

EYES BEHIND SHADES

APRIL 16

Han rolled off his palm mat and stretched. His back felt tight, but not unduly painful. He was starting to get too accustomed to his Sealy Posturpedic back home, he decided.

Still naked, he padded over to the dresser, feeling the cool sand curl up around his toes. He paused to scratch himself, then opened the top drawer and grabbed one of the complimentary Camille Spa T-shirts. There was no way that he was getting back into that blue suit for another two weeks.

Before putting on the spa T-shirt, he had a change of heart and walked over to his still-unpacked Nike bag in the corner. His compact gym bag was Han's only piece of luggage, aside from his laptop computer case.

Rummaging through the bag, Han found a yellow "Seattle Supersonics" T-shirt, thinned and tattered from more bleachings than there were java joints in his home state of Washington. His favorite shirt still had white paint splatters on one sleeve from remodeling his boathouse, but he pulled it on anyway. Wearing anything monogrammed from Camille Spa, no matter how he felt about being here, smacked of conformity. Han had been accused of many things in his thirty-nine years, but a conformist was not one of them.

Unzipping his computer case, Han admired the number of cables contained within. He was capable of connecting to any modem, printer, power source, or other computer known to man. At the center of it all, lashed in place with black nylon straps, was the computer itself, a Powerbook 5300C, a prototype of the version Macintosh planned to release in August. The laptop was tricked out with an ungodly-large 1 gig internal hard drive, an obscenely-fast 266 MegaHerz processor, and a completely unnecessary 64 Megabytes of free RAM — without even touching his virtual memory, which could provide an additional 128K if he suddenly had to perform multiple tasks like calculating pi to a hundred-trillion places just for the fun of it while simultaneously trying to hack into the Defense Department's personnel files, all the while listening to a CD of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 In G minor, reading the headlines of the Wall Street Journal, and sending nude pictures of Elle Macpherson with Boris Yeltsin's face superimposed between her legs to everyone in America with an AOL account.

Not that he would know anything about that. Besides, they could never prove it.

His computer was more than his baby. It was his wife, mistress, best friend, business partner, co-conspirator, muse, and link to a greater humanity that on the whole confused and irritated him.

Removing his Powerbook, Han spied a new copy of PC World magazine. Lila, his over-efficient secretary, must have put it there for him to find. Glancing down at the cover, he guessed her reason. Underneath a picture of a gleaming new Silicon Graphics terminal, there was a 2 x 2 inch box with his ugly mug next to the headline, "Is This The Man To Rescue The Storage Industry? Han Dickson: The Whole Story."

The cover picture was not flattering. Did he really have that many chins? The photo had been taken as he was walking across a parking lot, hair messed up, carrying some grocery bags. Han noticed with a snort that in the picture he was wearing this same Supersonics T-shirt.

He didn't remember talking to anybody from PC World recently, and certainly didn't give them permission to snap a picture of him in a supermarket parking lot. He'd stopped giving formal interviews years ago and refused to take publicity head shots.

Han briefly wondered how they could get his 'Whole Story' without even talking to him first. "Fuck it," he said and tossed the magazine onto the floor.

He hated reading profiles about himself. It made him feel disassociated in his own body. These articles all had the same back story anyway. The mother who left prematurely. Father already out of the picture. Life with the mean uncle who would go on weekend gambling binges to Vegas. Taking apart a ham radio before starting grade school. Never going to a school dance. His first love a Commodore 64.

Entering Cal Tech at sixteen, quitting two years later. Starting SuperNova in the basement of the Speed & Suds Laundromat. Going public before he could legally buy beer.

All ancient history. Psychocrappola. It had nothing to do with him anymore.

Han Dickson lived the way he wanted to live. Buying an America's Cup yacht. Trading two subsidiary companies for 60% of a NFL franchise. Giving \$500,000 to the Democratic incumbent in the 1984 Seattle mayoral election. Then turning around and giving twice as much to the Republican challenger, just to make things interesting.

Sometimes he felt like Steve Martin's character in "The Jerk"; giving away thousands of dollars to somebody with an underground film on cat juggling. When the pressures of

day-to-day living got to him, he'd take vacations in totally foreign locations, like Paraguay or Syria, just for the hell of it.

It all came down to his gut. The same gut feeling that predicted a future in spreadsheets. And right now his gut was telling him... nothing. That was the damn problem.

For the past several months, Han felt like his company — his life — was stalled in neutral. He was desperately in need of a new direction, the next big thing. And maddingly, his gut seemed to be sitting this one out.

Hence his decision to take some time off at Camille Spa. Han was hoping that the distance and rest would help crystallize a new direction for SuperNova.

Looking down, he realized that he'd already clicked open his Powerbook and started to boot it up. Force of habit. With only one spare battery and nowhere on the island to recharge, he'd have to watch that. Maybe — since it was already running — he could toy around with that new video editing prototype.

He thought about the bags of Snickers bars and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups at the bottom of his Nike bag. If he broke into them, he wouldn't need to leave the room. No, just five minutes on the computer, he promised himself, then he would go down to breakfast.

* * *

Jackson woke as the rays of morning sun warmed his face. It was an unfamiliar feeling, since his alarm was always set to 4:15 a.m., even on the weekends.

The jet lag must have him out of whack, he thought. He felt well-rested, but regretted getting such a late start on the day. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Jackson was unprepared for the shock of feeling cool sand between his toes. Yesterday's events came rushing back with an unpleasant thud.

The only plus side to this whole fiasco was that he'd actually had a great night of sleep. Jackson had expected the palm mattress to be too stiff, but surprised himself by quickly dropping off. Not that he would admit this to that smarmy spa director.

Katya stirred and wordlessly got out of bed. She crossed the room to the mirror and began running a flat brush through her hair. She had slept in a white, almost transparent nightgown that left little to the imagination. And last night he didn't have to imagine. In

the glow of a single lantern, Katya had performed a series of her old cheerleader routines until he couldn't stand it any longer. Then she attacked him with a ferocity that he hadn't seen in years. It was as though she was trying to make them both forget about their Spartan surroundings. And for a short time, it had worked.

But now the day was beckoning and it was ass-kicking time. Jackson didn't have to think very hard about whose ass was first in line. That crook of a spa director. First he'd have some breakfast, drink some real coffee to get blood flowing, then it was Go Time.

Now he just had to get dressed. He stood up, wavered, then sat down.

He stood again.

And sat down.

Jackson found himself unable to proceed. He picked at his silk boxer shorts.

Katya finally noticed and stopped brushing her hair. "What are you doing?"

"Getting ready."

Katya pulled her hair back into a ponytail and tied it with a blue ribbon. "If you're getting ready, why don't you put on some clothes?"

Jackson nodded and eyeballed his suitcases, but made no move towards them.

Katya asked him what was wrong.

"Arne usually does this for me. I don't know what to wear."

There was a schedule to follow. An order to things. First the alarm, then the swim, the 90-second shower while Arne set out his clothes, and his manicure. But now there was no exercise, no shower, no Arne, and he knew better than to ask Katya to file his fingernails.

How could he put clothes on before taking a shower? And even if he could do his laps and take a shower, what kind of clothes should he pick out? That was Arne's job; he always knew what was appropriate. Jackson mentally cursed the bony little Dutchman for not being here.

It already seemed too hot for wool slacks, but Jackson was the most comfortable in a suit. He couldn't remember the last time he wore shorts outside the gym. Even at home he relaxed with tasseled dress shoes, starched Brooks Brothers shirts, and gold-plated cufflinks.

In fact, he had no idea what was inside his two suitcases. Arne had done all his packing.

“You better decide on something quickly,” Katya said. “I’m getting hungry for breakfast.”

Jackson fought through his paralysis and wobbled over to his luggage. The bag was done in phantom black leather, with silver rivulets and a matching “Vuitton” label. The bags had been a birthday gift from Katya. Normally she never strayed from ties and expensive watches, but this year she went crazy with the travel-themed presents. God, it hadn’t been **that** long since they’d taken a vacation.

Inside the bag, Jackson found stacks of dress shirts still inside their plastic sheaths, neatly folded rows of new boxer shorts, a layer of rolled socks, and five pairs of pressed slacks. Digging past the socks, he came across a stash of clean, white undershirts and a handful of mono-chromatic golf shirts.

Where were his shoes and ties? By the time he found both in the smaller of his two bags, Katya had changed into a maroon sundress with a white scarf around her neck and matching heels. In the second bag Jackson came across a selection of Polo walking shorts and tropical, short-sleeved Hawaiian shirts. *This must be Arne’s idea of a joke*, he thought. There was no way he’d ever wear anything with a pattern of hula skirts and bananas.

“Problems?” Katya asked.

“No, no, I’m just ducky,” he snarled.

The sand between his toes was really starting to get on his nerves, so he put on a pair of tan socks and stuck his feet into the same pair of black loafers he’d worn yesterday.

He ripped open the plastic wrap to one of the long-sleeved white dress shirts and pulled out a red tie.

Katya lit a cigarette. “You’re not going to wear that, are you?”

“Why, what’s wrong with it?”

“That’s a Hermes tie. The countess told me they are so on the way out right now.”

* * *

“Breakfast, honey pie?”

Mickey D. winced at the sound of Marcella’s voice.

“Maybe I can have them whip up some pancakes. Or huevos. I bet I could have them put our breakfast on a tray so we can stay here in bed. How does that sound, smookie?”

“Yeah, sure,” he mumbled.

Mickey D. never really slept well unless he was moving. Planes, trains, buses, vans, whatever — after years of touring, the gentle rocking of forward motion was like Nyquil to him. This explained why he usually liked to take his vacations on cruise ships. Sleep, eat, nap, sex, eat, nap, sex, eat, sleep and repeat. After two refreshing weeks of that schedule, he’d be ready to hit the road again. If it wasn’t for the curse, and visions of Titanic-themed problems on April 19, he’d be cruising the Caribbean instead of being trapped on this island right now.

He’d already laid in bed pretending to sleep for what seemed like hours, hoping that his date would get hungry and go down for breakfast without him.

“What sounds better, pancakes or eggs, snuggums?”

What was it with the pet names? This was certainly a new, even more irritating wrinkle. “Whatever. You choose.”

“Okey dokey. Be back in two shakes,” she called as she breezed out the door.

Mickey D. exhaled in relief at the fleeting sound of her footsteps. What time was it, anyway? During his fake doze, he caught himself listening for his usual hotel wake-up call — then had to remind himself that this room didn’t have a phone. Or a clock for that matter.

Mickey D. had what he liked to call “resetable biorhythms.” It was a daily ritual. No matter how much or how little sleep he got the night before; no matter how many time zones he’d crossed; no matter how high or low the sun was in the sky — when the ten o’clock hotel wake-up call came, his day started at 00.00 like a stopwatch. And then he would make the calls, sign the autographs, do the show, sample some new flesh, and get however many hours of sleep until the next wake-up call.

Without that call, he felt adrift. Was it before ten a.m or not? Wait a minute, didn’t Zane say he’d packed a dive watch for him? *I bet that thing has an alarm*, he thought.

Mickey D. pulled on a pair of black silk briefs and tied his hair up with a bandana before searching through his unpacked bags. He found it in one of the side pockets. A Scubamaster Pro. Water resistant to 500 feet. Just in case he got a cameo in “The Abyss Part II,” he guessed. He was toying with the buttons, trying to find an alarm

function, when he heard the approaching footsteps. How had she come up with breakfast that quickly? Were they hiding a Burger King down there?

Mickey D. steeled himself for a fresh round of “snookums” and “honey-pie’s” when an unfamiliar face peeked through the open cabaña door.

“Massage, sah?”

The face was darker than the one he’d been dreading. A message? Who could be sending him a telegram out here? Only Zane knew the name of this spa. Not even his manager knew how to get a hold of him.

“Massage? You ordered?”

It was that handsome island girl — Veronica, or something like that. Now he understood. Not a message, a massage. That’s right, after arriving he’d requested a morning rub-down.

“Sure, come on in,” he said. “I’m Mickey D.”

“Virginia,” she said shyly. He thought he saw her eyes flicker down to check out the formidable bulge between his legs.

“Where do you want me?” His silk briefs were becoming tighter by the nano-second. He knew he didn’t have a whole lot of time before that other chick came back with his food, and this could be a super way to jump-start his day.

* * *

When Jesus came down from the mountain, He told his children to open up their hearts and He would show them The Way. Right there, the apostles had to make a choice. They could’ve turned their backs. They could’ve let their disbelief cloud their vision. But right there — RIGHT THERE — they made a commitment. A commitment to their faith.

Have you have made this same commitment? Have you opened your heart to Jesus? If so, then I need for you to show it. If you have laid yourself prostrate before this higher power; if you have accepted The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, then I’m asking you to call our toll free number at the bottom of your screen. This will allow you to share your faith with one of our friendly ministry representatives. “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity,” Psalm 133:1.

All you have to do is pick up your phone and dial that toll free number, 1-800-4CHRIST, that's 1-800-4CHRIST, and you will be surfing the pipeline to the Lord. And for those of you in our studio audience, I thank you for making your commitment to the Sister Glory Hour of Faith and Power.

If you would like tickets to a taping of our show, please mail us a postcard to the address you are seeing on the bottom of your screen right now. Remember, faith takes a commitment. Only the righteous may pass through those heavenly gates, so take the extra step toward your salvation. Call us now.

Not bad. She liked the bam-bam-bam punch with the word 'commitment' in the opener. She'd have to save that one for next Easter's pledge drive.

It was almost scary to Gloria the way she effortlessly composed that entire telethon pitch before even rolling out of bed. Right after waking, the words just floated from the dreamy void and stuck in her cranium. *Perhaps it was divine inspiration*, she thought, only half jokingly.

Opening her eyes, Gloria drank in the quietness of the room. No blue-haired fans pestering her to sign their Bibles. No cranky gaffers whining about union dues and overtime pay. No prop men, lighting supervisors, or nervous accountants. Even the shadows of the overhanging palm trees were as still as a chalk mural against the back wall of her cabaña.

This is what she needed. To get away from the pressure and the deadlines. Recharge the batteries, so to speak. She'd certainly earned it, bringing in three million in telephone donations over the last month alone.

There was no denying that she had a gift. Other televangelists had to rely on notes, cue cards, teleprompters, or wireless inner-ear microphones.

But not Sister Glory. She worked best without a prepared script, and lately had been performing her shows without even choosing a topic first. She'd lather on the pancake makeup, glue on the false eyelashes, and step in front of the camera with no idea what she was going to talk about for the next sixty minutes (less commercial breaks). It was as though she was daring herself to fail.

Her director, Pete, approached each new show with the trepidation of a skydiver who'd just learned that Stevie Wonder packed his chute. Pete had started drinking again over lunch, and chased down the martinis with a half-bottle of Pepto before each show.

“What’s it gonna be? Unmarried sex, spiritual healing, drug abuse?” he’d ask during their pre-show sound check.

“Dunno. I’ll think of something.”

“Are you gonna do a gimp number?” Pete liked to know if she was going to invite any audience members to the stage. That way he could position a cameraman by the stairs.

“Dunno. Maybe.”

So it went. Gloria considered herself fairly reserved outside the studio. Meek. But once she put on that frosted beehive wig, Sister Glory took over.

Sister Glory wasn’t afraid to single out Elton John as being a member of the great pink, limp-wristed menace. Sister Glory openly called for the impeachment of the newly-elected Clinton because he wouldn’t stand with God against Fetal Genocide.

Gloria sometimes felt like a stranger in her own body when the klieg lights went on and Sister Glory grabbed the microphone.

“You want to touch divinity? You want to feel closer to God?” she found herself screaming at her audience during one show last month. “I walk with God when I sleep. He comes into my room every night and shares my bed. I feel him brushing against my legs, whispering in my ear. So if you want to feel the touch of God, all you have to do is purchase a piece of my nightgown. For the low, low price of \$49.95, you will feel His holy vibrations in the fabric. I guarantee it!”

Afterwards, she realized what a disturbing image she’d just conjured up — The Lord Almighty stealing into her bedroom and rubbing up against her prostrate body like some vampiric dog in heat.

But the orders came flooding in; thousands of checks from towns like Waxahachie and Chadron all made out to Sister Glory Ministries. Her staff had been forced to spend a weekend cutting up a truckload of nightgowns from Target in order to meet the demand.

It would make her laugh, the desperation of those poor shmucks who’d send off their last fifty bucks for a 4-inch swatch of cotton/rayon fabric. Didn’t they know that if Heaven exists, you certainly couldn’t buy your way into it? But those fools treated the afterlife as though it was a lottery, where you could get through the pearly gates by scratching off the right box and matching a pair of numbers.

Meanwhile, Gloria watched her overseas accounts grow with weekly five and six digit deposits. Just the thought of that moose-choking amount of cash made her toes tingle. She was definitely on the way up. Even the mistake of choosing a spa without running water for her two-week vacation could hardly dent her growing financial empire.

If only she could rid herself of these unwanted feelings of... what? Vestigial guilt? She wasn't sure why she couldn't completely enjoy her success. Lately, there had been a prudish headmistress in the back of her head scolding her every move and shenanigan. Before she left for this vacation, Gloria thought the voice was the result of being overworked and overstressed, but even in the quiet of this empty room, the voice was there, judging. "God is watching," it whispered.

In that case, He must be really bored, she thought, because the only scheme she had planned for the morning was rustling up some toast and fruit for breakfast.

* * *

Virginia motioned to the bed.

Perfect. The Breakfast of Champions.

Mickey D. crossed the room and laid on his back, expectantly.

Of course, the singer had been with numerous black women before, and he'd always rated them above a six. He enjoyed their sweet smell, the creamy feel of their skin, and best of all, their aggressiveness. The black women he'd been with knew what they wanted from a man. He remembered this one gal from Atlanta — or was it Nashville? — who grabbed him by the hair after he'd shot his wad, growling: "Don'cha go thinkin' you're stopping now, white boy. This momma's got a train to catch, so you best be gettin' back to work and I'll tell you when to quit." How could you not love that?

His masseuse ordered him to flip over. Reluctantly, he obeyed, not wanting to spook her. Mickey D. preferred chest and thigh rubs over back rubs. That way he could watch and chat up his masseuse while she worked on him.

She hopped up on the bed and straddled his waist. Lighter than a tropical breeze, Mickey D. could barely tell she was there until her mace-like knuckles dug into his shoulder blades.

"Gahhh," he moaned. The sudden pain made him tense up his jaw so much that his ears popped.

“Relax now,” she said as she dug her thumbs into the tiny pocket between his seventh and eighth vertebrae. Her hands moved down to the band of muscles above his tailbone.

Her fingers were strong and practiced. He wondered what she would do if he suddenly turned over and showed her his hardening member. Would she keep massaging down there as well? He decided he’d better do it quickly. Caught between the bikini briefs and the thin palm mat, his privates were starting to lose circulation.

“He get tense again,” she said. “Relax.”

Before he could flip, Virginia shifted her weight and planted both knees in the center of his back. Suddenly, she gripped his shoulders and pulled, bending his whole torso backwards like a crossbow.

Mickey D.’s spine strained and popped. His vision blurred and faded into a pure, white light.

