Truman's hand found her foot and squeezed it tightly. Their eyes met and a short nod from him confirmed that his will to fight was as unwavering as her own. She nodded back.

“Where are we going?” Truman braved to ask.

“Where I'm going is none of your damn business, but where you're going is ten miles out to sea. I wanna see if you can swim wit your hands and legs tied. And Scarface, don't forget: I told you to keep your fucking yap shut.” The obese, black-bearded pervert who had played with his dick while Mike raped her appeared on the deck of the barge, heaving his bulk along the barge's narrow deck with a gun in his hand, close behind a tall, strikingly handsome man with a thin moustache who wore a white shirt and sports jacket. The stranger was smiling broadly, quite peculiar for a person in his predicament.

“Truman! Hello!” he called merrily. His body flinched and a grunt erupted from him, as the slob behind him jabbed a revolver into his kidney. Truman's reaction was as strange as the new arrival's smile: he began mumbling, ‘You stupid fuck! Asshole! Idiot’ and other expletives, staring rigidly at the good-looking, cherry man. She nudged him, but his fixation rendered him unreachable. With both Cockroach and Mike occupied appraising the man, she leaned towards Truman to the limit of her daring. “Psst,” she hissed but an inch from his ear. Nothing. He just sat there muttering. A slight cock of her head brought her a bit closer, but she couldn't tear free his attention and dared not move further. ‘You son-of-a-bitch, what the hell?’ and other hypnotic mumbblings were all she got for her efforts. She studied Truman's face for a clue, but he was captivated totally by the broad shouldered man descending the ladder. Who could this be?

“Patty, start the boat,” Mike snarled, the moment they were aboard. “I wanna get outta here.” He glanced only briefly in the direction of the fat one as he went towards the wheelhouse; his attention was more absorbed by the new arrival. “Who else is out there, asshole?” Mike asked, as the man turned to face his captor. He didn't answer, simply gazed calmly from the barrel of Mike's tommy gun to his face. Beth was impressed with his bearing: no panic, just smooth control. She watched his eyes: they were steady, and moved from Mike with disregard to scan the scene about him. “I'm talking to you, asshole!” Mike menaced. “Who else is out there?” The engine roared to life. “All right Patty, up on the barge and get us untied; let's go,” he said. The disgusting hog obediently waddled the width of the deck and ascended the barge. “So, who else is wit'cha, I asked,” Mike demanded of the man.

“I came alone,” he answered. “What's going on here? Who are you?”

“I'm the man with the gun, motherfucker. Who are you and what the fuck are you doing here?”

“It's personal.”

“Personal? Doug,” he called, “show ‘Personal’ here your knife.” Cockroach-face jumped from his work on Truman's ankles and began waving his knife in the man's face. “Now get over in the corner there before Doug takes your eyes out,” Mike ordered. “You'll talk to me later about your personal problems; oh yeah man, will you ever!”

Skinny backed the newcomer into the corner, made him squat and tied his hands to the rail above his head. “Lookie, what Personal has in his jacket pocket: business cards,” he said, displaying a small packet. He removed one and waved it in the man's face, then poked it in his shirt pocket. “Case I gotta call `ya one'a these days,” he sneered.

“Gimme those,” Mike said, snatching the packet from his hand. “The Nicaraguan Embassy, huh? Oh yeah, Pretty-boy, we're gonna talk, we're gonna talk plenty. Okay, that's it guys, we're outta here. Untie us and get down here Patty, let's go.”

Cockroach-face returned to his work on Truman's ankles. The sight of the tattoo was chilling, yet Beth eyed the bony bastard carefully. She wasn't yet tied. This might be it: her only chance. The fat man was up there struggling with the heavy rope, Skinny's knife lay on the deck as he worked on Truman's ankles and Mike stared out to the harbor, the gun dangling from his hand. It was unlikely that she could grab the knife, stab the skinny ass and still have time to reach Mike before he shot her, but there did exist a razor-thin chance. There was tingling in her fingertips and scalp. Just let the little weasel glance away then; go on, do it!

All eyes turned upwards towards a loud thump from the barge.

"Police, everybody freeze!" A man kneeling beside the limp bulk of Patty aimed a pistol with both hands directly at Mike. An angel from heaven sent to their rescue!

"Edgar! Thank God!" the man squatted in the corner cried out. Her sentiment, exactly! But no! In an avalanche of new horror, the realization dropped into her stomach like an exploding bomb: five hundred eighty-seven kilos of cocaine were in the hold. The next twenty years of life would be spent in prison. It was a fate to be relished only slightly more than being shot with a tommy gun or raped and thrown tied hand and foot into the ocean. Nevertheless, seeing Mike Henderson and Cockroach-face humbled was a delight.

"You're a cop?" Truman asked with incredulity of the man squatted across the deck while struggling to loosen the bindings on his wrists. The squatting man too fought to free himself, twisting his head upwards to bite at his knots and offered no answer, stopping his chewing only to smile broadly in Truman's direction then resumed working the rope with his teeth. Mike did as the policeman ordered and Beth watched with satisfaction as the tommy gun and pistol splashed into the water and as both men grudgingly assumed a spread-eagle position on the deck. Visions of the hard life awaiting her behind bars were interrupted when the fat man on the barge crawled to the top of the ladder, reached over and grabbed the policeman by the hair. He jerked to free himself from the grip, lost his balance and fell from near the top of the ladder with a thud.

His gun skittered across the deck.

Mike Henderson grabbed it up.

Cockroach-face sprang to dive onto the fallen form of the policeman. The twisted knife was suddenly in his hand. The policeman elbowed him off and began to find his footing, but not quickly enough.

"Edgar!" the man in the corner shouted, furiously tearing at his bindings.

The policeman turned towards the sound of his name. At the same moment, the stiletto flashed in an arc behind him. It struck his back with the reverberation of a kettledrum, and sank in to the hilt. He pitched forward onto the deck, tearing with his fingers at his shirt and jacket and making a sound that should have been inhuman.

Cockroach-face giggled. He stepped over the writhing figure, pulled the bloodied knife from the policeman's back and raised it for another plunge. In the corner, the big man, wailing like a wounded animal, ripped his hands free and dove at Cockroach but the knife flashed forward as a bayonet to sink deeply into his arm.

"No, Doug!" Mike shouted. "Don't kill that one," Cockroach-face was laughing and dodging the big man's futile kicks at his knife. "Not yet. First, I want him to tell me all about this 'personal' business. "Here, the little pig should have just the thing." He bent over the thrashing body, flipped up the hem of his colorful jacket and removed a pair of handcuffs from a holder at his waist. "Here," he said, handing them to Cockroach. "Hook him on to the rail over there where he was: the fucker won't untie these. Back up, you son-of-a-bitch," he ordered while aiming his gun at his forehead. Bristling with rage, the man withdrew and was handcuffed to the rail.

Mike returned to the policeman and rolled him onto his side to reach into the pockets of his jacket. When the policeman's back turned towards Beth, the thick glaze of blood saturating the jacket came into view. She pulled her hand to cover her mouth in horror. Mike opened the chamarra and, from an inside pocket, extracted a black notebook, which promptly slipped through his bloody hands and dropped to the deck. He picked it up and began to flip the pages, snorting in disgust as he read. "Looka what this faggot wrote!" He was poking a red-stained finger at a notation. "'Interview with Mike Scumbag!'" The pages flipped, then he came to an envelope tucked inside and extracted it. "Dougie," he said, "pick that faggot's head up so he can see me. See this ya lying little prick?" he shouted to the policeman, waving the envelope in his face. He tore it open, crinkled the paper inside into a ball and threw it overboard. "There, asshole! Now ya ain't got nutting on me!" He then hurled the black book into the poor man's face with the force of a baseball pitcher. "Who's the scumbag now?" he screamed. "Kill the cocksucker, Dougie!"

Cockroach was straddled over the officer's body, and lifted his head by the hair. He pulled the knife blade across his throat, slicing his neck practically through from one side to the other. The entire lower part of his neck and body fell away from the upheld head. Blood pumped dark arcs from severed arteries. The windpipe gurgled. Satisfied with his work, the maniac dropped the head into the spreading puddle of blood, with a dull thump.

Beth fought nausea and the instinctive urge to curl into a ball and weep. Alert! She must remain alert!

"Hey Patty, turn us loose here, huh, before someone else shows up!" Mike ordered of his man yet on the barge.

Beth shuddered at the horror awaiting them all, watching as Mike gaped at the convulsing body. Could she remain brave through to her end? Next to her, Truman had flipped forward onto his stomach in a struggle to free himself and lay there clearing his throat. "*Fijase la palanca roja, maje. Espera mi manda,*" he spoke abruptly at conversational volume. The Spanish had been so rapid-fire that Beth hadn't understood. What had he said? Was there something she should do? Mike whirled, striking the side of Truman's head with the gun. She held her breath as he stood over Truman and pressed the muzzle of his gun to the side of his head. What? What was it he had said?

"Get back over there where you belong, Scarface," Mike growled.

Her breath wouldn't move. This was it, she knew it! Truman's eyes had betrayed him: he had no intention to 'get back over there where he belonged.' Mike saw it too. He reacted, and in an instant, the cold gun barrel had been transferred from Truman to her cheek. There was the odor of metal, oil, Mike's sweat and his raspy breathing by her ear.

"Move!"

Truman didn't – he just stared! Was he going to let her be shot? Mike clicked back the hammer and she grimaced, waiting. Truman's tension dissipated, he wriggled in his bindings and returned to sit beside her. Her breath escaped in a blast as the gun was withdrawn.

"Any more spic-talk outta you," he said, "and I'm gonna let Doug have some fun with the lady's face. Understand?" Truman nodded dully.

"Hey man, I feel like shit," the fat man said as he dropped the mooring line from up on the barge onto the deck. "That cock-sucker hit me hard. I'm feeling dizzy, weird."

"Yeah, okay," Mike answered, looking up to him. "I'll give you a hand getting down. Keep an eye on them, Doug!" he commanded, moving towards the stern. Maybe now! She glanced to Truman, then tensed – ready.

Cockroach saw the intent in her eye. "Come on, sweetheart," he mocked, "want your face rearranged?" The knife sliced the air. On the barge, the fat man, unsteady from the blow, was having difficulty negotiating the ladder. His feet seemed unable to find the rungs. Mike leaned from the stern, grasped a rung in one hand and with his other reached up to

guide the fat man's foot. "Here," he barked, "put your weight here. For chrissake, waz'a matter wit 'cha, can't you feel the damn rung? It's right under your big fat foot."

There was a moment, maybe a half-second after slicing the air with his knife in which Skinny had appeared slightly off-balance with his weight thrown to one side. Maybe, just maybe, she could head-butt him at that moment if she could just get him to do that again. She glared defiantly at him, taunting him with her lower lip stuck out. She readied to tell him to go fuck himself, when suddenly from her side Truman spoke.

"*Empuja la palanca roja por atras, ya!*" he hissed. She spun her head to look in Truman's eyes. In that same instant, she was tumbled onto her back as the boat surged to full power and leaped away from the barge, roaring uncontrollably into the harbor. Her last sight of Mike was of him cartwheeling over the stern. Cockroach, Truman and she slid in a tumble towards the stern.

Beth leapt to her feet. Truman didn't exist; nor did anyone save weasel-man upon whom she focused with burning intensity. The skinny monster had skidded onto a coil of rope and lay there grabbing wildly at a wound in his thigh where his own knife must have stabbed him. She mounted his back and with both hands grabbed a thick wad of greasy hair. She lifted his head high, as he had done to her in the hold – and to the policeman too – and slammed it facedown onto the deck. Once! Up again, she heaved his head, removing a wad of hair with the force and slammed it to the deck. Twice! The wormy slime struggled to free himself. No way! Her grip was like iron: again, she lifted and slammed. This time there was a satisfying CRACK when his cockroach face encountered the deck.

"You fucker!" she screamed.

Slime-ball twisted onto his back, freeing an arm. In a bloodied hand: the knife.

It flashed towards her.

He was no match for a fury such as hers. With an intensity of speed unknown to her, her hand snatched his wrist from the air. "No chance!" she hissed. The arm was pulled close and clamped with both hands before she gnashed her teeth into the meaty flesh at the base of his thumb. With every force available to her – she bit.

Deep.

Blood flowed into her mouth. He screamed, wiggled to release himself from the vise-like clamp of her legs and tried to claw at her face. She pushed that hand away and sank her teeth deeper still, twisting her head from side to side. The knife fell free. She released the arm and spat blood at him. Balling her fist, she slugged his skinny beak of a nose while his free arm pushed against her and he squirmed to escape. He wasn't going anywhere! Beth pulled her legs tighter and hit him again. Her punch didn't have enough to it. The hateful face continued to leer! With a hammer, she could smash the cockroach into nothingness. Again, she slugged his nose, drawing blood this time. That was better. She lifted her arm high to pummel it again, but someone from behind had grabbed her arm.

"Let go of me!"

Tears of frustration filled her eyes. It was the stranger, pulling her off the animal. Didn't he understand? She needed to crush, to obliterate, to eliminate the slime. Somehow, however, the man forced himself between her wild rage and weasel-man. Keeping her behind his back, he leaned his broad shoulder into the scum's stomach and shoved with his palm against his chest, trying to force the skinny bastard overboard. Beth lashed her arms over the bigger man's shoulders and around his back, straining to reach her adversary's flesh. Couldn't the man let her get at him once more, just once? She screamed her hatred, stretching her grasp towards the worm, fists and clawing fingernails flailing the air futilely. Fighting to stay aboard, the monster tried desperately to maintain his grip on the rail with hands at either side of his hips and his toes

hooked under the low gunwale, as the larger man heaved his entire weight against him, forcing him out over rushing water and beyond Beth's reach. She saw her chance. Resting her hand against the large man's shoulder for balance, she swung back her foot and with her full force delivered a powerful kick into the 'V' of her enemy's widely opened crotch. His scream was heard above the roar of the engine then cut short as he disappeared into the frothy water, almost taking the other man with him.

She locked eyes for a moment with the tall man then, in synchronized motion, they turned to look aft into the foam of the wake at the figure thrashing there, then forward again, still in unison, to see Truman emerge from the door of the wheelhouse. He rushed to her and held her but, noticing the other man bent over the body of the policeman, Truman's face pulled into an angry grimace. He was like a different person, glaring with such venom that she felt he wanted to tear the man limb from limb and spoke with a voice that was frightening when he asked: "What have you done THIS TIME, Raul?"

Raul? He called the man Raul.

She curiously studied his features.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Truman helplessly watched the brutal murder of the policeman, his hands and feet bound, unable to do anything but recoil in horror. It was a vivid wake-up call to the fact that if he didn't do something, however desperate, soon, real soon, Beth could be the next to be sliced in half before his eyes – *after being raped*. He didn't doubt for a moment that that was exactly what was in store for them. There wasn't much time; with the engine running and only one mooring line remaining, they would soon be underway. He looked around for something, something. Just aft of where Raul was handcuffed, on the starboard rail, was the after throttle. It was the red lever among a cluster of others that controlled the winches. Its use was to adjust speed during trolling operations, while busy with nets and booms; he'd used it to maneuver alongside the barge and remembered clearly that it was still engaged. If Raul could stretch out, maybe with his foot he could reach it, the boat would then leap forward and knock both men to the deck – hopefully. Beth still wasn't tied, maybe she could do something too; get the skinny shit's knife or Mike's gun even. It was more than desperate; it was likely suicidal, but what else was there? Did Beth have the courage and willingness to kill? Could Raul be trusted? Had he changed, becoming his cousin again, or was he still a mindless puppet that would order rockets fired upon his own family? Maybe he came to steal the cocaine, or probably something more cowardly, like fetch him back to Nicaragua to stand trial for the La Palma bombing, but he had no choice other than to trust him.

Mike stood transfixed over the body of the policeman, watching it quiver in post-mortem convulsions while the cockroach tattooed murderer leaned over the rail, washing blood from his hands and knife. Truman's pleading stare desperately sought and finally captured Raul's attention. They had but a moment, while Mike and the other were distracted. With his chin, lips, brows and flashes of his eyes, Truman indicated the throttle. He saw Raul fix his eyes upon the cluster of levers, but his gaze returned to Truman with an expression of incomprehension. Truman was again under the watchful eye of Mike when Raul mouthed the word, 'what?' There was another moment when Mike turned again to his ghoulish pleasure over the corpse. Truman used it to stretch his head sideways and extended his tongue to point at the lever. Raul swung his eyes again to the controls, but he obviously didn't understand. Truman would have to risk it. He cleared his throat twice in succession and saw Raul's penetrating gaze fix upon him.

"The red lever! Wait for my signal!" He spoke the words rapidly in Spanish, then clenched his teeth knowing what was to come. It came. A stunning blow from Mike's gun struck the side of his head. Then, because he was stunned and unable to move quickly enough to satisfy him, Beth was threatened with mutilation. Had it been worth it? Had Raul heard and understood? If an opportunity presented itself could he be counted on? Truman didn't know and couldn't pull his gaze from the stomach-churning scene of Mike's desecration of the dead, cursing and kicking the body.

Then miraculously, it looked as though a chance might come: Mike went aft, grumbling instructions up to the fat bastard still aboard the barge, and it almost looked as though he intended to climb the ladder and offer aid. The chance was slim. They would probably all be killed, but to die while fighting is a far better choice than as victims of deranged brutality. He glanced at Beth to advise her to be alert for an opening, if he could only make one. There was no reason to doubt that she was up to it: her eyes were fixed cat-like on the knife-wielding little prick. He was instantly alarmed with the realization of what he was watching: practically imperceptibly, her body was tensing – she was preparing to throw herself, unarmed,

against a knife-wielding maniac! She WAS a warrior, but, he couldn't let her do it, she'd die for sure. Before he could act to intervene, the maniac, too, saw her readiness, and turned on her. The knife came out before him, and he advanced on her.

"Come on, sweetheart," he taunted, "want your pretty face rearranged?"

A shiver raced up Truman's spine as the knife menaced scant inches from her flesh. Yet, there was no retreat in her eyes. But, it was too soon to act! Aft, frustrated at the fat man's inability to negotiate the steel rungs of the ladder, Mike ambled closer to the stern and looked up to him, grumbling profanity. Not yet, not yet, Beth, please, he mentally begged. She seemed to want to provoke the man with her lip stuck out defiantly, like an angry little girl. Mike stepped up onto the stern rail, and with one hand grasped a rung of ladder, while with the other he reached above and guided the fat man's feet, cursing as he did so. It was a gift from heaven. He acted without hesitation: "Push the red lever all the way back, NOW!" he shouted in Spanish. The skinny one turned towards him with his knife and swung back his arm to slash at him while behind him, Raul reached the limit of his handcuff, extended his leg and, with the toe of a mud-caked shoe, shoved the throttle with such force that it buckled and wrapped around its end limit.

"Say good-bye, spic," Cockroach hissed as his arm swung.

The movement was never completed. Below decks, the mighty 671-T Detroit surged to full power and a great froth of water erupted from behind. The skinny devil was propelled sideways and tumbled aft, while Truman minimized his skid by lying on his back with palms to the deck and the soles of his shoes pressed flat. Frantically pumping his feet against the deck, he slid himself towards Raul. "Raul," he commanded, wriggling close. "My feet! Untie them, quick!" He lay on his back and raised his feet to where Raul's manacled hands could reach them. "Hurry!" A knot came loose and one foot dropped to the deck. He jerked the other free from Raul's efforts and sprang towards the throttle to slacken it. He pulled and heaved at it, but the control remained bent over its stop and refused to come free. The boat was hurtling headlong into a narrow and cluttered channel. He lifted his hands behind his back to within Raul's reach. "Hands!" he shouted. On the after deck, Michael Henderson was gone. Beth sat atop the skinny maniac, slamming his face onto the deck.

His hands came free.

The policeman's right front pocket yielded a set of keys. Truman slapped them into Raul's hand while racing into the wheelhouse. "Get her off before she kills him!" he shouted over his shoulder. Ahead, only moments away, at the end of a fire-damaged pier, loomed a cluster of pilings. He spun the wheel to the left a bit too rapidly and the boat slipped sideways, continuing its rush towards destruction. He rotated it right and caught a good bite of water just in time, missing the pilings by a mere hair's breadth. With an exhalation of pent up fear, he guided the boat towards the channel, secured the wheel with a line and reduced throttle.

Now there was Raul to deal with, and the body of the poor unfortunate policeman. Truman had been beyond understanding or reason when, in the midst of Beth being captured, threatened with rape and murder, Raul materialized from out of the darkness. At first sight of him, Truman felt he was hallucinating. Where the hell had he come from, and why? Yes, why? That was the important question. Now that immediate danger was past, Raul's objective, whatever that might be, would revert to its original design. Truman lifted the old chronometer from its enclosure at the top of the chart table, released the false panel below it and removed the pistol hidden within. With the gun jammed into his waistband, he hastened towards the rear deck where he encountered a struggle. Raul was heaving against the skinny man in an attempt to shove him overboard while he clung to the rail with tenacity, in spite of the fact that his body was literally out over the water. Meanwhile, Beth was a wild woman, ferociously clawing and punching to get to the man. She steadied herself against Raul and unleashed a kick that caught the skinny one right in the nuts. He yelped, lost his grip and went overboard with a splash.

They had escaped with their lives! “Beth,” he called, hurrying to her, “are you all right?”

“I’m okay,” she responded, leaning her head against his chest and becoming encircled in his arms. She leaned back in his embrace and studied a trickle of blood on his cheek, then turned to look at Raul kneeling over the body of the policeman. He was weeping as he closed the man’s eyelids, and his voice choked with grief and fury when he cried out, looking up to them: “He’s dead! Edgar’s dead!”

“See what have you done, this time, Raul?” Truman whipped the pistol from his waistband. “You murdering son-of-a-bitch! Lucia was my whole life!” The words escaped from between clenched teeth as a hiss. “You! You killed her, fried her alive with your traitorous Sandinista rockets. And my children too. Now this poor man!” His mouth drawn into a tight line, he cocked the hammer and advanced. His arm shot up automatically, elbow locked. Looking over the sight of the pistol, he focused on the eyes of the one responsible for Lucia’s, the babies’ and so many others’ deaths. Yet, the malevolent beast he had so long fanaticized killing wasn’t there: it was Raul, his cousin, his own blood. He couldn’t. The gradually increasing pressure of his finger upon the trigger had reached the firing point. One tiny micro-moment before the gun discharged, he flicked the barrel left. Raul was struck by the shock wave and burning grains of gunpowder, but the bullet passed harmlessly to bury itself in the deck.

“No, Truman! Please, no!” Beth pleaded, pulling on his arm.

He looked into her eyes, said nothing, and allowed her to lower his arm. “My cousin Raul,” he said with a wave. Raul, his mouth in a grimace, ignored Truman, returning his attention to the body and reverently crossing the arms over its chest.

“That Raul?” Beth’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“The same,” he pronounced grimly. “Beth, Raul; Raul, this is Beth.” Raul merely lifted his tear-stained eyes momentarily from the body. Not a word passed his lips. “Raul, get your ass up in the wheelhouse,” Truman commanded. Nothing: he may as well have spoken to the corpse. “The wheelhouse,” he repeated. “Move it.”

“This man,” Raul said with his hands laid atop those of the dead man, “was pure to the core, good, honest, and my most loyal friend for many, many years. He died trying to save all of our lives, cousin. We will not leave him here uncovered!” Truman had been humbled.

Beth looked from one to the other. She needed direction.

“Go below please and get a clean sheet from the closet,” Truman said. “Take a look in the head while you’re down there. There should be a first aid kit in the small cabinet. Maybe you can do something for Raul’s arm.”

“Me?” she questioned. “That’s not some superficial kitchen knife cut. It’s a deep stab wound, and I’m not a nurse,” she moaned. “Okay, I changed Herminia’s bandages, but that doesn’t mean I know how to take care of something serious like that.”

“Just bring it up; I’ll tell you what to do,” he said. The sheet was placed over the body and tucked under to prevent wind from blowing it away. Blood had already colored its center crimson when they turned towards the wheelhouse. Truman loosened the line securing the wheel and brought the boat on course, centered in the channel outbound towards the open sea.

Raul had begun to remove his jacket from his wounded arm when he noticed that the lights of Limon were visible over the stern. “Are you out of your mind, cousin?” he asked. “Where do you think you’re taking us?”

“We have to go out to sea.”

The pronouncement brought Raul suddenly to his feet. “Like hell, we do! Turn this boat around, now!”

Truman was elbowed, and Raul threw his weight against him in a struggle for control of the wheel. He stepped back and allowed Raul access to the wheel, while he walked from the wheelhouse to the deck and retrieved the handcuffs and set of keys dangling from the rail. A one hundred eighty degree turn was practically completed when he returned, with the pistol. "Back away, from the wheel!" he commanded. "I don't want to, but I *will* shoot you, cousin. Now, get back over there on the stool, sit down and let her take care of your arm. Move!" When he sat, Truman tossed the handcuffs to Beth. "Put 'em on: one on his good hand and the other to the rail. Fortunately, Raul complied, offering Beth his wrist. She closed the handcuffs as Truman instructed, and began to pull free Raul's blood-matted shirt and jacket.

"A policeman has been killed here," Raul said, speaking to them both, "don't you realize that? If we continue on this course, his murderer will swim to shore and escape with his accomplices. We must go back and call the authorities. Truman, listen to me: whatever you've done, I beg you, go back and turn yourself in!"

Truman held his expression rigid, ignoring the pleas. The tide was low, and the channel through the coral narrow and deadly dangerous. The side of his head pounded from the blow from Mike's pistol, and his hands trembled from adrenaline rush. He glanced at Raul. And why was *he* here?

"Please cousin," Raul said, noticing the fleeting look, "use your head! That's my friend out there."

"Raul, would you shut up!" he snapped. "I can't listen to your whining and get us safely through this channel." Beth, he could see, had exposed the wound.

She poured hydrogen peroxide over it and wiped with gauze, then grimaced at the heavy blood flow. "Oh, Truman!" she groaned. "I can't do this."

"Beth, you have to; I have to get us through this passage to the other side of the reef. Take a look at the blood flow. If it comes out in squirts, we'll have to put on a tourniquet and hope for the best, but if it's flowing steadily we should be able to fix him up."

"What's going on here, cousin? Who were those Americans? What did they want with you and why won't you call the police? You can use the ship-to-shore radio and maybe they can still be caught before they get away completely."

"If you insist upon talking, tell me then what you and your friend are doing here."

"I came here to see you. Edgar..." Raul fought a quivering lower lip, bit it and inhaled deeply through his nostrils. "Edgar found your name on the visitor's list at the prison. That's how I came to know that you hadn't been killed in the war. I went to find you at your hotel – a very nice place, by the way, congratulations – and they told me how to find your boat. I arrived too late at the fishing pier, but I followed you across the bay. Okay?"

"Is that so? I heard you were in Cuba."

"Well, I was, but I left a few years ago."

"Uh-huh. Pass me his wallet, Beth." Raul's eyes turned to watch his wallet change hands, then flinched when Beth returned to her medical efforts.

She studied the wound, wiped away blood then watched as more flowed down his arm. "It's just coming out in a steady flow, Truman; what do I do now," she asked, appearing peaked.

"All right, that's really good," he answered. "The blood should have rinsed out the wound by now. Clean the surrounding area thoroughly with alcohol and pinch the wound shut with a piece of gauze between your fingers. Hold it like that and with your other hand and wipe the surrounding skin as dry as possible. Then, stick a piece of tape onto the dry area on one side of the wound, take your fingers away, pull the tape tightly over the wound and quickly stick it to the skin on the

other side. Do that along the length of the wound until there's no more blood coming out and you're done. We'll see how it looks in a couple of days."

"I can't, my hands keep shaking." Beth held out her hands to be seen, squeezed them together, and then returned to attending the wound. "Okay, I'll do the best I can. You can help a little bit, you know," she said addressing Raul. "Put your finger there and hold that."

Truman flipped open the wallet. He found a Nicaraguan Embassy ID and tapped it against the wheel. "Well, I guess this explains why you brought a policeman with you."

"My work is with war refugees, Truman nothing else. I find them and help them claim their right to return home and, in some cases, to a plot of land as well. You're worried about possible war crimes, aren't you? Do you know..."

"Yeah, yeah. Be quiet, huh?" His hands too trembled, in fact, he trembled all over. Whatever lay in store for himself, he could only accept that it was deserved, but what had he involved Beth in? Why had he been so easily bent from his determination that she remain safely back at the hotel? Why?

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Was he cursed that, every time he saw his cousin Truman, loved ones should die violently? Raul asked himself. Or was it, as he suspected, simply Truman's proclivity for irresponsibility that repeatedly got him into the worst of all possible situations? He'd had such high hopes for a joyous reunion: Truman and Raul, the inseparable cousins of their youth, together again. But, there had been nothing but savagery and slaughter from the moment he'd seen him sitting on the deck. He'd called out happily to him from the deck of the barge, unaware that anything was amiss, when the night watchman who had kindly volunteered to escort him to Truman's boat suddenly jabbed a pistol in his back – and the unending anguish began. He'd been so fixed upon fantasies of Truman's reaction at the first moment of recognition that he hadn't immediately noticed the Uzi in the hand of the man standing. If he had, things may have turned out quite differently, but here he was: Truman's handcuffed prisoner, a gaping stab wound in his arm, and Edgar lying dead out on deck.

Raul pressed his chin on an upraised shoulder and studied his cousin with an uncomprehending gaze, while doing his best to ignore the bolts of pain his lady friend, Beth, sent shooting through his arm. He was pleased for Truman that the loss of Lucia hadn't hardened his heart to romance, as had his loss of Hilda done for him. Yet, what was this: Truman pointing a gun at him, handcuffing him to the rail and taking the boat to sea without so much as calling the police, while Edgar's murderers escaped? Had his cousin lost all trace of sanity? Granted, as a bullet grazing his ear had clearly demonstrated, in Truman's mind he was responsible for the tragedy in Jinotega, but there was no rhyme or reason for this: that was Edgar out there, and Truman was allowing his killers to walk away! Could this man be the same Truman he had so loved and protected?