* * *

Holmsley and his blonde wife were already midway through their meal when Han reached the courtyard. The foreigner with the camouflage jacket and poofy mustache — who still had his parrot on his shoulder — was the only other guest present.

Han walked over to the couple and held out his hand.

“Han Dickson,” he said. “In all the hubbub yesterday, I don’t think we were properly introduced.”

Jackson took a few seconds to ponder Dickson’s offering, then took his hand with a practiced shake. “Jackson Holmsley. And this is my wife, Katya. Actually, we’ve already met.”

“Have we? I had that feeling when I saw you at the airport, but I’m so bad at names and faces.”

“Washington,” Holmsley prompted.

“Which one?”

“D.C.”

“Hurm...”

“State Department.”

“Don’t think I’ve ever worked there.”

“Dinner.”

“I’m still drawing a blank.”

“The Undersecretary of the Interior.”

“Nice man. Big Knicks fan.”

“Yen Chu.”

“Oh God, you were at *that* dinner? I don’t think I’ve touched sake since. That whole night was a blur. I think I puked in the Undersecretary’s broom closet.”

“Actually it was his wine cellar. You managed to hit a whole rack of ‘75 Burgundies.”

Han scratched his forehead. “People always told me my stomach has expensive tastes. Now I know that extends to my projectile vomiting as well.”

“At least you seemed to be having a good time, which is more than I can say for our current situation,” Jackson said, picking at his scrambled eggs.

“What’s the matter, you’re not a big fan of port-a-potties?”

“No, I’m not. You know, it’s funny that when my wife got so excited about this spa, she neglected to make sure they had some of the basic amenities — say, for instance, indoor plumbing.”

“Just be glad you’re a guy,” Han said. “At least we can pee off our lanai without too much trouble.” He winked at Katya, who was too busy cutting her cantaloupe to notice.

She’d been well trained to stay silent and smile through insults when Jackson was talking business. And with Jackson, everything was business.

Skip swept into the courtyard carrying a silver coffee pot. “Ah, Mr. Dickson, good of you to join us this fine morning.” Skip refilled the European’s cup. Han noticed that the moustached man had a small line of bare skin showing through his black hair. The hairless part traced vertically from a spot behind the man’s left ear to the crown of his head. Han wondered what kind of injury would leave a scar like that.

“So what’s for breakfast?” Han asked the spa director.

“You’re in luck. Lucia is taking requests. I recommend the papaya pancakes with chilled orange juice. Your helicopter dropped off several bags of ice yesterday and it would be a shame if you didn’t enjoy it before it melts.” Skip gave no indication that refrigeration was something to be expected at a five-star resort.

Katya wanted to crawl under the table.

“The pancakes sound good to me. You got any hash browns to go with that?”

“I believe Lucia could come up with the potatoes, but it may take a half an hour to prepare them from scratch. If you are not in a hurry I will have her get started. I would suggest, however, some banana bread instead. Lucia’s banana bread is well known in the islands as a small slice of Nirvana.”

Han said, “Well, if it’s good enough for Courtney Love, it’s good enough for me.” Nobody else at his table appeared to get his pop culture reference. Must only be funny in Seattle, he supposed.

Aye-Aye came out of the kitchen wearing a starched white apron. He approached Han and offered him a cloth napkin wrapped around a set of silverware. Han eyeballed the two empty tables.

Before he could slink away, Jackson waved to the chair on his left. “Why don’t you join us.”

Han thanked him and politely took a seat. He asked Aye-Aye for some hot tea.

Jackson waited until Aye-Aye retreated to the kitchen before asking, “Have you looked into Jaycor Communications? Finally went public two weeks ago. Good looking first offering.”

Han made a noncommittal noise that sounded like a “Hurm.”

“How about Apple? You think they have a chance to overcome their debt structure?”

“Possibly. Not sure.”

Jackson wondered how this oversized computer nerd got to be 68 places above him in *Forbes’* list of the 500 richest people in America. He swore to himself that he’d get some usable information from Dickson before the end of breakfast. But he found himself losing focus as that Mexican bombshell arrived and asked Lucia to prepare a breakfast tray for her and her boyfriend. She was so top-heavy, Jackson wondered how she kept from falling on her face.

Skip approached with a tray of tea, cream, and sugar. “We have the full spa tour this morning. And afterwards some bocce ball lessons on the beach. Would that interest either of you gentlemen?”

Jackson twirled his finger in a sarcastic “whoopie” gesture.

“I was told that Virginia would be doing massages this morning,” Han said.

“Yes, as a matter of fact she doing Mr. D. right now.”

“Could I schedule one for this afternoon?”

“Certainly. After the tour.”

The man with the parrot on his shoulder two tables away evidently heard them. “One for me too,” he called out.

“But of course, Mr. Pijasek.” Skip poured a cup of tea for Han.

“So, Han, you were telling me about Apple,” Jackson said.

* * *

“What are you doing?” Marcella demanded.

She stood in the doorway, carefully balancing a tray of scrambled eggs, toast, cut fruit, and coffee.

That black island hussy was straddling her man, who looked to be naked and limp underneath her hips.

“Massage, you like?” Virginia offered.

“What have you done to him? Get off!”

Mickey D.’s voluminous hair completely obscured his face. He didn’t move a muscle as Marcella entered the room and set the breakfast tray down on a suitcase.

“Baby, are you okay?” Marcella’s eyes scanned down Mickey D.’s body, and she was relieved to see he was still wearing his underwear.

The singer mumbled, “Oh, man. Wow.”

“What’s that, honey-bunch?”

Virginia climbed off his hips as Mickey D. fought to bring himself to a sitting position. “That was un-fucking-believable. My back feels like it’s been totally unwound. Can you do that again? How about tomorrow, same time?”

“Very good, sah.”

“Wow,” Mickey D. repeated, grabbing a slice of melon from his breakfast tray.

“Maybe there is something to this spa here.”

Virginia paused at the doorway. “I suppose to tell you — after breakfast Skip gonna give de island tour. Just meet down in de common area. You doin’ want to miss de tour. No, sah.”

* * *

Skip smiled as he spoke to the group assembled before him. “I hope everyone slept well last night and enjoyed Lucia’s breakfast this morning, yes?”

The spa director stood on a small bluff, with Camille Cay’s topaz beach unfolding behind him. There was only one tuft of a cloud on the horizon, but it moved quickly out of sight, knowing better than to interfere with this Kodak moment. The air seemed to reach out and warm each visitor as though it were a flannel blanket.

“Since we never got to the official tour yesterday,” Skip continued, “I’d like to show off our little piece of heaven. Here we have Hearn’s Beach. It’s named after Lafcadio Hearn, a writer who described the water in the Caribbean as being ‘absurdly, impossibly blue.’ I don’t think it’s ever been described more accurately.”

“Money shot,” the bird cried, eyeing the pair of German shepherds playing around Skip’s feet.

“Would you shut that parrot up already,” Jackson snapped.

“The dogs make little Nikki anxious.” Ratko ran his index finger under his bird’s beak. “Besides, Nikki’s a macaw, not a parrot. Aren’t you little Nikki?”

“Sunku s vejci, *squaaack!*”

“No, you already had enough fruit this morning, Nikki.”

“If you will follow me now,” Skip said, “I can show you our beach storage locker.”

He led the group down a short path where the dirt and scrub bushes melted into the golden sand. The storage locker was crafted out of plywood, approximately four feet high by six-feet long. The salt air had weathered the original green paint to a dull blackish hue.

Skip opened the locker to reveal stacks of beach towels, folding chairs, air mattresses, and a half dozen sets of snorkeling equipment.

Sister Glory pointed to a rack inside the locker. “What are those long poles for?”

“I’m glad you asked. Those are for spearfishing. I’ll be teaching a class on that tomorrow morning, yes? Everyone is welcome to use this equipment at your leisure — but we do ask that you not swim on the other side of the jetty without spa supervision. The other side of that reef got deep deep water. It have bigger fish out there, to be sure — some sharks too. Those fish ain’t so nice, yes?”

That brought some nervous grumbles from the group. Marcella asked, “But the beach is safe, right? No sharks?”

“Oh, no no no. Perfectly safe. You have my guarantee on that. Reef out there too high for anything larger than an angelfish to get through. Also get lots of parrotfish inside the reef, you know. Very pretty and mighty tasty in Lucia’s lemon sauce.”

As Skip walked back up the path to the courtyard, he pointed at a row of green, fuzzy plants. “Here is a beautiful patch of Marans. The leaves can be used for scrubbing things — kind of like nature’s steel wool. The bushes that run all the way up to the sand with the circular, reddish, saucer-shaped leaves, are called Sea Grape. Over there, we have several Flamboyant trees — the ones with the bright orange blossoms. Did you know that those Flamboyants came from our very own Johnny Appleseed, a man named Ariel Melchoir Senior. Melchoir owned a newspaper on St. Thomas, and in 1947 he paid schoolchildren to gather up all the Flamboyant seeds they could find. Then he had a friend take him up in an airplane so he could spread the seeds over all the islands.

Sister Glory stopped in front of a cluster of oversized ferns. Each thick blade came straight out of the earth and reached about chest level before the sharp green tip curved back towards the ground. “What’s this one called?”

“Those go by several names. One is the cobra plant, because when they get large enough, the top of the plant looks like the head of a snake. It’s also called a ‘Mother-In-Law’s Tongue.’ “

Han asked, “Why’s that?”

Skip gripped one of the stalks and pulled the leaf out of the ground, exposing a pale 6” root. “If you chew on this root, it numbs your tongue, like the Novocain you get at a dentist. It got its name because most people wish they could feed it to their Mother-In-Law to eat it and make them stop talking lala.”

Sister Glory snickered, knowing that she would’ve used a plant like that on Harry’s mother in a heartbeat.

Skip said, “As we walk over to the game room, I’ll be sure to point out the wild nutmeg and my favorite silkcotton tree. It’s not quite as big as the *Ceiba pentandras* you can find in Africa, but it has an amazing root structure and a crown that is an impressive 35 meters high. Back in Africa, you can’t find anybody who will cut down a silkcotton tree or even damage its bark, because they are considered to be the holy tree of the Negros. Silkcottons are believed to be the dwelling of Jumbi, Master of the Obeahs, who is kind of a spiritual leader. We average about 40” of rain a year, which isn’t a tremendous amount, but enough to support a wide variety of flora. It should be sunny for your entire

visit, except for an occasional short burst of rain in the morning. Usually the heavier stuff doesn't blow in until May and June. Oh, here we have a fine example of a tamarind tree..."

The game room was little more than a thatched hut with a pitched ceiling. Along the interior walls sat rows of wooden shelves, each one packed with paperbacks and boxes of ancient board games. No Trivial Pursuit or Scattergories here. Sister Glory bent over to read the faded titles. Chutes & Ladders. Candyland. Risk.

From behind his aviator shades, Mickey D. asked "This is the game room?" It was difficult to tell whether he was being sarcastic or was genuinely disoriented.

"Ah, you have Mühle." Ratko nodded approvingly as he spied an open game board sitting atop a packing crate.

Skip tapped himself on his chest. "You are looking at the current Mühle champion of the island."

"Not for long. How's your chess? I'm getting tired of beating Nikki here."

Sister Glory found a shelf of crossword puzzles and flipped through a book that was thicker than her Bible. Only the last handful of puzzles were blank. All the others were in various states of completion. She turned to the front of the book. The finished puzzle on the first page was signed: "Frederik Brickerman, 1981."

Katya scanned the paperback novels looking for anything by Danielle Steele or Jude Deveroux.

Jackson said, "The last time I visited my good friend, Joe Eszterhas, in his Malibu Colony home, he'd just remodeled his game room. He'd brought in six pool tables, a bank of new pinball and slot machines, an indoor driving range, and round-the-clock exotic dancers in metal cages suspended over a 2-lane bowling alley. Now **that's** what I call a game room. **This** is what I call a joke and a waste of my time."

Katya stood back and watched Jackson push his way out of the hut. This tour wasn't going quite the way she'd expected. All morning she'd hoped that the grinning spa director would say "April Fools!" and pull back a curtain, showing them to the promised land — to a parabolic oxo-therapy tank, or a gleaming tub filled with champagne, Amazon mud, and bee pollen. She needed something extravagant to justify how much they'd paid for this spa. Something decadent. Something to unlock that growing knot in

her lower back. Instead, he kept pointing out stupid trees and bushes like they were something special.

This trip was supposed to be a “cleansing.” Even the Norse gods were in her corner on that. Katya decided that when she got home, her Viking Runes were going down her garbage disposal.

She didn’t recognize any of the authors on the shelf. There were a bunch of thin paperbacks by someone named L. L’Amor. One title stood out: “Rape of The American Virgins.” *Humm... that sounds like a promising bodice-ripper*, she thought.

“Looks like we will be down one, yes?” Skip said. “No matter. Still plenty of time to show you the livestock.”

* * *

Jackson couldn’t hold it any longer. Nothing for three days. And then, boom, he couldn’t even wait five lousy minutes. As he’d gotten older, his bowels began to develop a mind of their own. His colon defied all attempts at will power or muscle control. It laughed at bran, thumbed its nose at prunes, sneered at Ex-Lax, and gave Milk of Magnesia the finger.

He’d barely been able to storm out of that dreadful game room without soiling himself.

Jackson made it all the way to his cabaña before remembering that his room didn’t have a toilet.

He paused in his tracks and looked back down the stone path at the courtyard below. It was eerily silent, not a staff member in sight. Nobody to scream at, nobody to bring him toilet paper even if he had a real bathroom. Mercy, it felt as though he had to pass an alligator! Heads would roll for this indignity.

Where had that pool cleaner gone yesterday? He reversed direction and headed back down the path towards the game room, this time taking a left at the outdoor grill.

Every step was a small torture as his lower intestines played jumprope with his bladder.

He stumbled upon the port-a-potty, a box barely larger than a telephone booth with a ‘Welcome’ sign on the door. Jackson pulled open the door to reveal a raised wooden seat and a pyramid of extra toilet paper rolls.

“No way,” he said aloud. Jackson Holmsley the Third did not squat on port-a-potties. Who knew how long it had been since that seat had been disinfected? Especially with the freaks on this island. He would go back to that scumbucket spa director and *demand* proper facilities. Get his lawyers to — uhhhhnnn!

His bowels twisted with renewed vigor and before Jackson knew it, he was pulling down his undershorts; trousers already loose around his ankles.

With the door shut, the only light inside the outhouse came through a series of diagonal slits cut into its roof.

Aside from the metal rack of toilet paper on his left, there was nothing else to grab for balance. The wall on his right wasn't quite close enough to get leverage, so Jackson wobbled as he lowered himself slowly above the hole. His knees finally gave way and he crashed down on the seat with an audible expulsion of gas.

Once he started taking care of business, he noticed that the splash seemed impossibly far away. Jackson peered down between his thighs and could only see blackness. Surprisingly, even in the enclosed space, the outhouse did not have an unpleasant smell. In fact, it had the aroma of eucalyptus that you'd expect to find in a good sauna. But that didn't make it any more acceptable, he reminded himself.

As he gripped his knees and gritted his teeth with effort, Jackson took stock of his situation. He'd always prided himself on being able to take a bottom-line approach to anything.

Bottom line #1: He had already transferred a total of \$2.1 million to the spa's numbered account in the Caymans. It would be difficult to get that back even if he called in a favor with the US Attorney General. No sense in spinning his wheels there. In just a few short years, the Cayman bankers had developed the blockheadedness of the Swiss. His best recourse was to let them keep that money, then sue the spa for 10 times that amount in punitive damages.

Bottom line #2: If he didn't get to a workable phone, it was going to cost him a whole lot more than the cost of this spa vacation. His V.P.'s wouldn't piss even if their Joe Boxers were on fire without orders written in triplicate from Holmsley himself. When it came time to sign the deal with Fox, he knew they would try to stall. “Oh, I'm so sorry Mr. Murdoch, but Mr. Holmsley is temporarily unavailable... No, he's out of the country, I'm afraid... Yes, he must be away from his phone at the moment... I do realize that you need an immediate response on this matter... No, I'm sorry, but I'm not authorized to

green-light that contract... Well, I'll be sure to pass that message along to Mr. Holmsley as soon as he calls the office."

God, he could just hear their conversation. What his V.P.'s didn't know was that he'd leveraged Holmsley Enterprises up to its eyeballs on the Hotel Omni purchase and he needed the influx of Fox's cash to cover his commitments before opening his books in front of the downtown re-development committee.

He had to find a phone!

* * *

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help but notice... you're Mickey D., aren't you? I'm Katya. Katya Holmsley."

"But of course you are."

"Do you know I once did a routine to your song, 'Bad Boyz.' It was a crowd favorite — especially that one break that goes boom, dah-dah-dah, boom, shucka-shucka, boom." Katya did a hair whip and hip shake in time with the beats. "I used to do a triple cartwheel into a double-back hand-spring during your big screaming finale. I was a Raiderette, you know, right after that Davis guy moved the team from Oakland to L.A."

"But of course you were."

Mickey D. ran his eyes over her figure. Not bad for a woman in her mid-thirties. She had the All-American thing going — blonde ponytail, fit thighs, even tan. Her nose was a little too narrow and perfectly sculpted, however, and he guessed it was not her original model.

"I hope your girlfriend won't mind me talking with you, Mickey. I can just call you Mickey, can't I?"

"But of course you can."

Mickey D. looked ahead up the dirt path. His date was way ahead, chatting with that spa director dude. "It doesn't really matter what she thinks, 'cause I'm not really *with* her, if you know what I mean. It's kind of a temporary thing."

"Well, I'll have to keep that in mind," Katya cooed. "Do you think I can ask you a teeny little favor, Mickey?"

No wonder she landed herself a rich sugar-daddy, Mickey D. thought. This chick knew how to work the flirt. "For you... anything."

“Is there any way I could get a picture with us together before we fly home? It would mean a lot to me.”

“You’re into photography, huh? I like that in a woman. So where did your husband go off to?”

“Oh he throws those fits now and then. I’m used to them.”

“Goat shit.”

“Now where are they taking us? I’m getting hot. And what’s that awful smell?”

“Goat shit,” Mickey D. repeated.

Katya noticed that the singer was pointing down to a scattering of yam-sized lumps in the trail that she’d just tracked through. Her Guccis were the best pair of taupe flats that she owned, but now the toes were streaked with brown. “Oh hell, they’re ruined!”

“I don’t think this path is friendly to suede,” Mickey D. observed.

“They better have a good dry cleaner on this island, that’s all I’ve got to say.”

The group walking ahead of them stopped, with Skip gesturing to the side of the path. Once they caught up to the spa director, he pointed at a two foot high pillar of green thorns.

“That’s a Pope’s Head cacti,” Skip said. “We are one of the only islands in the Caribbean where this plant grows naturally. Plus we also have some fine examples of Barrel cacti and Dildo cacti in these higher elevations.”

“Now we’re talkin’,” Mickey D. whispered to Katya. “A Dildo cactus? I gotta write a song about that one.”

Skip was describing the properties of a Glueberry tree when Sister Glory pointed to a mud-packed bulge near its trunk. The large, tumor-shaped protuberance completely enveloped a thick branch like a cocktail olive around a pimento. “What the heck is that?” she asked the spa director.