"Come on Raul, the truth!" he was urging, tapping his embassy ID against a knuckle for effect. He raised a skeptical eyebrow while the woman fashioned a butterfly bandage to close his wound.

She pressed the tape to his skin painfully with her thumb. "Sit still," she complained at his flinching, "I can't do this with you jumping all over the place," and pushed him firmly down onto the stool.

He couldn't help but admire her feisty strength. "Sorry," he said, gentling the tone of his voice. He wondered how Truman could allow this woman to be caught up in whatever it was that he was up to. Hadn't he yet learned to consider the consequences of his actions, if not to himself, then to others? The final strip of tape was wound over gauze and given a satisfying slap by the woman, ending the torture.

She offered a shy smile, and began repacking the first aid kit. "That's the best I can do," she proclaimed, snapping it closed. It's probably going to leave a nasty scar. "Maybe it will make you look a little more like your cousin!" Both glanced to her and, despite the tension, managed wan smiles.

"Truman," Raul said gravely, "do you realize that if you don't turn this boat around you will be an accomplice in the murder of a police lieutenant, a man who has been my dear friend for twenty years?"

"You know, maybe he's right," Beth said. "They are getting away. Maybe, if we just called on the radio, the police could catch them before they get too far."

"No!" he snapped. "Do you realize what you're saying? They'd send a boat out after us, and then what? Think about it. We have no choice now but to continue. I told you this wouldn't be easy. Raul," he said, turning towards his

cousin, “I need to know what you are doing here. You can’t expect me to believe that you just popped out of the night sky for a personal visit. You’ve been sent by the embassy: why?”

“I do expect you to believe that I dropped by for a personal visit, cousin, because that is the truth.”

“And your policeman friend? I suppose you’ll tell me he too was just dropping by for coffee.”

Raul blew air between slack lips, in resignation. Truman was once again operating by rules of distrust and suspicion that only he understood. “Edgar is – was – an OIJ police lieutenant. He has been investigating the one with the Uzi, Michael Henderson, for suspected drug trafficking. He must have followed them here. Why they attacked you, I have no idea.”

“Is that so? Tell me then,” he challenged, “if you know so much about what your friend was up to, how did Mike Henderson know that we’d be here tonight?”

“How am I supposed to know that?”

“Enough games, cousin. Give me a little more credit than expecting me to believe such bullshit. A police lieutenant is not going to intercept a team of drug smugglers single-handedly armed with just a pistol. Now, how about the truth? Why are you after me? Who sent you and your friend?”

“After you?” Raul's heart was thumping madly. He’d been trying to regain some control, but Truman’s remarks shook him every bit as much as had the bullet, the knifing and the rest of it. “I was trying to reestablish contact with my cousin: I wouldn’t call that being after you. Aside from that, until a few days ago, I honestly thought that you had been killed after the La Palma bombing. Isn’t that what you Contras wanted us to think? How could I have known? Supposing, just supposing, that for some bizarre reason I was after you, why would I look for you in Limon Harbor? Can you tell me that? And yes, Edgar was investigating drug trafficking! Don’t you dare refer to him or his work as bullshit! A more honorable man has never lived!” His body shook with agitation. “It’s even written in his notebook! Here,” he said reaching into an inside pocket of his jacket and extracting the blood covered book picked up from the deck beside his friend’s body. “See for yourself. Look at the page that Michael Henderson talked about: ‘Interview with Mike Scumbag’. I’ve only had a chance to glance at it. Just be careful to only touch the pages by their edges so you don’t destroy fingerprints.”

“The notebook! I’d forgotten...” Beth took it from Raul’s hand, staring at it in wide-eyed wonder as Truman set a course of 020 degrees and worked at securing the wheel.

“This is it, Truman,” she said excitedly. “Mike’s fingerprints are all over the book, *and in blood, too!* I’ve been worrying myself sick thinking that he’s going to get away again because how could we ever testify against him? But with this, we’ve got him! This will convict him of murder even if he wasn’t the one who actually did it. Who, other than himself, will ever say he didn’t? I know I won’t!”

“Let me have a look,” he said, taking the book in his hands and leafing through the pages. “My God!” he mumbled, pausing to understand an entry. “Beth, look at this: ‘the prostitute,’ he mentions here why, that’s Herminia! This is crazy!” he commented at length. “What was his plan; a one-man showboat arrest of an entire drug smuggling ring?”

“It could be, I don’t know. He had hoped for a break in his career.”

“Let’s just assume for a moment that I believe this bullshit, which, by the way, I don’t. What if you and your friend did find something that might connect R. Gordon Edward with drug smuggling? Where would you have gone for a warrant to investigate further? You two were out of your minds. Gordon has more influence in this country than you could ever imagine. That part’s simple: he pays for it. I’m sorry to have to tell you, but any report your friend would have submitted would only have ended up shredded and burned. Then both he *and you* would have been burned – and that would have been the end of it.”

“What’s the matter with you? I am not part of this! How many times do I have to tell you? But don’t you see what that notebook means? Just like Beth said, those fingerprints will convict the one that had the Uzi and Edgar’s entries will certainly initiate an investigation in the affairs of Edward. But then, the testimony of the three of us is needed to arraign the others. So, come on cousin, turn the boat around and let’s call the police.”

“Raul, don’t you get what I’m saying to you? Give up your ridiculous idea. The police of Limon Province are Gordon Edward’s private little army. That’s not all; he is in collusion with the highest levels of national law enforcement too, and not just here in Costa Rica. The Director of OIJ, for example, and the judge you would go to for a warrant, they all receive Gordon’s money, and plenty of it. The whole system is in his pocket! Gordon Edward operates what is probably the largest cocaine smuggling operation in the world, other than the cartels themselves. I’m very sorry for your friend, but the long and the short of it is: any plan at all he may have had stood not even one chance of success. This notebook is worthless – I’m sorry Beth – but it is, because it mentions Gordon in connection with cocaine and there isn’t other corroborating evidence. It wouldn’t last a day in police custody without being lost, burned or given over to Gordon, and later, anyone who asked about it wouldn’t be able to find a soul who so much as remembered it. All that turning this boat around would accomplish would be for Beth and myself to be arrested for smuggling and quickly killed to shut us up. And don’t think for a minute that you would be excluded, either.”

“Okay, Truman,” Raul responded after a moments consideration. “Convince me. What makes you think you’re the person who has all the answers? For starters, what’s your position in the middle of all of this?”

“What do you think Beth, should I tell him?”

“You might as well, Truman.” Beth nodded her head thoughtfully. “I think it’s best if he understands.”

“All right then, I’m going to tell you some things,” Truman began, “then we’ll see how you feel.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Raul was astounded to hear Truman begin with the revelation that he worked for Gordon Edward. Furthermore, below, in the hold was a large shipment of cocaine. Small wonder he refused to turn back. He asked where they were bound, but Truman continued on as though he hadn’t spoken, amazing him again by saying that he intended to throw the cocaine overboard. Beth had come into his life, he went on, and opened his eyes to himself, and this idea of dumping the drugs in the sea had resulted. Raul listened with a jaded ear, seriously doubting Truman’s sincerity, while simultaneously praying that there was, at least, some truth to his stated intentions. How could Truman have allowed himself to become involved with a drug smuggler? he had asked. The extensive response told of events, all too close to what he had long suspected, to be doubted: the American CIA, he said, had employed him, Gordon Edward, and others as cocaine smugglers to finance their incursion into Nicaragua the same as had been done in Vietnam to finance certain ‘secret war’ activities only, in that case, the drug had been heroine.

He hungered for the opportunity to avenge his friend’s murder by turning his notebook over to the police, but Truman was probably correct in his charge that Gordon Edward’s power reached all the way to the director of the OIJ. He needed only remember Edgar’s complaints of his encounters with rampant corruption within the department. The only possibility appeared to be public exposure of the notebook and their own eyewitness accounts in the newspapers – unfortunately the government tightly controlled the press.

His head spun. After those terrible years of war and then exile in Cuba, he’d at last found peace and purpose. Violence and intrigue had been relegated to the forgotten memories closet. Then, in a dizzying avalanche of events cascading

out of control, Truman showed up, returned from the dead, Edgar was brutally murdered before his very eyes, and now, here's his cousin cocaine trafficking on a grand scale for a major politician! Added to this parade of horrors was the knowledge that the American CIA sponsored their bloody rampage through his country by drug smuggling. It was more than he could tolerate. His brain fizzled and he was instantly exhausted. "Enough! I've heard enough!" His words startled Truman, who had been going on trance-like with his story – just as he had as a child, talking into the dark until he succumbed to his sleep. "We're all exhausted; let's continue this after we've had some sleep, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Beth and I will take turns at the helm."

"Truman, I don't..." Beth said, spreading her palms at the array of instruments and controls.

"Are we returning to harbor tomorrow?" Raul asked abruptly.

"I've already explained that we can't go back until the third day," Truman answered, "because Gordon would know that we hadn't delivered the coke."

"We are not going to leave Edgar out there on deck for the birds to eat. Since you refuse to turn back, we have to bury him at sea. How deep is it here?"

The engine was cut and the boat allowed to drift, lifting and falling as broad swells passed underneath. Raul was relieved of his handcuffs with the understanding that he would submit later. He battled tears and returning nausea to face again the spectacle of Edgar's corpse lying in a congealing pool of blood. They wrapped him in the sheet with a short section of chain around his ankles to take him directly to the bottom. Raul prayed to his friend's God, thanking Him for Edgar and pleading for his eternal peace. He also prayed for his soul's safe delivery to his Lord, although, if ever a man had earned safe passage for his behavior here on Earth, it was he.

Raul spoke aloud of the life of the man they were burying that they too might appreciate him, if but a little. There was not one in this world, however, who knew him as Raul had. There was Edgar's zest for life, his love of things beautiful, his integrity and loyalty that endured without waver through decades, and he was also aware of Edgar's special love for him. He'd lived honestly and died honorably: an exceptional man. They lowered him into the water and released their grip. He became a white form undulating through darkness. Then there were just waves licking the side of the boat, and below, nothing.

Raul was in no mood to argue. He offered his wrist and was handcuffed to a bed frame in the lower cabin. He shut the tiny reading lamp and sank into the embrace of the pillow.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

A standing order of the Port Authority Police Department mandated that the Director be advised immediately of any significant or unusual incidents. It was right there, in the manual, the Port Authority Lieutenant said, turning the book around so Gordon could see the directive. “This report,” the Lieutenant insisted, “qualifies on both counts.” Gordon had his doubts, but he restrained himself; the previous report which someone had deemed important enough to warrant a report similarly delivered in person had been of a barroom brawl. However, not to dampen the young officer’s zeal, he listened, albeit impatiently, to his account, tedious for its attention to minute and mostly unrelated detail, of a death the previous night. Yet, as he followed, in heightening fascination, those same tedious details gave depth to a grizzly scene that began in the early hours.

The crew of the fishing boat *La Nene II* came across a man who appeared to be a light-complexioned foreigner clinging to floating debris and on the rush of tide being swept to sea through the narrow channel. He had been unresponsive to shouts and presumed dead until slight movements were noticed. As they pulled alongside, he appeared to be screaming, but there was so little voice left to him that all that passed through his lips was whisper. When they retrieved him from the water, crewmembers gasped, wretched and blessed themselves. Trailing from his left hip were the remnants of a leg that sharks had reduced to shreds of meat, gristle and vein. The captain of the boat leaned close, attempting to discern the man’s words, but they were in English and he comprehended little. The mate spoke a trifling of English from his days aboard a Pacific Coast party boat and understood better, but there was little else to be heard until they both distinctly made out “—a mountain of coke,” repeated several times. The mate maintained that he heard the man brag of killing a police officer, but the captain couldn’t confirm that. The man was slipping fast despite wrapping him in layers of blankets and frantic efforts to stay the bleeding. “It could be that he’s thirsty,” the captain suggested when the incoherent and barely alive man giggled amid his ramblings, saying, “— coke man, yeah lots’a coke.” A bottle of Coca Cola was opened and a small amount allowed to trickle into his mouth. The dying man’s eyes flashed wide, he spat Coke at them and, in a strong voice clearly understood by the entire crew, spoke his final words: “Cocaine, motherfucker! Cocaine.” And he died. Gordon’s heart caught in his throat. Truman; he hadn’t yet called in on the marine radio! Had this man attacked and possibly killed Truman?

“Excuse me please, Lieutenant,” he said, rising abruptly to his feet. “There is an important call I’d forgotten and I must place it at once, but please don’t go away; we’ll continue in a minute.” He rounded his enormous desk in record time, told the startled officer to leave his papers as they were and escorted him from the office. “Connie,” he called into the waiting room, “would you please make the lieutenant comfortable,” and slammed the door shut. Moments later the ship-to-shore microphone was in his hand.

Answering on the third call, Truman responded that he hadn’t noticed anything unusual. “Why?” he questioned, “has something happened?”

“No, nothing for you to worry about,” Gordon responded, feeling the rush of adrenaline dissipate. “A shark attack, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry. No sharks here, everything is fine. Over and out,” Truman’s voice responded, laying to rest his initial fear, but there were others: the man had to have been inside the harbor when he went into the water. Could it be that someone else was trafficking cocaine right there in his own backyard? That would be the last thing he needed: any blundering could

bring the world down upon him. He assumed a composed exterior and summoned the lieutenant for the remainder of his report.

“The man’s wallet was still in his pocket,” the officer said, eagerly probing the contents of a large manila envelope. He produced a sodden wallet, plopped it onto Gordon’s desktop and resumed rummaging. “One second, Sir. Right in here somewhere is the...”

“Lieutenant!” Gordon snapped.

The startled youth looked up from the envelope. Gordon held the wallet pinched between thumb and forefinger on an outstretched arm. “Sir?”

“Lieutenant, just read the report and please keep the, uh, evidence,” he said wiggling the foul smelling wallet, “off of my desk.” He buffed the wet spot with a clean tissue until the gloss returned. Disappointingly, the remainder of the report was brief and raised more questions than it answered. Exactly who was this Douglas Finney from Boston, Massachusetts? His police record, begun in childhood, included two separate arrests for possession of cocaine with the intent to sell, but through plea-bargaining he had avoided conviction on both occasions: the first had been reduced to possession, and the second dropped altogether. It appeared overwhelmingly obviously that cocaine had brought Mr. Douglas Finney to Limon Harbor and his violent, premature death. What cocaine? Whose? How had he ended up in the water? If there were Tweety traffickers in Limon, they were operating under conditions in which two associates had been recently eliminated. Maybe this Douglas Finney showed up attempting to rebuild the organization, and it all went bad. There certainly would be plenty of distrust and hair triggers. If so; excellent, but he had to know.

A shark wouldn’t attack a man unless he had been bleeding and trailing blood through the water: blood from what? There was nothing in police records of the night before even remotely associated with bloodshed, American criminals or cocaine. All that was there were the arrests of two transvestites for soliciting, six drunk and disorderly arrests, an array of traffic citations and the impounding of a car found parked in a space reserved for an executive. It was soon discovered that the car was registered to a Nicaraguan National who carried a diplomatic passport and whose worst offence recorded by the police was a singular incident of passing a red light. He was a social worker assisting Nicaraguan war refugees and he lived in San José. On the surface, he appeared to be the most innocent of individuals, yet in Douglas Finney’s shirt pocket was found his Nicaraguan Embassy business card.

Finally, there was this mention Douglas Finney made of killing a police officer. The mate of the fishing boat, *La Nene II*, had been questioned extensively, but couldn’t be shaken from his contention that that was exactly what the dying man had said. Yet, neither the Port Authority Police Department nor the OIJ acknowledged any police activity in the vicinity of Limon Harbor or any missing officers. A perfunctory call had been placed, just to cover all bases, to the City of Limon Police Department, technically independent, but administered by the Port Authority. The result had been as expected: nothing, every officer alive and accounted for. He ordered that his Port Authority Police Department spare no effort in learning everything there was to know about the American criminal Douglas Finney and, he added, if the Nicaraguan social worker should show up to claim his car he was to be brought to him immediately.

He tilted his chair backward to stare at the ceiling. He wanted to make sense of it all, but couldn’t. The fact that the Nicaraguan, Raul Herrera, was employed at the embassy was troubling. That made it a matter requiring finesse so as not to cause an international incident. Additionally, the press would soon catch wind of the unusual events in Limon Harbor. He needed a story to release officially that plugged all the holes, created no difficulties with Nicaragua and didn’t cause the American DEA to descend on Limon like a swarm of locust. Police captain, Manuel Flores, of the OIJ was an expert in such

matters and a recipient for many years of Gordon's generous contributions. He called him to get the ball rolling. Flores didn't think the Nicaraguan was associated with any of it when Gordon related the entire story. His first guess was that he would soon walk in and claim his car with a perfectly good explanation for why he left it there, and his business card could show up in anyone's pocket and mean nothing. Gordon, however, didn't trust coincidence. "No, there's a connection," he said, "and I want you to find it. Dig through immigration records, have a look at his personnel file at the embassy and search his home, too. Now, go and get back to me as soon as possible," he demanded.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

“Are you sure, Patty?” Mike asked. “Maybe, he swam all the way over to the other side.”

“How many times I gotta fucking tell ya, Mike? he drowned. I seen him go down in the water and he didn’t come back up again.”

“Yeah, but it was darker’n shit. Maybe he hung on’ta sumpin.”

“So where the fuck is he then, huh? We stayed around looking for him like a couple’a fucking jerks just wanting ta get picked up by the cops, all they way up until people started coming in `ta work, for chrissake. He’s dead, Mike! That’s it.”

“Shit, man, shit! Fucking Dougie’s always been like the best, ya know what I mean?” They drove in silence, each with his own thoughts as Mike navigated switchback turns at the edge of sheer cliffs at speeds that occasionally lifted the inside wheels from the road surface. “You gotta get the fuck outta here, Patty-boy,” Mike said at length. “The next plane, man; no sense’n you hanging around here wit me. Someone’s gonna show up soon, either the cops or the nigger’s guys.”

“Yeah, no shit, but what about you, man, what are you gonna do?”

“Well, I been thinking. If I can hold out here and keep things normal-looking for Sylvia when she calls, she’s gonna order another shipment’a coke before long, specially if you get back up there and light a fire under Kevin’s ass ‘ta sell the shit yaz already got real fucking quick. It ain’t gonna be a quantity anything like that fucking mountain the scarface spic had, but when it comes I’m gonna snatch it. That’n the money in La Hacienda’s bank accounts, which I’ll empty on the last day, will be enough to get me set up somewheres else. Maybe you’n I’ll hook up again after that, we’ll see.”

“But that don’t make no sense, Mike. What about when the cops come, or the nigger’s guys?”

“I got that figured, too. I’m gonna have a truckload’a rocks dumped across the entrance so’s nobody can get up to the hotel and put that Alfredo kid out there in the guardhouse. Anybody comes, I’ll have plenty’a warning before they can get in to the hotel. I’m gonna keep the car down in the valley on the other side’a the river in that old barn, and up in the garage I’ll keep me a saddled horse. So, if Alfredo calls saying there’s someone out there I don’t want to see, I’ll sneak down the hill on the horse, cross the river and split. Then, when the coast is finally clear, I go back. Should work, don’cha think?”

It was a desperate plan and risky as hell especially if Edward set guys after him, but he couldn’t let Patty see his panic. Would he be able to keep it all from Sylvia long enough? People in Boston had’ta already know that three’a the guys got busted. How long before word got back to Sal Cassano? Well, if she found out, sure as shit she’d call and start bitching even before she came down. That’d be a pretty good early warning system. If it happened, he’d have to satisfy himself with the money in La Hacienda accounts and split. But, what was it she’d said about anyone who fucked with Edward’s cocaine? That they were doomed, hadn’t she? Shit, that sucked! She was usually right the way she sized up situations and people. He needed to do something quick. Scarface: he must’a made a fucking bundle and a’half on that load alone. Truman, that was the name, and he sure did seem’ta be hung up on the American broad. Maybe he could find them, grab the broad and ransom her back to him. It was a thought worth looking in’ta.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Towering cumulus clouds, their bottoms flat and appearing close to the water, were scattered about an otherwise unblemished blue sky, but not one offered shade to *El Tiburón Limon*. Her engine off, she rolled gently on broad swells unruffled by wind. Raul had been freed of his shackle to help dispose of the cocaine, although his left arm was far too painful to move and hung useless in a sling. He leaned his right shoulder against the wheelhouse and watched perspiration drip from his nose, as his cousin manipulated controls, lifting the illicit cargo from the hold. Throughout the morning, he'd been having idle thoughts that possibly Truman's best option was to go ahead and deliver the drugs. He wouldn't have a drug lord putting a price on his head, and Beth could escape before her boyfriend's next foolish move put her in mortal danger again. But with the drugs dangling before his eyes in a cargo net, he was having second thoughts. It was just too great a quantity to turn one's back on when it was within your power to do something about it: it should be destroyed, before it did its harm. Still, were they doing the right thing? He'd spoken with Beth about it while Truman was in the hold hooking up his nets. She had said that she had been given ample opportunity to back away, but had made a life commitment with Truman and wasn't leaving his side. What had become of his cousin that he'd run his life into such a quagmire that each choice was grimmer than the last? The nets were pulled free and all three stepped back, squinting into the dazzling brilliance: five hundred eighty-seven snow-white kilos of cocaine reflected the full midday glare of Caribbean sunshine.

Limon Port Authority calling fishing boat El Tiburón Limon, come in. There had been regular chatter on the radio, but it had gone on ignored: this didn't. The call stopped them all cold: unmoving, they stared from one to the other. *Limon Port Authority calling fishing boat El Tiburón Limon. Truman, are you there?*

"Gordy!" Truman said in a voice as grave as the expression upon his face.

El Tiburón Limon, El Tiburón Limon, this is Limon Port Authority calling. Come in. Truman rushed into the wheelhouse with Beth and Raul right behind. Gordon's voice responded to his reply, asking if all was well, and if he had seen anything unusual in the harbor the night before. There was hushed silence as he turned to them for eye contact. He spoke into the microphone saying that all was well and he had seen nothing out of the ordinary. "Why?" he continued. "Has something happened?" Breathing was again interrupted as they waited for the response. When it came, announcing that there had been a shark attack in the harbor, Truman looked to them – neither said a word. He shrugged and jauntily wished Edward a good day, before breaking the connection. A smile lit his face. "Well, that's it: I guess we're all right so far," he said. Understandably, he was relieved, but were they really, 'all right so far'? If Michael, the leader of the gang, or the other one with the knife, was the person who had been attacked, wouldn't he be questioned by the police? Truman seemed not to have considered that, or its implications, but what would be served by pointing it out? If the authorities were closing in on them, there was nothing that could be done to avoid it now. And, if so, the sooner the cocaine went overboard, the better. But maybe they weren't. How could he think with Edgar dead at the bottom of the sea? His mind was about to explode.

"That's an enormous pile of cocaine, cousin," he stated gravely. "Are you sure you want to go through with this? You are taking a step here that there is no turning back from, you know." Beth's sharp gaze latched on Truman, apparently to read of any misgivings which might be written in his eyes. The smile that lit her face when he spoke was a joy to see for its radiance, but he couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't a prelude to her doom.

“There’s more than enough here for everybody,” Truman shouted with boyish glee. “Isn’t anyone going to help me?” Outstretched in his right hand, he held a kilo package. Raul gaped in rapt trepidation as his cousin’s arm arched high above his head and the gleaming kilo tumbled through the air in apparent slow motion. It hit the surface with a slap. The three raced to the rail and watched as it sank, flashing whiteness for a full ten seconds

“See how easy that was?” Truman asked, breaking the silence. He smiled and reached for another. With a grand wind-up, he pitched it, baseball-style, after the first. Raul and Beth joined in and began throwing kilo packages in mad abandon. It was a celebration of screams, giggles, and shouts of joy that, with each increase in its intensity, transported them further from the horror they’d found themselves thrust into. Bags torn open in their grip and others that burst in mid-air collisions spread a carpet of white dust across the water. There were, at times, four, and twice (with Beth and Truman each using both hands) five packages airborne simultaneously. Raul’s breath came in pants and he felt his pulse throughout his body, particularly in his wound. Yet, the straining of muscles under a baking sun brought with it a desperately needed release. As the sweat flowed in copious streams, he developed a rhythm that pushed his physical limits and thereby eased his sorrow. Between gasps, he joined Truman and Beth’s lighthearted banter and even shared an occasional laugh – till the coke ran out. The entire load of white-powder greed had taken flight, slapped the surface and sunk to the bottom, joining there the decayed ruins of Spanish galleons with similar cargoes, and returned Raul to the realities of Edgar’s unspeakable murder and the awful mess of Truman’s life.

“Okay, Beth,” Truman announced gravely when the last had gone overboard. “We now have two weeks, three at the most. If we don’t become completely invisible within that time, Gordy will know that the cocaine never reached Nicaraguan soil and we will be hunted down and shot dead; no negotiation. I can’t say it any simpler than that. We’re not playing any longer. I tried to get you away from this, but you insisted.” He stopped short in mid-delivery.

His own words seemed to frighten him and he fixed Beth with a prolonged stare. He continued then, but his topic and his concerns had shifted. “I’m worried sick about you already, and this only began five minutes ago. Tomorrow, I’m putting you ashore in Bluefields; period.” he announced, abruptly. “While you’re there waiting for me, I want you to look ...”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind, Truman Herrera!” Beth spat her words, interrupting his blunt proclamation.

“What?”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind, Truman Herrera. You promised Herminia and you promised me, too!”

“I know I promised Herminia and I’ll do exactly what I said: dentist, treatment center, educational fund – everything. It’s just that you don’t need to be here for any of it. I can do it all alone, and I can do it free from worry if you’re in Nicaragua.” Raul couldn’t help but smile at Truman’s complete lack of tact: Beth’s ears were so crimson that he could imagine steam shooting from them.

“We have a plan and we have a deal!” she said with a stomp of a foot. “You said we have three weeks. That’s plenty of time. Herminia goes in the center less than two weeks from now. What are you worried about?”

“What am I worried about? We just threw forty million dollars worth of cocaine in the sea!”

That took some of the steam out. She emitted a short whistle, looking from one to the other. “FORTY – MILLION – DOLLARS? US dollars?”

“That’s right and possibly more, if you take into account cutting it, but of course I’m talking street prices.”

“My God, I never...” She studied her hands, perhaps calculating how much had passed through them. Truman pushed his backside away from the rail, readying to depart for the wheelhouse. “Hey Truman!” she called behind him, “come on now, we’ve talked about this already. You said there’s enough time for us to be long gone before he finds out.”

“Beth, I had hoped that by now you would realize the gravity of what we’ve just done.”

“I do. Now get a grip on yourself, Truman. Let’s talk about what we’re going to do about Mike Henderson, if you think it’s time to discuss serious subjects. What do you intend to do about him?”

“When you and I are safely gone, Raul can turn his friend’s notebook in to the police and Mike Henderson will be convicted of murder.”

“Truman, last night, you said that if anyone turned it in, the police would lose it or give it to Gordon Edward!”

“I really think, that...” Raul began saying

“Shut up, Raul!” Truman shrieked. “If I want to hear what you think, I’ll ask you!”

“I’m getting a little tired of you telling me to shut up, Truman!” Raul yelled in response.

“Shut up! Shut up, I say! You’re the sorry piece of shit that murdered my Lucia! You have nothing to do with any of this!” He stepped close to Raul and inches from his face, yelled: “now, just shut the fuck up!”

That was the limit. With his good arm, he encircled Truman’s head, pulled it down until he was doubled at the waist then pushed him to the deck, lay atop him and spoke into his ear. “Do you want to know what happened in Jinotega, cousin? A wanted criminal walked into a family gathering, and by so doing, put them all in harm’s way. That stupidity killed Lucia, Hilda and everybody else – not me. Understand, my cousin? Do you remember my beautiful Hilda? Oh, I do, every day I do. And I remember my boys, too.” He added additional emphasis to the word ‘boys’ with a painful surge in the pressure on his chokehold. “But that was many, many years ago, so I suggest we put it behind us once and for all, shall we? Instead, let me tell you how very intent Edgar was on seeing to it that Michael Henderson got everything he deserved. He had been investigating him for several years. It was all off record, because apparently, Henderson has political connections and, whenever he was brought in, he would be released unconditionally and Edgar reprimanded. He was determined to build a case against him so ironclad that even his influence couldn’t save him. There’s a long story there, cousin – give me a chance and I’ll tell you all about it – but in Edgar’s private home files he has the bastard cold: it’s all there, in his apartment and, if you want it, it’s all yours. I’ll get every bit for you, if you’ll only let me. We have a common enemy now, cousin: let us work together as a team and send the piece of shit to prison. All we need is a little time to study Edgar’s files and conclude his investigation. It should be easier for us than for him, because we now know exactly what to look for. So, get on your feet and let’s discuss a subject that we can actually do something about: Mr. Michael Henderson.”

What was it that was contained in the envelope that Michael pulled from Edgar’s notebook, Truman queried. Michael had quickly thrown it overboard then triumphantly shouted into Edgar’s dying face that there was now nothing to be used as evidence against him. Raul couldn’t provide the answer to that question, but he shared what little information he remembered of his friend’s often-repeated suspicion that Michael and his friends were into cocaine smuggling and his frustrations at confirming it. He did remember well, one evening when Edgar pointed out a redhead, Caroline Steepleton, as the one who leaked information to him about Michael’s cocaine smuggling. It was obvious from his notebook entries, however brief and cryptic, that it was this very material that put the wheels into motion leading to Michael’s airport arrest for receiving ill-gotten money in tuna cans – as Beth had witnessed earlier. What was missing to them was knowledge of where he bought his cocaine and how he moved it. Raul suspected that most of that information was very likely available in Edgar’s files. Truman only needed to release him.