“Oh, that’s just a termite nest.”

Sister Glory stepped backwards, momentarily forgetting the difference between termites and hornets.

“Don’t worry. You’ve got nothing to fear from termites unless you suddenly grow roots. They provide a valuable function on the island by processing our dead wood.”

“But the Glueberry tree looks healthy enough. Look at all those little fruits.”

Skip said, “The termites don’t attack their host tree — which in my book places them automatically higher on the evolutionary ladder than us humans.”

* * *

Pepper dipped her head and nipped at her master's fingertips.

"Careful," Aye-Aye said. With his free hand, he rubbed the long white stretch between Pepper's watery brown eyes and twitching nose.

His voice calmed the gray mare long enough for Aye-Aye to finish brushing her neck. He worked without a shirt and the sweat pooled in the crease of his collarbone.

Both Aye-Aye and the horse straightened up when they heard the dogs. A minute later, the tour group crested the ridge, with Skip in the lead.

"You can see that the palm trees don't really grow up here. Mostly it's all Seaside Lavender, Bay Pea vines, and even some sugar cane. In fact, this ridge used to be the site of a small sugar refinery from when the Virgin Islands were under Danish rule. They used to call this island Kongens Tver Gade, which means 'King's Crossing.' Later, this island was re-named Camille Cay after the famous Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro, who was born on nearby St. Thomas in 1830."

"Now behind this chicken coop is where we keep the steers. Those are Brahman Bulls, a breed brought to the islands by way of Texas and Wyoming. It took thirty years of cross-breeding to get the tick-resistant hide of the Brahman with the heavy beef conformation of the Red Poll. As you can see, we cut down the horns to keep them from hurting one another, yes?" The spa director turned his attention to the next enclosure. "Ah, and here is Aye-Aye working hard. Who do you have there, Aye-Aye?"

"Dis heah is Pepper," Aye-Aye said brightly. "Big fine steed for dey bareback'n, sah."

Skip turned to the group. "If you've never ridden a horse bareback before, please see me and I will set up a time for Aye-Aye to give you a lesson."

"Excuse me," Han said, still huffing from the walk up the dirt incline. With the absence of Jackson, he seemed to take on the mantle of group spokesman. "This isn't a petting zoo, is it? What's the deal with all these animals?"

Skip smiled. "I'm glad you asked. With the absence of refrigeration on this island, it is important to have a fresh supply of food on hand. All the animals you see here — the chickens, the sheep, the steers, the cows — they are all bred on this island to eventually wind up in Lucia's kitchen."

That brought several gasps from the tour group. Gloria cautiously raised her hand. "What about Pepper?"

"Don't you worry about Pepper heah," Aye-Aye said. "She goin' be 'round for a few more years yet."

"That's too bad. I like dark meat," Mickey D. muttered.

Ratko leaned over and nudged the singer. "The hindquarters are the best. Very lean."

Gloria glared at the two men. "Stop talking about Pepper like that."

Han stepped forward. "Look, I think I speak for everyone when I say that I don't like seeing the animals before I eat them. Showing us the wild nutmeg was one thing, but I don't actually want to see Daffy before I eat duck for dinner."

"I understand. But I have a very good reason to be showing you this area," Skip said.

"What reason?" Han asked.

"So you know where to get the ingredients for your food groups."

Mickey D. cocked his head. "Say what?"

"Food groups," Skip repeated. "Swapping labor has a long tradition in the islands. Sometimes it would be cutlassing bush, where people would get together to clear a piece of land. In some cases, you'd have whole communities get together to move someone's house, timber by timber, to a new location. We have a saying among my people: 'When I have, I give; when they have, they give.' Camille Spa was created in that spirit. Here, we believe that sharing responsibilities helps foster a sense of community awareness. To that end, we have separated you into three groups. Mr. Pijasek and Mr. Dershowitz, you will be in group one. Mr. Dickson and the absent Mr. Holmsley will be group two. And then all the ladies will be the third group. Each group will be responsible for preparing one meal a day for your fellow guests."

"Hello? What is he talking about?" Katya asked.

"I'm talking about rotating shifts to make one breakfast, lunch, or dinner a day, Mrs. Holmsley. I'm talking about picking the vegetables, gathering the spices, plucking the chickens, and clearing the dishes. Lucia will help with the actual cooking and Aye-Aye will assist in the slaughtering and dressing of animals."

As he talked, Skip's rhythmic Caribbean lilt slowly melted into more formalized English. It rang of East Coast American, like he was planning a yachting trip in Kennebunkport, Maine instead of assigning chores on this isolated tropical island.

“You’ve got to be putting us on,” Gloria said.

Katya turned to look at Han. “They can’t make us do that, can they?”

“They can’t make us do anything.” Han turned to Skip and puffed out his already expansive chest. “What if we refuse?”

“We have no punishment for neglecting your assigned duties. But the last two meals you ate will be the only ones that Lucia will be preparing without assistance. If your group chooses to miss your assigned meal, then nobody will get fed. There will be no special orders, no frozen dinners. If you all choose not to pull your weight, then I suppose everybody here will go hungry.”

A vein pulsed in Katya’s forehead. “You can’t expect me to cook! I can barely find my own kitchen. That’s why I’ve got two full-time chefs on staff.”

“Yeah, you should leave it to those guys named Paco and José,” Marcella said. “That way you don’t have to pay their Social Security taxes.”

“I’ll have you know that all of my chefs graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris. We save our illegals for the yardwork and window cleaning.”

Marcella glared at Katya and wagged a finger at Skip. “There is no way that I am working with this coña.”

The spa director stood firm. “The groups stay. Part of building community responsibility is learning to work through personal differences.”

“Look, man, I didn’t sign on for no ‘community’ thing,” Mickey D. said. “I paid a lot of money to not have to worry about nothing and nobody, you hear what I’m sayin’?”

The other guests nodded in agreement.

“I hear you, Mr. Dershowitz. However, you all signed a contract before coming here stating that you would abide by all spa rules and regulations. Well, sharing in the workload and being responsible to your fellow man is one the founding tenets of Camille Spa. At this spa, as in life, there is no such thing as a free lunch.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” Sister Glory said, sneaking an upwards glance at her heavenly tormentor.

“So it’s settled then,” Skip said. “You may wish to meet with your food partners now. Tell you what, since we got started a little late today, I will have Lucia make lunch one last time for everyone. But tonight it will be Mr. Dershowitz’s and Mr. Pijasek’s first shift for dinner. Then tomorrow Mr. Holmsley and Mr. Dickson are on breakfast duties, Mr. Dershowitz and Mr. Pijasek have lunch, the women have their first dinner shift. You

have all that? I suggest that you speak with Lucia ahead of time each day to set the menu for your meal. It would be wise to meet at least two hours before the meal to start the preparations. You might want to consider giving yourself more time if you will be doing meat. But Lucia can help with all those details. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some other matters to attend to. You know your way back to the cabañas, yes? I will make sure lunch will be ready by the time the sun is directly overhead. And be sure to have yourselves a wonderful afternoon.”

That said, Skip turned, waved to Aye-Aye, and began to walk back down the path.

“What... that’s it? That’s the whole tour?” Katya cried. “Come back!”

But Skip sauntered quickly out of sight and the group was left alone with only the echo of Katya’s plea and the metronomic swooshing of Pepper’s tail. The six strangers fought the uncomfortable silence by looking around at their surroundings, as if for the first time.

They stood on a level ridge that stretched back no more than a hundred yards. Just past the animal pens and chicken coop, there was a small lean-to — presumably Aye-Aye’s residence or workspace — tucked up against a cluster of short palms and sawgrass. Behind the humble structure, the ground rapidly sloped upwards to a dramatic rocky peak in the center of the island.

Beneath them, the courtyard and villas were completely out of sight, at least a mile under the ridge. From this vantage point, one had an aerial view of Hearn’s Beach to the south-west, with the brilliant sand butting up against the natural jetty to the north. Past the clear shallows, you could see how the labyrinthine rings of barely-submerged reefs encircled the island. Each distant ring seemed to hold a darker shade of blue, until the water formed a tablecloth of azure tucked under the cloudless horizon.

A light breeze rolled in from the ocean, bringing the sweet smell of hibiscus to battle it out with the lingering stench of manure.

“I wonder what’s for lunch,” Han said, breaking the silence.

“I wonder what in God’s name they expect us to do for dinner tomorrow,” added Sister Glory.

Katya brushed the bangs out of her eyes. “I know one thing, you all don’t want me cooking for you. Tell you what,” she said to Marcella, “how about if I give you a thousand bucks to do it for me?”

“I’m not one of your servants,” Marcella shot back. “You can’t just buy me like those chefs from Paris.”

“Fine. Make it five grand. Don’t tell me you couldn’t use it. You may be on the gravy train now, but don’t expect to get your E ticket punched forever.”

Marcella looked over to Mickey D. to defend her honor, but he didn’t say a word. Fighting back tears, Marcella told Katya to stick her five grand where the sun don’t shine, turned her back on the group, and headed down the slope.

“Come back soon, chile,” Aye-Aye called.

* * *

Lucia spooned chicken and vegetable soup from her cast iron pot into a silver and gold-encrusted tureen. From years of experience, she knew that lunch on the guests’ second day — what the staff jokingly referred to as their “Last Supper” — came at a delicate time in their stay.

They had seen the whole island and been told of their responsibilities, but probably did not believe any of it yet. It would take time, and sometimes a few missed meals, for the reality to hit. Which is why Lucia liked to serve soup for this meal. Soup was good for the soul. Plus it didn’t fill anybody up for too long.

Aye-Aye was supposed to seat the guests according to their food groups, but as she brought out the soup, Lucia saw that instead of all the women sitting together, Marcella and Mickey D. were at the farthest table. The nearest table had the two other women, as well as Mr. Holmsley, who should’ve been with Mr. Dickson. Both Han and Ratko were sitting alone at each of the middle two tables.

As Aye-Aye fell in beside her, Lucia clicked her tongue in disgust. Her service partner was dressed in his crisp white apron and carried a stack of soup bowls. Aye-Aye shrugged at Lucia’s displeasure and his eyes said two words: I tried.

Mickey D. tried not to look at his lunch companion as Lucia and Aye-Aye served the soup. His date had remained in a fury ever since the end of the tour and insisted on putting as much distance as possible between herself and that blonde ex-Raiderette. This was exactly the reason he liked one-night flings. You didn’t have to put up with the moody shit afterwards.

Jackson wasn't used to eating soup in the middle of the afternoon — and certainly not when the broth was as hot as the air temperature. But he was too hungry to complain and wolfed down large spoonfuls of the chunky vegetables. Lucia managed to keep the crispness of the peas, corn, carrots, and celery so that they contrasted perfectly against the chunks of chicken. Plus, there was some kind of spice in the tomato-based broth that was unlocking his sinuses. Jackson wished she could teach those tricks to the chefs back at his country club.

Katya and the plain-looking woman — who'd re-introduced herself as Gloria — exchanged pleasantries and talked about how nice it was to wake up to the sounds of birds. *Of course Katya had to pick this one to bond with*, Jackson thought. *Why couldn't she have hit it off with that hot-looking Mexican chiquita?*

"So, Gloria, what do you do?" he asked, not really caring about her answer.

"I run a ministry in Baton Rouge."

This brought contradictory reactions from the two Holmsleys: Katya's eyes popped wide while Jackson's narrowed to pencil points. "What kind of ministry?"

"Pentecostal. I do a cable show on the PTL network called 'The Sister Glory Hour Of Faith And Power'."

"Is that so?"

"Yep. Pays the rent." She shook her straight brown hair, scratched a patch of freckles on her chin, and took another sip of her soup.

Jackson banged down his spoon. "I bet it does. Tell me, how does it feel to swindle millions of senior citizens out of their Social Security checks?"

"Oh, I don't know. Probably the same as selling out the livelihoods of thousands of Ford employees to Japanese interests," Gloria replied. Jackson wasn't the only one at the table who subscribed to the *Wall Street Journal*. She remembered reading about how 48,000 auto workers were ginsued out of their jobs after Holmsley Enterprises negotiated a block of Ford's stock to the Wang kuritzu.

Katya was mortified at this exchange and wished she could hide in her soup bowl. She still hadn't broken the news of the food chores to her husband, and was hoping that she could slip it in after he'd had a relaxing lunch.

Jackson rose from his chair. "If you will excuse me, I suddenly feel unclean and morally corrupt. But if I write you a check for a hundred grand, can you still guarantee me a spot in Heaven?"

“The going rate for automatic salvation is three seventy-five,” Gloria said with an innocent smile. “But I have arranged some attractive loans through Saint Peter’s Bank & Trust. I can drop by a payment schedule later if you wish.”

Jackson threw his cloth napkin on his table, pushed back his chair, and left.

“What’s his deal?” Gloria asked Katya when her husband was out of earshot.

“Jackson has a thing about religion,” she explained. “His parents were very well off, but when they both started having health problems, they got real involved in the Catholic church. When they died, they left the boys a small allowance and gave the bulk of their estate to the Church. Jackson used to tell me that his parents cheated him out of his ‘seed money.’ He still thinks that if his parents hadn’t found religion, he would’ve broken *Fortune’s* Top 100 years ago.”

Gloria couldn’t help but laugh at that. If Pentecostals were the *Oliver Twists* of the world, then Catholics were the D.B. Coopers.

Katya was about to track down her husband, but had to pause when her ankles started to itch madly. Looking down, she saw a series of red welts just above her sock line. “Damn it. Look at these mosquito bites! I don’t think I can stand another night with all these bugs.”

Gloria looked down at Katya’s delicate and perfectly tanned ankles. She thought that Katya could use some good Southern cooking to put some meat on her bones. “I’d offer to bless your ankle, but I don’t think your husband would approve. But I do have some Avon Skin-So-Soft if you want to borrow it.”

* * *

“Can you believe that puta? Treating me like one of her illegal maids.” Marcella arched her pencil-thin eyebrows. She’d spent the entire lunch and the walk back to their cabaña fuming about that ex-cheerleader.

Sitting on the corner of his bed, Mickey D. tried distracting himself by humming the melody for his last single, “Whipping Boy.” MTV had recently approached him about the possibility of doing an Unplugged special, and Mickey D. wondered how “Whipping Boy” would sound with the addition of strings and an oboe.

“I don’t know who that woman thinks she is, but she can shrivel up like a raisin and die before I work with her. I’d rather starve, you know. You’d back me on that, right, snuggums?”

Mickey D. hummed louder. Maybe he would need to add a cello.

“Honey pie, you’d back me up, right?”

At this point, Mickey D. was ready to say anything to shut her up. But when he stopped humming, what came out of his mouth was: “That soup we had for lunch is not going to hold me for the rest of this vacation.”

Marcella paused. “What do you mean by that?”

“Forget it.”

“No, I heard what you said. So, you want me to be that bitch’s little helper, is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“While I’m at it, maybe I should just do all the work and take her five grand. Or is the gravy train going to still be interested in me when we get back to the States?”

The singer started humming the chorus, this time in B-Flat.

“You know, my father was a chef,” Marcella said. “You haven’t asked about my family yet. But me and my younger brother grew up in the kitchen of a wealthy family in Houston. The house belonged to a surgeon, his wife, and two well-scrubbed white children.

“My papa, he was so proud of himself. Always telling us how prestigious it was to live in such a fine house. To be able to cook in such a fine kitchen. But he never did get it... it wasn’t *his* house. And he wasn’t part of *their* family, no matter how much he liked to pretend so.”

Maybe he should save the cello for the bass line in “Grass In The Infield,” Mickey D. considered.

“Even as a niña I could tell they saw my father as just another servant,” Marcella continued. “I remember their youngest, Julian, barging into the kitchen saying, ‘Hector, make me a sandwich.’ And my papa would do it, pronto, a smile on his face. Because he thought of Julian like his son – more, I think now, than he saw me as his daughter.”

Which acoustic guitar would sound best? Mickey D. considered breaking out his old Martin. It was his favorite guitar for composing, but wouldn’t look good under the lights. He wanted to look cool, like Clapton. *Damn, the drone of that chick’s voice was worse than staying at an airport hotel with single-pane windows!*

Mercifully, she stopped. But now she was looking at him expectantly.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well what?”

“Goddammit, you haven’t been listening to a single word I’ve been saying!”

“That’s not true. You were talking about kitchens.”

Marcella stood up. “I just asked if you wanted to pick some wild fruit with me.”

“Oh yeah. That would be great if you brought me back some. I like my bananas green and hard, not soft.”

“That’s it,” she said, grabbing her sandals and her largest suitcase. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I’m not some little poke toy that you can ignore between—”

“Woah. Take a pill,” Mickey D. said. “Hey, where are you going?”

“Out.”

“For a walk?”

“Out out. I’ll send Bomba or somebody to pick up the rest of my bags.”

“Pick up your bags? You’re leaving me? Hah, that’s rich. Where are you planning to sleep tonight, babe, the cow pen?”

“If I have to. I just know where I’m *not* sleeping tonight, buster.”

“Fine. See if I care. Say ‘hi’ to the mosquitoes and ticks for me.”

As he watched her walk out the door, it hit him harder than a looping Foreman overhand — he was just three days until April 19th! It was happening all over again and this time it was all his fault. nononononONONONO!

“Wait,” he blurted to her vanishing shadow. “I didn’t mean... look, I was just a little preoccupied. I was thinking of a lyric for a song I was going to dedicate to you. I’m sorry.”

For a split second he thought all was lost. But then her footsteps stopped. “What did you say?” she asked from the front walkway.

“I’M SORRY.”

Her face reappeared. “You’re dedicating a song to me? Really?”

“You bet, babycakes. I can already tell that it’s going to be a big hit. So, am I forgiven?”

“Maybe. It depends on how good it sounds.”

“Well, it’s still a work in progress. I was going to call it, ‘I Only Have Eyes For You.’”

“No. I want you to title it after me. Like that Toto song, ‘Rosanna.’”

“Sure. No problem.”

Mickey D. thought he'd dodged the bullet until she tapped her long fingernails together and said, “I want you to sing it for me.”

“Sing what?”

“My song!”

He tried to stall. “It's not finished yet.”

“Then sing one verse or I'm out that door again,” Marcella demanded.

* * *

“There you are!”

Skip glanced up to see a pair of incoming Holmsleys locked in, weapons hot.

“Ah, my friends. What can I do for you this fine afternoon?” The spa director stood on the outer ring of the courtyard, shirt off, his smooth back glistening in the blistering afternoon sun. He was holding 24” hedge clippers in one gloved hand.

“Look, you, this is in-in-in...” Jackson was so mad that he could barely speak. It had been nearly a full day since he'd talked to his office. “Intolerable!” he finally got out.

“What seems to be the problem, Mister Holmsley? Don't tell me that you're upset about missing the bocce ball lesson, because if so, I would be happy to reschedule.”

Jackson's neck muscles bulged. “I can't understand why you keep acting like you're running a legitimate resort here, Skip. You force me to shit in some outhouse and then have the nerve to pretend that nothing's the matter. To be honest, I would prefer that you stick a gun in my face and just **take** my two million dollars like a common thief, rather than have you insult my intelligence. And now Katya tells me that you expect us to cook our own meals!”