* * *

Later that night, with Raul asleep below, Truman and Beth discussed him and what was to be done. “He can’t be trusted,” Truman pointed out, “as he so clearly demonstrated in Jinotega. You can see that, can’t you? He knows about the operation and still he doesn’t appreciate what he’s stumbled onto. If we released him, it’s likely that he will go running to the police and blow any chance we have. What do you think?”

“Yes, he frightens me that way too, but what troubles me more is the idea of Mike or that skinny weasel in a hospital in Limon telling their entire story to the police right now. We have to continue in the slim hope that it isn’t happening, and I think trusting your own cousin should come a little easier, especially when he is offering us the policeman’s files. More to the point: I don’t believe for a minute that ‘the professionals,’ as you refer to them, will do a thing about the son-of-a-bitch. Maybe there just isn’t much evidence, but more likely, he has enough ‘friends’ in the police department that any coming their way will get lost or destroyed. I just can’t let that happen, Truman. If I leave like that, I’ll never be able to look at myself in the mirror again. The risk becomes worth it, when I consider him walking the streets, and realize the only way for me to see that this animal get the punishment he deserves is to prove that he smuggles cocaine. We already know half of it and Raul can get proof of the rest. We’re left with no choice but to trust him.”

“Okay, I’m glad you said that,” Truman answered, “because my thinking has been the same, but, my God, these are terribly difficult decisions!”

* * *

“Ahoy, Truman!” the gray-haired man with the protruding stomach called from the dock. “Who’s your pretty deckhand?”

“Her name is Beth Tierney,” he called back, “and you’d better watch your head: she can throw that monkey fist like a grenade!” They were in the protected bay of El Bluff, Nicaragua, at the quiet northern end, where Carlos – Truman’s Bluefield contact – had built his company’s pier. Things had changed greatly in El Bluff from the day Truman met Gordon Edward’s fishing boat for the first time, in an estuary not two kilometers away. There were businesses and docks along a waterfront where before had only been a sprinkling of structures and one wharf, abandoned after repeated bombing attacks had left it in ruin. Where there had been only jungle, the hills had been cleared and a town built. They tied fast on the inside of an ‘L’ shaped dock with a warehouse in its center that kept them hidden from anyone’s view out in the bay. Carlos’ truck was parked inside in anticipation of transferring the cargo. Truman stepped first from El Tiburón Limon and embraced his friend Carlos. They turned their attention back to the boat as Beth came ashore. “Carlos, may I present Ms. Beth Tierney. Beth is a geologist from America.” She took his extended hand, mumbled a greeting and stood close beside Truman with a hand upon his shoulder as Raul joined them. “And this big guy is my cousin, Raul.”

“Hello, Carlos,” Raul said, offering his hand.

“Is this the cousin who was a champion at football?” he asked, grinning from one to the other.

A glance passed between Raul and Truman. “Yes, he is the one,” Truman answered.

Carlos rested his folded hands upon his stomach, studying them. “What’s wrong?” he queried. “After so many empty years, a beautiful woman is in your life and here, standing at your side, is this cousin you talked so much about when we first met, and there isn’t a single smile among you. What is it?”

“It’s over, Carlos,” Truman replied, gravely. “There’s no cargo in the hold. The game is finished, at least as far as I’m concerned, it is. I suppose you will be asked to start in again, but I urge you very strongly not to accept. Our man in

Limon has become extremely reckless and I fear that his indiscretion could lead the American DEA directly to your door. I'm quitting now while I still can, and you should too."

Carlos rolled his eyes and exhaled deeply. "That's rough." He shook his head. "I've grown so accustomed to the money, I don't know what I'm going to do."

"It will be all right, Carlos. Your daughters and their husbands are going to have to make their own way in the world, but they'll do fine. You've given them all the tools they need to do well in whatever they undertake, and you have a good business that will provide very well for you and Anna. Just focus on how much better it is to finish this way than the alternative, and you'll find that you have reason to be happy. I have just one last request before we shove off..."

"Shove off? You're not leaving now. Anna roasted a goat in your honor and everyone will want to meet Beth, not to mention that my sons-in-law are going to demand an opportunity to challenge you and this legendary football star to a playoff."

"I think we're not going to be able. Raul has injured his arm and..."

"Speak for yourself, cousin!" Raul interjected. "I haven't had roasted goat since I was in Cuba, and I don't need my arm to win a challenge match at football, especially if you and I are on the same team. Do you remember that double fake to center we used to do?"

"He is right." Beth increased the pressure upon his shoulder. "We need to get away from everything for a while and, if we left now, we'd be back too early."

The sun had swung overhead and descended towards the west when its weakened rays found Truman and Beth lying flat on their backs, side by side on the lawn, their energy spent – but their spirits rejuvenated. Carlos' home had been a beehive of activity throughout the feast, with daughters, sons-in-law, grandchildren, neighbors, friends and who knows who else, involving them in cooking, cleaning, serving, eating, bouncing babies on knees, explaining their lives, and Truman and Raul going down to defeat – six-eight – in a boisterous football match cheered by all. "Feel better, my love?" Beth asked, propping herself on one elbow and dabbing perspiration from his brow.

"Oh yes, much, much better," he answered and pulled her down to receive his kiss.

"Did you meet Carlos in the war or did you know him from before?"

"I actually met him when I returned to Nicaragua as a Contra," he answered, "but I had already studied his complete history in a file provided by the American CIA, and knew much more about him than he would have told me himself. He was one of those recruited as the operator of a safe house. The Americans provided the seed money to convert his ox team delivery carts into a trucking company, and gave him a quality professional education in the fine art of smuggling. Throughout the war, he moved weapons, messages and men for the Contras and, of course, carried their cocaine. No one here, but the four of us, knows about it: not even his wife suspects. They all know me as the representative of the investors who they think own the company. The same applies to Juan, the next guy down the line in Honduras. By rights, I should go personally and deliver the bad news to him too; I'm every bit as close with him and his family as I am here, but Carlos will have to do that for me."

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

“There is a Captain Flores to see you, sir,” the gentle voice of Gordon Edward’s secretary, Consuela, announced via the intercom. Gordon glared at the hateful electronic wonder. Why couldn’t she tap on the door as he’d instructed? That chime had a way of going off at just the moment that all the many fragments of some deep thought tumbled into place. It would sound, scaring him half way to hell, and the entire conception would be shattered.

“Captain Flores? Which ship would that be, Connie?”

“Captain Flores is not a ship’s master, sir. He’s with the police.”

Of course, Captain Flores: Manuel Flores, the OIJ staff officer responsible for all interrelations between The Port Authority and National police departments. Gordon often dined with him when he visited the capital. They shared a long history. Gordon had fought diligently in the halls of government to win Manuel a bronze plaque, awarded by a grateful nation for heading an investigation that unseated a political rival of Gordon on charges of treason. Beyond the formal recognition, Gordon saw to it that Manuel’s reward included elevation to the rank of captain and the cushy job of Port Authority liaison officer. Additional benefits came whenever sensitive information was passed along or other special favors rendered. It had been a long and profitable friendship, but with the election only weeks away and all the excitement of the last several days, he was forgetting people’s names.

“I’m sorry about the intercom,” Consuela continued, “but Captain Flores insisted. He says it’s urgent that he see you right away.”

He glanced at the clock in annoyance. His campaign manager was due in half an hour, a reporter from *La Nacion* just after her, plus there were calls of vital importance to be made. He’d been preparing to dial when... He glared at the intercom. He’d keep the meeting short. “By all means, Connie, show the captain in.” He slid his tailored jacket over his frame and arranged a sober expression then trotted the two steps to his desk. “Good morning, Manuel,” he greeted, “I was expecting a phone call. What brings you all the way down to Limon?” Flores looked about the room with nervous suspicion. “We are quite alone,” Gordon said, reassuringly, secretly despising Manuel’s neurotic mannerisms. “There’s nobody here but you and me.”

“Do you have any recording devices of any type operating in this room?” He wormed in his seat like a chastised schoolboy.

“No, none at all.” Gordon was doing his best, but with Manuel fussing over details like a matron preparing a tea party, tolerance was increasingly difficult. He suppressed a groan and offered a patient smile instead. “Please feel free to speak with confidence, Manuel. There. Does that make you feel better,” he asked, disconnecting a wire from the rear of the intercom.

“Very well, then,” Flores replied, nodding at the silenced box. “You can never be too careful.” Satisfied, he squared himself to deliver a stately address.

Gordon’s patience was stretched to its limits. He swallowed a lump in his throat and listened: the Nicaraguan embassy had been more than cooperative, providing a complete copy of Raul Herrera’s personnel file. The effort hadn’t been too daunting a task, however: there were but two pages in the entire file from which nothing was gleaned other than his personal data, pay records and favorable reviews. However, when Flores entered his apartment, things began to look a little

differently. He slid across the expanse of Gordon's desk a photograph of two men seated at a table with their arms draped over one another's shoulder. "That," he said with a flourish, "was hanging on his wall. The one on the left is Lieutenant Edgar Vargas of the OIJ and the other is Raul Herrera. Lt. Vargas is our renegade Indian who has not been heard from for some time. He is also..."

"Wait a minute! I was told that there were no missing police officers. Where did this one suddenly come from?"

"Lt. Vargas is under suspension, in fact he is a fugitive from a departmental hearing and consequently no longer on our roster to be considered missing. He was also the partner of Lt. Enrique Segovia."

"Segovia? Isn't he the one who was selling Tweety-Bird cocaine?"

"Exactly. Perhaps the partners were closer than we suspected."

"Are you telling me that the American we found in the bay actually did kill a cop and that cop was Segovia's ex-partner?"

"It certainly appears that way."

"So, it was a Tweety-Bird cocaine transaction that turned sour! Why, that's wonderful news, Manuel! It makes the story we released to the press almost one hundred percent accurate. You see there: eliminating Segovia turned out perfectly. Now, they're killing each other off." Gordon was the winner! Again! "Manuel, I want you to find this rogue cop and the embassy employee as quickly as possible and, if they aren't dead already, make sure they are. Ah Manuel, don't look so distressed. I know it's an awful thing to ask of a man, but these are people who are trafficking cocaine to our young, right here in Limon, and it's exactly what they deserve. It will be good for my campaign too: the press will eat it up; and, all in all, everyone will be better off, particularly you – don't forget that."

There was a knock at the door, and Consuela poked her head in to report that the intercom seemed not to be working and that Truman was waiting in the outer office. "Send him right in, Connie," he said.

Truman had arrived in Limon several hours earlier, uncertain of what they'd encounter when they went ashore. It had been reassuring when via radio he'd announced his arrival to the port captain, and a launch hadn't come out for them. Nevertheless, they had been collectively nervous approaching the fishermen's wharf, half expecting to see a contingent of police – but there had been nobody. Raul had been anxious to depart for San José, but when they drove to the logging company to retrieve his car, it was gone, impounded for illegal parking, the woman in the office reported. Beth suggested that it would be wise to wait until after Truman's meeting with Gordon, to see if there was reason to avoid reclaiming it from the police impound yard. That was good to keep Raul from walking into a trap, but did nothing to reassure Truman that Gordon's office would be any less perilous. A telephone call did no good: Connie reported that Gordon was in a meeting with his intercom off and could not be disturbed. His legs were like rubber standing behind her as she opened the door to announce him.

"Manuel," Gordon said as he entered, "I believe you have already met my associate, Truman who, by chance, was in the harbor the night this all occurred. You remember Manuel Flores, don't you Truman?" Captain Flores' presence combined with Gordon's enthusiastic smile frightened him. He recoiled as from a flame, casting his eyes about the room for signs of a trap with the door yet open and its handle in his hand. "Manuel is here assisting in the investigation of another Tweety-Bird drug deal gone sour. Apparently, as a result of the death of Lieutenant Segovia – you know, the one you were so upset about – his American accomplice came down here, trying to fill the gap. Well, he ended up in the harbor, undoubtedly as the result of a power struggle within the depleted ranks of the gang, and died of shark attack and exposure. Here, take a

look,” he said, smiling with delight as he leafed through a stack of newspapers and tossed one across the desk. Truman approached cautiously, maintaining a safe distance between himself and Captain Flores

The headline was gripping: AMERICAN DRUG TRAFFICKER DIES IN LIMON HARBOR. Truman read how a certain Douglas Finney, a cocaine trafficker from Boston, Massachusetts, USA, had been found adrift on the morning tide. He still was alive when found, but fading fast and babbling incoherently in English. He was dead before he could receive medical attention or an interpreter found to hear his dying words. The article credited Gordon Edward’s relentless pursuit of drug traffickers in Limon Province for the implosion of the Tweety-Bird gang, and asked rhetorically why the federal government was incapable of following his brilliant example.

“You see, I was right, Truman!” Gordon proclaimed. His light mood was rare and, in view of his own distressed state, extremely disconcerting. It was that triumphant smirk, glimmering such as Truman hadn’t seen since election day, three years earlier that was most worrisome. “Releasing the story with linkage to the Tweety-Bird Case as a continuing news item was my idea,” he boasted. “Sends a message that we’re relentless: I like that. This man was found in the water the morning you left, so you can imagine my concern and the reason for the radio call but, once I knew you were all right, and the more I thought about it, the more I liked it. It proves I was right all along: this is the only language these Tweety-Bird dealers will ever understand. Getting rid of that cop smoked them out of their rat holes, and now they’re killing each other off. I couldn’t be happier: the problem’s solving itself and don’t you love the irony of it? Look at the article on page three where they label me ‘the people’s anti-drug hero’.”

So the skinny little creep died. That was good. Wasn’t it? “Well, at least you’re not still trying to deny having that cop killed,” he said, painfully aware that soon he and Beth would be included in the list of people for Gordon to mow down in his march to glory.

“Don’t look so glum about it, Truman. These are not the sort of people one mourns, and, this time, I didn’t have a thing to do with it, except that I kept up pressure until they turned on each other like sewer rats pushed into a corner. Nevertheless, you’re going to have to face up to the harsh realities of this business we’re in.” He shook his head sadly and turned to gaze through the window. “Strange,” he said a moment later, “that with a confrontation of some sort taking place, they didn’t make enough noise for you to notice anything. Are you sure there weren’t any other boats active in the harbor?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I always wait until there is no movement at all.”

“Okay. Well, thank you, Truman. Manuel and I have a few loose ends to wrap up, but we won’t need you any longer. Why don’t you take advantage of the tide, and go ahead to enjoy your fishing trip?” His words were like a breath of fresh air. He was on his feet in a heartbeat and headed out through the door.

“I followed up on the investigation of the Nicaraguan social worker,” Captain Flores continued when the door closed behind Truman, “by entering the home of Lt. Vargas. He was nowhere to be found, as I expected, but in his study, I found an entire file cabinet filled with folios of investigative research on a variety of suspects, some of whom Lt. Vargas had been specifically instructed not to investigate. Each of these files represents an illegal investigation done without authorization. It will all have to be destroyed, but I thought perhaps you would find his material interesting so I’ve taken the liberty of bringing the entire cabinet here for you to look through. It’s outside by your secretary’s desk, would you like me to bring it in?”

“Yes Manuel, I think I would like to look through that and thank you for thinking to bring it to me. I appreciate everything you have done and your attention to detail. You are a very valuable man. Oh, and Manuel, be careful with that

other business. If this goes smoothly, you can start a new savings fund. Make this one be for your own pleasures, and may you enjoy it thoroughly. Good day, sir.”

Gordon turned his attention to the file cabinet parked beside the bar. He pulled open the top drawer: it was filled with case files arranged alphabetically. His eyes went directly to the C’s expecting what – to find one labeled cocaine purchases and containing the names and address of the producers of Tweety-bird? He lifted out a file: Alan Bergen – pages and pages of observations of a suspected petty cocaine trafficker and the people in his life. He slammed the drawer. It was foolishness: he wouldn’t keep anything vitally important in so accessible a location. Besides, it was a mute point: the Tweety-bird network was self-destructing, and

Lt. Vargas was probably already dead, killed by the American. Good riddance. The second drawer was the same thing: a line of case files, all nice and neat. His hand was upon the drawer handle prepared to close it, when his eyes lit upon the name Michael Henderson. Michael Henderson, Sylvia’s son? He carried the folder to his desk and fell into rapt fascination, as a story unfolded such as he would never have suspected. When Sylvia first came to him requesting paperwork that would conceal from American authorities the death of a horse at sea, he hadn’t questioned her ready willingness to pay so dearly. It had seemed to him a reasonable price to avoid the headache and expense of an encounter with American bureaucracy, and he couldn’t help but laugh when he realized that he had been had; he could have charged five times the amount, and still she would have paid willingly, because Sylvia was also a cocaine trafficker! He chuckled as he flipped papers, anxious for her return to Costa Rica so he could surprise her with his knowledge, then further astound her with his own admission. Consuela announced the arrival of his campaign manager, but he was too deeply engrossed to tear himself away until the final page had been read, absorbed and delighted over.

Aboard *El Tiburón Limon*, the newspaper story and Truman’s meeting with Gordon received mixed reviews. Beth was horrified with the realization that she had killed a man, and no amount of rationalization could sway her from her conviction that she had. Raul, on the other hand, felt that for cockroach-face to be eaten by a shark was poetic justice, God’s perhaps, considering that it was Edgar he had slain. He was anxious to claim his car, now that it appeared safe, and be on his way, so that Michael Henderson, too, would soon receive his due, when Edgar’s files were in their hands. He promised to meet them in Chautita, and estimated he would arrive the following day before sunset. Truman was ambivalent about Gordon’s manipulation of the press, but delighted that his super-inflated ego and fixation on Tweety-Bird blinded him to all else. All three drove to the police impound lot at the edge of town where Raul’s car could be seen parked by the fence. Truman and Beth left him there and made their way to the highway and south towards Chautita where Herminia waited.

Raul signed the register for his car and received a bill for the parking infraction and charges for towing and storage, all of which he paid on the spot. The officer informed him then that he needed to thoroughly inspect the car for damage or missing items and sign yet another document before it would be released. As Raul walked from the tiny office to do as bid, the officer, following his instructions to a tee, picked up the phone and called the desk of the director of the Port Authority Mr. Gordon Edward himself.

* * *

Gordon was alone at last at the end of a long day with his tie loosened and his jacket off, busily reading the excellent news contained in his reelection team’s latest status report. In the background the radio played. The report showed him surging to an unbeatable margin over his opponent, as a result of his newfound notoriety as anti-drug champion of the people.

Now, with this new one flushed out he would be elevated to sainthood in the eye of the public. The intercom suddenly sounded, startling him from triumphant reverie long after he thought Consuela had left for the day. "Captain Flores is here to see you, sir," her gentle voice announced. "Excuse the interruption, but he says it's vital that he see you right away."

"Yes, yes, show Captain Flores in, Connie," Gordon barked at the contemptible box.

"Please, Manuel," he directed descending from his desk level and crossing to the bar, "Pull up a stool and allow me to fix you a drink. Before we get started, I want you to know that I disconnected the intercom when Connie said it was you. We are now alone and free to talk about anything at all, okay?"

"Sure, fine," Flores responded. He appeared pale and upset, understandable considering the mission he had just returned from.

"I would like to offer my congratulations for a job well done. Your personal bank account will reflect the considerable extent of my gratitude," Gordon said, hoping to snap him out of it. "There are already reports on the radio. They say that the car tumbled for more than a thousand feet before smashing into a rock. Sounds pretty gruesome"

"It was," Captain Flores began, his nervousness reflected in every gesture. "Well yes, I would enjoy a drink, thank you, sir. A scotch on the rocks." Flores accepted his glass and Gordon assumed a position on a stool across the bar from him. "Yes sir, that sure does look good!"

Gordon eyed him sternly. "Well, what is it?" he bellowed. "What happened? Speak! Are you too squeamish for this work, is that it?"

"Yes, actually I am," Flores answered, "especially when the subject's crime was a parking violation, he had no criminal record and carried a Nicaraguan diplomatic passport. At least that was how I felt when I left to carry out your instructions: the connection to cocaine seemed too weak, but now... May I?" Flores, acutely aware of Gordon's fastidious nature, made elaborate show of placing a large sheet of white paper upon the bar surface before laying atop it a booklet, bound in black leather, worn thin at the corners and caked with a dark substance. "This is the daily journal of Lt. Vargas, our suspended and fugitive officer who was partner to Enrique Segovia. The dried substance is blood – his own, by my estimation. When I made my way through jungle and over rocks to the crash site where the embassy worker died, I initially thought one of the uniformed officers had touched the body, because this blood-crust book was in the inside breast pocket of his sport jacket, where he had not shed a drop of his own. Additionally, look closely: the blood is already thoroughly dried so it can't possibly be his. I think what we're looking at here is proof that your idea that the killings are the result of a drug ring imploding was correct, but only partially so: our Nicaraguan social worker was more than just a member of the ring. I think that finding Officer Vargas' blood-soaked journal in his pocket strongly indicates that he may have been a murderer as well, with Lt. Vargas as his victim. Additional evidence was found in a laundry bag in the trunk; it contained the blood-splattered clothing he wore when he committed the murder." Flores leaned over the grim volume and, with the end of a pencil, began to leaf through. "There is a page here, sir which mentions you. Humm... Let me see... Where is that entry?" He flipped forward, and then reversed, studying each leaf in turn.

"Yes? Just tell me what it is, Manuel."

"Ah, here it is. You see, your name is just there, at the head of the page, below the heading: 'Interview with Mike Scumbag.' It says..."

"My name?"

“Yes sir, your name; see? There it is... Here, allow me to read this list; it’s quite short. Officer Vargas used a very clipped manner of notation, which makes interpretation difficult, probably because these notes were taken in a live interview. It reads, line by line:

Gordon Edward – log barges – the canal;
 Prostitute – back seat, not sleeping;
 Brother guy – Leon;
 Gringo fuck – Darling – \$600,000;
 One patrol craft – entire coast;
 Lies, lies, lies!

“That’s it. Subsequent entries deal with inquiries regarding log shipments and surveillance of a storage yard here in Limon.”

Gordon gasped. “What? Let me see that!” He slid the paper with the journal across the bar. Touching a book smeared throughout with a man’s life-blood was out of the question. Manuel’s idea with the pencil seemed the wise approach: he used two, working together, and quickly returned to the page. Perspiration gathered in his eyebrows. He wiped at it with the side of his hand, leaning over to inspect the words. He flipped forward, then back again, searching for answers that weren’t there. Manuel possibly knew of the existence of his operation, but if he did, that was all he knew and that was how it should remain, yet there it was, his whole operation, and the mess Leon had created, laid out in black and white in a policeman’s notebook. Thankfully, he was dead, but the man interviewed wasn’t. “Who is this person; this ‘Mike Scumbag?’” He tapped at the page with the eraser end of his pencil, and glared his rage at poor Manuel, whose Adam’s apple bobbed at the sight of Gordon’s humorless glare.

“Uh yes, I went briefly through the book and pieced together some of that. It’s all here,” he said, lowering his eyes hesitantly towards the notes resting on his knee. Gordon forced composure upon himself and offered Manuel a tight nod of reassurance that he should continue. Intent upon his notes, Flores traced a finger through them, stopped, glanced up for another of Gordon’s tight nods, then began reading.

“What’s his goddamn name?”

Manuel took measure of the tone carried in Gordon’s voice and took a careful moment of consideration before responding. “Who, Mike Scumbag?” he asked hesitantly. He had stammered, but just slightly.

“Yes, him! Who is this guy?”

“His name actually is Shannon Henderson, but the person Lt. Vargas...”

The infernal notes again! “Put,” he embellished the word with a strong downward arm gesture, “the notes down... Manuel, please. This Shannon Henderson; who is he? Another American?”

“Yes he is, but he lives here in Costa Rica. However according to the...” He glanced again towards his handheld pad.

“Forget the notes. Okay? He lives in Costa Rica: well, good! Do we know anything else about him, Manuel, the places he goes, the people he knows, that sort of thing?”

“Actually there is a thick folio of investigative research on him right there in the filing cabinet under the name Michael Henderson.”

“Michael Henderson? This Michael Henderson?” he asked, snatching up the folder from his desk and thrusting it towards Flores.

“Yes, that’s the one. You might wa...”

“I want him right here as soon as possible, where I can talk to him face to face, but quietly, Manuel, very quietly. Only we need to know about any of this. You can take care of that for me, can’t you, Manuel?”

“Of course. I’ll have him picked up for questioning in a current unrelated case and bring him directly down here. May I use your telephone?”

Manuel was the picture of efficiency. Gordon could imagine the frantic activity on the other end of the line, as he sent secretaries scurrying for their bosses and the bosses to the task of closing files and redirecting officers in the field. He had forgotten the power wielded by a police captain. It put the whimpering Manuel into a class where he seemed not to belong. He stared through his great window worrying his tie between fingers. What could possibly have happened that Sylvia’s son knew his business – and told a cop about it? Had he told others? He had to talk to him, soon, before something worse happened. Manuel finished. He looked better. “This ‘interview with Mike Scumbag,’ how did that come about, do you know?”

“Yes,” Manuel answered, “Mr. Henderson was one of four Lt. Vargas arrested recently at the airport on a charge of currency smuggling. I’m sure you’ve heard in the news about the cash hidden in tuna cans – well, that was it. Lt. Vargas was a misfit in the department under suspension at the time and facing a departmental hearing for repeated harassment of this same Michael Henderson. This arrest appears to indicate that perhaps there was something which warranted the harassment, although there was insufficient evidence to hold the suspects.”

“Thank you, Manuel. When this business is behind us, I’m sure we could all use a vacation. When you return here with our Mr. Henderson, we should also talk about your favorite resort locations.” They shook hands and immediately upon closing the door behind him, Gordon hurried to his desk and reconnected the little monster-box. “Connie, please locate Ms. Sylvia Henderson. I believe she is currently at her property on Marathon Key, in Florida. If you can’t reach her there, her nation-wide pager number is in the file. Tell her it is extremely urgent that she contact me immediately.”

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Where was Raul? The question was driving Beth mad, not to mention the anxiety it was causing Truman. Earlier, his idea as to what was the cause of his delay had been problems with that broken-down heap of a sedan he drove, while she had imagined him oversleeping, but too many calls to his apartment had been placed and too much time had gone by for either scenario to be true. Truman had repeatedly called to Edgar's home too, but to no avail there, either. Their worries had gone on for such a length of time that they no longer mentioned him. Rather, they tried to otherwise occupy themselves. Each noticed the other's expectant glances to the telephone, yet they held their tongues, afraid even to consider the possibilities. Beth almost spoke aloud that perhaps he had rushed directly to the police with his friend's bloodied notebook – as he wanted to –, told of the drug smuggling, and the police were on their way at that moment, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Despite his grumbling about Raul being a communist, it was readily apparent that Truman was delighted to be reunited. She couldn't say something that might turn him away from his cousin, not now, and particularly not when she was so likely wrong. She too, felt kinship with Raul, such as anyone must who survives with another so harrowing an experience. With the strength of that solidarity came conviction that he would do nothing against their interests, and as midnight came and went and still the police hadn't arrived to break down the door, it was refreshing that that possibility passed from her thinking.

Raul was all right. He'd been through a war; he knew how to take care of himself: she'd told Truman as much several times and mixed drinks to help sooth frazzled nerves. It wasn't working. He was as keyed up as ever, and the tension increased by the minute. He paced the breadth of his patio, worrying and flashing looks of contempt at the silent telephone. She could stand it no longer and left to walk the beach.

Half an hour later, she returned with Herminia, red-eyed and sobbing, resting her head against her arm. Beth had been strolling along the path that wound its way among the bungalows, allowing the intoxicating scents of flowering shrubbery, tended so lovingly by Cecilia and Alberto, to waft away the troubles of her world when, from the bungalow that had now become Herminia's, she'd heard weeping. "Truman!" she called from the downstairs landing. "Fix a drink for Herminia. Make it a double. You'd better fix one for me too."

"What's going on with her?" Truman asked from behind the bar when Beth had navigated them safely to the top of the stairs.

"*¡Esta muerto, Truman!*" Herminia wailed across the room, providing her own answer. "*¡Ahii, Truman! ¿Que voy a hacer? Aun, no he dicho como le quiero.* (what am I going to do? I haven't told him yet how much I care for him) *¡Ahiii, ahii, Dios mio!*" Herminia continued wailing and threw herself onto the sofa, luckily smothering the greater part of the ear shattering noise in the pillows. Beth went to her side, trying to hold her hand, but she wiggled it free and shook her buried head "No."

Truman stood in front of the pair, holding in either hand a drink which neither woman acknowledged. He set them on the coffee table. "Do you know what she's talking about?" he asked in bewilderment.

"She had a dream that Raul is dead and woke up screaming," Beth answered.

"No! No ees dream!" Herminia's wail was full volume as she turned her head to let loose the blast. "He ees dead! I see heem dead. These ees real: dream, she ees deerferent. Herminia doan have no dream."

Truman picked up the phone, dialed the OIJ in San José and asked if they had any information regarding a missing Nicaraguan embassy employee, Raul Herrera. “My name? My name is Antonio Ruiz, why?” he asked, winking and shrugging a shoulder to the women. “No, we’re not related, not at all, he’s my friend. Yes, okay.” He looked first to Beth, then Herminia, now propped on one elbow, her hysterics forgotten, gaping at Truman with intensity. “I’m on hold,” he announced. Suddenly, his eyes widened and he snatched up a napkin from the table to hold it over the mouthpiece before speaking in a rare voice. “Antonio Ruiz. Yes. No, no I’m not. No, not for several days. Are you sure, entirely sure that it’s him?” He returned the phone to its cradle slowly, his eyes fixed in awe upon Herminia. She stared back, her puffy-red eyes asking the question for her. He nodded lightly.

“¡Ahiiiiii! ¡Ahiiii! *Tengo toda la culpa. ¡Dios lo hizo para castigarme! Ahii, Dios mío, lo siento! ¡Señor! ¡Lo siento! ¡Por que no me llevó a mi? Yo soy la mala, Señor!* (It’s all my fault. God did it to punish me! Oh my God, I’m sorry! Lord! I’m sorry. Why didn’t you take me? I’m the bad one, Lord!)” With her final lamentation delivered skyward, the volume of her screeches was somewhat alleviated when she collapsed again to the sofa and buried her face in the pillow.

“That was Captain Flores,” he said with a finality that seemed to indicate that that was information enough while lowering himself into a chair as though he had suddenly been stricken with arthritis.

Beth looked from one to the other. “And?” she demanded. “What?”

“If my call was directed to Captain Flores that means there was no accident. He is one of Gordy’s men and... he has killed Raul.” He sank deeper into his chair, staring at the wall with tear-stained cheeks. Beth tore to the balcony’s edge and vomited over the railing into the sand below.

* * *

They left immediately. Herminia had no idea why they panicked, but became instantly infused with the emotion, asked no questions and joined Beth racing between rooms to grab up clothing and necessities, stuff it haphazardly into suitcases and tear down the stairs to throw them into the back of Truman’s 4X4. Meanwhile, he emptied his desk, safe and files, double-stepped with them down the stairs and tossed it all in a heap atop the suitcases. He descended once more, trailing cables and plugs from his computer tower and set it on the ground for Beth to figure out how to jam into the back with Herminia’s oversized plastic bag, while he went to waken Don Alberto and Cecilia. They rose from a deep sleep, totally baffled, as Truman hurriedly told them he was offering them the hotel as a gift for years of loyal service, and assured them that the necessary documents would be completed by his lawyer and delivered. His only request was that they provide no information to anyone about anything and, in particular, the existence of Beth.

Truman followed the coast highway north. His lips were pursed into a thin line, his eyes frozen on the road and his shoulders pulled high with tension. Beth sat sideways with one hand on his thigh and the other twiddling his earlobe, hoping to, somehow, alleviate his pain and worry. “I’m okay, Beth,” he said, shrugging her hand from his ear. “Just let me drive.”

In the back seat, Herminia sat alone and quiet, staring through the window. Beth turned to her and listened as she told of meeting Raul on the dining room terrace and his invitation to dinner. She smiled feebly and said that, other than the two of them and Flavio, nobody had ever paid much attention to anything she had to say, but Raul did. He encouraged her to talk of herself, and her children too. Having a handsome, well-spoken gentleman take such an interest, caught her attention – and fancy. But, there was more to her grief: Raul had promised to help her to get a plot of land, a real home of her own, in Nicaragua where she could raise her children and live in dignity. That hope died with him.

They remained on the highway but a short distance, then lurched and jolted over trails that hadn't been traveled by motorized vehicle, other than Truman's, for years. At the junction of a footpath deep within the forest, Truman stopped and in the gloom of dappled moonlight, slogged with his computer through knee-deep mud to the edge of a swamp. Standing in the muck, close to open water, he dropped it and forced it deep into the jet-black slime.

Throughout the night, they traveled over roads of rocks, potholes and mud. It was dawn before they saw the lights of San José in the valley ahead, and just before seven when they arrived at the front gate of a friend's home in the suburb, Curridabat, to find him pulling from the driveway. His was a large property, made larger than its neighbors by joining together four already spacious lots. A twelve-foot concrete wall, topped with broken glass surrounded the estate. The front gate, complete with a small guardhouse, manned by two smartly uniformed guards brought to Beth's mind the Federal Reserve Bank. In the back, behind the main house and servant's quarters, was a guesthouse, nestled among flowers and fruit trees that became their temporary home.

□ □ □

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Sylvia was delighted that Gordy considered seeing her so important, but she scheduled her time carefully to accommodate the many important matters she attended to. He was going to have to learn that she was a professional woman and couldn't just walk away from business at his bidding. The secretary had insisted, however, that it was a matter of utmost priority, so here she was. As the San Jose runway came into sight and she anticipated their first moment, the words 'utmost priority' did begin to describe her desire for him. Lusty dreams had been filling her nights recently but, now in her fantasies, it was Gordy and the muscular beauty of his ebony body that had taken the role William had so long occupied. She pulled a tiny mirror from her bag and began touching up here and there.

An immigration officer met her upon leaving the plane, took her baggage claim and passport, then whisked her through formalities. Gordy's driver was at the door to greet her warmly and guide her into the back of the limo where the man himself sat sipping a cold drink, patiently waiting. They exchanged kisses, small talk, and Gordy prepared a martini – extra dry – while her baggage was delivered.

"Well then, Sylvia, I hope you had a good flight," Gordy said when they had settled into their seats in the dining room at the nearby Marriott. "I'm sorry to disrupt your schedule, but there have been several developments that you need to know about," he stated when the waiter departed.

He carried himself with a professional demeanor, which was not at all what she had expected when she saw that he had taken her to a hotel. Something was up. "All right, Gordy," she answered, arranging the pleat of her pantsuit and assuming her business self. "Tell me what happened that is so damned important that I had to drop everything and come running all the way down here."

"I will, Sylvia, but first let me tell you what sheer delight it is to see you again. You know, even though I haven't known you for so very long, I consider you to be my closest friend, the person I'd prefer to confide in above all others. I wish I was seeing you today just for the pleasure of your company: if I were, I would have come to meet you at the airport every bit as fast as I did out of necessity. Now, some of what I have to tell you is difficult to say, so please listen to all of it before you reply. The ending may change the middle, if you know what I mean."

Sylvia looked suspiciously across the table. When you have to tell someone something like 'I consider you my closest friend,' it is a pretty good sign that they're about to stab you in the back. So, she'd flown all that distance for a brush-off!

"Your son, Michael, was arrested a short while ago at the airport with a group of his accomplices..."

"They were not his accomplices!" snapped Sylvia, interrupting him even before he got a good start. She didn't know what was going on, but she didn't like it. Mike was capable of any type of screw-up so, even though she hadn't heard of anything going wrong, maybe he had been arrested, but no way would she admit to a thing. "There is no connection whatsoever between those men and my son!"

"Very well, then," he continued using his gentlest tones. "Allow me to reword that: following the arrest of some men that Michael has no connection with, okay? Now, there never were any..."

“There is no proof, none at all, that Mike even knows those men are alive,” she insisted. She didn’t know what mess it was Mike had created this time, but she had lawyers who could prove anything to be so or not so, depending on how she wanted it.

“Sylvia, please,” he pleaded. “You don’t need to defend your son with me. I haven’t even said anything at all, yet. You’re going to have to just sit quietly and listen, so I can get through this, but please remember: I’m on your side. I assume from your remarks that you have already heard some of this, but I must continue in this line to give you the story in its entirety. At the moment, I’m just trying to tell you what set it all in motion. Can you give me a chance to continue?”

“Yes, sure. Go ahead,” she answered, reaching into her bag below the table and clicking on a mini recorder.

“Good. Well, like I said, there were never any charges brought against Michael, and he has been released.”

That took a load off of her shoulders. “Mike!” she insisted. “It’s Mike, not Michael.”

“I understand that it’s Shannon,” he said quietly, then leaned back into his chair.

Now what, she wondered. He was, after all, a highly placed government official with an entire police department below him. “Do you? Why do you say that?” she asked.

“This,” he said producing a small notebook from his briefcase, which he handled with a napkin. “It is a daily journal of an OIJ police lieutenant. He’s dead now, killed in a power struggle within a cocaine trafficking ring he participated in but, before he died, he discovered Michael’s true identity, and it was he who arrested and interrogated your son at the airport.”

“If this is the reason you brought me down here, Gordon, you’re wasting your time and mine too. This is a matter to be discussed by attorneys, not us.” Steam was rising. This was entirely inappropriate. “That little prick,” she said stabbing a finger on the table for emphasis, “Lieutenant Edgar Vargas, has been harassing my son from the moment we arrived in this god forsaken banana repub...”

“Sylvia, please,” he said, stopping her cold with a wave of his hand. “Just stay with me for a little while. This isn’t going to turn out bad; in fact, I think you’ll be very happy. Now listen: when this dead, corrupt and harassing police officer’s home was entered, one of the items recovered was this,” and he removed from his attaché case a manila file and set it near the notebook. She eyed the two items warily and could not see how good would come of them. “There are several items in this file that attracted my immediate attention. You see, this officer worked in narcotics control and had for some time investigated your son – diligently, I might add.”

Sylvia gripped the edge of the table with both hands and opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with an upheld hand.

“Oh, I see you’re starting to appreciate what has happened. There’s more, but I want you to understand that this notebook and file were brought to my attention before they were entered into official records. You therefore, have nothing to fear from the OIJ: they have no interest in you, at all. I have seen to that, personally.”

“Thank you for that, Gordy. I...” she began to say.

“Pardon my interruption, Sylvia, but there’s quite a bit more to this. I’m coming to the difficult part, so listen to the whole story, all the way through to the end, before you say anything else, please.” He paused, waiting for her undivided attention. “If you know how to read this file, there is a great deal of information to be found about you.”

“Me? What information had that son-of-a-bitch gathered about me?” she snapped. “Anything at all he may say should be taken with the gravest doubt. Who the hell does that pipsqueak think he is, anyhow?”

“He doesn’t think any more,” he corrected. “He’s dead, remember? And this file will never again be seen by anyone at all, because you and I shall burn it. Let’s see, where was I? Oh, yes: what troubled me about his investigations of you was not what he uncovered, but the fact that they existed at all. I couldn’t understand why he would try to build a case of drug trafficking against you, when he and his partner collaborated in their own cocaine trafficking – and his partner sold drugs to you...”

“Now just a minute, Gordy!” she retorted, glancing about to see if anyone was in range to overhear.

Gordon didn’t give her a chance to start, he pushed ahead immediately with his delivery. “He had here a very compelling body of evidence implicating Mike – and you. With the files he copied from my Port Authority offices added to what he already had, he could have made a very convincing argument to indict you both. He could have shown that you are shipping cocaine to the United States through the Port of Limon, concealed in the stomachs of horses, with the laundered money returning in tuna cans via Mike’s former associates in Boston. There was every reason for Officer Vargas to initiate an official investigation – except for the one glaring truth: that the investigation would implicate himself, and that is what has kept you out of jail. Take a look, if you doubt my word.” He placed the file before her.

“Gordy,” she replied without lowering her eyes to the folder, “he was just trying to frame me for some reason or another. I can’t understand why...” She rested back into her chair, inhaled once deeply, then leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, blowing jets of air from her nostrils, nodding and staring directly into his eyes. “All right, Gordon Edward,” she began, her voice tight with anger. “Just exactly why are you badgering me about this? Yes, I deal in cocaine – so do you!” She let her eyes defy him.

“Now we’re getting somewhere, Sylvia!” He smiled conspiratorially and waved off an approaching waiter. “That was the hard part, getting it all out and said between us.”

She looked at him with his polished perfect smile and air of authority, wondering what was coming next and rather wishing that it wasn’t. “If you really need to know,” she said icily, “I have my own boat and deliver my product by sea, just as I understand you do. So just what do you intend to do about it?”

Gordon, still smiling, held aloft his hand again. “No, you don’t understand,” he interjected, “I’m not trying to interfere in your business.”

He was right: she didn’t get it, but she had heard enough to know that it was time to get up and leave.

“Look,” he said, restraining her with a hand upon her wrist. He opened the journal and turned pages with the aid of two pencils. “These are the dead officer’s notes taken during his interrogation of your son.” He looked up, smiled mischievously and tore out a page. “We ought to burn this before returning the book to the police, don’t you think?” he asked, placing the sheet on the table before her. “Read, and you will see that your son provided considerable information about me to a police officer. Obviously, he had knowledge of my operation, and it now appears that you do as well. I’m sure, as a fellow in this business, you can appreciate my desire to understand how, and to ask who else has it. This is a situation I must address immediately, so please Sylvia, where did you receive this information?”

So, that was it. She had been half expecting to see a contingent of police descend upon the table and haul her away! Why he hadn’t asked more directly was beyond her, but relief was palatable. She smiled toothily and in hushed tones, related the episode of the stolen tuna tins, the involvement of Beth Tierney and the prostitute’s subsequent revelations. Naturally, it was in both their interests that the women be silenced. Gordy remembered the two women: he had shared lunch with them and, recalling Truman’s comments, he confirmed Sylvia’s belief that the American had indeed returned to the US. As for where the prostitute was, or what had become of her, that was “anybody’s guess,” Sylvia interjected, but added that she didn’t

think there was much to be concerned about from her. She cackled, assuring him that she would never work the bars again, where she might have contact with anyone interested in her story, because of “a slight disfiguration.”

Gordon took her hand in his and, with a beguiling smile, said: “Your candor has brought me great relief, Sylvia. I trust you have shared this information with no other person.”

“Of course, I haven’t: you and I are the closest of friends.”

“I thank you for that. You realize I will be speaking with your son about this issue, of course, but you needn’t worry: I promise to be gentle. A great deal has happened since you left,” he said, drawing himself erect in his chair. “As you know, it is election time. I made a campaign issue of a certain renegade band of cocaine traffickers who have been peddling their stuff in Limon and the federal government seemed incapable, or unwilling, to do a thing about it. My associate sees hypocrisy in that,” he added, “but you, I’m sure, understand.”

“Of course, I understand: if Limon was primarily ladino instead of black, it would have been a very different story.”

“Precisely! Well, in a highly publicized effort that was incorporated as part of my reelection strategy, I put the Port Authority Police to work on the problem and, under the pressure, the gang collapsed. Now, they’re killing each another off. Needless to say, I took full advantage of my unforeseen success in the press and now, I’ve become something of a national anti-drug hero. The other day, I received a call from the ruling party presidential candidate – essentially our next president. He asked if I would accept a cabinet level position. It seems he wants me in a high profile position to keep me in the public eye, in preparation for elective office on the federal level in the next go-round. I’ve long felt that is where I belong: it’s good to see I’m not the only one who recognizes my potential. I have the black vote, plus the former Nicaraguans – for my charitable service to their country, delivering medical supplies during their civil war, at considerable risk – and now, it appears that I have the law and order advocates as well. I’m the perfect future candidate to unify the country, including, for the first time, Limon and her people. This is my hour and for them – the people of Limon – I have to accept.”

“Congratulations! What wonderful news, not just for you, but also for justice. Will you be the first Black in the federal government?”

“At the cabinet level, yes, and who knows about next election?” he said, beaming. “At any rate, I will be leaving my position as Director of the Port Authority which, as the two of us know,” he lowered his voice, “is a position sensitive to my other activities. I’m recommending for the job the current director of the OIJ, and I know the people will back my selection. He and I have been closely associated for a number of years, and he will protect my interests. However, I should distance myself from the business, as scrutiny of my activities is sure to increase – and that is where you come in. As my dearest and closest friend whom I trust implicitly, I want to offer you the opportunity to move up in the trade as my general manager, where there are no tuna cans to be discovered or horses that die at inopportune moments, in fact, where the risk involved literally becomes less than flying in a commercial airliner, and the profit – well the profit is beyond imagination. Let it suffice to say that anything you desire shall become readily affordable.”

“I don’t know what to say, it’s just too overwhelming. What kind of a time frame are we talking about?”

“Soon. The proposed ministerial postings will be announced to the press tomorrow and the new administration will assume office following the elections. However, I shall need to be in San José, more or less on a permanent basis, as of Monday to begin transitioning into my new office, and allow our next Port Authority director to do the same here. All of the material relating to the business is here in my safe, so I’d like to put that in your hands by Saturday at the latest. That’s very short notice, I know, but I had intended to move my associate into this position, before your involvement came to my attention and I concluded you were the better choice.”

“Oh my, that’s quick! I mean, yes of course, I accept – I’m just flabbergasted.”

“Yes, yes, I can well imagine. My thought is for you to take over my current customers and be free to develop new ones (on the wholesale level only, however).”

“Well, let’s see; today is Wednesday, so what I’ll do is return to Florida on tonight’s evening flight, finish up my affairs there and be back here on Saturday morning. Will that work for you?”

“Yes, that will be fine. Of course, there is a great deal more for you to know, and I promise you will be well initiated before the next shipment. Basically, it involves moving you out of retail and into wholesale. My thought concerning your current operation is to turn it over to your son. That will have to be done immediately and I expect you to have no further association with it – that is a must.”

“Considering the mess he has apparently made of it,” she said with a sniff and toss of her head, “that sounds appropriate!”

“My associate is anxious to retire and, without him, my current delivery system is untrustworthy,” he said. “New arrangements for transport by a respectable commercial carrier will need to be arranged. I have a number of contacts to help us with that, and it should not prove difficult. Additionally, in view of the recent notoriety of the log barges I currently use,” he said, indicating the log barge references in the notebook, “we will, for safety’s sake, need to discontinue the use of them as well so, with you coming aboard and my associate retiring, there will be a great reshuffling, but I want no interruption of deliveries to our customers. I have been shipping on a precise schedule for years. But don’t let this cause you to feel too pressured by time: The package passes through here on the tenth of each third month, and it just passed through, so we have close to three months to prepare for the next.

“I hope you understand that your son cannot be included in this business or so much as be cognizant of its existence. I’m sorry, but I must insist upon that as a condition, as this is a situation of the gravest importance to us both – if you don’t already grasp my reasoning, all you need do is look right there, in a policeman’s journal! In fact, I think it important that he be relocated, distancing him from our activities.”

“Yes, of course, you’re right. Street sales in Boston have been booming recently, and I have just called in another order. It comes by dugout canoe from Panama to my boat in Puerto Viejo, arriving Sunday evening. He should have made the pick-up and show up at my inn in Puriscal around midnight. I’ll be there, waiting to tell him that the business is his, to pack his bags and get out. It’s something I should have done years ago. This last shipment can be his severance pay, if he can figure out how to get the money down from Boston without tuna cans.”

“Oh, that reminds me!” he said, reaching for his attaché, “I almost forgot, I have recovered something of yours,” and set on the table a plastic bag containing emptied tuna tins and bound stacks of US currency. “Unfortunately, for the prosecuting attorney, the material evidence against your mules has mysteriously disappeared from police custody, and they have, therefore, been released.”

She looked from the bag to Gordy and back again. “What can I say?” she said, grasping both his hands.

“Now, my dear friend and partner, would you like to see the menu, or shall we go to my room and order up?”

CHAPTER SIXTY

Sleep didn't come that first night to the little guesthouse in Curridabat. In her room, Herminia curled before the television and, in a trance-like state, watched religious programming. Following what they had seen on the news regarding Raul, it was for Truman and Beth an impassioned, sleepless night of emotionally charged discussions with imminent violent death a very real possibility. An international incident had resulted from Raul's death, when it was shown from skid marks on the highway and certain paint smudges on his car that he had been murdered. Edgar's bloodied journal and Raul's similarly stained laundry added fire to the sensation. A police spokesman speculated that the death of the Nicaraguan embassy employee represented the killing of a murderer within the notorious Tweety-Bird gang – and, through it all, Gordon Edward was portrayed as virtually a national hero. Speculation between Beth and Truman as to how the news would report their own demise had wound their nerves up to where sleep was impossible.

“Truman, you have to promise that if I'm killed, you'll keep running until you're safe,” she said in the darkened room with only the light of the moon filtered through trees to see by.

He replied by pulling her close and kissing her eyelids. “You're going to be an old, old woman before death takes you; don't worry.”

“You can't know that. Please, promise.”

He continued holding her against his chest running his fingers through her hair, then responded: “Okay, I promise, but it's a promise I shall never have to keep, and I make it only if you make the same with me.”

“I do, Truman, it's a solemn oath.” Interspersed between these nightlong doubts, worries and fears, were fervent expressions of love and an equally fervent loathing of Mike Henderson, the vilest of villains. There were tears and pleas and joy and anger. And there was the celebration of their affection through ardent lustful lovemaking, tearing hungrily at one another amid a snarl of twisted sheets.

With the arrival of morning, Truman could take confinement no longer. Transfixed in hushed and motionless silence, holding hands across the breakfast table, they had watched the morning news replay the charade of Raul's death. Conversation erupted with considerations of possible scenarios of what may have actually happened. The image of a grinning Captain Flores, speaking to a crush of reporters in the continuing broadcast, caught Truman's attention. “Wait!” he gasped, interrupting Beth's words just as the anchorwoman moved on to the next item: sports. The topic had been the formation of the incoming president's cabinet. He could have sworn that he heard Gordon Edward's name as the proposed Secretary of Commerce – and what was Flores so thrilled about? The next news report wouldn't be until noon. It was maddening not knowing. Less than five blocks away was a mall where he could melt into the crowd and return with a newspaper. He donned a raincoat, pulled the hood low over his face and left.

He returned enraged that the announced shuffle of public figures included Gordon's recommendation of the current director of the OIJ for his position, and Captain Flores' elevation to the nation's top police officer. Truman was also perplexed at other discoveries. “There's something mighty strange going on,” he said after raving over the news. “I called the hotel and spoke with Cecilia, and guess what? She said there hasn't been anyone looking for us, so I went to the cash machine to see what would happen – and look, this is the money it gave me. That means Gordy hasn't frozen my account, and I don't understand how that can be: it is the first thing he would do. So if he isn't trying to cut off my money and hasn't

sent people out looking for us, then maybe he didn't have Raul killed. But if not, then who did and why? Still, it had to be him, otherwise, why would inquiries about Raul be routed to Captain Flores and not some junior officer? It almost looks as though he is starting to believe his own lies to the press. Does it make any sense to you?"

"No, not at all, but I sure like the part about nobody tracking us down. And Truman," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "about that bank account that hasn't been frozen... How much do you have in it, more or less, in US dollars?"

"The maximum, roughly two hundred fifty thousand, but I'd have to go into the bank to get it and besides, we can't carry that kind of cash around with us; I'll just have to abandon it."

"Yippee!" she shouted, flipping the paper to the real estate section. "Herminia, come in here: we're going to pick out a house for you!" She looked up to Truman's stern expression and, under her steady gaze, watched it melt to a reluctant smile.

"Well, I guess I could risk enough time in the bank to certify a check," he said, following a deep sigh "but make it quick: Herminia's room at the center will be ready the day after tomorrow, and then we're out of here."

"Okay, Truman; we'll pick out a couple of houses right now, and then will you drive us around to see them before your meeting with the lawyer?"

"Make sure you limit your choices to this area and don't expect to be all day looking. An hour or two, that's it."

"Truman," she said, smiling coyly, "there's no sense in abandoning what money we don't spend, is there? Why not take it all out and deposit what we don't spend into an account for Herminia?"

He frowned, laughed once, shrugged and then nodded.

"Herminia, hurry, hurry, hurry!"

Of the three houses she looked at, the one Herminia settled upon was a three-bedroom ranch-style home in *San Francisco de Dos Rios*, a neighboring suburb. The streets were clean with sidewalks, lawns, and playgrounds in nearby parks. Public bus lines provided direct service to the city center. There was a large family room, dining room, modern kitchen and, in front, well-tended shrubs and a flower garden.

* * *

Truman drove, his eyes fixed on nothing at all. All that existed was a heavy, morose cloud of impending doom, and beside him sat Beth, giggling.

"It looked like her face would fall off when you said, in that big business-like voice of yours: 'We'll take it; however, it is necessary that we conclude this transaction tomorrow, so please have your attorney call me with the exact total I will need, as we shall pay by certified check,'" and another giggling fit consumed her.

Truman turned the wheel, suddenly pulling to the curb and stared at her. "How can you be in such a trivial mood? We're going to be damn lucky if we so much as live through this week. I am sitting here with visions of Mike and Gordy, side by side, happily pissing on our graves and there you are as merry as can be."

"I'm delighted for Herminia, Truman. She's so excited! I think her next excuse for worming her way out of going to the center is going to be that she doesn't want to leave the house: she's probably even going to want to sleep in it tonight. Besides, Truman, I think I have a plan." She turned, lifting her bent knee onto the seat, rested an elbow upon it and lowered her chin to her hand, looking directly at him while thoughtfully stroking a crooked finger over her lip. "The lawyer said the soonest he could have all the papers in order won't be until Friday. And you know, my love, if we just run out of here

without at least trying to do something about Mike Henderson, for the rest of my life the image of him will stick in my mind. So now, with this additional time, I think I know who might be able to help us.”

“Really? Who?”

“Caroline Steepleton.”

“Like I said: who?” he queried with a short laugh.

“She’s the woman who turned Mike in to Raul’s friend. You’ve met her.”

“I have? When? I don’t remember meeting anyone by that name.” he replied, shaking his head and frowning in thought.

She reached out her hand and laid it on Truman’s arm. “Do you remember the redhead you told me was with Brian Walston in the prison? That’s her.”

“That one? She had fire in her eyes for me. I don’t think that woman would lift a finger to help.”

“All of that may be true, but she is the one who turned Mike in, don’t forget that and, if she did it once, maybe she will do it again. I think she likes me. It’s worth a try, anyhow. I’m going to go to Club Hollywood and see if I can get her to open up about Mike.”

“We’ve got to get out of here, Beth. What do you think we’re going to be able to accomplish, in just a few days, anyway? Raul is dead; so now what, huh? Do you want us to just wait around to be next? Any day now, Gordy is going to find us. When that happens, it isn’t going to be pretty.”

“Only if he’s looking for us, and apparently, he isn’t yet, right? Anyhow, I’m not suggesting that we stay even one minute extra, just that we put to good use the time we do have. Sure, I know it’s a very remote possibility, but I can’t leave it like that. Why Caroline informed on Mike, we don’t know, but according to the policeman’s journal she isn’t new to the business of informing. Maybe to another woman, she would reveal even more than she did to him. The several times I’ve met her, we were comfortably friendly. I think I can build on that. My major worry is that Mike might appear at the club.” She stopped with that, returning to massaging her lip. “Maybe a better idea,” she said, “is for me to get a job as a nude dancer, so I can watch everything from one of those little stages.” Truman wasn’t laughing.

◇ ◇ ◇

It had been a satisfying day. Gordon leaned back in his chair with a contented smile remembering the hours he had shared with Sylvia. She would be arriving in Miami about now, he thought, and when she returned on Saturday, it would be on a semi-permanent basis. He would have her close at hand, the lion’s share of the money would still be his, and he was moving up to the federal level, yes very satisfying indeed! He lowered his eyelids and let the pleasure of his musings carry him.

Like a bolt from the blue, the little box wailed its frightful pitch, shattering his dreams. It was Consuela with what had clearly become the standard message: “Pardon the interruption, Mr. Edward,” her electronically mechanized voice began. “Captain Flores, with the OIJ is here to see you, sir. He says it’s urgent, sir.

“Captain Flores says he must see you right away...”

“Mr. Edward, are you there?”

“Sir?”

Gordon wasn’t answering because he had a new idea: in it, Captain Flores wasn’t promoted to head the OIJ, he was transferred to traffic duty in Golfito, a forgotten smugglers cove in the far south. At least there, he wouldn’t be in a position

to interrupt his every thought. “Yes, yes, Connie I’m here. Please show in the good Captain Flores,” he answered with defeat registered in his voice.

“Welcome, Manuel,” he gushed with politician’s polish, meeting him at the door and grasping the captain’s upper arm with his left as they shook hands enthusiastically. “How is the future director of the OIJ, this fine evening?” They remained thus for several minutes, complimenting each other on their assignments, amid assurances that the public could not be better served.

Eventually, they assumed their respective seats, Gordon upon his throne (which he would dearly miss) and Manuel in the lower chair, from where he reported that Michael Henderson, with two uniformed officers as his escort, waited in the outer office. He had been found barricaded in his residence and, when they approached, attempted escape on horseback but, as the valley he fled into was surrounded by jungle with the highway its only outlet, it was poorly contrived. Even after apprehension, he continued to behave most uncooperatively, despite being told repeatedly that he was not being arrested, merely brought to the office of Gordon Edward to answer several questions.

“As I’m sure you remember,” he said, “Michael is an alias. His name is Shannon Henderson. According to a report from the Boston Police Department, Shannon is wanted for the drive-by murder of a boy.” Gordon’s eyes widened in surprise. “That is not all. The bloody fingerprints on Lt. Vargas’ journal are not from the Nicaraguan embassy employee as we expected – they are his: Shannon Henderson’s.”

This was craziness: could Sylvia’s son be a multiple murderer and part of the Tweety-Bird gang? “Show him in then, Manuel. I want to have a word with this Shannon Henderson.”

“Yes, certainly, in a moment, but I have something else...”

“There’s more? You have been busy, haven’t you? Go ahead, then.”

“I think there is something you ought to know concerning your associate, Truman Herrera.”

“Truman? Yes, what is that?” Gordon asked in surprise.

“When I looked at the identity card of the Nicaraguan embassy employee, I began to ask myself if perhaps sharing a surname might not be more than mere coincidence. The thought was highly speculative and the family name common but, considering the situation, I did some checking. According to the personnel file from the embassy, the social worker was born in Jinotega, the same place as Truman. The home addresses turned out to be one number apart on the same street, they attended university together, and an additional check with authorities in Managua confirmed my suspicion: they are first cousins, there’s no doubt about it. However, in the war, the social worker fought as a Sandinista colonel so, considering Truman’s military history, I thought perhaps not much connection remained between them. Nevertheless, I felt it a rather uncomfortable coincidence.”

“What the hell are you trying to tell me?” Gordon retorted. A strange crawling sensation gnawed at the pit of his stomach. Truman and the social worker, cousins? It couldn’t mean that Truman too was part of the Tweety-Bird gang. No, of course not – impossible! But, what? It wasn’t like Truman not to mention a cousin, if he had one around. “Well, go on, damn it. I want to hear the rest.”