“That is correct. You and Mister Dickson have breakfast duties tomorrow morning, so I would suggest that you both meet up beforehand—“

“No. That's not happening, understand? I paid too goddamn much to have to cook for anyone. You've got no electricity here, no running water, not even a damn golf course for me to play on. Well, this is where I draw the line.”

Katya jumped in, trying to show Jackson that she was the innocent victim here as well. “For less money, we could've stayed at the Golden Door for a whole year!”

“But just think, then you would’ve missed out on Lucia’s banana bread,” Skip said. “I’m sorry, but if you aren’t willing to help out with the meal preparations, then I suppose we will all be going hungry very soon.”

“This is bullshit. You have to feed us.”

“I don’t have to do anything, Mister Holmsley. Check your spa regulations; this is perfectly within the parameters we have set concerning—“

“Fuck your parameters. You’re going to cook for us, or we’re going to go at it right here.”

Katya stared at her husband with a mixture of awe and fear. Jackson almost never threatened physical violence. He was so good with the verbal jabs, he rarely needed to take it to the next level.

“Careful, Mister Holmsley.” Skip jiggled his hedge clippers. “You wouldn’t want to accidentally cut yourself on these.”

Jackson stepped up so that he was only a feet away from the grinning spa director. He brought up a balled fist. “What’s it going to be?”

“Communal meal responsibilities have been part of Camille Spa’s program since day one. I’m certainly not going to change that now.”

“Have it your way.” Jackson whipped a right hook at Skip’s ear.

His knuckles only met air. Skip eluded Holmsley’s blow with a lightning dodge to his right.

Jackson lurched forward, his face perilously close to the tip of Skip’s gardening tool. The spa director’s foot shot out and caught Jackson’s shin before the businessman could regain his balance.

Katya brought a hand up to her mouth as her husband tripped forward, stopping just short of a squared-off hedge of Sea Grape. Jackson wheeled around, furious.

“Now you’ve done it.”

He was about to make another run at the spa director when his arms were pinned to his chest by what appeared to be a pair of steel-belted tires. Holmsley looked up and saw a cascade of dreadlocks and the bottom of Bomba’s chin.

“Let go of me, you fucking ape,” he said.

Bomba tightened his embrace and arched his back. Jackson felt his heels leave the ground as his lung expansion was reduced to the volume of one of his handballs.

“I think Bomba feels you need a cool-out period,” Skip said.

“If he doesn’t drop me right now,” Jackson gasped, “I’m gonna sue for assault.”

Skip nodded and Bomba relaxed his bear hug long enough for Holmsley to draw a full breath of air. The dreadlocked man still kept his hands firmly clamped around both of Jackson’s biceps.

Jackson momentarily struggled against Bomba’s grip, then he took a deep breath and collected himself. The redness left his face.

As businesslike as he could muster, Jackson said: “You know, I don’t even care if you are telling the truth about your legal victories in American courts. I’m still going to sue you just for the fun of it. We’ll see how much you like having your assets tied up in probate for a couple of years while my lawyers do a jig all over your bank books. Not only am I going to sue you for false representation and emotional damages, but I’ll also hit you for every cent that my company **didn’t** make in my absence. By not providing me with a working telephone, you’ve opened yourself up to all kinds of lawsuits. Let me tell you, fuck with Jackson Holmsley and you’ll pay the piper. Guaranteed. I’m going to reveal your little scam on every prime-time TV program — Nightline, 20/20, 60 Minutes, Dateline, and anybody else who wants the story.”

Now Jackson was feeling the juices. Even though his arms were locked up, he felt back in control.

“That’s perfectly within your right,” Skip said. “The lawyers, the TV shows; if you want the whole country to know that you — Jackson Holmsley the Third — paid two million dollars to sleep on a bed of leaves, that is a good course of action. I mean, if you wouldn’t be at all embarrassed by everybody knowing your personal business, go right ahead. I’m sure all your friends and work associates would be very understanding.”

At that, Jackson fell silent.

“Uh, honey,” Katya began.

“Shut up,” he snapped at her.

“Or,” Skip said, “you both could go back and tell everybody you had a grand time and nobody will be the wiser.”

“Wouldn’t that suit you all just fine,” Jackson said through clenched teeth. How had he lost his upper hand so quickly with this grinning spa director? All this travel must have dulled his edge.

Skip bent down to continue his pruning. “A man like you, Mr. Holmsley, must have some friends that are really friends, and some friends that are really enemies. Can you

think of anybody that you would in turn like to send our way? Anybody you would derive some secret pleasure knowing that they too spent two weeks in our care?”

There was something in Skip’s last statement that stuck Jackson oddly. It took him a second to figure it out. “What do you mean by ‘in turn’? Were we referred to you by somebody we know?”

Katya gasped. “I bet it was the Waverlys.” *No, the countess wouldn’t stoop that low, would she?* Katya knew the answer to that question.

“Perhaps that’s how your reservation at Camille Spa came about. Perhaps not. You are curious to find out, yes?”

“Not really,” Jackson said.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Okay, maybe I’m slightly curious. Who was it?”

“How much is that information worth to you?”

“It’s worth about the same as two weeks at your spa. Five dollars, tops.”

“You know what they say, Mr. Holmsley, ‘worth is an outdated concept.’ ”

“Who says that?”

“You did, in *Newsweek* magazine, October of 1989. You were doing a Q & A with their financial editor and you said those exact words: ‘Worth is an outdated concept. There is no such thing as inherent worth. The only thing worth knowing is what the market will bear. A Monet is not, in itself, worth more than a velvet Elvis portrait from Tijuana. A Monet is only worth more than the velvet Elvis because there are two or more buyers out there willing to pony up the cash for it. If nobody out there was willing to buy either painting, then neither one would be worth more than a Alan Ashby baseball card.’ By the way, I’ve always wanted to commend you on the Alan Ashby reference. I don’t know very many CEOs who would’ve chosen to name drop a weak-hitting catcher from the old Toronto Blue Jays.”

Jackson was amazed that Skip had not only read that *Newsweek* article, but memorized the passage word for word. He didn’t even realize that Bomba was no longer holding his arms.

The dreadlocked man put on a pair of gardening gloves and began to help the spa director trim back a stubborn row of sugar cane shoots.

Panic stricken, Katya turned to her husband. “We have to find out who it was!”

“Relax. We don’t even know if anybody referred us in the first place.”

Skip wiped sweat off his brow with the back of his gloved hand. “Very true. It could just be something I made up. In the meantime, be sure to think about how much that information is ‘worth’ to you. I’m guessing the market can bear more than five dollars.”

* * *

“Okey dokey. All finished now.”

Ratko slowly opened his eyes and grunted as he rose to a sitting position. The thick carpet of black hair on his chest and back glistened with massage lotion. In a couple of locations, his body hair was spiked and twisted like miniature shampoo horns.

“Is that it?”

Virginia wiped her slick hands on a fresh towel. “I can come tomorrow, sah.”

“You missed a spot.”

She didn’t see how that could be and told him so. He’d already flipped over and she’d performed a deep tissue massage on every muscle, front and back.

Ratko pulled on his mustache and looked Virginia in the eye. “I hope you now give me ‘special’ massage.”

“Special?”

“Yeah, you do have that here, don’t you? For what this spa charge per day, I expect some extra-special treatment.”

“I sure doan know what you mean dere.”

Ratko laid back down on his palm mattress and removed the sheet covering his hips. His naked manhood stuck out from his hairy midsection like a single, flesh-colored traffic cone in the middle of an asphalt parking lot. He said, “Be sure to use lots of lotion.”

He was pleased to see that Virginia didn’t seem shocked by his directness. She cracked open the tube of massage oil and squirted a long stream of lubrication onto Ratko’s nether region.

“You want my tun tun? Den close your eyes,” she said.

Ratko sighed and laced his fingers behind his head, anticipating her touch. He waited, trying to control his excitement. There was a creaking noise. When he opened his eyes, his room was empty.

* * *

Mickey D. thought quickly and strummed his guitar. “Okay, here it goes:

*Everytime I'm down I want to see ya
All the other gals want to be ya
'Cause you're the cheese in my quesadilla
You're my lovely Mar-gar-ita"*

A cloud crossed across his date's expression. “It's Marcella. MAR-CELL-A! After four straight days of sleeping together, you'd think you might have the decency to remember my name!”

The way she looked in that moment, standing outside the doorway with her suitcase, proud and tall like a Mayan Priestess, suddenly turned Mickey D. on more than anything else she'd done since the beginning of the trip. “Look, why don't you come to bed and we can forget about all that foolishness.”

“Oh, so wanting you to remember my name is foolish?”

“That's not what I meant. It's not that I forgot your name — I was just using the word Margarita as metaphor of what we have together. You know, like you are a frothy alcoholic beverage that gives me a buzz. It was an allegory.”

“Allegory this, you butthead.”

“C'mon now. Margarita, Marcella; it was an honest mistake.”

“And one you won't need to worry about making again, because I'm outta here.”

This time she slammed the door behind her. The entire cabaña shook with the force of the blow.

“After I just apologized? Fine! If you can't accept an apology than FUCK YOU!” Mickey D. found himself shouting through the open window. “I can have any woman that I want, you hear! And you weren't even that fucking good in the first place! In fact, maybe I'll write a song about how shitty of a lay you were! How's that, bitch? I'm gonna call it ‘Van Gogh’ because you talk so damn much a man wants to cut off his OWN FREAKIN' EARS! YOU HEAR WHAT I'M SAYING?”

Mickey D. kept on going until his throat burned and his voice cracked — long after he believed her to still be within earshot.

Finally, he cradled his head in his long hands and tried to squeeze out the blood from his flushed cheeks. April 19th was just 60 hours away.

When Mickey D. first began his journal, the entries were haphazard, sloppy. Of course, he'd been using more recreational drugs back then. He'd wake up and find entries full of gibberish like, "Bubble wrap trees sing for their supper."

But once he cleaned up and developed his own shorthand, Mickey D.'s journals developed a life of their own. Often, he would find himself screwing just to have something to write the next morning.

The journals became his Bible. He would study them whenever he was lonely — remembering encounters, looking for areas of unexplored carnal activity.

It was seven years ago when he originally made the discovery. He was flipping through his entries (1,899 at that point) to double-check that he'd done it in every possible time zone. Then he confirmed that he'd gotten laid while riding every form of transportation possible (in alphabetical, not chronological order: airport shuttle, ambulance, Amtrak, bicycle, bulldozer, catamaran, camel, canoe, Concorde, convertible, dog sled, donkey, dune buggy, elevator, escalator, ferry, fishing boat, garbage truck, golf cart, glider, gondola, gurney, hearse, helicopter, horseback, hot air balloon, hovercraft, jeep, jet ski, jumbo jet, kayak, limousine, monorail, motorcycle, motor home, rickshaw, roller blades, row boat, scooter, seaplane, skateboard, ski lift, snowmobile, submarine, subway, tour bus, tow truck, tractor, U-Haul trailer, wheelchair, white water raft, yacht, and zamboni). Lastly, he got the idea to make sure he'd done it at least once on every single day of the year.

It turned out that January 6th, April 19th, March 15th, and September 2nd were the only days not represented. The following year, Mickey D. took care of the January, March and September dates, but that week in April he was bedridden with a bad flu virus.

The following year, in the wee hours of the morning, Mickey D.'s tour bus collided with a Hostess bakery truck outside of Providence, Rhode Island, and the singer was hospitalized all of April 19th with a severe case of whiplash. The only upside to the whole debacle was that he was awarded a lifetime supply of Twinkies and Ding-Dongs in the settlement.

His April 19th's only got stranger from there. He was all set to break the jinx with a 6'1" brunette on Stanford's women's basketball team when she got an urgent call with

news that her brother had been involved in a bizarre accident involving a hang glider and some tuna netting.

Mickey D. begged her to stay and satisfy *his* love dolphin before going to the hospital, but she didn't bite.

The next year he tried isolating himself in an Alpine ski lodge with a German supermodel named Anja. Unfortunately, Anja chose this April 19th to have an emotional breakdown because — as she tried to explain to Mickey D. in halting English — she could no longer deny to herself the fact that she was gay. The singer thought she was trying to say “let's begin” instead of “lesbian” and he kept trying to unbutton her blouse until she keelhailed him with the flat side of her snowboard, knocking him unconscious.

Then there was the year that Mickey D. overdosed on yohimbine root and went into toxic shock just moments before getting it on with a Kentucky State nursing student. That was an especially bad April 19th, because when he awoke on the 20th, he was greeted with a hard-on that would not go away. It just stuck out there, painfully rigid, reminding him of his inadequacy. Taunting his failure.

This past April 19th was possibly the worst. Their tour was playing a pair of dates at Candlestick Park in San Francisco, and Mickey D. had given Zane two weeks notice that he wanted a special, but “sure thing” that day. Zane went through his magic book and came up with Yuki Matsua, a high-priced escort based in Denver. Matsua was well known in certain circles for giving the most seductive foot massage since Mary Magdalen.

True to form, an unexpected late-season snowstorm swept through the Rockies and all flights out of Denver's Stapleton Airport were put on hold.

At first, it only looked like a one-hour delay. But then Zane got a call from Matsua saying the pilot had brought their plane back to the gate after detecting ice on their wings. Get on another plane right now, Zane told her. Just get out of Denver, and we'll send the jet to meet you. It looks like a lot of flights are being cancelled, she replied, promising to call again once she found something.

Zane was relatively new to his position and did not know his employer's battle against the April 19th curse. Thus, he was unprepared for Mickey D.'s reaction to this wrinkle in his plans.

“You're fired,” the singer said between epithets and strangled grunts.

“Say what?”

“Why the fucking fuck didn’t you just send the jet to meet her in the first place?”

“Do you know how much your plane costs to re-fuel? I thought you’d appreciate me saving you some scratch.”

At that, Mickey D. lit up like a Roman candle. “You’ve got a car, right?” he finally demanded.

Zane reminded the singer that he’d just been fired.

“Fine, you’re re-hired. Now give me the goddamn keys.”

“Where you goin’, boss?” The desperate look in Mickey D.’s eyes had Zane worried.

“Down to Union Square to get my own pussy. Since I obviously can’t rely on you to do a simple job—”

“Look, boss, it’s still too early to panic. Don’t go down to Union Square; you get all kinds of freaks down there. If we can’t get Yuki here in a few hours, I’ll put in some calls and hook you up with a reliable local girl. How does that sound?”

“Give me the keys or you will be tuning snare drums for the rest of your career.”

Zane tossed over the keys to his rented Valiant and Mickey D. drove the seven blocks from their hotel on Market Street up to the park. He circled down Geary, where there was already a crowd of street walkers getting ready for a busy Friday night.

Mickey D. stopped at the first woman who walked up to his car and asked if he wanted a date. She had a silver lamé halter top, leopard print wrap around her bronze shoulders, mid-thigh black leather skirt, and a simple gold cross dangling from a chain around her slender neck.

After she climbed in, he silently drove several blocks towards the warehouse district.

“Hon’, you aren’t going to find any hotels down here.”

He stopped the car away from the streetlights. “Backseat.”

“Gotta watch out for the police cruisers in these parts, sweetie pie.”

“I’ve got a hundred bucks. Do we have a deal?”

“Well, shucks,” she said, batting her false eyelashes. “For a Ben Franklin I’ll even bark like a dog. Would you like that? Arf. Arf.”

“Just get in the backseat.” Mickey D. climbed over the Valiant’s center arm rest and cup holders. The hooker opened the passenger door and stepped back to the rear door. By that time, the singer already had his pants down to his knees.

“Where’s the fire there, baby? The cops aren’t even that fast ‘round here.” She undid the strings on her halter top and Mickey D. ran his hand up her hairless thigh. With a few deft movements he was suddenly inside her underwear.

The hooker pulled back, but not before Mickey D.’s practiced fingers rubbed up against something odd. It was warm and spongy, the size of a schoolboy’s desktop eraser.

Then it was Mickey D.’s turn to recoil in horror.

“It’s okay, baby doll, it’s cool,” she said. “My last operation isn’t for another three weeks — but there’s still all kinds of other things that we can do.”

Mickey D. opened his car door and promptly vomited on the curb. “Get out,” he said between heaves.

As he drove off, the transsexual cried, “Hey, my wrap is still in your back seat!”

That incident gave Mickey D. the creepy willies all the way through June. Since then, when giving Zane his nightly order, he started adding, “And make sure she’s a she.”

To which Zane always gives his stock response: “Don’t worry, boss, all my tasty treats are guaranteed 100% penis-free.” It was their little inside joke.

But Zane still didn’t quite understand that April 19th was no longer a laughing matter to his employer. April 19th was no longer a quest. The date was now an open sore, mocking him every time he opened his journals. Mr. Big Shot Rock Star, huh? Can’t even conquer something as simple as a calendar page, can you?

And here — yet again! — Mickey D. was being bested by April 19th. That stupid chick, ol’ Margarita-what’s-her-name, goes and walks out on him just three days before breaking the curse.

You know, when he told Zane to find someplace isolated, he didn’t mean *deserted* for chrissakes!

Mickey D. found himself becoming paralyzed with fear. This was worse than the shakes he had before his first stadium show in Wembley Arena. He wanted to crawl into his bed and hide from the world.

As he stared into the abyss, there came a knock on his door.

Saved! Thank goodness the bitch has come to her senses.

Mickey D. rushed to the door, but instead of his curvaceous date, there appeared before him a vision of black hair and green camouflage.

“Dinner,” Ratko said.

“Not hungry.”

“No, no. Dinner. Tonight we make... “

Before Ratko could finish his sentence, Mickey D. cursed and slammed the door in his face.

* * *

“I’m ready,” Ratko said as he plunked down the Mühle board.

“Is that a challenge?” Skip looked up from polishing the courtyard furniture. “Are you sure you want to take on the King of Mühle on his own turf?”

Ratko allowed himself a hint of a smile. “White or black?”

“Black, of course,” the spa director said, putting down his cleaning rag. “Shouldn’t you and Mr. Dershowitz be in the kitchen right now helping Lucia?”

“I go ask that singer guy, but he say I should perform a sex act on my mother. I don’t like that idea, so I fix my own dinner. You go first?”

“No, Mr. Pijasek, the challenger has the honor. You do realize that all the other guests will go hungry?”

Ratko shrugged and silently placed a white pebble in the corner of the middle rectangle.

The game board was simple, a bull’s-eye of boxes, with three concentric rectangles that were also joined at their midpoints. The rules of the ancient game were a mixture of tic-tac-toe and checkers; each player attempting to line up three stones in a row in order to remove their opponent’s pieces.

Skip eyed Ratko’s opening move. “How very European of you. Middle of the road. Equal parts adventurousness and inbred caution. Did you know that Israelies, on the other hand, will almost always put their first pebble on the outside box. I think it has something to do with their national obsession with borders and security zones.”

The spa director put his first black stone on the midpoint of the innermost box.

Ratko quickly put his second piece on the center of the middle box, in line with his opening move. This forced Skip into a defensive move, having to place his second black pebble along the middle corner to block.

“Everything work out okay with the shipment?” Ratko asked, changing strategies by putting his third piece inside the smallest box.