“When this came to my attention, naturally I wanted to speak with Truman. I thought it a remote possibility, but perhaps this relationship explained Truman’s lack of enthusiastic support for your pursuit of the Tweety-Bird gang and, if questioned directly, he could provide valuable insight. I called repeatedly, but each time, I was told he was not in. He once was reported to be in the shower yet, when I called again fifteen minutes later, a different person claimed that he was away on a fishing trip. I checked and the boat is tied up in Limon so, last evening, I had a Guardia Rural officer stop at his hotel. He

found Truman's apartment vacant although the staff claimed to know nothing. They said he rarely spoke to them and they knew nothing of his comings and goings. His office had been emptied, with the computer torn free of its connections, and the file cabinet stripped. Elsewhere, drawers and closets had been emptied and his remaining personal effects folded and packed into boxes. An interesting observation was that a significant number of female articles were among his personal items, including toiletries. The hotel staff refused to acknowledge the presence of a woman, but it seems apparent that one lived with him and they left together."

So he'd lied: his girlfriend (who Sylvia claimed was a thief) hadn't left – and his cousin was part of the Tweety-Bird gang! He didn't know what was up, but Truman, sure as hell, wasn't going to get away with anything! "Damn! Damn and double damn!" Gordon shouted at full volume, visibly reducing Flores' already shaky confidence. The captain's lower jaw began quivering. "Find him!" Gordon demanded. "Find him and bring him here. I want that woman, too: both of them. She is an American by the name of Beth Tierney. I don't want this goddamn little box scaring the shit out of me again, telling me you're here with another urgent message, unless that message is that you have both of them with you! Have I made myself clear, Captain?" he shouted, shaking the intercom in his hand, and boring holes in the captain with his gaze.

The meeting with Mike was worse.

He entered and slouched into the chair, crossed his arms over his chest, slid his backside to the seat's forward edge, extended his legs and tapped the toe of his boot against the desk. Rancid body odor wafted the air.

Gordon crossed to the air conditioning control panel, behind the bar and set it on high, in ventilate mode. "You are Mike Henderson?" he asked in obvious surprise.

"Yeah, Gordy, that's me, Mike Henderson!"

"Very well, *Shannon*," Gordon said returning to his throne. "Let's get a couple of things straight before we begin, okay? First of all, you address me as Mr. Edward, or sir, if you prefer, and never will you use that tone of voice in this office." Gordon withdrew from his desk the .38 he had once fired into the wall to impress Leon, and laid it before him, cringing inwardly that he soon might be inflicting costly damage to his expensive paneling – again. "I'm going to be very blunt with you, Shannon. If I'm not one hundred percent satisfied that you are speaking with total honesty – and respect – you will leave here in a body bag! The officers outside will be quite content to deliver you to the morgue without a question asked. Your mother is a very good friend and I fear that would cause her discomfort. For that reason only, you are, at this moment, still alive. But, do not misunderstand: I will not hesitate, because the subject I wish to discuss with you means more to me than her friendship. Are we understanding one another so far?"

"Yeah, okay, I got it," he answered as he assumed a position slightly less resembling a dog sprawled in the center of the road.

"Very well then, without further ado I want you to begin by telling me exactly – with every detail included – how you learned about my privately conducted business." He related basically the same story as Sylvia, regarding a prostitute's theft of their tuna cans and the subsequent 'questioning'. It was painful to hear that the source of his problems had once again been Leon. They were brothers and he did love him – hadn't he always provided for him? But this was it – Leon's days were over. It was an unpleasant decision he had avoided countless times, but it was now glaringly apparent that if he hoped to continue it was an unpleasant matter that must be attended to. "Who other than your mother and yourself has knowledge of my affairs?" he asked abruptly.

"Uhm, ah, nobody. Nope, nobody at all." He swallowed and glanced awkwardly about the room.

There was a lie in that hesitation. Gordon picked up his pistol and worked a round into the chamber. “I’ll ask only once more,” he spoke calmly while studying the pistol, then aimed directly at him and shouted: “Who other than your mother has knowledge of my affairs?”

Mike sat bolt upright and held his hands up defensively. “Just two’a my friends and the cop know about it, but we killed him, and one’a my friends is dead, too. The other one won’t say nutting to nobody, I promise,” he stammered.

Gordon was taken aback. Was he referring to the person found adrift in the harbor? “You say, one of them is dead. How did that happen?”

“He drowned. He got thrown in the bay and he never come swimming in, so we figgered he drowned.” He shrugged his head towards one shoulder and opened a palm in hopelessness at his friend’s fate.

“Just a minute! Did this friend who drowned have any tattoos?”

“Yeah, he had a roach. A cockroach on his cheek, why?”

“Wait. Let me try to understand this. You, your two friends, the two police officers, Vargas and Segovia, and the Nicaraguan embassy employee were all members of the Tweety-Bird gang. Who else was there?”

“Say what? ‘Tweety-Bird gang’? Sounds like a bunch’a fags! I don’t know nutting about it, and I sure as hell ain’t never run around wit no fags.”

Gordon fixed him with a fiery glare and lifted the pistol again.

“Easy man, easy” Mike said. “It’s the truth. I don’t know these fucking bird guys. All’s we did was try to rip off a load’a your cocaine from the ugly fuck wit the scarred up face and the American broad. We would’a got it too,” he said with a meek smile, “’cept these other two pricks showed up: maybe they’re your bird guys, I dunno, but when they got there, everything turned to shit. My pal knifed the cop, but then the fucking boat took off, I fell in the water and Dougie – he’s the guy wit the tattoo – got dumped way out in the bay and never come back, that’s why we guess he drowned. That’s it, end of story.”

Gordon was speechless. Truman had been assaulted? So why had he not mentioned it? Indeed, why had he also lied about sending away his lady-friend, hidden the existence of his cousin and run off? There was no sense to any of it.

“No, that is not the end of the story, Shannon. You are going to tell me everything that happened that night.”

Sentence by sentence, the scene of theft, treachery, murder and bedlam on the fateful night in Limon harbor unfolded. It became apparent that Truman together with his cousin and girlfriend conspired to steal the same shipment of cocaine that had Mike, and the two groups of thieves clashed aboard the boat. Then Truman and his girlfriend (the one who had robbed Sylvia) had escaped – with *his* cocaine! He spun his Rolodex to Carlos, and dialed the Bluefields home number. Yes, Truman had appeared on schedule, he was told, but without a package, rather with the news that it was all over and there would never be another. His rage was out of control. Gordon could never have imagined Truman doing anything worse than walk out of the organization: this, this bold theft and betrayal spun his head and brought his blood to boil. His only comfort would come when he and his girlfriend were thrown from the same cliff his cousin had gone over, although a bullet through the brain would do. An idea also began to take shape in his mind of what could be done with this surly beast seated before him, that wouldn’t be perceived by Sylvia as coming from him and thereby alienate her. Michael had a shipment arriving in Puerto Viejo this Sunday night, he recalled Sylvia saying. Also, his Port Authority Police had humiliated the OIJ; perhaps to mend intradepartmental fences, he could offer Captain Flores, as the new OIJ director, the opportunity to arrest Michael when he arrived, keeping him completely out of the picture.

“Well, we got through that, all right,” he said, hopping to sit on the corner of his desk closest to Mike and, despite the smell, leaned towards him as he spoke. “It wasn’t so hard, was it? Now, to show that there are no hard feelings, allow me to offer you a drink. What would you like?”

Mike turned in his chair to face Gordon: his face was blanched and his breath coming in difficult gasps. “Yeah man, I could go for a whiskey,” he replied, attempting to smile.

Gordon filled a cocktail glass and offered it. “Your mother and I are both retiring from this business,” he said in a tone of confidentiality. “However, she and I worked out an arrangement for you, which I think you will find most agreeable. I intended to offer it only if you came here in a spirit of complete honesty and, although we had a rough start, it looks like you have been open with me. Here’s the deal: you are to take over your mother’s operation in its entirety. Its profit and all decisions shall be yours alone.”

Mike looked up from his emptied glass with a tentative smile.

Gordon refilled it. “So, you see how valuable maintaining honesty has been for you?”

“Yeah, oh yeah man. We gott’a be honest with each other, that’s for damn sure,” he answered, continuing to smile weakly.

“I want you to know my truths too, so you and I don’t have any other misunderstandings. This second friend of yours, who was with you that night in the harbor and knows about my business, is going to have to be silenced.”

“Oh, you got no problem wit Patty-boy. He knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Listen, as a fellow in this business, I’m sure you know that there are those who know how to open closed mouths. Just give me his name and address, and I will make the appropriate arrangements: your hands will be clean and if, in the future, the situation becomes reversed, I would provide you with the same information. I know turning on a friend is a difficult thing to do because I’m facing the same situation: a man I have been close with for years, my former associate, the one with the scarred face, and the woman who was with him, must also be eliminated. If you happen across them – kill them on sight. I am in a position to offer you a considerable reward and complete immunity if you do just that. As the director of the Port Authority, I have complete control of the Port Authority Police and also considerable influence within the OIJ. Should any investigation of you for eliminating those two ever be initiated, you can rest assured that it would fail. Now, give me the name.”

“There ain’t much I would rather do than snuff those two,” Mike huffed through a deep laugh. “Yeah, okay.” He drained his glass in one swallow, leaned across the desk and jotted the name and address of Patrick Crowley on a pad.

* * *

They pulled to the curb around the corner from the dazzling brightness of the casino, beside the domed green canopy bearing the lettering BAR CLUB HOLLYWOOD. Truman was angry because of the risk she insisted upon taking and because his scared face was such a beacon that he dared not enter first to ensure Mike wasn’t there.

“I’m sorry, but I have to do this,” Beth said, kissing him before departing. “Don’t worry so, my love: I’ll be extremely careful and, you know, I can run like the wind.”

“Five minutes, that’s all, or I’m coming in,” he said, looking into her eyes.

She nodded, giving him one last peck and noting, as she did, the pistol stuffed into his waistband. Beth worried that, with Brian Walston in jail, Caroline might find it difficult to free any time to speak with her. As it turned out, she was wrong: she had floor managers that allowed her to mingle with her patrons. She greeted Beth like a long-lost friend, and led her to a

pair of stools in the bar. “There’s a game in progress in my back room, so it’s best to talk in here,” she said above the din of music. “There is always someone watching and trying to overhear conversations in the casino. In here, you can’t hear anything that’s said more than two feet from you, and nobody gives a damn what you say anyhow: all these guys want to do is jerk off or run in the back room.

“Let me buy you a drink, it’s the least I can do. After all, if it wasn’t for you, all of this,” she crowed “wouldn’t be mine.”

“What do you mean by that?” Beth questioned in frank surprise.

“It’s all up there,” Caroline answered. Her red enameled finger pointed to a picture frame hanging above the entrance and bathed in the beam of a mini-spotlight. “Read it.”

Beth stepped close and scanned a two-column newspaper clipping. The substance of the item was that Brian Walston had been remanded to San Sebastian prison pending trial on charges of conspiracy to murder George Dearling. A sentence near its end stated that a disinterested third party, Beth Tierney, an American tourist, had corroborated critical information. She was stunned and instantly incensed. The article was bad enough, but to have her name appear on a whorehouse wall, was a hundred-fold worse. Yet, if she hoped to win Caroline’s cooperation, tearing it from the wall was not an option: she gritted her teeth. “There was no reason for my name to be included in that article,” she said with as close to a normal tone as she could produce. “I’m sure the police paid little attention to what I said.”

“No, you’re wrong. Your statements to the cops were the frosting on the cake that put Brian away, and with him gone, this is mine. Welcome to Club Hollywood, where dreams really do come true!” She held a drink before her lips, offering a toast. “For you tonight, everything is on the house. I’ll have the cashier give you a complementary thousand dollars in chips. Play and have a good time. Any winnings are yours to keep.” She held her glass high, completing her salute with a flourish.

“That’s very generous of you, but I only wanted an opportunity to talk for a while. Could we continue in one minute please? I have a friend waiting outside and, so he doesn’t worry, I should tell him that I’ll be a little longer, okay?”

Caroline stepped to the window, pulled back a curtain and peered out. “Who would that be out there, Frankenstein?”

“Frankenstein?” Beth couldn’t help but giggle.

“Yeah, him. Go on out and tell him to wait if you want, but don’t bring him in here. If he wants to know why tell him that I don’t like people who have secret conversations with my fiancé that turn him into an absolute bear.”

As Truman advised, Beth got immediately to the point upon returning, stating that she had come to speak about certain information Caroline had provided to the police.

“What?” snapped Caroline. “How did you find out about that? That was a protected secret guaranteed by a federal judge!”

“Caroline, your secret is safe with me.”

“Safe? You told Frankenstein about it! That’s why he went to see Brian, isn’t it?” She had turned to face her, and her angry words were spoken but inches from her ear.

“Please, his name is Truman and he didn’t say anything about it to Brian, in fact, at the time, he didn’t know.”

“I’m not telling you a thing, and tell Frankenstein to stay away from Brian!”

“May I just ask you why you went to Officer Vargas in the first place?”

“Vargas... the Indian?... Oh my god, I thought... But, you’re referring to what I told him about Mike!” Caroline pushed into the backrest of the stool and appraised her. She had been curious about Beth from the first time they met: a new face who knew many of the people in her own social circle. The first time she had seen her was on the arm of George Darling. Then she showed up one fine morning in Sylvia’s stable as a personally invited guest, free to ride any horse she chose, and at her formal dinner party, mingling with all the worst of her cronies and assigned the seat beside George. He was devoted to his wife, a man women couldn’t get close to, and he had tried to say that he really didn’t know her, nevertheless, there she had been, chatting and laughing merrily away with him, as though they had been intimate for years. Later, she had seen her huddled in the shadows on the balcony with Gene Frazer, talking with him too as though they were old chums, and Sylvia told of her lunch in Limon with the politician Gordon Edward, appearing there as his friend’s date. The last time she had heard Beth’s name mentioned had been a disparaging remark made by Sylvia. Something had happened between them, but Sylvia had refused to go into it. “Why don’t you tell me exactly who you are?”

“I’m nobody,” she replied. “Just a geologist from Green Bay, Wisconsin – really. But, Mike Henderson is a terrible man who belongs in prison. I thought you might feel the same way and be willing to share what you know about his cocaine trafficking.”

“You want to know about Mike Henderson, I suggest you ask him yourself. I never got along with the little Indian, but I always knew he was honest, and his word was as good as gold. Him I trusted, you I don’t and, in particular, I don’t like the people you associate with. What good would it do anyhow? Since you seem to know so much, you must already know that I gave the Indian enough to put Mike away, still he was released almost as soon as they picked him up. The cops came for him again this morning (I know because I was in the stable, and saw it happen), but he was out again this afternoon. If I told you anything it would just get back to him that I ratted, and I’d have to deal with that. No thanks.”

“Well, if you refuse to help, then the next time he rapes someone let it be on your conscience, that you could have done something to prevent it, but refused.”

“Rapes someone? You said trafficking cocaine.”

“Yes, I said trafficking cocaine because that’s what he does, as you full well know. That can send him to prison, where he belongs and where at least he can’t rape any women.” Caroline seemed to be waiting for more, staring without speaking. “He raped me,” Beth said, and related the story of her own kidnapping and violation, and the mutilation suffered by Herminia. “I gave back the money my friend stole, but he mistakenly thought we knew something about cocaine trafficking. Now, some even worse things have happened, and I can’t stay around to testify against him. But then, if I just walk away, he’ll rape someone else: you know it’s true, I can see in your eyes that you do. Won’t you, please, reconsider?”

While Caroline studied Beth, her emotionless soul developed a fissure, allowing a sense of sympathy to enter, and suddenly, she was anxious to help. “But you keep me out of it. If anyone comes around asking questions, I won’t know a thing about it,” she insisted, then related what she knew or suspected.

When finished, the only item that Beth didn’t already know was that Sylvia had purchased a boat that became Caroline’s namesake. “I’d so hoped and prayed that you would have something earth-shattering, and the OIJ would just have to arrest him, but I don’t think this is going to do it,” Beth responded dejectedly. “I mean, who in this country are you going to get to do anything about his using an alias? And maybe he uses this boat for drug trafficking, but again, who is going to pay attention to a maybe? The son-of-a-bitch wins again!”

“If you want, I could listen in on some of his phone calls. I’m the one who arranged the installation of telephone service in La Hacienda, and the phone company ran the lines through the stables. They put in one of those push-button

phones out there so, if I choose, I can listen in when his line lights up. I'm there almost every morning riding and grooming my horse. Do you want me to do it?"

Later in the car, listening to Beth describe the plan she and Caroline had come up with Truman's face, with furrowed brow and pursed lips, was betraying his disapproval.

"I'm going to sneak in past the guardhouse hidden in Caroline's car," Beth continued, "and listen..."

"Oh no, you're not! Absolutely not! That's enough of you sticking your neck out!" He twisted the key in the ignition and pulled out into traffic.

"What's this? Where are we going?"

"To see a friend of mine. He's an electronic engineer who has done a lot of work for Gordy: bugging, wiretapping, that sort of thing. I'm positive that he has a wiretap recorder Caroline can install herself, then, all we have to do is collect the tapes from her – a little easier than riding, curled up in the trunk of a car, on a road fit only for four wheel drive vehicles, don't you think?"

* * *

They awoke early Friday morning, left Herminia to enjoy her sleep and took off for Puriscal, so as to be in Caroline's driveway when she returned from riding. Waiting was a nerve-wracking experience spent by Beth chewing the miniscule remnants of fingernails and, by Truman, fuming that it made much more sense to walk right up the entrance to La Hacienda, grab the hairy bastard by the throat and stomp the living shit out of him. The arrival of Caroline's car broke their pleasant pastimes, especially as she walked by the car with a conniving grin, waving a mini cassette victoriously above her head. Her delight came from the third recorded phone call, in which, she claimed, Mike negotiated to purchase broken-down horses for more than double their value. However, of interest to Beth and Truman, there was nothing, though they listened intently to each message which treated them only to a rogue's gallery of prostitutes and alcoholics.

The possibility of hearing anything different had been an extreme long shot; nevertheless, listening to the foolishness they had gone to such great lengths to get, left them feeling bitter. It was a bad start to an already dark day. Not only was there a cold rain, driven horizontal by the wind, but this was also the day to say good-bye to Herminia. Somehow she sensed that something terrible had happened beyond the killing of Raul, but it had been decided that, for her own safety, she should be told as little as possible; as a result, Beth had been avoiding confidentiality with her in their final days together. It was nine-thirty in the morning and Herminia entered the convalescent home at two: not much time to make up for so thoughtless a slight.

They returned to Curridabat as quickly as crossing San José would allow and found that in their little guesthouse, nobody waited. Herminia was gone. They searched the grounds, combed the neighborhood, checked every store and bathroom in the mall, returned to the house then drove to San Francisco de Dos Rios to do the same in her future neighborhood: nothing. They found their way to the barrio where she had grown up and her family still lived. They knew not where to look, so they cruised the streets of wretched poverty and questioned a few whose misfortune it was to call this place home if they knew of Herminia, her 'mother' or her three children, to no avail. Beth then remembered the brick wall in the side of an alley Herminia had pointed out on Calle Ocho: a certain loosened brick, when it was removed, yielded crack cocaine if the correct amount of money was placed in the opening and covered over again with the brick. Rail-thin addicts

queued on a nearby corner and trailed into the alley one after the other, but Herminia was not among them, nor was there one willing to be questioned.

Returning in abject disappointment, they entered the neighborhood of San Francisco de Dos Rios for another check of Herminia's new home. The moment she opened the kitchen door from the garage, Beth knew from the scent of now familiar crack cocaine fumes that they had found her. She sat on the floor in the corner of the living room, smiling dully, her smoking tube limply in her hand, nose running over her upper lip, eyes cherry-red and focused upon another world. "Here she is!" Beth called out. He joined her in the doorway where Beth stood, staring down in hopeless confusion. "She smoked a lot, but I think I've seen her do as much before; she'll be okay," Beth said, not altogether certain that she spoke the truth.

Herminia's eyes returned to the here and now, and she smiled. "Jus theese one last time, Beth, I promise," she said, then laughed uproariously, abruptly stopped, sprang to her feet and in an instant was before them. "So sorry," she said meekly, sniffed and wiped her running nose across her forearm, "but theese, she is the last time, really. What time is it?"

"It's a couple of minutes past twelve," answered Truman.

"Two hours!" she whimpered in a little girl's voice. "Herminia is very scare!" Tears sprang from her eyes as if a tap had been opened, she sat on the floor again with her back to the wall, dropped her head onto arms crossed over her knees, and cried.

Truman clamped both hands on hips and leaned his back to the wall.

Beth circled the room slowly. "If I was you," she said, speaking down to the sniffing Herminia, "I would buy a sofa that picked up the colors of that bush in front: green, but with a lot of yellow, and put it over here to catch the light from this side window." Herminia peeked above her arms. "Then and oval carpet, large enough to cover this stain, but otherwise just wax the hardwood flooring. What do you think?"

"Green, no," Herminia answered, "white with red," and she was on her feet, moving rapidly. "White carpet, red curtains and white sofa, soft and warm, with red pillow. And, we get dog: my hijo, Christian, he loves them. Oh, and bicycles – new ones. The leetle bedroom in the back she ees for Jeremy. And, look, look," she said dashing into the oversized bathroom and throwing open a pair of doors. "Theese ees special place for washing machine and drier. Doan know how to use them, but I geet both. Thank you, Truman, I love you forever! I keess heem, Beth; no?"

They arrived at the stroke of two where they were permitted access only into the parlor off the entrance and not – as they had thought and merrily chatted about on the drive over – to Herminia's assigned room. Beth held a large vase of flowers that she intended to find the perfect location for and Truman awkwardly managed three suitcases at once, but neither the flowers, suitcases nor themselves were permitted beyond the door at the end of the room. They were allowed five minutes for their good-byes. Beth looked from Herminia to the steel door with a small panel of shatter-resistant glass near its top. On the other side were comfortable accommodations, she was sure, and competent, caring people, but it hurt to think of her dear friend a prisoner for a minimum of four months and, more likely, the doctor had advised, six. They hugged and kissed, and said all the things that they could find in their hearts to say, but the five minutes ended and the door closed behind her.

* * *

"Play it again, Beth," Truman said with surprising enthusiasm. Even on a Saturday afternoon, midtown San José traffic was a nightmarish crush of gridlock and boiling Latin tempers. His was as hot as any of the others: they had had to

wait in Puriscal for hours while Caroline overslept, relaxed over a lingering breakfast, prepared herself for riding by braiding her hair into a bun and adjusting her riding regalia to perfection. Now running late, he cursed and leaned on the horn between bursts of acceleration and rapid braking, but his excitement over the taped conversation overshadowed his fury. Beth, meanwhile, grumbled while clicking between the play, fast forward and reverse buttons searching for and eventually finding the start of the call he wanted to hear. The continual strain they were under was taking a heavy toll on both; they were worn down, short tempered, terrified, elated for their love, mournful for Raul, concerned for Herminia, puffy around bloodshot eyes, and beyond exhaustion. Even their rumpled clothing reflected their frantic condition, and the tension of knowing that they were walking a tightrope upon which the slightest misstep could well cost them their lives.

“Here,” she proclaimed. “This is it, listen.”

“Mike?” queried the voice with an unusual Spanish accent. It was a voice that Caroline had been able to identify.

“I know who that is,” she’d said. “It’s Angel, an Indian guy, down in Bocas del Toro, Panama. I met him when I was down on vacation, and do you know what he tried to sell me? Cocaine, by the kilo. I didn’t go for it but, if Mike’s trafficking, Angel could be where he’s buying it. I think what’s going on here is that he’s arranging a sale to Mike, and I would bet my bottom dollar that Mike is going to ship it north aboard the *Caroline*.”

“Yeah,” answered Mike’s voice. “Oh, hey there, Angel, how’s it hangin’ man?”

“Fine, Mike, fine. Thank you,” Angel began. “I’m calling to confirm your reservation for tomorrow, Saturday. Your favorite room, room twenty, is available. Will you be staying in twenty or would you prefer a different room?”

“Tomorrow? Shit, that’s short notice, man.”

“I was asked to have room twenty ready for you as soon as possible. I can’t hold it, you know that. After tomorrow, everything will be sold out.”

“Yeah, all right. We’ll be there tomorrow and, yeah twenty is good. That was the order, right?”

“That’s what I was told,” he replied, with a sound of disgust in his voice.

“Okay,” Mike answered, “but, shit, I had fucking things planned for tomorrow. Don’t worry though, I’ll be there. And hey, *hermano*, I wanna get down there an’ spend some time wit’cha one’a these days. Ya know, relax a bit. Maybe I’ll pop on down an’ give `ya a visit when we finish up wit this shit. I can probably get away in about, hey maybe a week or two. I’ll let’cha know.”

“Thank you for the reservation, sir,” Angel’s voice responded, and abruptly the connection ended.

Truman glanced from the recorder, to the road then to Beth. “Caroline said that with this tape, we should ‘go get the son-of-a-bitch and send him to jail’, but I’d bet that nobody other than us would believe that this tape is about buying kilos of cocaine from someone in Panama.”

“Not straight, Truman!” Frazzled nerves had her shouting in reprimand as she pointed insistently to a narrow alley they were about to pass. “It’s in there, what’s the matter with you, can’t you see the sign?”

They were bound for the courier company, so the packet of documents concerning the transfer of Cabañas Arrecifes could be delivered to Alberto and Cecilia. The entrance was clearly indicated but, operating the recorder while driving, Truman had missed it. “No problem,” he asserted with a wry smile, “watch this.” He cut the wheel sharply and gunned into the other lane, ignoring a near collision with a car that swerved towards the sidewalk and braked with a squeal. He blew the horn at a taxi attempting to navigate the same turn then cut in front of it, in a quick series of wheel turns, sudden jerks and curses that ended in a successful challenge for the narrow opening.

At the curb, Beth hopped out with the folio of documents tucked under her arm then turned back to lean through the window. "I yelled at you, my love, I'm sorry," she said and blew a kiss through the open window.

"My fault," he replied, "I'm driving like a lunatic. Go ahead: I'll be in the parking lot at the rear waiting for you. I want to listen to this tape some more," he said as the window between them slid closed and he gunned into the alley. He parked out of sight, at the far side of the trash container, slid his seat back to its stops, stretched his legs and ejected the mini-cassette from the recorder. He jiggled the tape from one night earlier into the machine. There had been a voice that he recalled as similar to Angel's. He watched absently the spinning of the mini-recorder's tiny reels as the thickness of tape gradually shifted from one side to the other.

In a violent implosion of flying glass, the passenger window erupted, freezing him in momentary shock. His blood ran cold when he saw the barrel of a Kalashnikov automatic rifle appear amid the shards. "Well, if it isn't my old friend, Truman!" greeted the man who held the weapon, speaking with an all too familiar East Texas accent.

Truman didn't answer: he couldn't. He waited for the barrel of the gun to unleash its deadly shower of lead, ending his life.

"Your ass is mine, Truman! Now real slow and careful-like, put your hands on the steering wheel. Anything else, and you get it right now!"

Hardly aware of what he was doing, he obeyed. He looked at the man, idly wondering at the coincidence of so similar a voice to Frazer's, while amid a myriad of thoughts competing for attention, was horror at the thought of Beth returning. "DON'T COME BACK," a silent voice within screamed. Riveting his eyes through the rear view mirror on the alley entrance, he hastily planned to grab for the rifle the instant she came into view. Win or lose, he thought, Kalashnikovs are loud bastards, it's going to sound like Chinese New Year between these buildings, and that should give her enough warning to get away.

If it wasn't for the accent, Truman doubted that he could ever recognize the man. The snow-white hair, most prominent of Frazer's features, was dyed dark brown, and his hairline shaved to create a bald center. The eyebrows, usually thin wisps of white fuzz, were now dark brown and thickly matted. The skin had gone from blotchy pink over chalk to Ladino tan. Gone too was the Western outfit. He wore a blue blazer, heavily padded in the shoulders, a cotton button-down shirt of powder blue with a conservative tie. Perched on the tip of his nose was a pair of tortoise shell glasses with dark blue lenses.

"Let me just slide in the back seat here." He reached inside with his left hand to unlock the rear door, his eyes never blinking or moving from Truman. Even while his right hand found its way to the lock and latch, the index finger of his right remained encircling the trigger and his gaze steady. He knew, of course, that Truman would be watching for an opening. "Tell me something, Truman," he drawled as he slid in the back seat and pulled the door shut. "Why is it you're never happy when an old friend drops by for a visit? Huh, why is that, partner?"

Truman didn't move or answer. His gaze was latched on the rearview mirror with Beth his only concern.

"Now you just sit still and don't move even one of those fingers of yours, cowboy. I'm just going to reach over here a minute to see what you have for hardware." He shifted the gun to his left with the muzzle centered on the base of Truman's skull and reached around his shoulder with his right. Feeling around, he found and removed the .38 and the keys from the ignition. "I'll put this stuff in the back here, where they can't do anybody any harm."

Truman remained motionless, his hands gripping the wheel viselike and his eyes alert for the first sign of movement at the alley entrance.

“This time y’all ain’t going to run off your old friend, John Sinclair the way you did last time, are `ya partner? You’re going to give me a chance to thank you, proper like, and you’re going to answer a few simple questions, too. I ask, you answer: got it?” he asked, tapping the barrel against his skull.

“Go ahead, Frazer, Sinclair, or whatever the hell you call yourself these days. What do you want to know?”

“That’s the way, partner. I just knew you’d be a little more sociable this time. First thing I’d like to know is why you covered up for me at those inquiries into the La Palma massacre. I saw transcripts of your testimony. They were running you through the ringer trying to get to me. They even put words in your mouth, but my boy Truman didn’t break. You could have handed them my head on a silver platter and saved yourself a lot of trouble, but you were a good-old-boy and held onto your story like a pit bull, saying something had gone wrong with the timers. There was never no love between us – so, why did you save my neck?”

“I didn’t do it for you, asshole, if that’s what you were thinking!” he replied in disbelief.

“No? Why then?”

“Fucking gringo!” he growled, his anger bringing bile to his mouth. “You kill my people and burn my country for your giggly-ass pleasures, and you think I’ll help you? You’re one of those pricks who came to Nicaragua for a chance to maim and blow things apart. How can a man such as you understand patriotism? I didn’t tell the truth because, if your government knew that they were supplying and supporting terrorism, all aid to us Contras would have been cut off. We were on shaky ground with your Congress as it was, that would have been the final straw. I fought for my people, Sinclair, and I lied for Nicaragua, not for you! Never for you! Now go ahead and shoot. Get your nuts off killing one more spic, you piece of shit!”

“I didn’t like you from the moment I met you, Truman. I thought you were a lily-livered pansy, puking your guts because some commy bastard had to suffer before he told us what we needed to save lives – Nicaraguan lives, asshole! I hated that sentimental streak of yours, couldn’t understand how a man with a center as soft as yours could be so good under fire, but you were. You were one of the best field commanders I ever saw. You fought like a tiger, Comandante Cobra, you really did. I never would have guessed I’d be one to benefit from your bleeding heart, but here I am, a free man with a pension, thanks to it. Okay, let’s get on with today’s business.”

Truman’s grip on the steering wheel tightened fiercely, waiting for the bullets, but Frazer had more.

“Edward told me to tell you that, if he gets his coke back, I shouldn’t hit the girl, but why bother telling you about it: I figure you ain’t talking, no matter what, so let me just give you this last message he said that you should take to Hell with you. It is, that your big mistake is you’re too damn impatient. He was ready to tell you this week that your retirement is all set up, so it was all for nothing, you greedy bastard. Well partner that’s about it; ready to kiss your ass good-bye?”

“Maybe I am interested in his deal.” He knew full-well Gordon wanted them both dead, but he needed to keep up conversation long enough to warn Beth and give her a running chance. “But how can I be sure you’ll let her go? I need some assurance that you won’t hurt her.”

“You’re in kind of a funny position to be pressuring for assurances. Maybe you should just take my word for it, cowboy. I’m going to give you some advice, because you need it. You know how easy you are? It took me exactly two hours to find you. When Edward told me what happened, I figured you had to be chasing the Henderson punk, so I just headed on out and found me a nice comfortable spot beside the Puriscal highway to sit down where I could whittle and watch traffic go by. Carved me a nice little figure of a horse reared up on its hind legs, too bad you ain’t going to get a chance to see it. Anyhoo, shure ‘nuff, who comes tearing ass down the road, but my old buddy Truman and, all cuddled up next to him,

my new friend Beth, who talked to the cops about Brian Walston, George Dearling and me. Two for the price of one: how lucky can a guy get? Now listen to me, old buddy: if the two of you are going to get out of here alive, you're going to have to do a far better job of staying out of sight than that."

"What are you talking about?" Truman queried, tilting his head to search for Frazer's image in the mirror. He found him, sitting directly behind and waiting for his eyes to alight.

When they did, he grinned broadly, resembling himself slightly. "I can't hit you, Truman, old boy, you're my old war buddy. You and I go back too far together: besides, I owe you a big one for saving my ass, even though you say you didn't do it for me."

"I don't get it. Are you telling me that you aren't going to make the hit?"

"That's right, partner. It's a little rule of mine: you don't betray a comrade-in-arms, much less kill him, especially one who covered for you. You and Beth both walk, and that squares us up. It's the right move for me too, because my luck is running at rock bottom low, not a good time to be hitting anyone. And hey, partner, you ought to know that the bit about not hitting Beth if you gave up the coke was bull: the fuck told me to take out the both of you regardless of..."

"Truman, what happened to the window?"

Beth was back and he hadn't seen her coming!

He swung his right arm as a baseball bat over the seat back, using his grip on the steering wheel with his left as leverage. Simultaneously, he roared through the hole where the window used to be what would be his final words: "RUN, BETH! RUN!!!"

Frazer saw the wide swipe of Truman's arm coming at him with time to spare. He ducked his head below the level of the seatback, and Truman's arm slammed with a thud against the window frame. He grabbed the arm and twisted it forcefully down. Truman tried to rise to reach back with his other arm, but bumped his hip against the steering wheel and dropped helplessly onto his seat. At that moment, the barrel of Frazer's weapon cracked against the side of his head, stunning him. The ex-CIA man spun in his seat to watch Beth race around the corner of the alley and disappear from sight. "Hot dawg, Truman! You're crazier than a shit-house mouse!" he twanged. "What did you do that for? Look at that gash I had to give you in the side of your head. You'll need stitches to close up that baby, and you'll probably have to spend the rest of the morning looking for Beth too. You don't have time for shit like that, partner, Edward wants you dead, real bad, both of you. The longest I can delay is till Monday. That will give you a couple of days, and you better use them to get your ass good and lost, because, come then, he'll sure enough issue some kind of 'shoot on sight' order with the cops. There isn't an order yet, because he wanted you taken out nice and quiet, but that will sure 'nuff change when I tell him you gave me the slip. He'll hire other pistoleros, good ones too, like me. You can probably guess that he's offering top dollar for your ass, so they'll be crawling through every sewer looking for you – and you're way too easy to find – so get your ass in gear and move on out of here, now! That's all the advice I have for you, old buddy. Oh, except for one thing: get some driving lessons, will ya? You're a menace on the road. You goddamn near ran me up on the sidewalk coming around that last corner." He opened the door, stepped out and began walking, then quickly reversed to lean in the open window. "You ever been to Madagascar?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"Madagascar. I went there once, to a place called Tamatave, a beautiful little town right on the Indian Ocean. Ya know, over there they still use rickshaws for taxis, and a dollar can last a man all day. I always wanted to go back and, you know? It looks like now is the time. Maybe you should be checking it out too, old-timer. Ya get my drift? Okay, I'm outta

here.” He pushed away from the car, headed towards the alley while stuffing the Kalashnikov under his jacket – and he was gone.

Frazer was wrong about wasting the remainder of the morning searching for her. The moment Truman came out of the alley, a tear stained Beth jumped from between buildings on the opposite sidewalk, bounced her curls through the traffic, and enveloped him in an embrace. “Truman, my Truman, thank God!” she mumbled, kissing straight up one cheek then down the other.

“Come on,” he said guiding her back even as she remained clinging to him, studying with a practiced eye the wound in his scalp, “we’re attracting too much attention out here. I can’t tell if people are looking at us because you’re kissing me, I’m bleeding or if they want to kill us. We have to get out of here quick,” and he moved her briskly down the alley.

“What happened back there?” she asked, her eyes on the car with its doors ajar and broken glass scattered over the pavement. “When that man walked out with his tommy gun under his jacket I thought you were dead, for sure.”

“Tommy gun?” Despite, or because of, the tension, he laughed. It became infectious and they faced one other, their fingers interlaced, laughing until tears rolled down their cheeks.

Beth sobered suddenly, pushing Truman to arm’s length where she examined the details of his face, then clung to him with her face nuzzled into the cradle at the junction of his neck and shoulder. “Oh, Truman... What happened?”

“It was Frazer!”

“Frazer? Gene Frazer? That wasn’t him!”

“Yes, it was. He changed his appearance, but it was him. Gordon knows, Beth! He gave him a contract to kill us both!”

“But he didn’t; he just walked away! I don’t understand.”

“He said he’s having bad luck lately and owes me a favor – crazy stuff that goes back to the war, it’s a long story – look, we have to get out of here.” He took her by the hand, returned quickly to the car and drove from the alley. Back at their guest house in Curridabat, they packed the bare necessities for traveling light, intending that night to slip aboard *El Tiburón Limon* and hopefully be in Bluefields before it’s disappearance was noticed and, from there, travel overland aboard local buses and trucks through tiny, forgotten pueblos in Nicaragua’s eastern expanses.

* * *

Truman struggled with navigating treacherous hairpin turns unlit by either man or moon, and Beth with the equally daunting task of creating a letter compelling enough that the DEA in the US embassy would take it seriously. “This sounds lame,” she said, looking up from her work, “reporting that, ‘somewhere in Bocas del Toro’ he buys cocaine in kilo packages from, ‘someone who uses the name Angel’, transports it to the US in a boat, but, ‘I don’t know where it is’ and when he will do it again is another ‘I don’t know.’ The only evidence is a tape of someone reserving a hotel room. It’s all totally worthless! That bastard has the devil’s own luck. He rapes, maims, murders and traffics cocaine, yet every thread of evidence he leaves behind, like a black miracle, disappears.”

“Well maybe, we could improve your letter by sleeping in the car tonight and tomorrow, nose around Limon harbor until we find where the *Caroline* berths, then leave tomorrow night instead. You could then say, ‘this guy buys his cocaine in Bocas from someone, possibly a hotel operator, who uses the name Angel and ships it north on this particular boat,’ and include the boat’s exact location. Then, stick in the tape, and tell them which phone number to listen in on if they want more

of the same. I think with all of that, they would follow up. But it means that we wouldn't have time enough left to make it to Bluefields before it is liable to be noticed that *El Tiburón Limon* is gone. We don't have to go all the way there, though: we could turn in the Rio San Juan, and get off on the Nicaraguan side. We'd just have more 'chicken buses' to ride on."

"That almost sounds good but, Truman, really! You can't go wandering around Limon, especially the waterfront. Are you crazy? Everyone knows you. Besides," she said, "I don't think you're right. I think the place to find the *Caroline* is in Puerto Viejo."

"Yeah? And what if he uses a speedboat instead of a dugout canoe? The *Caroline* would already be in Limon where she needs to refuel. No, Limon is the place to look, but please Beth, let me put you on Jesus' brother's boat in the morning so he can deliver you to Nicaragua, and let me take this risk: I'm the fool who brought this whole problem down upon us."

"Truman, we have evolved to where we are, and now your problems are mine as much as those of my own making. I can't say why it happened that way, but it did. Anyhow, for me, this isn't just about getting you away from Gordon Edward, it's Mike Henderson and knowing that if something isn't done about him, I won't sleep well the remainder of my life. I'm going to do everything I can to avoid trouble, but I have to try to finish what we've started. So let's do this with the least risk possible: it's a lot safer for me to be in Limon than for you, and if the *Caroline* is in Limon, I will find it. We should look in Puerto Viejo too, so you go there."

Truman was a reluctant participant, but he did, after considerable discussion, agree to leave Beth in Limon and travel to Puerto Viejo; however, he insisted she be at a certain public telephone in the park at three in the afternoon. He would call to be certain that she was all right; then, regardless whether they had found the *Caroline* or not, he would return to Limon for them to leave aboard *El Tiburón Limon*. While he drove back, she could finish her letter using whatever they learned and mail it. "And," he added grimly, "if you don't hear from me that means something has gone wrong and you can't hang around here waiting for me. Jesus' brother won't be back from fishing before dusk so you wouldn't be able to go there. Besides, if something happened to me you should get out of the country right away. Do you know the Coca-Cola market area in San José?" She nodded. "Well, two blocks behind it, is the station for buses to Peñas Blancas, the Nicaraguan border. Your travel restriction for leaving the country has to be lifted by now with Dearly's killer in prison, so you should be able to cross with no problem. Once you're in Nicaragua, go to Rivas; it's a town just up the highway from the border. If I'm able to get away from whatever might delay me, I'll be at noon on Monday in the central market where all the buses are."

Beth looked askance at him, her nose wrinkled. "Yeah, right! And what if my exit restriction isn't lifted? Am I supposed to run through a jungle where you said the border guards shoot first and ask questions later?"

"I was being overly dramatic. Anyhow, I said if I'm delayed – that's all, just *if*. Don't worry, though, we will be all right, we just have to be careful. I know that Frazer said the police aren't looking for us yet, but you never know, so just be careful to stay out of their sight. I'll do the same and everything will be fine. Give me a kiss and I'll see you in the afternoon."

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Beth's day was turning out no better than the night had been. Truman had slept the night through like a log (and sounded like he sawed it in half) but, curled with their luggage in the back of the Mitsubishi 4X4, she had found it impossible. Now, exhaustion, more mental than physical combined with the tedium of watching boats creep by, had long since caught up with her. In spite of her life or death situation, she was bored to tears, fighting to remain awake, and her ankle hurt. Soon after Truman left for Puerto Viejo in the poor light of early morning, she tripped among the rocks, wrenching it and partially tearing loose the sole of her sneaker. She hadn't had a shower, dinner, breakfast or sleep, and she had had to relieve herself like a dog, squatting between rocks. On one of the first docks she had tried, she had enjoyed a sense of accomplishment when she learned from the foreman that the Caroline occasionally loaded fish from that very dock and would arrive 'some time today' for a cargo of red snapper and sail immediately for Florida. With buoyed hopes of success, she had sentenced herself to pass the day among the sharp rocks in the particular spot where she found herself. The outcropping of land commanded a view of the pier and of every vessel that entered or left the harbor. Even the smallest lettering on the bow of boat or ship was easily readable with the aid of her telephoto camera lens that she had thought to bring. Yet, through broiling sunshine and a thunderous downpour, Beth had sat perched uncomfortably and growing continually more dejected. She determined nonetheless to remain vigilant to the end, but this was it: she couldn't wait another minute, it was two forty-five, barely enough time to get to the central park by three. She would have to run, and the best she could manage was a fast limp.

By three twenty, she was no longer bored, exhausted or glum: she was terrified. By hitching a ride in a pickup, she had managed to arrive at the park on time and been anxiously waiting for the phone to ring since just before three. Twice, she had to walk away from the phone, trying to appear nonchalant, when police patrolled the park, and each time her level of fear had risen. Truman hadn't called, and now it was beginning to look as though he wasn't going to. Something had happened, and thoughts of just what that something might be, churned her stomach close to the point of vomiting. She lost all will to continue and sat on the bench to await her fate.

The telephone rang, almost frightening her out of her skin. "Truman?" she questioned into the mouthpiece.

"Naw, I'm Yogi," a drunken voice responded, "your friend is too drunk to come to the phone. Listen, are you..."

"What? No, I have to talk with Truman. Please bring him to the phone."

"He's too drunk, Miss. He told me to tell you that you should go to Ivis, or was it Bevis?"

"Rivas? Did he say I should go to Rivas?"

"Yeah, that's it, Rivas. And he said you should hurry."

"My God. Is he all right?"

Yeah, he's just drunk, that's all. He'll be okay when he sleeps it off, take it from a professional."

He hung up abruptly, leaving her breathless. She looked around. Everything appeared so ordinary – people sitting with their lunches, chatting, children chasing one another among the trees – and that normalcy seemed so strange; abnormal. Drunk? He couldn't have gotten drunk! She had to accept that he was okay and would be waiting for her tomorrow noon in Rivas, Nicaragua – had to believe it, or she couldn't go on: without Truman, there was nothing left of her life. She limped towards the bus terminal but, from a block away saw, at the entrance, a pair of policemen stop a tourist couple and ask for

documents. Turning quickly, she walked in another direction, her mind racing as to where she should go and intently aware of squad cars passing with the traffic. Panic seized her, but she contained its powerful urge to run and continued limping along aimlessly. From every window, eyes followed, and each person she saw was the one who would kill her until he or she passed, then the next became her doom.

Rounding a corner, she was surprised to find herself back at the park. Then she remembered: Caroline had offered to help, at least as far as putting Mike away was concerned. She doubted that the offer extended to rescue service, but there was nowhere else to turn. She placed a coin in the phone and nervously dialed. Please be there. Please be there.

It rang five times before being picked up by a machine requesting her message. She poured out her heart, left the number of the phone and hung up. Her fear began again to spiral out of control, and sitting on the bench staring at the telephone would get her nowhere. She paced the walkways of the park, never too far from her phone, returned to it, called again and said that she would wait another fifteen minutes before attempting to hitchhike to San José, then sat, staring at the telephone and battling a whole new set of worries: Caroline had a history of betrayals, and Beth had heard her described as cunning and evil. Had she just made a terrible mistake? Should she go now and hitchhike, or would that be more stupid because of the chance of a police car in the line of traffic? Then it came to her: Sylvia might possibly help. True, she was Mike's mother, but she didn't know anything of what had happened, and she was a stable, mature woman, not a tramp who ran a whorehouse and betrayed friends. "Hello, is that you Sylvia?" she asked moments later.

"Yes; who is calling, please?"

"This is Beth Tierney, the woman you met in Hotel Paradise and invited to your dinner party."

"Oh yes, Beth, hello! How wonderful to hear from you! Where are you right now?"

"I'm in central park in Limon and I'm in a whole lot of trouble. I have to get out of Costa Rica right now, and I didn't know anyone I could call for help, so I'm calling you."

"Oh my! Why don't you call the police, my dear? I'm sure they can help you."

"No, you don't understand. The police are looking for me; that's why I need help. Some terrible things have happened and, I'm sorry, but it involves your son too. Oh please, can you help me? I beg you!"

"You said you're in central park..."

"Yes, at the public telephone behind a row of vendors' stands near the fountain."

"You stay right there, don't move. I'll have someone come by to pick you up in a few minutes."

"Thank you, Sylvia, thank you so very much," and she disconnected. Hardly had she sat again on the park bench than the telephone rang. Truman? She sprang to her feet and answered.

It was Caroline. "I just came in and heard your messages." Her words were tumbling in a rush. "I'm so glad you're still there. I saw Mike yesterday. The asshole's walking around like John Dillinger with a gun stuck in his belt: he said that he's going to shoot you and Frankenstein dead. Really, Beth, he said he can kill you in broad daylight and won't go to jail for it. I think he's nuts, but the crazy bastard means it. Are you all right?"

"No, I'm in terrible trouble. I think the police are looking for me now and I have to get out of the country, but I'm stuck here in Limon."

"You're not out on the street, are you?" The nervousness registered in Caroline's every word elevated her fears.

"Yes, I am. I'm in central park, but I think I'll be all right now: I just got off the phone with Sylvia, and she's sending someone to pick me up."

“Jesus, Beth, don’t you know she would do anything to mollycoddle her baby-boy – including turn you in – which is what she is probably doing right now! Listen, there’s a Chinese restaurant at the western edge of the fish market there in Limon. I can’t remember the name, but it has big double doors, painted red and gold. Do you know it?”

“I think I know where the fish market is; I can find it.”

“Good, wait for me at a table in the back room. I’ll be there in about three hours, maybe less. Go now, get away from the park as fast as you can, but don’t make a scene by running,” and she hung up.

Who should she trust? Sylvia seemed the most logical, but Caroline, at least, shared her feelings about Mike. She hobbled from the park.

□ □ □

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

After dropping off Beth, Truman drove to Jesus' brother's home, signed over the title of his Mitsubishi to Jesus with instructions that it could be retrieved late that night or the following morning in the parking lot of the fishing pier, then continued on his way. The highway turnoff for Puerto Viejo was a dirt road towards the shore that followed an embankment across salt marsh to a finger of land behind the beach. It proceeded along this narrow strip of dry land for five hundred meters before it widened and accommodated Puerto Viejo. At the beachfront general store-restaurant-bar (which marked the town's entrance and was its hub), the road divided to form the pueblo's two principal streets. Truman pulled into the lot in front of this multi-purpose establishment and parked directly beside the La Hacienda 4X4. He hopped out and, while between the two vehicles, kicked a large concave dent into the door of his enemy's car. He then walked onto the beach in the hope of seeing a jetty where the *Caroline* might be tied, but the land came to a point and there were rock outcroppings obstructing sight. He sighed and wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm, thinking: Puerto Viejo was a tiny pueblo, and the boat would have to be of a fair size to voyage as far as the United States: surely someone in the shop, bar, whatever it was, would know. They didn't. The woman in the store didn't so much as move her eyes, as he entered, scanned for someone to speak with, saw her and stood impatiently at the counter: she might have been a mannequin, except that the paper fan in her hand waved continually. Eventually, a thin, dry voice came from her, directing him into the bar area to ask of her husband. There, a town drunk, wearing a battered, wide-brim straw hat, breathed toxic fumes into his face asking for a handout, while the old man behind the bar shook his head. "The Caroline, you say? Oh, like Carolina, uh-huh. Yes sir, um hum, nice name for a boat." He shook his head again. "No, never heard of her."

He drove the entire length of town several times, peering into the entrance of every waterfront property, but there was no sign of any fishing boats at all, a phenomenon he found strikingly odd: after all, the pueblo's name in English was Old Port and what was a port without boats other than dug-out canoes or a public jetty? He returned the car to the general store, and decided to endure the heat trudging the length of the beachfront road in a more careful search for a dock or someone who knew the whereabouts of the *Caroline*. All he got for his efforts were sweat-drenched clothes and uncomprehending blank expressions. It seemed nobody had heard of her. The locals were, however, quite proud of their fishermen. They, he was repeatedly told, fished from dugouts, not fancy gringo boats. The canoes, which, if he was interested, were available for fishing trips, didn't have names other than so and so's boat. He returned to the general store to sit on its wide porch, sipping the water of a chilled coconut, and thought.

If Caroline was right that Mike brought the cocaine in by dugout – and by the presence of his car it appeared she was – the boat must be nearby. Then he thought, of course, Mike could transport it almost anywhere in his car: it would be best to just await his return, follow him and see what went on, but he had to get back to Limon. It was starting to feel like he had reached a dead end: a sour disappointment for Beth when he would telephone in another two hours.

Sitting alone at a nearby table on the 'bar' part of the porch, the drunken man who had accosted him earlier sat with a collection of empties. "I'm looking for a boat, a fishing boat by the name of the *Caroline*," he called over. Do you know where I could find it?"

The man raised the brim of his hat to give Truman an appraising stare, held an index finger before bleary eyes and wagged it from side to side. "You can't fish off'a that boat, mister," he announced drunkenly. "That there's the *Esmeralda*

you're talking about." Hiccup. "I'd heard said they'd painted that new name on her, but there ain't nobody who took notice. It's still the *Esmeralda* as far as we're concerned."

"I want to talk to the owner about chartering," Truman responded excitedly. "Where is it docked?"

"No. No sir, you can't do that there either," the man slurred, wagging the finger again. This time the finger, arm and all were swinging broadly, like an inverted pendulum before his face. "The owner up and sold the whole business: boat, buildings, dock, the whole damn works, to some rich gringos, and those folk don't live here in Puerto Viejo."

Truman looked at the man in frustration, doubting that he could remain conscious long enough to provide the answer. "Just tell me where the damned boat is, please," he beseeched the drunken sod. "I want to see the boat, all right? I have to see the boat. So, where is it?"

"Bueno." the drunk blubbered defensively. "Why didn't you say so right off? The boat is where it always is: at the fishing pier." Reading in Truman's stern expression, an angry 'where the hell is that?' he quickly provided directions. "Go straight up there," he slurred, pointing a wavering arm in the general direction of the single road coming into town. "You'll see the entrance marked by two pilings with rope wrapped around them, so everybody will know it's the way to the pier. You can't miss it," he asserted, noting Truman's skeptical expression. "It's just there, where the road bends to the left. And, and, and," he added as Truman stood to leave, pointing again, "the captain, he lives at the end of that road over there, in the green house."

"Thank you," Truman snarled.

"Hey, hey you!" the drunk called after him, "I need a beer."

"Yeah, sure," he said, slapping enough for five beers on the man's table before hurrying to the car. There was only one bend in the road: it was where the road turned sharply inland, avoiding a growth of mangrove. He approached slowly and found the entrance obscured in overgrowth, but exactly where the drunk had said it would be. It continued straight along the beach as a narrow, rutted track with a mangrove-bordered estuary to the left and on the right, the sea. Suddenly, it opened to a cleared and leveled parking area behind a building, in front of which a pier extended into calm, protected water. Tied alongside, was an old steel boat. The paint of her freeboard was stained with broad orange rust stripes running over faded, ancient white. Alternating with the rust stripes were black, dripping runs of greasy oil, giving her the overall coloring of a seagoing Bengal tiger. The only fresh paint was a crisp white rectangle masking her previous name and, in black letters: *Caroline*. He'd found it! He strolled around the building's end and walked onto the pier, appraising the old boat and wondering where aboard her Mike stashed his cocaine, but to that question were as many possible answers as parts to the boat. Anything, from booms, to mast, to engine parts and decking could be hollowed out and, if done well, made into a cache undetectable even to trained dogs: the only way to find the drug, if one was certain it was aboard, would be a gradual disassembly of the entire craft. Still, it was interesting to speculate.

"*Hola, que tal compañero?*" called the jolly voice of a heavy, bearded man leaning from the rail at the *Caroline's* bow.

"Well, hello yourself," he answered.

"I'm sorry, but if you want to buy fish you will have to come back tomorrow," the man called down. "There is no one at the counter inside, besides all the fish we have now are for export."

"That's fine, I don't want fish. I was just admiring the boat, is she yours?"

"She is mine and yet she is not mine," he answered, beaming proudly at his cryptic response. "Almost since her construction, I have been her captain; so yes, she is mine, but sadly I do not own her. She is now on her third owner."

“I asked in town about a charter boat and I was told the only boat around is the *Esmeralda*. I can see that this is not a charter boat, but is she by any chance the *Esmeralda*?”

“Si, she is *Esmeralda*, *Esmeralda III*, actually. There has been an *Esmeralda* at this dock since before I was born, but the new owner changed her name.”

“She looks as though you take good care of her,” he answered

“Ah, you have a good eye for boats. You are one of the few who sees beyond the rust to the care she receives. She is truly a fine, sea-worthy vessel. I take care of her with love, my friend. Inside, every bit of her machinery works as well today as it did when she was born. Soon, she will go to dry-dock in Limon as the new owner promised and will be made to look like new again. She will then be a beauty as well as a reliable performer,” he proclaimed with visible pride. “Right now, friend, I am taking my crew into town. They are to have time free today, because tomorrow we sail. I’m afraid you will have to leave too.

Truman returned to Puerto Viejo triumphant, parked between the public phone and the La Hacienda 4X4, dented its rear door to match the front and, after chasing off the pesky drunk, ordered another chilled coconut to idle away the forty-five minutes before he would call Beth. He sat, gazing across the lot to the telephone he would use, imagining the relief there would be in her voice when he told her to include the boat in her letter. How liberated he would feel when they were gone from Costa Rica, and more so when it was finally all behind them and they were settled somewhere with different names and a wholesome life to share!

A bread truck rumbled into the lot and pulled up beside the two 4X4’s. Two men emerged and walked along the beachfront road away from the store. Two others alit from the opposite side and began to walk the other street, then another three opened the rear double doors and began wrestling two bulky packages towards the beach with the driver supervising, but not one entered the store with bread. Puerto Viejo was a black community with a sprinkling of Native Americans. Who were these Ladinos and Caucasians with close-cropped hair and portable radios strapped to their hips? They weren’t bread salesmen and they weren’t tourists: there wasn’t a swimsuit, surfboard, beer or boom box among them. Cops! It had to be, and not ordinary mindless buffoons, but some sort of elite strike force. He couldn’t stay where he was, in plain sight yet, with them out there in the parking lot, he couldn’t leave either. He moved inside to a table in the far corner and watched through the window as the four who had walked the streets returned, the bundles on the beach inflated to become dinghies then, with the addition of sixty horsepower outboards, high-speed powerboats. The efficient work teams merged into a single group in the parking lot, admiring their handiwork, then turned towards the store with the obvious intention of enjoying a rest break.

“Hey buddy,” Truman called to the drunk. “Come here, I think I still owe you a drink.” He positioned himself in the corner, offering the chair opposite and when his new companion joined him, he snatched the straw hat from his head, jammed it on his own and sat, just as the first of the group walked through the door. “Order two beers,” he said to his astonished, hatless friend, “then sit down and tell me how much you want for this hat.”

Through the window, the telephone was visible, yet three o’clock came and went and all he could do was stare at it longingly through a growing field of empty bottles. From snippets of overheard conversations, he learned that he wasn’t the target of the police: they were there for Mike. That was doubly good news, but their portable headquarters parked beside the telephone booth wasn’t, and neither was the fact that the entire crew used the porch as their shady lounge. He was

completely boxed into his corner, and it didn't look like they were leaving any time soon. He glanced to his watch: three-twenty! Beth must be in a panic! "Yogi," he said to his new chum, "you have to make a phone call for me."

* * *

Monday's dawn was creating shadows across the highway, and Truman was almost to Limon. He'd been treated to the spectacular show of Mike Henderson and two companions' arrest. The inflatable speedboats closed in on their canoe from the sea, while a squad of officers was deployed along the beach. The pleasure of watching, however, was dampened by concerns for Beth. Her very life hinged on her name not appearing on the Immigration Service computer with an exit restriction, and he wondered if perhaps he hadn't been very, very wrong when he advised her that it had to have already been cancelled. She was his only reason for hope. He told himself over and over that his logic was sound, and she was now safely ensconced in a Rivas hotel. Composing a compelling letter of accusation was no longer necessary: that would be wonderful news for her, but it left him wondering who provided the police with their information of when and where to capture Mike red-handed – Caroline?

Ahead, out of the morning mist, began to appear a cluster of red lights. He studied them curiously, considering them to be the flashing lights of an airplane on the runway of Limon's Airport. As they grew and took form, fear prickled his skin from his testicles to his scalp, as he realized that what he was looking at was a roadblock across the highway.

Gordon's anti-drug obsession used to make him smile but, this early morning, he was anything but amused – rather the flashing lights and painted barriers seemed akin to the gates of Hell. To his right was a high and sturdily constructed fence enclosing the airport, and to the left a wide, bare area, about four hundred meters across, at the end of which the land rose sharply to Limon's south side, a mere three blocks from where Jesus' brother lived. There were no trees, but the plain was strewn with boulders and crossed over with dry gullies and fields of soft sand. If he could get across the lower area ahead of the police and climb the hill, he might make it. He tightened his seat belt, engaged the four-wheel drive, killed the headlights, and roared over the shoulder of the highway. He hit the rocky plain with a crushing jolt and drove over rocks, while dodging large boulders in a seemingly endless series of splintering, grinding leaps followed by shattering landings. A back window shattered, whether by gunfire or impact with a rock, he knew not, but doubted that his departure from the pavement had gone unnoticed. He lunged into another ditch, hit bottom, and the rearview mirror wrenched free to join a hundred other objects flying from one side of the car to the other. A dry streambed appeared to be filled with loose sand. He gunned the engine to make it through, but the sand was, in fact, firm, offering excellent traction, and he crossed way too fast, shooting up the other bank high into the air. He came down hard among the rocks with a bone-jarring crash that sent hubcaps flying, fired a shot of pain up his spine, and wrenched the right front wheel sideways with a terrible ripping noise of twisting steel. With it scraping along the ground, the car refused to be steered, but he forced it along, jamming the accelerator to the floor while remnants of the wheel grated thunderously. Suddenly, the good front tire exploded, impaled by the sharp point of a rock, and he snowplowed into total immobility. He grabbed his and Beth's bags and dove sideways from the door, scurrying behind a rock, grateful to note that there hadn't been anyone at the roadblock willing to take up chase across the field of rocks. The long, deep shadows of early morning provided cover. He ducked low from the shelter of one rock to another and quickly made his way up the hill.