“I wanted to talk to you about that.” Skip also put his pebble in the smallest box. “We’ve had two false reads in the past week. I’m wondering if there might be a defect in the equipment. What kind of guarantees do you have on the merchandise itself.”

Ratko snorted and placed another white pebble. “Guarantees? Do you know how hard that was to acquire? Especially no questions asked.”

“I’m telling you, we might need some replacement parts.”

“Not going to happen right now. You mind if I ask why you even need it here?”

“Do you really care, Mr. Pijasek?” Skip didn’t look up from the game board.

“Not really. Just slightly curious is all. No skin off my toes.”

The spa director smiled as he put down another pebble in the inner box, effectively clogging it for both players. “That’s ‘nose.’ The saying is ‘no skin off my nose.’ Like a bad sunburn, you know.”

“Really? Not toes?” Ratko had used English for years — the international language of deals — but still hadn’t mastered it’s baffling colloquialisms. “I thought it meant pulling skin off bottom of feet. Very good technique for getting information or keeping prisoners from running away.”

“Humm, I’ll have to mentally file that one. So, what do you think of our little spa here?”

Ratko set down his final piece and studied the game board. Neither player had linked three pebbles during the set-up, so both sides were at full strength. “I think you overcharge.”

Skip found that observation immensely amusing. “You may be correct there. But beggars can’t be choosers.”

“You call me a beggar?” Ratko’s moustache quivered like a nervous hamster.

“Relax, Mr. Pijasek. It’s just another saying. ‘Beggars can’t be choosers’ means that you are in no position to complain about our accommodations. Frankly, you should be thankful to be here, considering your current predicament.”

Ratko calmed slightly. “When we made the deal, you didn’t say anything about no TV, that’s all.”

“But we do have Mühle, my friend. We do have Mühle.”

“That we do.” Ratko moved one of his white pieces down a joined midpoint in order to form a link. He pulled one of Skip’s pebbles off the game board. “But if you ever call me friend again, I will cut out your heart.”

* * *

This was starting to get ridiculous, Gloria thought. Skip had promised that somebody would be by to give her a massage before dinner. And now it was already starting to get dark and here she was, alone and hungry, lying on her woven mattress staring at the ceiling.

She never realized how slowly time passed without any diversions. Just to have a television on in the background — or some soft jazz on the radio — would have made it easier to wait. To amuse herself, she watched a neon green gecko skitter back and forth across her window frame.

The only book she brought on this trip was her Bible. But Sister Glory didn’t consider the holy book to be entertainment. To her, it was more like a technical manual for her sermons. You could never tell when inspiration would strike and she’d need a good quote to back it up.

First she cursed at herself for not stopping at a W.H.Smith before getting on the helicopter. How could she have known that there wouldn’t be a bookstore at Camille Spa? Then she cursed at herself for not picking up some kind of paperback from the so-called game room during the tour. But if she went down there now, Gloria knew there was a chance she’d miss her massage. Since she was already in the hole for seventy-five grand a night, there was no chance of her losing out on any pampering.

Finally there came a knocking on her door.

“Who is it?” she called.

The door opened and the sun went out.

At least it seemed that way as Bomba stepped into her cabaña, making the entranceway look like a doggy door. He carried a pair of rolled towels under one arm.

“Wie kann ich Ihnen helfen Frau?”

Gloria sat up. "I'm supposed to have some kind of special spa rub-down."

Bomba furrowed his massive brow. "Was wünschien Sie, gnädige Frau? Die Gesichtsmassage?"

She puzzled over the words coming out of his mouth. If this Camille Cay is some kind of U.S. territory, shouldn't this Andre The Giant at least understand English?

She tried a different topic. "Do you know what is for dinner?"

"Das Abendessen? Nein."

"You know... food." When this elicited no response from Bomba, she pantomimed eating a chicken leg.

"Nein bestellen." He mimicked the action of eating while shaking his head no.

Gloria shook her head along with him. "No food?"

"Nein bestellen," he confirmed in a low rumble.

Okay, at least we are getting somewhere. She said, "I think Mickey D. and that Ratko guy are supposed to make food for everyone tonight."

"Gute Idee. Eas Backhuhn kann ich bestens empfehlen. Und für mich ein großes Glas bier. Und schöne Ferien!" The consonants spilled out of Bomba's mouth like a handful of jacks.

Sister Glory realized that she would have to keep any kind of communication simple.

"How about the rub-down?" she pantomimed a massage in the air with her hands. He didn't seem to get it, so she deliberately enunciated the words 'rub down' while caressing her own legs for effect.

"Ja. Massage. Also wo tut es weh?"

She thought she heard the word massage in there so she took a chance and stretched face-down on the palm mattres. Bomba sat down beside her and slipped the rolled-up towel under her bare feet. He draped another towel over her midsection and Sister Glory shimmied out of her oversized pink sun-shirt. In anticipation of the massage, she wasn't wearing anything under it.

Bomba pulled a bottle from a pocket in his shorts and squirted about a cup of lotion on his gargantuan hands. The room immediately filled with the soothing smell of orchids.

"Schmerzt das?" He took her petite shoulders in his hands and started kneading with his thumbs.

"Praise be," Sister Glory murmured in satisfaction.

* * *

With his angry pacing, Jackson carved a wide “O” into the sandy floor of his cabaña. “I’m bored,” he announced to his wife, who was sitting on the corner of the bed platform and reading a book. His words came out as an accusation, as opposed to a statement of fact.

Katya didn’t look up from “Rape of the American Virgins,” which she’d borrowed from the game room. It was difficult to ignore Jackson under normal circumstances, but even harder in a small, silent room that was lit only by a pair of lanterns. To make matters worse, the book she’d picked out wasn’t holding her interest.

She’d been wrong in guessing that it would be a steamy romance or, at the very least, a true-crime account of some vicious sex crimes. Instead, the first chapter went on and on about how “industrialization” was destroying the culture and ecology of the American Virgin Islands. Hello! Can you get any more dull?

In Katya’s opinion, this island in particular could certainly use a Prada or Coach outlet. *What’s wrong with a few malls anyway? If this author wants unspoiled scenery, he should move to Alaska,* she thought.

“I’m bored,” Jackson repeated. “What the hell am I supposed to do tonight? Watch TV? Whoops, no TV. Read a newspaper? Whoops, no *Wall Street Journal*. Catch up on my phone calls? Whoops, no phone. And it’s so dark out there that I can’t even go for a walk — not that there’s anything to see, of course.”

Katya finally put her book down. “What the hell do you want me to do about it? Turn on some street lights? Swim to the next island to see if they have C-SPAN?”

Jackson’s face got redder and she instantly regretted taking his bait. “Maybe you should. It certainly wasn’t my idea to spend a small fortune to sleep on a palm mat and shit through a hole in the ground.”

Between the pacing and the memory of the outhouse, Jackson’s bladder woke up and decided that it instantly needed to be emptied. He fought to hold on long enough to finish his conversation with Katya, but quickly realized that his mutinous bladder would not wait another minute.

“Yeah, you sure made a good call on this vacation,” he said as his parting shot. Recalling Dickson’s comment about peeing off his lanai, Jackson walked to the corner of

the deck, unzipped his fly, gripped the wooden railing and let loose with a torrent of piss. Aside from the wash of starry pinpricks in the sky above and the soft glow of the lanterns filtering through the window on his right, Jackson could not make out another light source.

“Going to water dey plants, sah?” a low voice said behind him.

Jackson whirled around, spraying urine across the side of his cabaña like a rogue sprinkler. He saw a flash of a pink dress as Virginia stepped out of the night and onto his front deck. Attempting to turn back towards the railing, Holmsley dripped all over his new boat shoes.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, trying to shake himself off.

“S’okay. I can wait.”

Jackson tucked himself in and pulled up his zipper. He felt embarrassed that Virginia had seen him performing such a crude act, then reminded himself that it wouldn’t have been necessary if he were staying at a legitimate hotel.

“What do you want?”

“Massage. You request, sah?”

He considered canceling his massage just to make a statement, but remembered that he didn’t have anything else to do. “Go on in.”

Jackson followed Virginia into his cabaña and immediately went to the sink to wash his moist hands.

Katya looked up with surprise as Virginia entered. Her gaze quickly changed into the suspicious stare of a lioness eyeballing a trespasser on her turf. The attractive spa worker evidently didn’t recognize the threat, because she walked right up to Katya and handed her a small tube of lotion.

“Some’ting for they bugs. Mosquitoes doan like this here stuff.”

Just the sound of the word ‘mosquito’ made Katya want to start itching her ankles all over again. “How does this mix with glycolic acid? Do you have any idea? Because I’m on a delicate skin care regime, and if this affects my pore rejuvenation, I will hold you personally responsible.”

Virginia shrugged her well-sculpted, ebony shoulders. Cautiously, Katya opened the lid to the mosquito repellent and took a sniff. It had the bold aroma of sweaty pig’s feet mixed with a nostril-clearing dose of burning rubber.

“Jesus crispies,” Katya gagged. “There’s no way I’m putting that on my skin.”

“Suit yourself,” Jackson said. His hands were clean and dry, and he was ready for his massage. Virginia spread a clean sheet over the palm mattress as Jackson took off his shirt. After he’d stretched out on his stomach, Virginia placed rolled-up towels under his ankles and forehead to take off the pressure.

The bed was stiff, but actually had more give than it appeared. Below the layers of palm fronds there was a layer of cushioning hidden inside the wooden bed frame.

Virginia didn’t even need to go south of his deltoids before Jackson was moaning in satisfaction. She had stronger hands than Arne or any of the masseurs at his racquet club.

As Virginia turned him slightly on his side to work out his shoulders, Jackson caught a glance of his wife standing in the corner of the room, still holding the tube of mosquito repellent. She was glaring at Virginia with murderous intensity.

“You’re just going to have to wait your turn, babe,” Jackson said and closed his eyes.

* * *

Aye-Aye took a slice of banana bread and put his feet up on one of the empty wicker chairs with an “oomph.” That afternoon, he’d spent six hours shoveling hay — shirtless and sweating. Even the small motion of bringing a warm beer to his lips brought a concert of complaints from his lower back.

Lucia and Virginia clicked glasses in a silent toast. They washed down their bread with sips of home-distilled rum. The clear liquor was approximately 148-proof, but the two women preferred it to drinking beer since rum was good at any temperature.

These wind-down sessions were a nightly ritual for the staff. They always gathered in Lucia and Skip’s bungalow, partially since it had the most square footage, but mostly because it contained the healthiest stash of alcohol. Five chairs were set in a circle around a rattan coffee table, which held their drinks and an evening snack.

The bungalow was patterned after the guest cabañas, with the same sandy floor, cistern, sink, mirror, dresser, and raised bed platform against the far wall. The thatched roof was extra high and gave the living area an airy feel that Lucia liked. A series of sixteen-inch wooden beams ran overhead at a height of fifteen feet, with lanterns hanging from every other parallel beam.

The only personal touch to the room was a small vase of dried flowers atop the clothes dresser. They were the same dozen red roses that Skip had given Lucia on their first date. When a hurricane threatened the islands three years ago and they were all forced to evacuate, she delayed the helicopter by going back for the vase. She spent the whole ride huddled over the roses, cradling them against her chest, protecting the brittle leaves and delicate blossoms against the raging winds.

“S’right now,” said Aye-Aye. His eyes were heavy with drowsiness.

Lucia nodded and took another draw of her drink. It was an acquired taste. Locally, the unaged rum went by the name “kill-devil.”

The first full day and a half were always the hardest for her, with all the unassisted meal preparations. Just peeling and chopping the vegetables for today’s lunch took nearly two hours. Still, it was better than putting away the luggage and dealing with the new personalities of the guests. Lucia didn’t envy her co-workers at the start a new two-week run.

The single off-day between sessions was barely enough time to re-stock supplies, fill the cisterns, and thoroughly clean the rooms. The sand floors alone were surprisingly difficult to maintain. It never ceased to amaze Lucia the kinds of objects she’d find while sifting and raking the white granules between guest stays. Sometimes it was just easier to shovel out the lot and start again from scratch.

For the past year, she’d been trying to talk Skip into installing hardwood flooring in all the rooms. They would be so much easier to clean — just a quick mop and she could get on with her day. Skip stubbornly refused, claiming that the sand was more modest, authentic, and helped keep the cabañas cool.

She knew how Skip focused on keeping things simple, but Lucia secretly believed that in this case he was more interested in the shock it gave the new guests.

Lucia reminded herself that Skip knew what he was doing. He had the plan and always knew the way.

She chastised herself for being such a nag and swore to herself that she would try not to bring up the floors to Skip again. She was just so tired. There seemed to be an unrelenting stream of visitors lately — the weeks were all blurring together. She’d never admit that to Skip. He was always working harder than them all and it wasn’t her place to complain.

Maybe I just need a vacation myself, she said to herself, with a secret smile.

“Hey, hey, another day,” Skip said as he walked through the front door.

Virginia raised her glass. “Hip, hip.”

Skip scanned the room. “You didn’t pour one for me?”

“Lemme get you one, sug’.” Virginia reached for the bottle.

“Where’s Bomba?”

“Doin’ that preacher woman,” Aye-Aye answered through a mouthful of banana bread.

“Ah, Sister Glory. I’m sure she’s enjoying Bomba’s laying of hands on her lumbar region.”

Skip ignored the one empty chair and instead knocked Aye-Aye’s feet off his favorite seat. Aye-Aye silently protested into his beer and made a big show of moving his feet to the corner of the coffee table.

“So, what do you think of our new crop of guests?” Skip asked.

Lucia shook her head sadly. Virginia held out both fists, thumbs down.

“De neighbors dem too bad,” Aye-Aye said.

“I think it’s safe to say this won’t be as easy as the Sultan’s visit. We were lucky that the old man got off on the spearfishing and ordered his family to all pitch in. So we got a little spoiled. But hey, it could be worse — remember that Aussie soap opera star who had his breakdown and did nothing but bark and throw fruit at the other guests? Now **that** was a challenging session.”

Virginia rolled her eyes at the memory.

“Just try to stay focused,” Skip reminded them. “This session puts us at 51% against the Cane Bay Reef Club on St. Croix. We’ve been working on that one for more than a year. Remember what I always say: It’s the steady, consistent ones that come through in the clutch. Think of it like trying to hit a homer over the Green Monster. It looks so inviting that the righties want to muscle up on every swing and wind up popping out to the shortstop. The good hitters at Fenway Park are the ones who can relax, block out the temptation to pull everything, and just take the pitch as it comes.”

Aye-Aye groaned. It was hardly the first time he’d heard this particular baseball analogy from the spa director.

“I’m sure this group will settle in just fine,” Skip continued. “Assuming they aren’t too sunburned, they should all sleep well tonight.”

Aye-Aye said, “I hear dey guest take a poke at you today, Skip. Felix tol’ you that Holmsley dude was gonna be a crabit, but you didn’t listen, mon.”

“I can handle Mr. Jackson Holmsley the Third. In fact, I’d be willing to bet that he’ll even sign up with the program.”

“S’right, you **are** crazy.”

“Bet?”

Aye-Aye grinned. “How much you lookin’ to lose, chief?”

“Loser has to re-roof the game room after this session.”

Aye-Aye had to think about that one. Thatching a roof was a laborious chore that made shoveling hay seem fun in comparison. And Skip had bagged some tough nuts before. But this morning, while he was serving breakfast, Aye-Aye got a weird vibe off that moko. Something told him that Holmsley was more than a pampered idiot. Aye-Aye went with his gut and said, “Deal.”

Skip drained the rest of his rum and clapped his hands. “Hah! Now we’re making things interesting!”

* * *

Marcella spread two large beach towels on the sand and wrapped a third into a makeshift pillow. The path of torches didn’t extend all the way down to the beach, so she had to navigate by the light of the moon to find the spa’s beach storage cabinet.

Sitting upright, legs curled up against the sweatshirt her mother had insisted that she pack, Marcella shivered. It had nothing to do with the temperature. The air was still at least 80°, and the breeze was barely strong enough to ruffle her ink-black hair.

This already wasn’t the first evening she’d been alone on this vacation. After meeting up with Mickey D. at the hotel, he proceeded to get drunk and fall asleep immediately after sex. It was barely 8:00 p.m., so Marcella dressed and walked out of the Holiday Inn to get some fresh air.

The hotel was on the harbor down from the Sea Plane terminal. She crossed the busy street to get a better view of the gleaming cruise ships docked in the distance. While walking along the waterfront sidewalk, she came across a trailer that sold, of all things, Texas pit BBQ. Already slightly homesick, she bought a plate of ribs with a side order of coleslaw.

Marcella heard a cheer, and noticed activity on the illuminated public baseball diamond bordering the Holiday Inn. She crossed the street, hugging the Styrofoam box

of BBQ ribs to her chest like a baby, and joined the sparse crowd on a set of covered bleachers.

It was an adult slow-pitch softball league. Both teams had official, color-coordinated uniforms, and the scoreboard in the outfield kept a running ball-strike count, along with the inning, outs, and runs. The few fans on the benches near her yelled encouragement to the players, often in a sing-song slang that she barely understood.

The teams were filled mostly with athletic-looking black men, but Marcella noticed a pair of women covering first and second base. The inning's lead-off batter grounded the ball sharply to the right side of the infield. The first basewoman made a mover to her right, scooped up the ball, and stepped on her base. Marcella took a bite of potato salad and thought: *Right on. Girl power.*

Girl Power. Now, sitting in the darkness by herself on a barren Caribbean beach, Marcella could use a little of that.

A shiver moved from her legs up to her chest. Then, before she could help it, her eyes betrayed her as well and filled with tears.

The gentle and steady crashing of waves against the shore was just loud enough to cover the sound of her sobs.

RED WRINKLED NECKS

APRIL 17

Jackson bent over to straighten the tassels on his favorite pair of dress shoes and his empty stomach growled in protest. He attempted to calculate how many hours it had been since eating that light lunch of vegetable soup, but found it difficult to focus. Faintly, he could hear the call of a rooster in the distance.

This morning, he did not waste any time debating his fashion choices. He just grabbed the first short sleeve dress shirt he could find, slipped on some khaki shorts, and pulled on some black socks. Even though they had been steam cleaned twice, his Bruno Magli wing-tips still had faint stains from when that jerk stopped on that freeway onramp and wrecked his Jaguar.

He wanted a shower, but wasn't willing to stand at the sink and wipe himself down with a wet towel. He was so hungry... Jackson couldn't remember the last time he'd actually missed a meal.

Last night, after his massage, he couldn't find that bastard Skip or any other guests in the dining area. By the time he'd made it back to his cabaña to ask Virginia where he could get some food, Katya was asleep and the masseuse was gone.

He should've woken Katya and kept searching for other staff members, but it was so dark and he'd been unnerved by all the noises coming from the undergrowth. The crickets were more relentless than a violinist on diet pills. Occasionally, he could hear a feral, high-pitched cry in the distance. Once, from the shadows just beyond his porch, there was some rustling in the bush and a reptilian hissing sound.

It had been enough to temporarily kill his appetite. Now, however, in the light of morning, he was ready to beat down doors to get some service.

This time, when he reached the courtyard, he found the smelly guy with the bad accent walking out of the kitchen hut. Jackson's attention was immediately drawn to the whole pineapple in Ratko's left hand.