Ten minutes later, the police descended on the neighborhood in force, but Truman was already in the harbor aboard a fishing boat. He had been lucky: arriving dusty and breathless, he encountered Jesus with his brother Miguel, leaning in the window of a car in front of the house, chatting. It was the crew's carpool, on their way to work. They left immediately. With

Truman no longer at Cabañas Arrecifes, Jesus had resigned and was temporarily working with his brother until he could decide what next to do with his life. His indecision ended when Truman appeared running down the center of the street. Wherever it was that Truman was going and whatever his intentions, Jesus begged to be included. His only concern regarding the danger that might be involved was that Truman should not face it alone.

□ □ □

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Beth gorged herself on fresh jumbo shrimp chow mien, and lingered for hours over a pot of Chinese tea. The young waiter had even gone to a pharmacy to purchase an ace bandage for her ankle. Her pain lessened and her stomach full, she felt reasonably safe, hidden behind a newspaper in the rear of the restaurant; her main concerns became not falling asleep on the table and keeping her mental image of Truman as it belonged: sober and en route to Rivas, Nicaragua. He was fine, not on a drunken binge – just delayed, that was all.

Caroline arrived earlier than expected at fifteen minutes before five, when Beth felt that she couldn't last another minute without falling deeply asleep. She had repeatedly dozed off, but woken when her chin slid from the roost of her cupped hand. The comfort of the seats in Caroline's Mercedes was too great to resist. "You need to drop me at the *Fronteras* bus terminal behind the Coca-Cola market in San José," she said when Limon was falling away behind. "I can't hold my eyes open a minute longer; just wake me when we get there."

"Be realistic, kiddo, you're exhausted. Come to my house and have a nice bath, a good night's sleep and fresh clothes on your back before you get on a bus for a long ride like that."

"Thank you, that sounds just wonderful, but I have to be in Nicaragua before noon tomorrow."

"Well then, come at least for the bath and clean clothes. I'll take you back into San José right after. How's that?"

"I shouldn't but, it sounds far too good to pass up. Okay, wake me when we get to your place."

* * *

"Wake up!" Caroline pushed roughly against her shoulder. "Watch behind and tell me what they do!" Sleep swept instantly from her, and Beth sprang up to look over the seat through the rear window. It was almost completely dark, with but a glow of light in the west. Behind, at the side of the highway, was a car a police cruiser had pulled over. The two officers stood on either side of it, one on the pavement speaking with the driver. The other at the passenger side wasn't concerned with that vehicle: he was looking and pointing at theirs! Just as they came around a sharp bend and the police disappeared from view, she saw the other officer lift his gaze to look directly at her, turn and begin to run towards the patrol car.

"They're coming after us!" she gasped. "Where are we?"

"Puriscal, my territory. Maybe I just have a taillight out or something, but I don't think we should take chances. I've ridden every back road there is around here. Hang on," and she switched into four-wheel drive. They turned sharply onto a rapidly descending gravel road, came around a bend and stopped. "This little road serves a couple of farms out here then joins up with the highway again down below. I'll take it and save having to go all the way back into that narrow valley for the switchback. I'll be down there waiting for them when they come around and then give them a good chase all the way to my place. That should give you a little time to get away if it's you they're looking for. Good luck, kiddo," she said and sped off down the hill.

A dull overhead lamp illuminated the turnoff. Beth stood under it and prayed that someone took pity on a lonely hitchhiker. Fortunately it wasn't the police or a mad rapist, but a large truck rumbling up the incline under the weight of thousands of sacks of coffee. Their destination was the Coca-Cola market. She clambered atop to join the workers who manually loaded and would soon discharge the enormous cargo.

Settling into a comfortable nook with her head resting on a sack, she watched the sky. The heavy afternoon blanket of clouds had cleared and in the west, Venus and the tips of the crescent moon were in perfect alignment: a legendary good omen according to Truman. He knew so much about the stars: Cassiopeia, the Big Bear, the North Star, Jupiter, the Southern Cross... She crossed her fingers and squeezed shut her eyes, trying to absorb their stellar energy. There was something so beautiful and eternal about the sight that it caused her to weep. Would she ever see him again, feel his arms around her or learn the name of that bright star over there? What if she made it to Rivas and he wasn't there – what then? No, he would be there! Regardless of the pressure, he wouldn't go on a drunken spree at a time like this. She shouldn't even allow herself to think that he might have: all her positive strength was needed. She sat up and faced into the wind, waiting for the lights of the central valley to appear from around a bend.

In the market district, after a double search of the same grid of streets that returned her gait to a painful limp – she found the bus station she needed: a pair of wooden garage doors with a small office at its side and just a small sign above the window to identify it. It was closed. Schedules painted on the outside wall indicated that the first bus to the border was a four AM departure. She checked into a cheap hotel around the corner and put in a wake-up call for three. Almost before touching head to pillow, she fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

It was three fifteen in the early morning when Beth arrived at the bus station, a full forty-five minutes before the scheduled departure, and to her astonishment discovered a multitude of people. A line extended from the door, down the block, to the corner, and grew steadily as more people arrived. To be fair, the queue wasn't entirely of people: each, it seemed, had stacked beside them boxes, bags and bundles more than equal to their own bulk. Then came the horror to discover that the line was for people who already had their tickets. To purchase one, she was told, there was yet another line inside the office where she would have to go first.

The office was a crush of people jostling its way forward towards the counter. She found what appeared to be 'the line' and joined its rear, but it dissolved before her, as the sales people ignored those at its head in favor of whomever shouted loudest. It became a mob with only those who pushed and yelled enjoying any success. Following the lead of the others, she shouted and, remarkably, won the attention of a vendor. However, the four o'clock bus was sold out. All she had tickets for were the six o'clock or later departures: did she want one or not? She took one. The four o'clock bus arrived at the border at nine-thirty: early enough – she promised herself – to cross and make it to Rivas before noon, but the six o'clock wouldn't get in until eleven thirty. Way too late! She had to get on that bus!

Outside, she walked the length of the long line of passengers, offering to exchange her six AM ticket for theirs, with a two thousand Colones bonus as incentive (about eight US dollars). An elderly man promptly accepted, and she assumed his place near the head of the queue.

* * *

The first several minutes after arrival at the Peñas Blancas border crossing were maddeningly hectic. Everyone had to get off the bus: it was the final stop. As the driver downshifted and the exhaust roared, belching a black cloud, pandemonium broke loose. Moments earlier, there had been the pleasant chatter of conversation and a cooling breeze from the open windows, but the air inside quickly turned dead and oven-hot with the sun on the thin metal roof. The narrow center aisle became a crush of people simultaneously struggling to their feet. Straining to wrestle huge bundles from the overhead

racks, they collided, cursed and shoved. Children screamed. Outside, a throng clamored for attention. There were cab drivers, currency exchangers, people searching out relatives and a multitude selling everything from food to souvenirs, each shouting louder than the next. As they pushed towards the opening door, those inside strove to escape. It was a pickpocket's dream come true – they too joined the melee, hoping for a slice of the pie.

Beth battled just to keep her footing, making little headway towards the door, but the luggage bay opened, diverting attention down the side of the bus, allowing the bottleneck to clear. She began inching forward towards relative coolness, scanning the crowd for a currency exchanger who seemed the sort not to cheat with a false rate, counterfeit bills or slight of hand maneuvers. The man she sat beside had warned of these tricks, and advised that the correct exchange rate was two hundred twenty-five Nicaraguan Cordobas per thousand Colones. Besides what she had in her pocket, tucked into the bandage around her right ankle was the equivalent of four hundred dollars and, wrapped in plastic inside her left shoe, was a stash of another five hundred dollars: a fair sum, but she dared not use her bank or credit cards so it might need to last a very long while. She selected a young man, flashing a wad of bills in his fist, but different in that he wasn't shouting. She made eye contact and gave him a short nod. He understood, nodded back, and waited for her at the edge of the mob.

She stuffed her left hand into her jeans pocket over her cash, held her bag with her right and jostled along. She was making reasonable progress when a bulky woman with a basket miraculously balanced atop her head blocked her path. Beth tried to get around her, but the woman was not going to allow a potential customer pass before attempting to sell her a pupuso, a Nicaraguan specialty Truman had often praised. Soft corn tortillas stuffed with cheese, they steamed fragrantly from under a cloth. She leaned her bulk against Beth, coaxing her to sample a bit. While pulling coins from her pocket, a boy took advantage of her distraction and tugged at her bag, attempting to wrench it from her. She won the short battle, wrestling it free, ignored the woman and continued on.

"How much do you have to exchange?" the man asked, moistening his thumb in preparation to count from his fistful of bills.

"Just tell me how many Cordobas to the Colon."

"You have to exchange now," he replied. "You can't exchange Colones in Nicaragua. How much?"

"Okay," she answered angrily, certain that there were many in his business on either side. "I have one thousand Colones. How many Cordobas is it worth?"

"Two hundred eighteen Cordobas, Señora," he responded.

She shook her head. "No, it's two twenty-five."

"Two twenty-five is the selling price. To buy it's two eighteen, but I'll give you a special deal: two twenty. How much?" and he readied again to count as she turned to go. "Okay, Señora," the man yelled after her. "Two twenty-five; how much?"

"Five thousand Colones," she answered, selecting a number for easy calculation.

"One thousand Cordobas." He began counting, until he looked up startled at her objection. "Yes, one thousand," he said, producing a calculator that confirmed the figure.

She gawked at the instrument in amazement and pushed past to the next individual with a wad of currency, who readily agreed that one thousand, one hundred twenty-five was correct for five thousand Colones. "Isn't there someplace where we can sit for a minute?" she asked, sighing, "in the shade?" He pointed to a concrete bench under a tree opposite from the Customs and Immigration building. While changing all the Colones hidden in her bandage, she mentioned that a travel restriction might exist for her because she was a witness in an upcoming trial, and wondered if he knew of any way

around such a problem. "Listen," she pointed out, "I only want to visit some friends in Rivas for a couple of days and I'll be right back."

"Wait here a minute," he replied. "I have a friend who can help."

A minute later appeared Hector, a soft-spoken young man with big brown eyes who, as she repeated her request, seemed to take in Beth's entire face with a calm gaze. "This, I can do for you, no problem," he assured her. "I know all the officials who work here. Just give me five thousand Colones and your passport. I'll get it stamped and be right back."

The offer sounded enticingly good but, if her name appeared on a wanted list, she would be without a passport to continue – if she got away. "I don't want a stamp in my passport," she invented, remembering Caroline's complaints about residency. "I might not be able to renew my residency if it comes to someone's attention that I didn't pay the taxes for coming and going and I can't pay them now or I won't have enough for traveling. Isn't there something else I can do?"

"Si Señora, maybe I can help you get a three day pass. Give me the money with your passport and wait here."

"All that's needed," she countered, "is valid identification, so here, take my driver's license. I'd just as soon keep my passport in my own hands." Hector accepted the cash and Wisconsin driver's license without comment, and crossed the street. Within the glass walled lobby, banks of windows extended the length of a wall. Half served travelers entering the country, who formed a queue that crossed the lobby and continued along the opposite wall. Those leaving formed another line, equally long, snaking from the remaining windows to the arrivals entrance on the other side. Beth could see through the windows as Hector entered, approached a uniformed official and spoke for a moment, undoubtedly slipping some of her money to his palm, because he abruptly smiled, accepted her ID, studied its face, then flipped to the back where there was nothing but an organ donor sticker: that, he studied with equal intensity. The man then passed through a door into an office.

The exterior wall of the room he entered was of brick with a row of grimy windows covered over with steel mesh. Beth quickly crossed the street to join the others standing there, and through the accumulated dirt on the glass, could see the official hand her document to an agent who then entered Beth's data into the computer. The screen flashed, becoming a list of names with columns of information to the right. An entry near the top of the screen was highlighted red. The agent traced her operator's permit along the base of the entry, obviously comparing the data. Her license's next stop was the desk of a supervisor. She, in turn, typed in Beth's particulars, calling up the same presentation. More conversation ensued, involving another supervisor. Standing, he leaned to study the screen, shook his head negatively, said something to the original official, picked up the telephone and dialed, tucking her driver's license under a corner of his desk blotter. Returned to the lobby, the uniformed man spoke briefly with Hector, who turned and began to weave his way through the crowd. She was faced with an instantaneous decision: run, or take a chance that this would work out. She opted to stick with it a while longer, and returned to her bench where Hector found her a minute later.

"Everything is fixed," he alleged. "Come inside, because they need your passport to put in it all the necessary stamps and seals to show that you paid the tax and all." She went, but with a growing sense of doom, reluctantly trailing into the lobby.

"Good morning," the official greeted cordially. "How are you today?"

"Fine, thank you," she answered. "Hector tells me you can help me with my problem."

"Yes, perhaps, but your name is showing up on the computer as denied exit. Did you know about that?"

"Yes, I know. That's because I have to testify as a witness in a court case coming up soon and is also why I don't want my passport to reflect this exit. I only wish to visit friends in Rivas for a few days then return. Is that possible?" she asked, palming her remaining Colones for him to see.

“It is but, we won’t be able to give you a normal exit because it would register in the computer,” he replied. “This will be a bit more difficult,” and with his fingers signaled for more money. She offered an additional thousand, then two and finally three – before it was accepted and slipped into his pocket. “What we will do,” he said with a smile, “is issue a three day pass. Please take a seat in the restaurant while it is prepared and, when it is, I’ll walk you to the Nicaraguan side.”

“But, I...” She thought better than to protest: a little time to consider what she was doing seemed a good idea. The red highlight on her name and the telephone call were very bad signs, but so was the prospect of crossing illegally, especially after Truman’s dire warning. Also, he was speaking about a pass, not apprehending her. It seemed best not to sound an alarm in his mind by protesting and thereby eliminate the option of merging with the crowd and slipping out unnoticed if things got worse. She thanked him, went into the restaurant and, through its darkened glass, observed the lobby’s activity. The immigration man who had her money was standing close to the door and had not yet gone into the office to notify anyone to prepare her pass. She watched, in maddening frustration, as he engaged a man who appeared to be a tourist in a lengthy conversation, when he should be doing something about her pass. The man gave over his passport then dug in his pocket and, attempting discretion, passed over a five thousand Colon banknote, whereupon, from his breast pocket, the official produced a small pad of papers, copied data onto it, signed it and, tearing it free, handed it to him. He then leaned his back to the post between the windows and leisurely lit a cigarette. What about attending to her? She went to the door, leaned out and received his immediate attention. “Hey, and me?” she asked with an accompanying gesture of question. He smiled, smoke pouring from his nostrils, and held his thumb and index finger closely spaced, an indication that she would soon be tended to. She returned to her seat, deciding to allow another ten minutes.

“Hi, are you alone?” It was the tourist, smiling congenially and speaking English.

“Sure, have a seat,” she invited. “Hey, if you don’t mind me asking, what did that guy have to say? He has me sitting in here, waiting for a three day pass.”

“Well, if you want anything, you have to bribe him,” he answered. “The going rate for a three-day pass is five thousand Colones. That’s what I just gave him for this one,” and he produced the valid pass he had just received. “I’m in the middle of a hassle with a former girlfriend about a kid that isn’t mine. Obviously, you don’t have a girlfriend trying to put the squeeze on. So what’s up?”

“No, nothing like that,” she answered with a tight smile. “I’m a witness in an upcoming trial, so I have a restriction too.”

“Oh, there’s my buddy! We’re going across now; do you want to come with us?”

“No, I can’t just yet, thanks anyhow,” she responded, although her mind had already spun into overdrive and the floor seemed to have dropped out from under: needing to wait for a pass was a lie. No wonder he hovered so close to the restaurant door: she was caught in a trap. What were they up to? And why? How long before something happened? And what would that be? Was she to be arrested? Panic overtook. The official, she could see, was occupied attempting to return the two groups of travelers to their respective lines. She slipped down the narrow hallway to the washrooms, and slowly pushed against the door at its end. It opened to the exterior, beside a large trash container, on the opposite side of the building, where traffic was entering Costa Rica. She stepped out, her heart fluttering with fear and breath coming in hesitant gasps. Staring across the no-mans-land between countries, she talked herself down, controlling breathing and taking time to think. Nearby, an immigration officer rested on a bench in the shade of the building. She sauntered over. “*Buenos dias. Que calor, verdad*, (what heat, right)?” she expounded, sighing as she sat at his side.

“*Bastante* (very much),” he answered.

“Habla usted ingles?” she asked.

“Yes, I speak English, a little bit.”

“May I ask you a question, please?”

“Si, Señorita, what is your question?”

“I think one of my traveling companions has a problem. Now the rest of us are all sitting around, waiting for his papers to clear, and we don’t even know the man very well: we just met him yesterday in San José, and we’re traveling together because we are all on our way to Managua.”

“What is this man’s problem?”

“Apparently, he has an exit restriction, but the official inside said that everything would be okay and a three day pass will be issued. It’s taking forever, though. It all started because his name showed up on the computer in red highlight.”

“You should go on without him,” the officer explained. “There will be no three-day pass for that one: at noon, when the police arrive to receive detainees, he will be taken to San José. If he had only exit restriction as he told you, his name would be highlighted in white. Red isn’t restriction: red is ‘to detain’.”

“Oh, my God!” she exclaimed. “A criminal? I had better go now and tell my friends that we should just leave without him.”

“That’s the thing to do,” he advised, “and in the future, be more careful in your choice of traveling companions. You never know what might have happened to you. Where is this man now?”

“In the restaurant with an officer,” she answered. “Thank you very much.” She walked around the building to where another bus was unloading; it would begin its return trip soon. She had to try to locate someone who could help her cross illegally. Undoubtedly, the money exchangers seemed the shiftiest among those vying for customers by the bus’ opening door. She approached and asked one with a thick mop of curly hair if he knew of anyone who could help an undocumented person cross.

“Ten thousand Colones,” he responded, glancing about to see if they were overheard.

“Okay, but we leave right now,” she insisted, holding out the ten thousand for inspection, but with a secure grip on it.

“See that little building over there?” he whispered, indicating with a toss of his head a small brick building directly across from Immigration. “Walk over there as though you’re just wandering about and wait for me behind it.” He snatched the cash and disappeared into the throng around the bus. Two minutes later, he was at her side again, behind the brick building. “Follow, but wait until I am behind those bushes and be sure to keep that building between you and the office,” he instructed. “If we come across any policia remember: you are going to visit a friend in Las Palmas.” He walked quickly into the forest where there was no trail, descended a hill slippery with leaves, then turned onto a wide murky path that descended in a gentle slope as both mud and jungle thickened. In disgust, she sat at the side of the trail, tore the flopping sole from the bottom of her sneaker and threw it into the bush. Half a mile later, they came to a wide, swift and very muddy river. Her guide visually searched its banks in both directions, while signaling her to stay out of sight. Satisfied that there was no one, he ordered her back up the trail to be sure that they hadn’t been followed. When she returned with her report that she hadn’t seen anyone, he gave out a loud whoop across the river, sounding like a Spaghetti Western’s Apache – nothing happened. He whooped several more times before an answer sounded from the opposite bank. Soon, an old, slope-backed, brown mare appeared from the brush on the far bank and, astride a shirtless man who held the frayed rope reins loosely, allowing the mare to pick her own way over a trail she obviously knew well.

As they forged the river, Beth noted that the water rose above the rider's knees, soaking his pants. She quickly pulled off her shoes, socks, and ace bandage, carefully hiding her stash of American bills in the toe of a sneaker and stuffing socks in over it: they were caked with mud, but still dry inside. Slinging the tied laces around her neck, she sprung up onto the smelly mare behind her new guide. Upon reaching the opposite bank, she dismounted while still among the rocks at the river's edge out of sympathy for the tired old beast, struggling with the weight of two on the steeply inclined rocks and mud. She scrambled, barefoot and limping, up the riverbank, turned for a wave to her first guide then followed the mare along the narrow jungle trail.

One hundred meters later, they came to a clapboard house with a wide, airy porch in a small clearing. Two little boys played nude in the yard. She took a seat immediately in a corner of the porch to slip on her shoes and socks over muddy feet – before her plastic-wrapped stash of American dollars was noticed – then rewrapped the ankle over sock and dirt, while the horse was tied and its rider came to join her on the porch. Basically, the mud formed her feet, socks, bandage, money stash and shoes into single units as heavy and clunky as the mare's hooves. Three other men joined them, taking seats on the porch railing next to her. Two of them had just arrived, en route to Costa Rica from Nicaragua. The other, introduced to Beth as Jorge, was to be her next guide to take her through the jungle beyond the Nicaraguan checkpoint. He appeared to be no more than nineteen or twenty, yet carried himself with the confidence of maturity. It was strangely uncomfortable to notice that her shoes were receiving considerable scrutiny. "You will need different shoes," the man who had brought her across the river said in Spanish, indicating the sturdily constructed work boots on his own feet, "such as these."

"I only have these, they'll be okay," she answered, stomping her feet in a little demonstration of their versatility. The man watched her footwork, then looked up for the opinion of the others. With exaggerated frowns, they shook their heads in unison, whereupon he entered the house and returned with a pair of old shoes similar to those he wore. They were beat up and filthy, but appeared to be the right size, and they were certainly sturdier than a pair of low-cut sneakers with the sole torn from one.

"Here, try these!" he instructed. All four watched her every movement. The high-rise shoes would offer much needed support to her throbbing ankle, but transferring her stash of American money discreetly with the three watching as they were would be impossible, and it seemed dangerous enough in this nowhere land between countries without inviting robbery. She picked up a shoe, made a show of studying it, then allowed it to slip backwards slightly while comparing the length of its sole to that of her sneaker.

"Too small, it would never fit!" she reported. "Thanks, anyhow. Let's get going. These shoes will be fine." Gratefully, her measuring method wasn't questioned, the subject of shoes was dropped, and conversation shifted to trail conditions. The two who had just arrived from the north reported good conditions, and said they hadn't encountered any police. With that, they left, Jorge leading and Beth right behind, on a well-worn and muddy trail into the jungle.

"I live up ahead," Jorge announced when they had proceeded some five hundred meters. "The police patrols often stop at our house for lunch and coffee, so I know almost all of them. Except for a few of the bad ones, I think one thousand Colones would convince them to let us pass."

It was possible that an advisory to be on the lookout for her had already gone out to the border patrol by radio. Even if it hadn't, simply being a gringa could be seen as reason enough to be returned to Costa Rica, where Mike Henderson and Gordon Edward waited. She insisted upon avoiding border guards entirely, without mention of the life and death importance of the matter. "It isn't you who has to feel secure, but me and I say no!"

“All right,” he agreed reluctantly. “We’ll stop before we get to the house, and you will wait for me while I go in to see if there is anything important we should know.” They set off again at a brisk pace through rows of newly planted sugar cane, and on a fallen log crossed a small river. Beth was dripping with perspiration, panting and covered with insect bites when, after about two miles, they came to a banana grove. “Stay well hidden and quiet in there while I go in the house,” he urged. “If a tall man with a black mustache comes along, don’t be frightened: he is my Uncle Pedro. Tell him you are waiting for me, and it will be okay.”

Deep in the grove, where the still air was heavy with moisture, heat and insects, but well hidden from the trail, she waited. In a mad entomologist’s dream come true, virtually every tropical species of flying, burrowing or biting insect descended on her to enjoy a hearty lunch. They battled for space on every inch of exposed flesh as though she was a prime filet. Despite the intensity of heat, she pulled on a long-sleeve shirt, wrapped another around her head with only a small opening to see and breathe, tucked pant legs into socks and hands under arms. Still they came to chew at her eyelids and poke holes through her clothes.

Twenty torturing minutes later, Jorge was back, urging her out. “The police are searching for someone,” he reported gloomily. “Come on, let’s go.”

“What? Wait a minute, Jorge! We have to find another route. I told you, I don’t want to see any police,” she stressed.

“Don’t worry. I know all the ones working today and, if they are on this trail, I can talk to them,” he asserted.

“No,” she insisted, her feet planted, unmoving. “I don’t want to take that chance. I’m not going down that trail! Which way is Nicaragua? I’ll go alone!”

“Señora,” he whined, “I know who they are. Just follow me, and everything will be all right.”

“How about if I follow one hundred meters behind? If you see anything, at least I’ll have a chance to hide.”

“The trail twists too much for that and I want to move fast. But we’ll leave the main path before we get to the area where they are, so don’t worry. I have lived here all of my life, and I promise that you will get through.”

“Okay.” She succumbed, feeling an empty pit of fear where her stomach should be. “Let’s go. The insects are eating me alive.” Jorge set off at a pace that was almost a trot, through thick jungle foliage, along a trail that Beth couldn’t distinguish. She was limping painfully, getting slapped with branches and stuck in thick strands of spider webs that sent shudders through her, as she wiped desperately before one of the huge things could gain a foothold on her skin. From a few glimpses through the bush, she could see that they paralleled the bank of a wide muddy river. They came to a tributary stream and followed it, moving fast and rather recklessly as far as generating noise was concerned.

Jorge held up his hands to stop. “We have to cross this stream, but I can’t find where I did last time,” he murmured as a whisper. “And, we’ll have to be very quiet now, because the police may be on the other side.”

“Why not right there?” Beth questioned, indicating a limb protruding from the water at about midstream. The flow was too wide to reach the branch from either side without wading, but it looked sufficiently sturdy that they wouldn’t be swept away.

“*Bien, vamos,*” he whispered then promptly slid into the gully, with Beth right behind.

Suddenly, there was the snap of a breaking branch and rustling in the undergrowth, followed by a considerable splash in the water. Beth froze, watching as waves traveled across the water’s surface. “Someone’s there,” she hissed, scrambling back up the incline.

“*Solamente es un cocodrilo,*” he replied, signaling her back down the embankment.

‘Only a crocodile?’ He made it sound no more harmful than a goldfish! With great reluctance, she returned, handed her bag to Jorge, glanced suspiciously at the surface for telltale signs, then lowered herself into the surprisingly deep water. In one step, it was to her chest, and the current threatened to carry her away. ‘Better a crocodile than Gordon Edward,’ she reasoned, although that logic did little to quell her revulsion. She leaned quickly and with an outstretched arm reached the branch, climbed onto it, received her bag passed by Jorge on the end of a stick, threw it to the other shore, lowered herself again into the muddy water and swam two strokes to the far shore.

‘Police may be in that field,’ Jorge whispered when he joined her. Above, she saw tall, waving grass. ‘They could be up there anywhere, so we have to be very quiet and try to pass along the edge, keeping our heads low.’

‘Why don’t we stay down here?’

‘The brush would make too much noise, and they would see the saplings move too. The edge of the field is better.’ He raced up the embankment and, bent over at the waist, darted off with Beth limping and panting behind. Again among the trees by the river, Beth’s back creaked like an old ironing board as she straightened, and her breath came in gasps.

‘Wait for me here,’ Jorge ordered. ‘We have to cross the river now and up ahead there’s a bridge, but the police watch it very closely. It is better to go by boat and I know a man who has one. From here, he can take us the rest of the way. Are you willing to pay to use it?’

‘Jorge, I have to trust you, but how much will it cost?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘I don’t know, but probably four thousand Colones,’ he opined.

‘Okay, I’ll go for it, but please explain that I don’t have a lot of money. Wait, Jorge! Why don’t we just swim across?’

‘No, we can’t,’ he replied. ‘Do you see how the weeds are cut short over there? They do that so anyone trying will be seen and they will have a clear shot at you.’

That was enough – she was convinced. ‘Okay, get the boat. I’ll wait here.’ She left the path, squatting in the dense foliage.

‘No good,’ Jorge declared when he returned. ‘We will have to use the bridge. The man can’t do it; he said that he has to use the boat to do something for his boss. Follow me, but stay a good distance behind. If you see me remove my baseball cap, hide yourself and stay perfectly quiet.’

They followed the narrow path through riverside thicket until, after about two hundred meters, Jorge stiffened, pulled off his baseball cap and slowed his pace to a relaxed stroll. Beth moved into the bush as quickly as she dared, trying not to make the slightest sound and ducked low behind some wide-leaf, banana-like plant to remain motionless. After several minutes of hearing nothing, she raised herself slightly and peeked between the vegetation towards the river. Close ahead was a steel bridge and in its center two army fatigued men with automatic weapons slung from their shoulders. Jorge noticed her movement and flashed a desperate hand signal to stay low. She dropped down again and her heart pounded off seconds that seemed hours. Suddenly, there was noise on the trail and Jorge speaking with someone. Had he been caught? She tried to control her breathing that seemed to be making the racket of a steam engine. Then, through a gap between leaves, she saw children and finally Jorge signaling for her to come out.

‘These boys just came across the bridge,’ he explained. ‘The guards asked if the little store down the road was open because they’re thirsty. We’ll continue to hide here, and the boys will tell us if they leave.’

Several minutes later, one of the boys came running down the trail. ‘*Rapido señores! Ya se fueron, pero regresarán pronto*_(quickly. They left, but they are coming right back)!’ he shouted into the bushes.

“Here, put this on to hide your blond hair,” Jorge urged, offering his cap. “Let’s go!”