"Say, buddy, where did you get that?" Jackson tried to make sure he didn't sound desperate.

"In the kitchen there, just sitting on the table."

"You didn't happen to notice if there was any more in there?"

"No. I checked all the drawers. Found this knife, though." Ratko held up a wooden-handled steak knife.

“Tell you what. I’ve got twenty bucks in cash on me right now. I’d be willing to give it to you for that pineapple. Now that’s quite a price for a piece of fruit.”

“Pshaw.” Without warning, Ratko braced the football-sized fruit against his thigh and sliced off the spiny green top.

“Wait, wait, wait! I can see that you are a no-nonsense kind of man. Tell you what, why don’t you tell me what it’s going to cost for that pineapple.”

Ratko pulled at his mustache. “One thousand in U.S. dollars.”

“A grand? Highway robbery! I could buy a whole warehouse of pineapples for that kind of money. For all I know that thing isn’t even ripe. How about fifty?”

“Oh, it’s very fresh.” Ratko thumped the bottom of the fruit with the handle of the knife. “See, it make that ping noise. Nine hundred then.”

Jackson drew himself up to his full height. “Who’s to say that’s the last pineapple on this island? There could be more just sitting around. Or maybe I could walk over that ridge and find rows of them just waiting to be picked. Two hundred.”

“I’ve been over that ridge looking for Nikki already and there are no pineapples. Just goats and bulls. Say, you see Nikki this morning?”

“Your bird? Hell no. I’ve just been looking for that blasted spa director. What would you say to two hundred and twenty five dollars? I can’t even believe I’m offering you that much for this stupid piece of fruit.”

“Since you look more hungry than me, seven hundred and fifty.”

“Three hundred and that’s my final offer.”

Ratko palmed the fruit in his left hand and used the knife to start trimming off the yellow and brown scales.

Jackson threw up his hands. “Okay! You’ve got me over a barrel. Six hundred for your damn pineapple. But you gotta throw in the knife.”

“Deal,” Ratko said. “Will that be cash, cheque, or American Express?”

Jackson strode through the door, presenting the fruit like it was a tribal offering.

Katya squealed with delight. “Where did you find that, honey?”

“I bought it off that smelly European. Tell you what, he may look like a commie, but he certainly didn’t negotiate like one. I did get him to knock 40% off his original asking price though.”

“I can’t tell you how starving I am.” Katya licked her lips. “What are you waiting for? Let’s cut it open.”

“Not so fast, kitten. This pineapple is an investment. I put six hundred into it and I expect to see some return. If you think how bad you’re feeling right now, imagine how the others are doing? I mean, you’re *used* to missing meals, right? I bet I could get someone like Han Dickson to cough up two grand a slice.”

“Jackson Emerson Holmsley the Third — don’t you dare!”

“Don’t worry, babe. I’m not going to sell this to everyone. I’ve got an even better plan for it.”

“But Jackson, I’m *hungry*.”

* * *

Food, food, food.

Sister Glory repeated the mantra to herself as she followed the path from the courtyard to the game room. She was looking for someone — anyone — who could cook for her because she needed food, food, food.

Her basic needs were not being met, and when that happened, Gloria Gortner was one crabby Sister. As much as she enjoyed her long baths, Gloria really had only three basic needs: sleep, food, and sex.

She’d satisfied her sleep requirement quite well by going to bed before ten o’clock last night. The sex was still a background issue (*You didn’t just come here to get a few facials, did you?*), but right now food was her number one priority.

The game room was vacant, so she kept walking in the direction of the staff’s quarters.

Food, food, food.

Minutes later, she came across Lucia, who was sweeping rocks off the dirt path with a metal rake.

“There you are!”

Lucia smiled and bid her a good morning.

Gloria asked Lucia if she could make more of the papaya pancakes that she’d fixed yesterday. The cook shook her head sadly.

“How about some more of that great banana bread then?”

“I’m sorry,” Lucia said. “I’d love to cook-up, but cain’t with no help. Skip say no breakfast wit no jollification.”

“Jolly-what? Look, you’ve got to make me some food. I’m starving!”

“She have to take dey issue up with Mister Holmsley and Mister Dickson. They suppose to do breakfast this fine fine morning.”

Sister Glory ground her teeth and stomped off, determined to have words with those two blue suits.

* * *

“Gahh!”

Mickey D. couldn’t believe that it was possible for his back to pop like that two days in a row. This time his masseuse had him sit on his bed and bring his right foot over to his left hip. Without warning, she torqued his shoulders in the opposite direction, causing his vertebrae to shuffle and re-set like pins in a bowling alley.

“He carry a lot of tension here,” Virginia said and plunged her knuckles into Mickey D.’s tender lower back.

“I’ve been under some stress lately,” he admitted. “But you could go a long way to relieving that for me, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, sah?”

“Tell me, babe, do you like the white chocolate?”

Her eyes had the same quizzical look as his fourth-grade girlfriend when he’d asked her to give him ‘canny-lingus.’

This could take some time, the singer thought. I’m a little out of practice.

There was no question that his masseuse was the best second option, given the limited pool of available women on this island. She certainly had to be better than his nightmare date.

If she didn’t work out, then he’d target the blonde trophy wife. That ex-Raiderette had sent him the signals, hadn’t she?

The pressure was making him doubt his abilities. And the clock was ticking. Only 48 hours to line up a piece of ass before D-Day.

* * *

Marcella remembered the first time she met Mickey D. almost a whole twenty-seven months ago. She'd felt like a million bucks that magical night at the Astrodome.

She'd done up her hair with half a can of Final Net, manicured her nails with her favorite "Burned Orange" Maybelline polish, pulled on her best Victoria Secret thong, driven more than two hours to get to the concert and slipped that slimy 'Personal Assistant' a hundred dollar bill in order to be allowed inside Mickey D.'s limo after the show.

But it wasn't like she was some kind of regular Star Fucker.

Marcella had just been a fan of Mickey D.'s so long that she considered it a fantasy come true. She'd grown up watching his videos, reading all the glossy magazine profiles, and listening to his records with headphones after everybody else in her family had gone to bed.

There was something so sexy about him: the long hair, the swagger, the way he put 110% into every song. Ever since she was thirteen, she always knew that if Mickey D. ever got the chance to really get to know her, he'd see how special she was.

How could she be so right and so wrong at the same time? A decade after buying her first Mickey D. poster at Sam Goody's, here she was having the man actually take her to the Caribbean. For two whole weeks!

But instead of using this opportunity to try and get to know her better, Mickey D. only seemed to pay attention when she spread her legs.

Now, after spending the night looking up at the stars and fitfully trying to sleep on a beach towel, Marcella felt like she was worth less than the singer's pocket change.

Her hair was plastered to the right side of her head and was a tangled mess on the left. She knew it would take at least thirty minutes to comb out all the sand and knots from her tresses. Marcella mentally kicked herself for not packing more conditioner in her toiletry kit.

The first order of business was to find somewhere to wash her hands and pick the dirt from under her fingernails. Thinking about washing up, Marcella realized how gritty her skin felt under her rumpled T-shirt. She supposed that she could just put on her bikini and take a dip in the ocean, but guessed that the saltwater would turn her hair into a cement helmet.

The staff should be up and moving about by now, she hoped. They must know somewhere she could get cleaned up. Since it was breakfast time, the courtyard was probably filled with the other guests. She didn't want anybody else to see her like this, especially Mickey D., that pendejo.

Breakfast, though, did sound appealing. She realized that she hadn't eaten anything since Lucia's soup yesterday afternoon.

Marcella sighed, shook out her towel, and put on her flip-flops. Leaving her suitcase in the sand, she trudged up the beach, cutting through the break in the hedge of red-green Sea Grape. She was halfway to the courtyard when she encountered Ratko coming from the opposite direction. He was still wearing his green fatigues, causing Marcella to wonder if he ever took them off.

Seeing her, Ratko's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Early morning swim?"

Marcella thought that was a pretty stupid question, since her hair was obviously dry. "You guessed it."

Trying to sound casual, even though she knew she looked a fright, Marcella asked who was up there eating breakfast.

"Nobody."

"What do you mean?"

"No breakfast. No people."

Marcella felt deflated. "The spa people aren't making anything?"

"The two Yankee businessmen did not show up for their — how do you say? — 'chores' this morning. So Lucia say no breakfast." Ratko didn't mention the fact that Lucia had pointed out where he could find a small garden near the helipad.

Marcella thought she might start crying again. "Well that's just perfect. I guess I could start eating tree bark."

Ratko nodded sympathetically and was struck by an idea. "Trees... exactly! That's where I should be looking."

"What?"

"Have you seen Nikki? I left the door open all night and Nikki not there in morning. Usually he never gone for more than a minute. But I look all morning and no Nikki."

Marcella was a little thrown by the change of subject, but saw that Ratko was genuinely distressed about his bird. "Sorry. There was a bunch of gulls down by the beach, but I didn't see your parrot."

“Nikki is macaw, not parrot. It very unlike him to miss meals.” This seemed to spark something else in Ratko’s mind. “Perhaps Nikki is waiting back at my room for his breakfast! Come. I have extra food, and I bet we find Nikki there.”

“You have food?”

“I never travel without back-up supplies. You coming?”

Marcella wasn’t sure if she felt comfortable accepting Ratko’s offer. Usually she trusted her intuition when dealing with strange men, but this morning she was too hungry to think clearly.

“OK,” she said.

* * *

Han attempted to blink himself awake as he opened his door. He’d been trying to dull his painful sunburn with some shade and a nap when Jackson knocked.

All his dreams seemed to involve hot and prickly sensations: digging a hole in the desert, fighting off the vultures with the shovel, then waking up on his aunt’s living room couch as she jabbed him with her ivory knitting needles.

Stripped down to his white cotton briefs, Han ran a dry tongue through his mouth and slowly focused his eyes on Jackson’s pineapple.

“I think we are supposed to be on breakfast duty this morning, Jackson.”

“I didn’t see anybody making us dinner last night — so I say fuck ‘em. I hunted down this piece of fruit, so at least you and I won’t go hungry.”

“How thoughtful of you.” Han thought about the beef jerkey, roasted peanuts, and bags of candy in his Nike bag, but decided it would be best to keep that a secret in case things got really desperate. “Come on in. I’ll just put on some clothes. To tell you the truth, I could eat Pepper the horse right now. Where did you find the pineapple?”

“Well, I was just in the courtyard a few minutes ago and bought it off that commie. Can you believe he charged me six hundred bucks for this? It better be worth it.”

Han pulled up a pair of white walking shorts, wincing as the fabric slid across the back of his crispy thighs. “I didn’t know pineapples grew on this island. Did he say where he found it?”

“The guy claimed it was just sitting there in that outdoor kitchen. Either he’s telling the truth or he knows where to pick these things. I bet that’s why nobody cooked last night.

They probably all know where they hide the food at this spa. Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to play along with this shit."

Jackson cut a wedge out of the fruit and passed it over to Han. The knife was so slippery with juice that Jackson almost lost his grip as he sliced one for himself.

They ate in silence. The acid in the meaty fruit found every sensitive crack in their chapped lips, but the two men didn't care. It was divine; and for a few brief seconds, Jackson truly believed that his pineapple was worth the asking price.

Jackson reminded himself why he was here. "So what's this I hear about you guys and WebScape?"

"I really can't comment on that." Han sucked the juice from his fingers.

Jackson cut another slice of pineapple and offered it to his partner. Han accepted it without hesitation. "We've been looking at their financials," he admitted between bites.

"And?"

"They've got some cash flow problems, but WebScape does have a solid customer base. We don't have a natural tie-in with the new TV-based internet providers, so they could bring some interesting synergy to our new 3.0 browser."

"How so?"

"We could act as their operating system and provide them with all their future servers as they expand. Then WebScape could just concentrate on marketing the interface boxes — maybe do a partnership with some national cable operators like Cox or Time Warner."

Jackson wished he had a tape recorder in his pocket. He understood Pig Latin better than this modern techno-babble. "Now I don't want to get you into trouble with the SEC, but if I were to invest some money with WebScape, do you think their cash flow problems might go away in the next few months?"

"Possibly. I'll put it this way — if you were to buy some WebScape stock right now, I wouldn't discourage you."

Jackson smiled. "Want another slice?"

There was a loud knock on Han's door. "Entré," he said.

Sister Glory burst into the room like the second coming. "Aha! So you two were holding out on us."

Han held up his hands. "No, it's not what it — I mean, it isn't exactly—"

Jackson crouched over what was left of the pineapple. "Stay back, your holiness."

“Hand it over,” Sister Glory demanded.

“Go find your own,” Jackson said. “I bought this one fair and square from that guy with the parrot.”

“Oh yeah, how much?”

“A thousand bucks,” he answered without blinking.

“But I thou—“ Han started to say until Jackson cut him off with a glance.

Gloria pondered her options. “I’ll give you five hundred for what’s left.” She reached into her white sundress and pulled out her travel wallet.

“Make it eight hundred. And I need to keep a slice for my wife.”

Han looked pained. “C’mon, Jackson...”

“Don’t tell me she can’t afford it,” he shot back.

Sister Glory opened her wallet and counted a pile of crisp hundred dollar bills.

* * *

Ratko was right. The courtyard was totally empty. Marcella even called out a “Hello!” just to be sure — but nobody answered. None of the four dining tables were set with silverware, but she did spy a pile of unused dishes on the corner of the outdoor grill.

She followed Ratko all the way back to his bungalow, almost running in to him on several occasions when he abruptly stopped to scan the trees. He made funny clicking sounds with his tongue as he called Nikki’s name.

Marcella felt like she should be helping him look for his pet, but she was too ravenous to be charitable. Still, if he was going to give her food, she should at least attempt to be friendly.

When they reached his front porch, she asked, “So where are you from, Ratko?”

“Around.” Ratko pulled open his front door and immediately grumped when he saw that Nikki hadn’t pulled a macaw version of Houdini in order to be magically waiting for him inside.

“Have you been to Spain? I’ve always wanted to see the running of the bulls.”

Ratko thought back to the last time he had been in that country. It had been a long, drunken weekend in Seville while doing a backpacking trip to Portugal. That was when he was a younger man, still in his 20’s. Long before his name, face, and reputation made travel more difficult.

“No. Never been there.” He reached into a black valise and brought out a sealed package the size of a paperback book. “Here. It’s a Yankee MRE.”

“MRE?”

“Meal, Ready to Eat. I like the American ones the best. They have good cling peaches.” Ratko reached into the valise again for his steel fork and spoon set.

He never traveled without ‘The Essentials’: Swiss Army knife, a week’s worth of rations, silverware, canteen, water purification tablets, first aid kit, chessboard, alternate passport and identification papers, duct tape, flashlight, clean underwear, oral hygiene kit, a dozen gold and diamond wedding bands for bartering purposes, and his trusty SIG Sauer. Ratko knew from firsthand experience that you didn’t want to be holed up in someone’s musty attic for a week without any one of ‘The Essentials’.

Marcella tore open the MRE and found an energy bar and several vacuum-sealed packets inside. Pointing to an orange-colored packet, she asked, “What’s this one?”

“Macaroni and cheese, I think.”

She opened the energy bar instead and tore off a bite of the chocolate bar. The bar’s manufacturers had thrown in some oats, peanut butter, and raisins — evidently a feeble attempt to disguise the eater into thinking the chocolate had been prepared with real butter instead of, as Marcella surmised, shaved chalk.

“Pretty good, eh?” Ratko said.

She forced herself to finish the bar and asked for some water. Ratko retrieved his canteen and handed it over. The water smelled like iodine, but she gulped it down anyway.

“Thanks. I was starving.”

“You are welcome. Well, since Nikki not come back yet, why don’t you take off your shirt?”

Marcella almost dropped the canteen. “What?”

“I give you food. Water too. Now your turn.”

“Madre dios, I cannot believe this!” She stood up quickly and then it was Ratko who suddenly looked offended.

“I don’t want to touch, just look.” He reached into the pocket of his fatigue jacket and pulled out Jackson’s cheque for the pineapple. “Look, I even throw in six hundred dollars. That’s more than fair.”

Marcella was too stunned to cry as she ran out.

“Hey,” Ratko called, “You not finish your macaroni and cheese!”
Zum Teufel, he thought. *What is it with the women at this spa?*

* * *

Skip peered down at the pasty body sprawled out at his feet — all tangled hair, gangly limbs, with barely a hint of muscle tone through the torso. It never ceased to amaze Skip who got named a ‘Sex God’ in the States. Oh well, as long as they kept paying their hotel bills. “Mr. Dershowitz, it appears that you have forgotten about your lunch obligations.”

Face down on a beach towel with the midday sun deep-frying his scapular region, Mickey D. stirred. “Oh, is that today?”

“You and Mr. Pijasek are responsible for this afternoon’s meal. May I inquire what you two were planning to provide for the group?”

“I dunno. Whaddya got?”

Skip sighed. “Have you spoken with Lucia for suggestions?”

“Ahh... let’s see. Which one was she again?”

“How about fish. Fish is easy. They are all around us. All you have to do is swim out there and spear a few. You might even find it mildly entertaining.”

“I doubt it.”

“Regardless, it is your turn to provide for the group. And I’m guessing that even if you don’t care about the others, you are probably getting a little hungry yourself.”

“Not really,” Mickey D. lied. Even the pangs of despair over this morning’s failure with his masseuse couldn’t totally deaden his appetite.

“Why don’t I have Bomba track down Mr. Pijasek before we get started on the spearfishing lesson.”

“Whatever.” The singer dozed off as Skip walked back to the courtyard.

It felt like only moments later when the spa director was standing over him again, this time carrying a mask and snorkel.

“Try these on,” he said.

Mickey D. reluctantly got to his feet and fitted the yellow-rimmed dive mask over his face. It was a struggle to pull the strap over his straggly hair. “You got one of these specially made for skinny white boys with big noses?”

“Is that one too small?”

“Naw, it’ll do. What’s this thing for?” Mickey D. pointed to a nickel-sized valve in the center of the mask.

“That’s the purge. When water leaks in, just hold the mask tight to your face and blow out your nose. That will clear the water right out.”

Skip fitted the singer with a pair of slip-on fins and went back to the beach locker to get a spear. He returned with a red fiberglass pole, the length and width of a javelin. The pointed end had a pair of reverse barbs just above the tip. The opposite end was thicker and connected to what appeared to be a short loop of hospital tubing.

The spa director showed Mickey D. how to hold the spear with his right hand through the plastic loop. Then, Skip explained, you swim up on the fish and load the spear with tension by running your hand up the fiberglass shaft. When you get right up to your target, you let go of the shaft and the rubber band snaps the spear forward into the fish. He told Mickey D. that it’s best to get as close as possible and aim in the middle-front of the body behind the gills.

Skip made Mickey D. practice the spear technique until he was satisfied that the singer wasn’t going to hurt himself.

Ratko approached the pair wearing nothing but a fluorescent orange Speedo and a pair of tattered flip-flops. Given the generous size of Ratko’s midsection and the amount of black hair sprouting off his chest and thighs, Skip was glad that none of the women on the island were present. Mickey D. instantly wondered where he could get a bathing suit just like it. The outfit would be perfect the next time he played in Miami.