Beth stuffed her hair under the hat, pulled the brim low over her face to cover her fair complexion, and followed closely. Trying to appear casual walking across the bridge was nerve-wracking, particularly with boys at their side, hissing. “*Mas rapido! Apuranse, ya* (faster! hurry up!)” they urged from the rails.

On the other side, they returned to the water’s edge, out of sight below the embankment, walked quickly from the bridge, startling several fishermen, then crossed through the parking lot of a closed restaurant to the swamp behind, and began slogging. “Are we in Nicaragua, yet?” she asked while struggling to maintain his pace.

“Yes, this is Nicaragua.”

“Super! We made it!” she exclaimed.

“Not yet. We still have to get to the other side of the Nicaraguan border checkpoint and this is a dangerous, lawless area,” he added.

So much for glee. They continued, eventually emerging from the swamp to wade across several knee-deep streams, then suddenly, ahead of them was an enormous body of water: Lake Nicaragua, more an inland sea than a lake. On the other side, two conical volcanoes, their middles shrouded in clouds, stood out against the blue sky. Tiny waves washed a narrow, sandy beach. They followed the lakeshore for about a mile before coming to yet another stream. Beth stepped in to wade, lost her footing on a steeply inclined bottom, and plunged into water over her head, bag and all. She had managed to keep the precious bag dry throughout, but no longer. She fished it out and walked on, shaking water from her passport, while her feet made disgusting sucking sounds. They passed one house, then another and another until they were walking by a cluster of buildings that was a pueblo.

“This is it,” Jorge pronounced, indicating a road from the shore that wound up between the houses. “We’re beyond the border station. Walk up to the highway and turn left: you’ll see some restaurants and the bus stop ahead of you. The buses to Rivas leave every half hour.” She handed him the last of her Colones, they exchanged well wishes, and she limpsloshed into town with stained clothing and shoes that more closely resembled buckets of mud. She reached the highway and trudged to a handicrafts shop where she bought a blouse and pair of colorful trousers. Somewhat cleaner, she sat at the back of a restaurant, to wait for the bus to Rivas and ordered a beer. It took but one swallow to conclude that Toña brand was her favorite in the whole world.

* * *

Noon came and went; still, there was no sign of Truman. Beth had arrived in the Rivas market at fifteen minutes past ten, so she felt confident that he hadn’t come and gone, missing her. Three times, she hobbled through the crowded open square, which was simply a block in the pueblo’s center without buildings, trees, or pavement: just a hot, lumpy, dusty, place where buses arrived, departed and throngs of people milled about. Around its perimeter, were restaurants, bars and hundreds of shanty-like stalls selling everything from nuts and bolts to live farm stock. Men, women, children, dogs, chickens, goats and pigs roamed freely in a confusing sea of activity: just the sort of scene she had once dreamed of capturing on film.

How long had it been since she had even thought of photography? Weeks probably, but it seemed a different lifetime – a separate reality, where emotions other than terror and depression existed. At the moment, she felt only despair, although there was plenty else: her skin was so insect bitten she could be mistaken for a smallpox victim, her feet were encased in sun-dried mud bricks, her ankle swollen and throbbing, and her underwear felt as though she had messed herself – none of it registered on her conscience. ‘Truman, Truman, Truman, where are you?’ was the extent of her thinking. She ordered a fresh-squeezed orange juice, and scanned the bus parking area for the umpteenth time. No Truman. He could be in

jail, tortured in some unspeakable manner, even dead, and it was her obsession about Mike Henderson that was to blame! Now she was doomed to spend the remainder of her life in solitude, haunted by his horrid face and the jeering laughter of his friends. She was without any convincing argument to send authorities to prove his guilt, had no life to go back to and hired killers hunted her.

One thirty: she took another slow hobble around the square, searching everywhere. Still no sign of him! Her head hung in sorrow as she ordered a Toña and literally bawled into her beer. Two o'clock: another walk – nothing. What would she do? Really, now what? Just return home and forget everything? What home? Deeply sorrowful, she stood, leaned against the short wall enclosing the restaurant's outdoor dining area, and scanned the multitudes.

“Señorita Beth Tierney?” questioned a voice at her shoulder. She turned and looked directly into the face of a uniformed man. She spun and, ignoring the flaming pain at her ankle, ran to the interior of the restaurant, where she encountered Jesus entering the front door. JESUS? She was frozen into immobility as the big bazooka smiled and called her name. Then they were both at her side. She learned that the man with the uniform was Miguel Farias, an immigration officer and longtime friend of Truman. He was there to legalize her entry into the country, and Truman was outside parking the car Carlos had lent him in Bluefields and which they had driven through the night in shifts

□ □ □

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

JINOTEGA, NICARAGUA

“*Aqui! Aqui mismo, por favor* (right here, please),” Truman instructed the driver. They had driven to Managua, left Carlos’ car with his brother and hired a ride to Jinotega, arriving in the afternoon. They stepped from the car at the corner across from *La Iglesia Católica de Los Angeles*, and there Truman remained with his thoughts, for several long minutes after the hired car disappeared. Beth took his hand.

“Let’s go inside,” she urged.

“No, not yet,” he answered. “In back, behind the church. That’s where it happened.” Jesus went to wait in a corner restaurant, as they crossed slowly before the imposing wooden doors to the side street separating church and high school. His legs trembled: fifty meters ahead was where his entire family had died. The enormous bell with its deep clang that could be heard into the farthest reaches of the valley was silent, but Truman could yet hear its reverberation from that day all those many years ago, announcing the marriage of his young cousin to little Maria Angela, one sunny Saturday afternoon. It was at this time of day that his father and uncle would have been back there with the others, struggling with tent poles.

Returning was proving to be far more difficult than he had anticipated. Memories and guilt were heavy upon him. Stopping for a long deep breath, he blew it between slack lips and looked up to the crucifix, the sight of which once had the capacity to bring peace to his mind. Now, its cast shadow seemed to forbid entry while the hedges at either side of the lane, appeared to lash out with their thorns. Reluctantly, he moved ahead towards the plot dedicated as a memorial garden to those who had died. A narrow gravel path bordered by native plants wound among thirty-five crosses adorned with plastic flowers, images of saints and flaming candles under a trellis overgrown with bougainvillea. Hummingbirds darted between blossoms. He walked without hearing the beat of their wings, rather, to him, came the sounds of a long-ago wedding party and remembered words of hope he had offered the young bride and her groom. He heard the happy squeals of children, his and Raul’s both, as they played with seldom seen cousins. He heard the murmur of dozens of simultaneous conversations echoing through corridors of time and, rising above them, the baritone voice of Raul: “Well, you look like shit, cousin. What happened to your face?”

Someone, in designing the garden had judged correctly the limit of a person’s endurance, for there was a low bench to sink onto, just as his legs turned to jelly. Opposite, were the crosses of the wives and children of the two men whose grave errors had combined to bring the rain of hell down upon their own families.

Beth was beside him, but she was taken by the beauty of the garden, and didn’t hear as Lucia’s voice spoke again her final words to him: “*Los aguilos y yo aqui estaremos bien con sus padres. Siempre estas en nuestros corazones. Que Dios te acompaña y te proteja, mi amor* (the kids and I will be fine, here with your parents. You are always in our hearts. May God be with you and protect you).” Nor did Beth see, as he did, the bright flashes in the night followed by deep echoing thuds. They became the air erupting from his lungs as he focused again on the present.

Beth held her arm helplessly about his shoulder. “Okay? Okay, Truman?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you,” he responded with a weak smile. “I love you; thank you for being with me today and every other day too. See those two crosses with the others clustered around? The one on the right is Lucia’s and the others, my children; on the left is Hilda, Raul’s wife and those other two are his sons.

“I love you too,” she affirmed, squatting before him. “Do you want some time alone?”

“No, not now,” he murmured, rising, “but I think I will go into the church. I want to light candles for my family and I need to offer a million apologies.”

He was on his knees, praying, when he heard his name spoken. It was an older version of the same parish priest Truman had once reduced to a whimpering figure curled on the ground, with an accidental kick to the groin during a football match.

He stood at the end of the pew, ashen and holding his hand to his mouth. “Truman? Truman Herrera? Is that you, son?” the priest quietly asked.

“Yes, Father, it’s me.”

“Praise God!” proclaimed the priest, blessing himself. “You are alive. I thought for a moment I was visited by your spirit. Do you know that long ago in the Herrera family plot we buried a man beside your wife and children whom we believed to be you?”

“That was a treachery of war, Father, and I apologize profusely. It wasn’t my idea, but I admit that I should have objected and did not. The body is of a Sandinista private whose name is Fernando Lopez Ramirez.”

“I shall have to have the grave marker changed, but unless his family requests, I will not move him. I am sorry also to have to tell you that, on Saturday, we buried Raul between Hilda and the grave we thought was yours. When I saw you here, I expected him at your side, together again spiritually as it should always have been. It saddens me to know that, with your grave occupied, even in death you shall not be reunited, as I thanked God you had been.”

“I know about Raul. He and I did become reunited, but only shortly before his death.”

“That then, was a gift from God, and keep that thought in your heart to lighten your burden, son. I shall take this news and the joy of finding you alive to my heart as bittersweet remedy for the grief of his death. Have you been to see your parents? The family is in deep mourning, and I fear for your grandfather.”

“No, I arrived only minutes ago. I have just come from the garden; it is beautiful.” Truman bit his bottom lip and lowered his eyes. “I am so awfully ashamed of my life that it is difficult to find the courage to face them.”

“You have come to the right place to find it. Would you like to offer your confession?”

“No, I can’t. My sins are too innumerable to list and too ghastly for forgiveness: I can’t offer so much as one excuse which might deflect responsibility. But yes, I intend to go to my parent’s home, although I doubt that the sight of me will bring them any comfort.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, my son. Go to them, and I will pray for your eternal soul.”

“Thank you, Father.”

* * *

With Jesus trailing behind, they went hand in hand through Jinotega’s center, each marveled by different aspects of what they saw. Captivating for Truman was the spread of the business district to formerly residential streets, modern stores in place of open-air vendor’s stands, repaved streets, large numbers of cars and the absence of certain landmarks, all of which

went unnoticed to Beth. She saw a quiet provincial town of colonial architecture preserved in time from centuries gone by but, eerily scarred with bullet-pocked walls.

At a small shady park with a kiosk at its center, they sat on a bench across from a gas station that Truman explained had been the site of a giant guanacaste, with horizontal limbs that extended beyond where they sat. Far out on one, almost over the street, he and Raul had built a tree house that children still used the last time he had been in Jinotega. “My parents home is only two blocks from here,” he added matter-of-factly. “It’s down that street, then left at the corner.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” Beth answered brightly.

Bright was the last thing he felt, nevertheless he rose to his feet and led her to the block of his youth. Black bunting hung above his parents’ door and also above Raul’s. “Well, here we are,” he said when they reached the low stone wall in front. “It looks like one house, but in fact it’s two. The one on the right is ours...”

From within, a wailing scream sounded, and the front door opened with such force that it struck the adobe wall with a resounding crash. A rotund woman burst through, rolling forward like a runaway locomotive, screaming: “Truman! Truman!”

“Mama,” he whispered, then louder until he too was shouting: “Mama! Mama!! He stepped slowly towards her but, by his third, he was trotting on a collision course towards his mother.

Beth remained immobile, watching in amazement. Seconds later, the door to the adjoining house flew open and, until he was pushed through by another screaming woman, a man stood framed in the portal, staring with mouth agape. Then, from the first door, another man emerged followed by a gray old man, tottering with a cane as rapidly as his legs could manage to join the wailing mass on the lawn. Truman appeared from its midst and called to Beth and Jesus that they should meet his mother, father, grandfather, aunt and uncle. The entire mass of humanity migrated from the lawn to gather around the dining table, and began unraveling the events of lives.

Truman had lived with his own sense of culpability for what had happened on that dreadful night, safely masked behind a burning wall of anger towards his cousin. If any of his family harbored any doubts about who was ultimately to blame for the rocket attack, he needed to put the question to rest by explaining how his return to Jinotega in the midst of the war had been the catalyst. Raul’s parents in particular, needed to hear him concede that their son had done right when he reported his whereabouts. It was he who had been wrong for being where his due befell upon his family, Truman explained. He needed also to confess that, in the end, Raul’s death too was caused by him.

He began, and once the door of confession opened, the truth about trafficking cocaine spilled out also. Horrified looks circulated, but he persisted – they also needed to know that more troubling times were soon to enter their lives: men would be coming searching for him and Beth – men whose purpose would be to kill them. Therefore, they were going away, that very night, and would likely never see them again.

Truman found himself alone with his father in the open-air patio behind the kitchen, astounded at how he had aged beyond his years. The Sandinista victory had wiped out his business and Truman’s supposed death had drained from him any will to carry on. The once proud and successful entrepreneur had been reduced to a bitter hermit, living at the edge of poverty. They talked of Beth and of events in Truman’s youth – innocuous things, avoiding cocaine and massacre. It took him back to times gone by when, as a young man, they would sit together after dinners, in that very spot, chatting for hours, perhaps about Truman’s future or university studies. If he could stay, he could help his mother pull his father together and they would grow close again, but he couldn’t so there were things that needed saying. “I can imagine how you’re going to

feel about this,” he began, “but there’s something I should make you aware of, just in case. In Puerto Cabezas, there is a kilometer-long pier. It was built to survive hurricanes, and that is why I chose it.”

“Chose it for what? I don’t understand.”

“The pilings are numbered,” he continued. “Under water and several meters into the sand, there is a box attached to piling number one hundred thirty-nine. It contains money sealed in wax. You can leave it for the fish or you can use it for something good.”

“Good? That is the devil’s money, Truman, and I won’t touch it,” he said contemptuously and abruptly left the room.

To quell his anxiety Truman busied himself preparing coffee, and was startled when from a darkened corner came the dry old voice of his grandfather. “That’s a mighty beautiful woman you came home with,” he said. “You should thank your lucky stars that I’m too old to keep up with her, or I’d steal her.

“I refuse to pay any attention to what they’re saying about you in there, Truman,” he continued, cocking his head towards the parlor. “You don’t kill innocent people or sell drugs. I remember you and me together, right here in this kitchen, just the two of us playing away an entire afternoon with your set of little wooden numbers. You were confusing three and five and when you finally got it right you stood on the seat of the chair and counted all the way to twenty without a mistake, just for grandpa. You were only a little bit of a child and you probably don’t remember, but I’m an old man and there are some things I remember perfectly. I can see you still, standing on the stool with your back arched and your hand on my shoulder, proud as a cock turkey ruffling its feathers. To me, you will always be that little boy with wonder in his eyes who scampered through these very rooms giggling, light as fluff in the wind, filled with joy and who thought his grandpa was the smartest guy on Earth.

“I want you to know something before you leave: that night at the wedding party, after you left, I went with Raul out of the tent, trying to stop him from blowing the whistle on you, but he went anyhow. Then I turned around and who was there, but old man José, the grocer. The ignorant son-of-a-bitch said that you belonged in jail and worse. Anyhow, I swatted the bastard with my cane, but he hit back and we fell to the ground, fighting like a couple of arthritic dogs. Your parents and your aunt and uncle came to break us apart, and suddenly there were explosions inside the tent. So, you see: it was you who saved their lives.” He kissed Truman on the forehead, patted the back of his hand, and shuffled from the room, leaving him speechless, staring at the ceiling.

* * *

Determined to leave no record of their movements on any passenger list or at any border crossing, Jesus, Truman and Beth spent that night huddled for warmth in the back of a pickup, bouncing along dirt roads through the high mountains, passing through Ocotol at three-thirty in the morning. They crossed into Honduras the following day, traveling through the cloud forest on footpaths connecting pueblos of Native Americans who cared not for frontiers created by outsiders. They carried but one small bag each, empty in the highlands where every article of clothing they had was worn for warmth, and bulky again in steamy valleys. Late afternoon found them, dirty and exhausted, in quaint and friendly Villa de San Francisco, already invitingly cool in the shadow of a mountain. The single hotel offered rooms with doors of nailed planks, cement floors, platforms of raw wood covered over with thin, flattened foam rubber as beds, a single, threadbare sheet, one frayed towel, no pillows, a bare bulb hanging from a spider web decorated wire, no window, no fan and walls partially covered in flaking, stained paint. The community toilet, with a bucket and spigot as replacement for the shattered tank was without a

seat, light, ventilation or paper. The walls of the adjoining shower had black and green mold to knee level. But it was a safe place to sleep: they took it.

They were off again at five AM on the bus to Talanga from where they hitched a luxury ride with a British anthropologist in his Land Rover to the junction of the highway, and there jumped in the back of a large truck all the way to Cedros. A festival was in progress that Beth would have loved to attend. A brass band led a procession of women with red ribbons and flowers in their hair, beautifully embroidered blouses, wide, ankle-length skirts, and men in the traditional white of the campesino. Tables large enough to accommodate the entire pueblo filled its central square and the smells were heavenly.

“Aw, come on, you guys!” Beth pleaded. “What do you want to do? Eat at another taco stand when there’s this right in front of us?”

Joining the feast did cause them to miss the bus, but they had no difficulty in securing a ride, joining ten others in the back of a truck loaded with sacks of pesticide, bound for Marale where they hopped off at the bus terminal. Within five minutes, they were out of town on a bus bearing the markings ‘Newtown Elementary School, Newtown Missouri’, but bound for Sulaco, Honduras, hours away, and not a space to be had without sitting, knees drawn to chest. The four-thirty AM departure for Yorito was right on time delivering them to a highway junction for another bus to Santa Rita de Yoro while the day was still young. The next one, to La Barca brought them to the westbound highway where they boarded the second-class bus, got off at La Entrada and waited what seemed an eternity under the broiling sun, inhaling fumes, until at three forty-five the tourist bus to the Mayan Ruins of Copan delivered them to the pueblo of Santa Rita. At daybreak, they were semi-rested and off again in the back of a pickup to the pueblo of Los Planes, adjacent to the Guatemalan border. Hired horses carried them along a well-travel trail to Morola, on the Guatemalan side. En route, a woman and child coming from the other direction appeared surprised when asked about immigration officials. “You would need to go to El Florido for that,” she responded.

From Morola de la Brea, a hired pickup carried them to La Union, another to Gualán, where they bedded down in an air-conditioned room with cable television and fabulous showers. The morning bus got them through the lowlands and, by noon, back again in the mountains to the city of Cobán. They ate on the delightful patio of a restaurant on the center square, where Beth enjoyed her first good cup of coffee since Costa Rica. There was risk in rest, so they pushed on, riding a diesel-belching, broken-down, old bus that coughed and sputtered its way along the nearly impassible road to Chisec, caught another, equally decrepit, to Xuctzul where Spanish wasn’t regularly spoken and the Native tongue Truman knew served only slightly better at communication, but was extremely more hospitably received: people who had claimed to know nothing of the area when questioned in Spanish, suddenly became fountains of useful information. A pickup left them at the road to Santa Elana, deep in the highland jungle, close to the Mexican border. They walked. And they walked – up, down, around corners and over streams. The birds and the jungle itself were exotically beautiful, but the heat was oppressive and each hill became a heart-pounding challenge. Still no vehicle of any sort appeared, so they walked. Night came, and the empty road could be seen by moonlight to wind through unpopulated heights ahead. Fortunately, Jesus located a corncrib where they passed the night. In the light of early morning, a bus rumbling up the road delivered them at last to Santa Elana. A boy was hired to guide them through the jungle to the road on the Mexican side where they stopped a tourist bus and rode to the ruins of Bonampak.

Their journey continued in like fashion through southern Mexico, avoiding principal routes and towns where immigration checkpoints are routine. After three days in the country, they entered a suburb of Veracruz, from where Truman

called Anton, the son of Juan who, as a young man, attended Pennsylvania State University – thanks to his father’s cooperation with Truman and the CIA. Anton was a highly successful Veracruz businessman, involved – apart from forwarding shipments of cocaine – in natural gas, shipping, tourism, and whose cousin in New York provided documents for illegal immigrants. He had once mentioned that this cousin also had the capacity to create an entire new identity, “but,” Truman added, glancing from Jesus to Beth, “that was several years ago.”

They were received with open arms and spent the remainder of the day and that night recuperating in Anton’s seaside villa, while the cousin was contacted and the wheels set in motion for a ‘deluxe disappearance. Upon their arrival in New York’

Several exhausting days later, they arrived in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, directly across the US border from McAllen, Texas. In the late afternoon of the second day, before infra-red detectors can effectively see the movement of people through the brush and long deep shadows cover much of the land, they crossed the Rio Grande, ten kilometers east of Reynosa, into the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge, just south of Pharr, Texas. There, a young couple from Idaho with a two-year-old in a stroller, delighted with Beth’s adventurous account of hitchhiking to the park from McAllen, cheerfully offered to take them back. From McAllen, they traveled by taxi from town to town until they were well into the interior, beyond the Border Patrol checkpoints, where they switched to Greyhound.

Their new temporary home became The Kings Inn, a Brooklyn, New York motel not far from the home of Anton’s cousin. Truman located, several blocks away, a wharf from which charter boats left early each morning, providing him with an entirely new fishing experience. Jesus discovered himself to be in pizza heaven, eating little else, morning, noon and night, while Beth made use of the nearby subway to carry her to the New York City Public Library. Meanwhile, documents were produced that made them over into reincarnations of people who had died in their infancy. In the company of the cousin, they traveled, late one night, to the New Brunswick, New Jersey, Coroner’s Office, where, in a truly chilling experience, they were fingerprinted and officially photographed as corpses, laying on a cold slab with talcum-dusted faces, blue lipstick and with their jaws held slack. Their ‘deaths’ awaited only the arrival of unclaimed bodies that the substitution of data could be made.

The day after Jesus ‘died,’ Beth returned from the library in a light mood. “Look, my love, I’ve found our new home,” she proclaimed, displaying a handful of computer printouts. “Longview, Washington. It’s a beautiful town with mountains behind, forest all around, small, but with a community college, a great library, salmon fishing, skiing in the mountains and close enough to Portland, Oregon, that we will have all the cultural activities of a big city.”

Truman sat at the edge of the bed holding his head in his hands. “You signed on to the Internet?” he asked, a tense edge to his voice.

“Yes, but not in my own name, silly!” she answered. She then studied him more closely: it was cool in the room due to Jesus’ delight with air conditioning, yet a sheen of perspiration glistened his skin, his face was ashen and the bottle of quinine in his hand trembled. “Hey, you don’t look good,” she said sitting beside him and feeling his forehead. “And you’re burning with fever.”

“It’s my malaria acting up again,” he answered. “It can happen when I wear myself down. This helps,” he said indicating the quinine, “and so does sleep. I just took four Advil PM’s. They’ll knock me out and, in the morning, I should feel a lot better.”

She folded back the covers and tucked him in with a kiss, shut the lights and joined Jesus in the other room. Any day, perhaps as soon as tomorrow, she and Truman would cease to exist as themselves, and any contact with their present

lives would jeopardize them. There was only one person alive she regretted leaving behind: dear old Mrs. Leonard. She sat down to compose a letter that, if mailed in the morning while she was yet 'alive', wouldn't expose them by its postmark. Jesus sat across from her as she wrote, watching Spanish television and sharing with her his nightly order of two double-pepperoni pizzas.

Suddenly, he clutched his hand to his chest and pitched forward, sprawling onto the table. He seemed to have pizza caught in his throat. She attempted the Heimlich maneuver, but it didn't help: he slid from her arms and fell to the floor at the side of the table. She rushed to the washroom for a wet towel. While passing through the doorway, a crushing weight seemed to descend upon her chest and burning pain shot through her shoulder and along her left arm. She struggled with all of her will to pull breath into her lungs, couldn't, fell forward onto hands and knees until she lost strength, slipped down, flat on her face, and crawled again onto one elbow. The room began to rotate, her vision washed through with red and she felt herself at the point of passing out. The arm gave way, she sagged to the floor and just lay there, half in and half out of the bathroom.

In the next room, Truman slept like a baby. She wanted to shout in his face. He had to, HAD TO wake up! She could die lying out there like that. Jesus was already gone, she could see that. Looking over the motionless body, it was empty of life, just meat wrapped in his clothing. The truth came to her in a flash: she knew, she knew everything! Looking desperately into Truman's sleeping face, she tried to will him awake to tell him that it had been Sylvia, Mike's mother who was behind everything. It was she who had ordered Mike to attack her and Herminia! She was the cocaine trafficker! She was the one who, after Jesus' clandestine telephone call to his brother revealed their location, sent her friend Charlie to them as a pizza deliveryman. Beth looked from Truman's sleeping continence to her own body: motionless, lying where she had fallen.

How had she done THAT?

but...

T H E E N D

EPILOGUE

Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua

A feeble old man, his weight balanced between legs and cane, stands on the kilometer-long pier and watches bubbles rise to the surface of the water surrounding piling number one hundred thirty-nine. Twenty minutes later, a diver surfaces and hands a dripping metal box to the elderly gentleman. Without comment, he tucks the box under an arm and totters from the pier.

Club Hollywood

San José, Costa Rica

Brian Walston stepped back to admire the picture frames highlighted by a mini-spotlight above the entrance to Bar Club Hollywood. Many didn't notice them, but Brian stopped to admire them daily. They represented for him the end of the end to more than two years of torment. The beginning of the end had been his release from prison six months earlier. In an unexpected turnabout, police had found the daily logbook of slain police lieutenant Edgar Vargas in Mike Henderson's bedroom closet with his bloody fingerprints on it, as well as other incriminating evidence, including the weapon used to murder George Dearling. Brian clearly recalled that Mike had been in Club Hollywood – thrashing a girl in one of his back rooms – the night of Dearling's murder, but he wasn't about to mention that to anyone. It was the second time a strange quirk had inexplicably come to his rescue.

Immediately upon his release from prison, Brian and his new wife left for Jamaica, on a long overdue honeymoon. Two months later, he returned alone with the tragic news that, their very first night there, Caroline had drowned in a swimming accident. As his wife's sole heir, Brian resumed ownership of Club Hollywood and, in a touching gesture of sentimentality, hung the matched frames, containing their marriage license and Caroline's death certificate above the door. It was a fitting tribute.

San Sebastian Prison

San José, Costa Rica

Flavio had a brand-new boyfriend and was he proud! Today, visitors' day, with all the prisoners, their families and friends there to see, he would show him off in the exercise yard for the very first time. For the occasion, he wore pink hot pants rolled up tight into his crotch, to enhance his shapely legs, a well-padded halter-top and red, open-toe sandals. His hair was coiffed to perfection, nails manicured and make-up spotless. He was ready. "Clean him up, he has to look pretty," he ordered.

When Mike Henderson, the macho gringo who had mutilated his lifetime friend Herminia, appeared in San Sebastian, convicted of cocaine trafficking and the murders of George Dearling and police lieutenant Edgar Vargas, Flavio let it be known that blow jobs would be free to any convict or guard who helped convert Henderson into his personal sex slave. His nose, cheekbone, left leg and several fingers had been broken in the process, but they had healed, and he still looked good as long as he didn't smile and show all those broken teeth.

University of Costa Rica

San Pedro Campus

Among the honor students receiving their baccalaureate at commencement exercises, was one who had been selected by the university president to receive special recognition for her spectacular achievement. It isn't often that a student with only a sixth grade formal education earns a high school diploma then, in three short years, completes a Bachelor of Science program, graduating with honors near the top of the class.

Herminia Cisneros stepped to center stage to receive her Bachelor of Science in psychology. In her ultimate moment of glory, with her children in the audience watching, she stood proudly before her class while the university president praised her hard work. Her teeth may have been capped and her lip sewn, but Herminia's radiant smile lit the packed auditorium as brilliantly as ever.

Lake Sacajawea Park

Longview, Washington, USA

Rafael Vasquez was a Guatemalan who, as a younger man, had fled the terror of war and immigrated to San Antonio, Texas as a refugee, where for many years he operated a bookstore. When his wife passed away several years earlier, he sold the business and retired to Longview. It was a beautiful June morning, perfect for a stroll around Lake Sacajawea, and Rafael was up with the birds to enjoy it. The lake, although situated in Longview's residential heart, was a picture of rural tranquility. His now well-established pattern of an early-morning walk around it began his first day in Longview. He had set off to familiarize himself with his new neighborhood, and ended up walking the entire three and a half miles around the crescent shaped lake surrounded by a one hundred twenty-three acre botanical garden, resplendent with more than seventy varieties of trees from every continent on Earth. The hour-long walk meant more to Rafael than just a restful time with nature in the center of town, it was his time to commune also with memories of his wife. This morning, as he often did, he sat at a picnic table on a point of land where sweetly scented flowering shrubbery lightly touched the still air, and laid before him her diary and the letter she had been writing when she died. He reverently unfolded the letter and read.

Dear Mrs. Leonard,

You have always been the dearest of all things: a loyal friend. Even when I was shunned by the entire world, your trust in me didn't waver. I adored you before, but ever so much more because of that. I have found the love of my life and, despite appearances to the contrary, he is a good man and I love him for that goodness, which is so deeply ingrained in his character that he has hung on to it while enduring the unimaginable.

You are about to receive bad news regarding me. Believe me again, if you can: regardless of what you are told, I am actually all right. You may also hear that I've done terrible things and, although in some respects it's true, if you knew everything, you would understand me through it all, and still want to remain my friend.

I have followed my love through hell and back, and we've survived. I don't know how, but we did, and now we embark on life together, abandoning the worlds we lived in to create a new one. I depart with but one regret: I shall never again lay my head against your breast and know that all is well.

P.S. I haven't told him yet, but a baby is due in April.

Love, kisses and oh, so many regrets,

Beth

Rafael refolded the letter, tucked it back inside the cover of the final diary and began shuffling along the lakefront path. Henry Garrett, an elderly chap who was often his walking companion, fell in beside him and was startled several minutes later when Rafael suddenly turned off. “Going home so early? What are you going to do there?” he asked.

“I’ve been contemplating that very question,” Rafael replied. “It seems that I have been kept around this good Earth for something. Now I know what it is; I need to write a book.”