“Mr. Pijasek, thank you for joining us. I was just about to turn Mr. Dershowitz loose on our local fish. Have you ever spearfished before?”

Ratko nodded. “In the Red Sea a few years ago.”

After the way that raven-haired vixen so rudely ate his food without giving up anything in exchange, it would feel good to kill something. Ratko pointed to the rack of spears inside the cabinet. “You got some goodie bags to go with those?”

“As a matter of fact, we do. Ours are attached to belts, so you can keep your hands free. Plus, each belt is slightly weighted to make diving easier.”

The spa director pulled off his shirt, revealing a completely hairless back and a total absence of body fat. “Let’s go,” he said and led the two guests to the shoreline.

As Mickey D. waded through the knee-high waves, he was amazed at the temperature of the water. It was so warm, he could barely tell the difference between the water and the air.

Ratko spit into his mask and rubbed the saliva around before rinsing it out. When Mickey D. saw Skip do the same, he followed suit. After pulling on their fins, Skip instructed them to follow him out to the deeper water.

Mickey D. fit the snorkel into his mouth and ducked under the water. A new world immediately snapped into focus. It was like looking through a window at an alien landscape, with sand, seashells, and broken bits of coral blowing at his feet. A small school of inch-long silver fish swam between himself and Ratko and disappeared in a flash.

The last time he'd been snorkeling was at Lake Wattanoba, when he was twelve years old. That gray day, the water was cold enough to numb his toes and he could barely see the muddy bottom three feet down.

But now, Mickey D. could see the sand sloping down at least 50 feet ahead. There were countless varieties of fish out there: red ones with green fins, flat blue ones with bright yellow spots, every color of the rainbow, all shapes and sizes, darting and dancing. The water around his head felt suffused with warm light, and he could feel the sun tickling the back of his neck. Mickey D. tasted the plastic of the snorkel and the ocean filled his ears with a silent pressure.

A flash of movement near the surface caught the singer's attention. He glanced up to see a pair of long, iridescent, needle-shaped fish cruise past, just inches below the water line.

Gripping the spear in his right hand, Mickey D. followed Skip's trail of bubbles as the spa director kicked out towards the reef. The singer's hair swirled around the mask, and it was difficult to keep track of Ratko swimming next to him.

After a minute, Skip stopped and let the two men catch up. He took out his snorkel and said, "This is a good spot to practice." They were straight out from the center of Hearn's Beach, about halfway to the reef.

Mickey D. could barely feel the weighted belt around his hips, and with the swimming fins, he had no trouble treading water. He looked down and saw a half dozen black fish the size of 45" records drift up to greet him. Mickey D. had no idea what they were called, but they had yellow dots and stripes that ran vertically along the length of their

bodies, frantic eyes, and puckered, snout-like mouths. He poked in their general direction with his spear and they all scattered.

“Don’t waste your time on those angelfish,” Skip said. “We are going to be hunting maca, commonly known as parrotfish. They are the bright green ones, with a face like a painted clown. They chew on the coral, so that’s where you should look for them. You see, there’s two right there.”

Mickey D. and Ratko put their faces back in the water and followed Skip’s finger. They spotted the two parrotfish hovering under an enormous pillar of coral. The grayish, antler-shaped coral had so completely overrun a cleft of rock that in proportion, the foot-long parrotfish looked smaller than two kids enjoying an afternoon picnic beneath a Banyan tree.

“Now you are going to want to make sure that the parrotfish aren’t longer than your forearm, or you they will be too big to carry. Remember, it’s best to swim up on them from the back, load up the spear with tension, and hold the tip about six inches from the middle of the body. After you spear it, swim up to the surface, clear your snorkel, then worry about bagging your fish. I will demonstrate.”

The spa director took a deep breath, sank under the surface, and jackknifed his body so that his powerful fin strokes took him quickly to the bottom. Skip swooped down behind the batch of coral and slowly extended the spear in the direction of the lead parrotfish. Frozen and coiled like a panther on a tree limb, Skip released his grip on the shaft and the spear leapt out of his hand and ran completely through his stunned prey. The parrotfish belatedly thrashed about in a death spasm as the spa director rose to the surface.

“See, no problem,” Skip said after surfacing. He opened the mesh goodie bag around the twitching parrotfish and pulled out the spear with a grunt. The clown-faced fish twitched one last time and sank to the bottom of the bag.

“Cool,” Mickey D. said. “I can do that.”

“Don’t forget to hold your nose with your left hand as you descend,” Skip reminded him. “Softly blow out to equalize your ears before you get to the bottom. Are you ready?”

“I’m all over it,” the singer said and sucked in a lungful of air. Mickey D. had excellent breath control from all the years of performing, and he found it easy to load up on oxygen before ducking underwater and swimming for the bottom. His ears protested

until he wiggled his jaw, blew through his nose, and his eustachian tubes squealed and equalized to the pressure. He took a quick look up and was amazed at the volume of water between himself and his diving companions. Mickey D. flashed Skip and Ratko a thumbs-up sign and turned to his prey.

The remaining parrotfish didn't appear to notice his missing companion, because it had returned to gnawing on the outcropping of coral. Mickey D. held the spear in place with his left hand and stretched the tubing around his right forearm. The fiberglass shaft threatened to pull out of his grasp as he moved in on the mottled green fish. The parrotfish was near the bottom, so Mickey D. tried to twist his body past a horizontal position to get close enough to aim at the yellow stripe. It felt disorienting to have his feet slightly above his head and he noticed the edges of his mask starting to fog up.

His prey drifted forward a few feet and he slightly lost his grip on the spear shaft. The pole jerked a few inches before Mickey D. could recover, but the sudden movement spooked the parrotfish. It sprinted off faster than he could follow.

Mickey D. made a couple of kicks in that direction, but realized that he could really use some air. His ears popped all the way up as he clawed through the clear water and broke the surface between Skip and Ratko.

"Not bad for a first attempt," Skip said. "Next time don't hold the spear so far away from your body. Keep your forearm closer to your torso and you'll have more control."

"My turn," Ratko said through his snorkel and submerged. Mickey D. was impressed at how quickly the European moved through the water. Ratko skimmed the bottom, kicking up miniature swirls of sand until reaching a different parrotfish. Ratko ignored a handful of diamond-shaped angelfish to his left and effortlessly loaded the spear with tension. Ratko picked off the parrotfish in less time than it took for Larry King to propose to a cocktail waitress.

Ratko had a big smile under his bushy mustache as he emerged with his fish in tow.

"Good one," Skip exclaimed. "That may be an eight incher. Catch another six and we'll have enough for dinner."

"Can't we bag anything else out here?" Mickey D. asked.

"Stick with the parrotfish on this side of the reef. They taste the best and aren't too smart. It shouldn't take you too long. Be sure to stay together out here and don't go reaching into any holes. There are some moray eels in the reef that will take a nibble out of your fingers if you give them the opportunity."

Skip offered to take in Ratko's catch with his own. Ratko handed over his spear and the spa director thrust the parrotfish into his goodie bag. "I'll have Lucia start preparing the lemon-dill marinade. Happy hunting."

Mickey D. had bagged two parrotfish to Ratko's three when he saw it. The fish was several feet long, with brown and white zebra stripes, bulging black eyes the size of marbles, and yellow-tipped fins down its back. It had to weigh close to a hundred pounds. Mickey D. didn't know what it was, or how it had gotten on this side of the reef, because it dwarfed all the other fish around it. He didn't know if it tasted good or not. All he knew was that he wanted to kill it.

Both he and Ratko were hunting along the reef wall due to the high concentration of parrotfish among the coral forest. The fish were lined up like horses at a trough, and didn't seem to notice the two men diving down and picking off their brethren. The reef itself was a wash of colorful corals: circular fans of blue; swaying stalks of red tubules; brittle white tendrils; and plumes of yellow shaped like heads of broccoli. The whole palette stretched from just below the surface all the way down to a rocky base, at least fifteen feet deep. The water pulsed against the reef every ten seconds, which caused a slight churn of bubbles at the top. Urchins lurked in the crevasses of the coral, their purple spines keeping predators at bay.

Mickey D.'s attention had been captured by a spotted pufferfish hovering above the sandy bottom when he first saw the zebra-striped beast. It floated perfectly still, camouflaged by a semi-circle of jagged rocks. The fish's large, downturned mouth looked like frowning lips and the singer guessed it was some kind grouper.

He turned to look for Ratko, but his partner was diving too far away to notice his frantic gestures. Taking a gulp of air, Mickey D. readied his spear. It took seven or eight kicks for him to get to the bottom, but the monstrous grouper held its position. Mickey D. closed to within a yard, but before he could strike, the fish sensed some kind of danger, as only something that has been both hunter and hunted can. The grouper shot ahead and made straight for the reef wall. Mickey D. followed and caught up just in time to see his prey turn sideways and wriggle through a unnoticed gash in the rock. The opening was far too small for Mickey D. to follow.

All thoughts of calendar curses, tender vocal cords, and record label disputes vanished as he quickly surfaced. Mickey D. didn't even feel the branch of coral slice into the skin above his knee as he scrambled atop the narrow ledge. The water was only a foot deep, but with his fins, the long spear in one hand, and the bag of fish around his waist, Mickey D. struggled to keep his balance. Holding the mask to his face with his left hand, Mickey D. took a step and jumped feet-first over the other side.

* * *

Jackson was elated. "Honey, I'm home!" the conquering hero announced. "I **knew** that pineapple was a gold mine. Not only did I get a hot stock tip from Han Dickson that could make up for the cost of this spa, but I turned around and sold the rest of it to that stupid preacher woman. She actually paid me eight hundred bucks for what was left!"

He proudly fanned the cash he'd made from Sister Glory. Katya was crushed. "You sold her the rest of it?"

"Not all of it, babycakes. I saved some for you." He held out a sliver of pineapple about the length and thickness of a yellow highlighter.

"That's it?"

"Now I've really got to find a phone," Jackson said, dropping the morsel of fruit into her lap. "I need to move all our AT&T stock into WebScape right away."

* * *

The water was a few degrees colder and two shades bluer on the far side of the reef. Mickey D. scanned the sea floor, which he now guessed to be at least twenty-five feet below, but could not see any sign of his brown and white striped prey. There were some new additions to the aquatic life on this side of the reef wall. A school of leaf-shaped violet fish swam past. When they turned, their skin seemed to turn silver, and then royal blue, depending on the angle.

The rock and coral formations were larger here as well — some outcroppings the size of submerged Volkswagon bugs. Mickey D.'s jaw ached from clenching his snorkel between his teeth and the back of his throat was salty and raw.

He finally spotted his target about twenty yards from the reef wall, lounging next to a batch of green, brain-shaped coral. This time he formulated a plan. Swimming out so that he was directly above the grouper, Mickey D. blew out as much carbon dioxide from his lungs as possible, and took a huge breath. He descended, head first, aiming for the top of his prey's dorsal fin, feeling the elastic band pull tight against his forearm.

Mickey D. looked down to double-check his hand position on the fiberglass shaft, and consequently missed seeing the torpedo-shaped shadow as it passed less than a hundred yards behind him.

* * *

Marcella felt like doing a little exploring on her own, so she looped behind the game room, and cut down a smaller path that veered away from the main beach. The narrow trail soon disintegrated into a choked grove of mangrove trees interspersed with tendrils of indigo and red Bougainvillea. She skirted the edge of the mangroves, sometimes having to climb over sections of roots the thickness of rebar. The massive network of tree roots looked to her like skeleton fingers reaching out from the embrace of the wet earth.

Eventually she reached the water. The mangroves created an impenetrable stretch of coastline, except for a small, crescent-shaped strip of sand only about thirty feet wide. Marcella realized that she'd stumbled onto her own private lagoon.

To her surprise, a pelican dropped out of the sky and knifed down into the water. It disappeared for a moment, then bobbed to the surface. Lifting its bill, the pelican swallowed its catch and flapped away.

Marcella watched it make a wide circle over the lagoon, gain altitude, and begin to hover. The pelican tucked its wings, and streaked toward the water again, this time making almost no splash as it hit.

Marcella felt a rush of pleasure knowing that she was the only one getting to see this remarkable display of nature in action.

The shallows of the lagoon were filled with dozens of small, brown birds, which she recognized from the tour yesterday. During their tour, Skip called them "sandpipers." These birds definitely resembled their musical namesake with their long, soft bills.

Marcella walked through the fine yellow sand, curious to find out what the sandpipers were eating. As she got closer, Marcella was disturbed to find the beach was not as pristine as the one she'd slept on last night.

She stepped over several clumps of coconut husks and a few washed-out timbers before finding something that made her skin crawl.

* * *

Fully grown Caribbean Reef Sharks can reach up to ten feet in length and can tip the scales at over five-hundred pounds. This particular reef shark was only four years old — a virtual puppy as far as sharks are concerned. But it was still eight feet long and nearly three-hundred and seventy-five pounds of cartilage, fins, and serrated teeth.

It had been born around Camille Cay's reef, and with such an abundant supply of food, never needed to stray too far from home for a meal. Lately it had been cruising the north shelf of the island, where the depths plummet to several hundred feet and it could find rays and other larger meals.

But today it had a much needed appointment for a tooth cleaning.

The family of pilot fish could always be found around the same dome of brain coral, where fish of all sizes came for grooming. The reef shark was very familiar with the location — it had been coming to the pilot fish ever since it was a calf, only 60 centimeters long, barely larger than the cleaning fish themselves. Now, years later, it got to cut to the front of the line.

The reef shark especially liked the way the pilot fish tickled his gums as they picked off the little scraps of food wedged between his rows of teeth. It was more relaxing than the brief periods when it found a cave and drifted off to blackness.

By flicking its powerful, black-tipped tail, it glided through the water with an ease and confidence exuded by all creatures at the top of their respective food chains. The black-tip was about to start veering away from the shallow reef wall in the direction of the brain coral when its olfactory sacs picked up a sensation that sent jolts of electricity down its entire torso.

Blood.

The sensory lamellae in the reef shark's snout immediately picked out two separate scents. One was already familiar to the black-tip: parrotfish were as much a staple of

the shark's diet as hot dogs are to an American teenager's. That alone would not have been enough to hold its interest and keep him from his dental appointment. But the other scent was something new and fresh.

The novelty got the better of its curiosity and, although it wasn't immediately hungry, the black-tip turned its lidless eyes in the direction of the smell and began to home in with methodical and deadly precision.

* * *

Marcella pulled off her flip-flops and waded a few steps into the water. The flock of sandpipers jerked their heads up at her approach but did not fly away.

It was a crushed milk carton. Floating in the clear Caribbean water, the white plastic container looked as out of place as a Big Mac on a china plate. The carton's red, screw-top lid — which is what had caught her eye in the first place — was labeled "2%".

After fishing out the milk carton, Marcella scanned the shallows for more debris. She eventually came across a Dixie cup resting against the sandy bottom. A pair of tiny silver minnows were either attracted to the cup's waxy taste or its pattern of Mickey Mouse ears. Marcella spent a few seconds watching the minnows nibble on the cup's flaky rim before reaching into the water and spoiling their fun.

With the cup and milk carton in hand, Marcella stormed her way back to the courtyard.

"Where's Skip?" she demanded.

Lucia, who was standing behind the outdoor grill mixing up some kind of sauce in a glass bowl, nodded in the direction of the kitchen area to her right. Moments later, the spa director walked out carrying a mesh bag weighed down with green fish. He was shirtless and had a towel draped across his neck.

"What can I do for you, Miss Rodrigues?"

Marcella held out the milk carton and Dixie cup for him to see.

"First, you can tell me why you dump your trash in the ocean. Then you can tell me," she said and pointed to his bag of fish, "how contaminated those are."

Skip shook his head. His close-cropped, coiled hair sparkled in the sun. "All the spa's organic waste goes into a compost heap beside the vegetable garden. Everything else is stored in a temporary landfill and barged off the island once a year."

Lucia looked up from her whisking. "Where you findin' dem?"

"Right down there in the water." Marcella was too upset to explain how the trash had spoiled her private lagoon.

"They may have been thrown off a fishing boat, but more likely a cruise ship," Skip said. "This year, of the five million people in the world who will take a cruise, over half of them visit the Caribbean. You would not believe the stuff that washes up here: beer cans, prescription bottles, tennis balls. And with an industry growth rate of over seven percent a year, it's only going to get worse."

Marcella didn't know whether to believe him or not.

The spa director said, "Besides, Lucia would never stoop so low as to use 2% milk in her recipes."

Lucia nodded in agreement and Marcella felt her anger shift from Skip to a faceless passenger on a cruise ship. "Don't you have laws against littering?"

"As a matter of fact, Virgin Islanders take pride in keeping our islands beautiful. But it's impossible to legislate respect and common sense, Miss Rodrigues. As long as there are visitors to the Caribbean who are only interested in piña coladas, their suntan, and a second serving of lobster thermador, nature will get caught in the cross-fire. The way I see it, the only real way to save nature would be to get rid of all the tourists. But then I would be out of a job, wouldn't I?"

Skip reached into the mesh bag and slapped a foot-long, clown-faced fish down onto a wooden cutting board. With a practiced motion, he made a cut right down the fish's belly and spread its breast in two. "So, how are things going with the illustrious Mr. D?"

"Fine." Marcella hoped that Skip and Lucia wouldn't notice all the blood rushing to her face.

The spa director made a humming sound and chopped off the fish's colorful head.

"Look, it's kinda personal, OK?"

"Fair enough. But for what it's worth, Mr. Dershowitz is out there spearfishing so the whole group can finally eat a meal. That does show that he is capable of being considerate of others. And if you do change your mind and feel like talking, you will find that I am an excellent listener."

* * *

Mickey D. equalized his ears for the final time. His prey seemed to be completely oblivious to his approach as it floated next to the brain coral. The zebra-striped grouper remained so still that Mickey D. took the chance of bringing himself level instead of firing from above.

He lined up his shot, aiming just behind the fluttering gill flaps and was just about to release the spear when he saw a large blob out of the corner of his mask.

Unconsciously, he turned his head — and nearly exhaled all of his reserve oxygen in shock. The shark was nearly as long as a Holiday Inn hide-a-bed, with gray skin that graded to a white underbelly. For a hopeful second, Mickey D. thought the shark might just be passing by, but the sleek predator turned its bullet-shaped nose and began to circle his position.

At first glance, the look in the man-eater's eye seemed casual, unfocused, and even slightly bemused. But there was also a purpose in each small twitch and dart. Mickey D. instantly recognized the behavior. It struck him that in the old days, before hiring Zane, he zeroed in on the groupies backstage in exactly the same manner.

Mickey D. had been this close to sharks before, but that was at Sea World in San Diego, when the beasts were behind a thick wall of plexi-glass. Fighting the urge to panic, the singer tried to remember what the Sea World tour guide said about sharks. Most weren't man eaters, she had told their skittish tour group, and would only attack if they mistook you for a seal or were excited by the smell of blood.

Say, for example, the blood from the two parrotfish in his goodie bag.

His right hand was still caught in a death grip around the spear shaft, so Mickey D. used his left to quickly unhook his belt buckle. The weighted belt slipped from around his waist and pulled the attached mesh bag down to the ocean floor.

Mickey D. hoped the shark would veer off and go for the wounded parrotfish, but the glassy-eyed terror didn't miss a beat as it circled closer, and with two strokes of its black-tipped tail, halved the distance between them. The large grouper remained frozen next to the singer.

A puff of red floated across his vision and he assumed it was from his goodie bag below. *Of all the times to be suspended in a cloud of blood, now was not a good one*, he thought.

It took every ounce of willpower for Mickey D. to break eye contact with the black-tipped shark. As he glanced down, the singer made two quick realizations. One, the

majority of the blood in the water was not coming from the parrotfish, but was, in fact, seeping out of a cut in his knee. Two, he had been down for at least a minute and was rapidly running out of air.

Time ratcheted to a crawl. The elastic loop of the pole spear strained against his aching forearm. In that instant, Mickey D. made his decision. He released his grip on the spear and the fiberglass shaft shot forward, plunging into the grouper's head.

Mickey D. let go of the spear and kicked for the surface, praying the shark would find the wounded grouper a more appetizing target. The colors of the reef wall to his right blurred out of the corner of his eye.

It seemed to take an eternity to struggle through the clear water. His legs felt naked and vulnerable... like he was the Golden Delicious in an inverse version of bobbing-for-apples.

His right shoulder felt like it was on fire, but he was too afraid to look down. Lungs expanding with the ascent, it took all of Mickey D.'s strength to kick through the last few feet.

He broke through the surface, gasping. Saltwater burning in his nose, he spit out the snorkel. Checking his shoulder, Mickey D. half-expected to find a bloody stump, but everything appeared to be still attached. Then he felt another yank on his right arm and was pulled back underwater.

He looked through his half-fogged mask and saw a large shape rising up beneath him. The singer thought he was history until something metallic glinted in the sunlight and he realized that it wasn't a set of teeth, but his spear, still imbedded in the side of the trailing grouper.

Mickey D. realized that the elastic band was caught on his wrist, and he'd been dragging the zebra-stripped grouper behind him this whole time. He freed his wrist from the elastic band. Before Mickey D. could swim away, an even larger object overtook them faster than he imagined possible.

The singer lunged to his left as the reef shark thrashed to the surface. The bleeding grouper momentarily hung out of the beast's mouth like a half-smoked Marlboro, until the flashing jaws unhinged and tore it in two. A second lunge, and the black-tip snapped through Mickey D.'s spear with a gunshot crack.

A funny thought came to Mickey D. in that instant. He'd always read that a shark's most sensitive spot was the tip of its snout. In fact, when his uncle used to play "Jaws"

with him in his backyard pool, Mickey D. used to boast, "If you was a real shark, I'd just punch you in the nose!"

It seemed like such a good plan back in his uncle's pool, but now that he really needed it, Mickey D. saw the glaring flaw in logic. In order to punch the shark in the nose, he would first have to reach across its gaping mouth. And after getting a close-up of the reef shark using his fiberglass spear as a toothpick, that didn't seem like such a brilliant idea.

Turning, the shark seemed to catch him again in its saucer-shaped eye. The jaws were opening again, and the singer could see chunks of flesh the size of floor amps in that soupy maw. Before the black-tip could add any of his extremities to the mix, he heard a banshee howl from above.

Mickey D. looked up just in time to see a hirsute Tarzan in a fluorescent orange Speedo leap off the edge of the reef wall. Ratko gripped his spear over his head like a battleaxe and with a ferocious thrust, plunged his spear midway between the sharks' dorsal fin and snout before splashing into the water beside his diving partner. The black-tip jerked back, beestung. A new shade of red mixed into the churning water around their midsections.

Then, as quickly as it had surfaced, the black-tip ducked its head underwater and swam away. Rakto watched with satisfaction as the shark retreated, the spear wagging above the surface like a yellow safety flag on a child's bicycle.

"Time to go," Ratko said. "All this blood is going to attract more bad news."

Mickey D. nodded and breathlessly thanked the hairy European as they climbed back over the reef wall. The singer's body tingled with the best adrenaline high he'd felt in years. It was better than sex.

"Man, anytime you want to go to one of my shows," Mickey D. said as they swam back to shore, "consider the tickets my treat."

Ratko said, "I don't know if I'd like it. Do you do anything by Edith Piaf?"

* * *

Skip was none too happy to hear about the duo's snorkeling excursion.

"Didn't I tell you not to go over that reef wall without supervision? You could've gotten yourselves killed!"

Ratko said, "It's okay. I took care of that shark."

"I wasn't worried about the shark. Did it have a pointed dorsal fin, or was it rounded?"

"I wasn't looking at its freakin' fins," Mickey D. said.

"Did it go from gray to white underneath, with black-tips on all its fins?"

They both nodded.

"That was a Caribbean Reef Shark, *Carcharhinus Perezi*. It was probably just curious about you. The only sharks to worry about around here are the *Charcharhinus Leucas*, commonly known as Bull Sharks, which are all-gray, and have a blunt snout. They can be more aggressive and unpredictable. But the real danger in crossing the reef is trying to spear a fish that's too big. Unless you are an experienced diver, if you spear one of those large Napoleon groupers out there, they can pull you under and you'll be good and drowned."

Mickey D. sheepishly brushed a strand of limp, wet hair from his eyes.

The spa director asked him what happened to all the fish he'd caught.

"I, ah, kinda dropped my goodie bag when I saw the shark," the singer admitted.

Ratko handed over his bag of fish, which he'd tied to the reef before coming to Mickey D's rescue.

"Fortunately, it looks like Mr. Pijasek caught enough to go around this afternoon. Let me show you how to do the gutting and scaling, so you can help Lucia with the preparations."

"No need," Ratko said. "I can do it."

Skip gladly handed over a pair of heavy-duty knives and let Ratko demonstrate the technique to his food partner. Mickey D. proved to be a quick study, and soon the two men were boning the parrotfish, trimming the meat, and handing the slices over to Lucia. She brushed each new fillet with marinade and stoked the coals in the outdoor grill.

After the excitement with the shark, Mickey D. enjoyed the mindlessness of cleaning the fish. It allowed his thoughts to drift to the future. His agent and bandmates were assuming that he'd go back into the studio after this break. Assuming that his new album didn't completely suck, that would mean going back on the road for another two solid years.

Twenty-four months of four to five shows a week. Arenas full of screaming fans. A new batch of willing women in his hotel room. He would be living the dream all over again, right?

But as he used his serrated knife to peel back the skin of a six-inch parrotfish, Mickey D. dreamed about taking a job as a short-order cook. How relaxing that would be! No expectations, no multi-album contracts. Just show up, clock in, and scramble some eggs.

He didn't see how he could he escape being Mickey D. After all, did he really know how to do anything else?

* * *

Gloria had been on her way to the game room in search of crossword puzzles when she caught a whiff of grilling fish and doubled-back through the courtyard. "Oh my Lord, is that real food?"

Ratko and Mickey D. stood by the grill as Lucia added a scoop of crushed papaya and guava to the top of the cooking fillets.

"We caught them in the lagoon," Ratko said. "With spears only."

Sister Glory really wished that Ratko would put on his shirt. At least the swim had cut down on his body odor. Turning to Mickey D. she said, "That's so awesome."

"I speared an even bigger one," he whispered so that Skip wouldn't hear, and held his arms about four feet apart. "But it got eaten by a shark before I could get it to shore."

"A shark?" she gasped.

"Mister Dershowitz made the unadvisable decision to go spearfishing on the other side of the reef without supervision," Skip said with a stern tone as he brought a stack of drinking glasses out of the kitchen hut.

Gloria noticed the cut on the singer's knee. "You're bleeding!"

"It's just a scratch."

"Here, let me help you." She took the white scarf from around her neck and folded it into a bandage.

"Don't worry about it. You'll ruin your scarf."

"Shush." She bent down and tied the silk around Mickey D.'s knee.

"Thanks, Sister." He smiled down at her in a way that made her heart skip.

Suddenly, with horror, Gloria realized she wasn't wearing any make-up.

Marching through the courtyard, the two Holmsleys headed straight for the grill. "I better not have to pay for this," were the first words out of Jackson's mouth.

“No, no,” Skip said. “Lunch today has been provided by our two valiant spearfishermen, Misters Dershowitz and Pijasek.”

“About time,” Jackson said, already forgetting that he was supposed to have made breakfast earlier that day.

“I am soooo hungry,” his wife said. After the sliver of pineapple, Katya had been forced to smoke three menthols to keep from gnawing off her own arm.

Marcella appeared at the fringe of the dining area and quietly sat down at an empty table. She had planned to go back to her private lagoon until all the other guests had eaten and left, but was too hungry to wait anymore.

“Unfortunately, Misters Dershowitz and Pijasek did not prepare any side dishes for the group, so what you see is what you get,” Skip announced.

“I don’t care, just hand it over,” Katya said.

The spa director asked Mickey D. and Ratko which of them wanted to help set the tables. They both stared blankly at the spa director.

Jackson said, “Give us some plates and we’ll eat right here.”

“Is that all right with everyone?” Skip asked.

Everyone nodded except Marcella, who pretended to examine her cuticles.

Lucia used a metal spatula to transfer a smoking fillet to an empty plate and Skip handed it to Ratko along with a fork. “The provider always gets first taste.”

Standing beside the brick grill, Ratko balanced the plate with one hand and dug in. “Mummph,” he said through a mouthful of fish to indicate how good it tasted.

“I wonder where Mr. Dickson has wondered off to,” Skip said while passing a plate to Mickey D.

“I can bring him some,” Jackson offered.

Skip grinned. “How generous of you, looking out for your food partner!”

“No problem.” After turning a couple of slices of pineapple into a hot stock tip, Jackson wondered how much a plate of fresh fish would be worth.

“Before everyone finishes their meal, I’d like to remind the ladies that they are responsible for dinner this evening,” Skip said.

Gloria looked over to Katya, who looked over at Marcella, who concentrated on her chipped nail polish.

Mickey D. set his plate down on the side of the grill and adjusted the scarf on his knee so that it could bleed through a new patch of white silk.

“I’m in,” Gloria said.

Katya looked over to see if Jackson had an objection, but her husband was busy shoveling large amounts of grilled fish into his mouth. “If I have to,” she said.

Marcella shrugged noncommittally, but Skip took it as a yes. “Wonderful. Why don’t you all meet back here in about an hour so Lucia can describe your duties.”

* * *

Lucia spent the next hour cleaning the grill and preparing sugar cakes. It was a simple recipe, only requiring boiled sugar and shredded coconut, but the guests wouldn’t know that. She planned to break out the cakes later as a surprise dessert.

Marcella, Sister Glory, and Katya showed up at roughly the same time. Lucia bid the women good-day and asked if they had any ideas for dinner. Nobody spoke up, so Lucia suggested chicken kebabs, since they were a relatively easy meal to prepare.

The spa worker held up three slender fingers. “Dis many jobs needing t’be done for de kebabs. First, she has to pick de vegetables.” Lucia pulled down one of her digits. “Then ‘nother goes up with Aye-Aye for dey chicken. And last of you stay with me for prep work.”

“I can do the vegetables. We used to pick a lot of fruit and stuff as kids,” Marcella volunteered and immediately hated how that sounded.

Katya started to snicker, but remembered her own dark years as a restaurant hostess.

Lucia reached into a supply cabinet and gave Marcella a wicker basket. She instructed Marcella to follow the path back to the helipad and look for a little yellow gate. Inside, she would find a full garden where she was to pick a selection of peppers, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, and onions.

After Marcella set off down the path, Lucia turned to the two remaining women. “Chicken or prep?”

“What’s prep?” Gloria asked.

“Got to cut up all with she knife. Go out and set de tables. Maybe help out washing up afterwards.”

Katya thought back to when she was at El Torito — the kitchen was always hot, smelly, and full of sweaty guys wearing hair nets who wiped their hands on dirty rags

and yelled instructions at each other in Spanish. She used to avoid going back there and only did so long enough to pick up food for her own meal breaks. “What’s the deal with the chicken?”

“Aye-Aye will help you,” Lucia said. “Just meet him by de stables. He should be up there now.” She turned to Gloria and asked if she would be okay doing the prep work.

The evangelist said that would be fine.

Lucia handed her an apron. “Hip hip. It settled den.”

* * *

Her poor shoes! Katya had on the same pair of taupe Gucci’s that she’d worn during the tour yesterday. Last night, she’d managed to wipe her flats and get out most of the brown streaks. But as she trudged up the ridge to the stables again, it was impossible to keep the dirt from coming into contact with the suede strap across her toes. Katya knew she should go back and put on sandals, but didn’t want to give Jackson another opportunity to berate her about her choice of spas.

Oh, how she wished that she’d taken that slot at the Trump’s Mar-A-Lago resort. Right now, she could be standing in the mirrored dressing room of an Escada boutique, with multiple salespeople catering to her every whim.

But no, here she was, breathing in the putrid odor of horse crap, looking for some island stable boy whose name sounded like a stuttering sailor.

She finally spotted Aye-Aye inside one of the fenced pens. He was shirtless, wearing nothing but cut-off red shorts, his head ducked under the belly of a bored-looking cow.

“There you are,” she said by way of a greeting.

Aye-Aye popped out his head and leaned back on his stool far enough for Katya to see a metal bucket between his knees. “Hello dere,” he said and released his grip on the cow’s swollen nipples.

Katya pointed to the chicken pen. “You’re supposed to get me one of those things for dinner tonight.”

The spa worker dropped the bucket and approached the gate. As he came closer, Katya couldn’t help admiring the man’s rippling oblique muscles.

“End of de road for one of dey chickens, huh?” He led Katya over to the front of the poultry pen — watching with amusement as she stepped gingerly in order to keep from further damaging her flats.

In his island lilt, he said “Here we are.” There were at least 20 birds inside an area smaller than Katya’s sundeck back home in Brentwood. Nearly all of the hens had white feathers and pink faces. A handful of tiny, brown and gold mottled chicks hopped around a pile of hay near the rear of the enclosure.

The pen’s one rooster — jet black from the breast down, with a shock of rust-colored plumage around its neck and a fiery wattle jutting from its forehead — strutted imperiously to the water trough, scattering hens in its wake.

“Now what?”

“Now you get de hen, of course. Gotta be quick and grab she neck dere.” Aye-Aye reached over the fence and pulled out a leather scabbard containing a large carving knife. “Then just use dis here and give she a big whack.”

Katya waved off his offer of the cutlery. “Lucia didn’t say anything about that. She just said you would get me one of those birds. I’m only here to pick it up.”

“Skip tell me dey guests must catch all dey chickens.” Aye-Aye carefully, but firmly, pressed the handle of the knife into her hand. “C’mon, gonna be big, big fun!”

“Hell no.” Katya tried to hand Aye-Aye back the knife. When he wouldn’t take it, she set it on the fence next to the scabbard. “Look, I’ve got cash back in my room. How much will it take for you to do this for me?”

“How funny! If guest don’t wanna catch dey chicken, den guest no eat, Skip say.”

Katya raised her chin. “Fine. I’ll just have to take my money elsewhere.”

Aye-Aye waved as the blonde trampled back down the hill. “Good luck dere.”

* * *

Marcella missed the wooden door the first time. Upon retracing her steps, it was easy to see how she could’ve walked right by. The opening was only four feet high, covered with ivy, and set back into the shadows of the green undergrowth.

As she stepped off the path and got closer, Marcella marveled at how the weatherized door frame blended into the yellow blossoms of the overhanging Flamboyant tree. The

frame itself didn't appear to be attached to any kind of man-made fence, but seemed to float there in a wall of undergrowth.

The latch was unlocked, so Marcella opened the door and ducked her way through. On the other side, she was immediately greeted by the tangy aroma of oranges. The grilled fish for lunch had quieted the worst of her hunger pains, but the smell of fresh citrus made her stomach shriek for more.

There were two sprawling orange trees just inside the door, and Marcella quickly went over and pulled a ripe piece of fruit from the first branch she could reach. Without completely working off the rind, she tore into the orange with the ferocity of a wolf. Teeth grinding against the pits, chapped lips stinging against the rush of juice, Marcella finished the fruit in two breaths.

She ate another orange, this time taking the time to peel off each section. As she sucked her sticky fingers clean, Marcella took in the rest of the garden. On the opposite side of the entranceway there were a pair of shorter lemon and lime trees. A series of wooden trellises bordered the sides of the enclosure, which ran about thirty yards deep. The entire garden was about the same size as her parent's lot back home in San Antonio.

Marcella recognized tomato plants among the latticework, while other sections appeared to support various kinds of beans and berries. The middle of the garden was cut into six vertical rows of rich, dark soil that contained parcels of herbs, green shoots, and clusters of knee-high plants.

She carried her wicker basket down one of the rows and saw that each plot was labeled with small, hand-painted stakes: Mint, Thyme, Parsley, Tannia Root, Cayenne Pepper.

All the different scents mingled together to form a heady, powerful force that sat over the garden. The air shimmered with freshness, growth, and possibilities. If Camille Spa was supposedly the oasis in the middle of the Caribbean, then this was definitely the oasis at the heart of Camille Spa.

Marcella passed a group of larger bushes that were identified as green peppers. She brushed away an umbrella of leaves and saw that, indeed, there were a handful of ripe vegetables growing inside.

Lucia had asked for several bell peppers for the kebabs, and Marcella picked a half-dozen of them when she caught herself.

Why should I bring anything back for the others? My date is a puerco, and everyone else here treats me like an outsider.

Now that she wasn't hungry anymore, Marcella couldn't think of one reason why she should play along with this food group thing. She saw the way the other guests had been looking at her from the moment she boarded the helicopter with Mickey D. It was as though they saw her as one of those sucker fishes. The ones that stick to larger fishes for protection and the odd scrap of food. Remoras. That's what they were called. The Discovery Channel had a special on them last month.

"Well they can all just starve for all I care, Goddammit!" she said aloud and started back towards the doorway.

¡Marcella Graciana Elena Luciana Rodrigues! her mother's shrill voice rang through her head. *¿Diciste el nombre del Dios en vano?*

She mentally apologized to her mother for taking the Lord's name in vain.

Marcella Graciana Elena Luciana Rodrigues, are you shirking your chores?!

How she hated it when her mother addressed her by her full name. It made her feel so small. *No, mamá, you don't understand.*

I understand plenty, hija. Other people are going to go hungry because you a lazy, selfish girl.

But I went hungry last night and this morning. Nobody cooked for me and I had to sleep on a beach.

Sleeping on the beach was your own choice. Your father and I don't always see eye to eye but we made it work all these years.

But, mamá—

No, but's, hija. What's next on the list after the bell peppers?

Lucia asked for three onions. But I don't see why I should have to—

Don't make me raise my voice again. Now get back to work and quit all that bellyaching.

Marcella reluctantly turned back to the garden and obeyed her mother.

* * *

Of all the obstinate— Katya couldn't believe that awful peasant expected her to actually go in there and take a bird's life. Nice stomach muscles or no, that Aye-Aye was definitely one sandwich short of a picnic.

Speaking of food, where else was she going to find a chicken for the kebabs? It certainly couldn't be her fault that they don't have a Bristol Farms or some other kind of grocery store on this island.

Stumbling down the incline, Katya wondered how she could have wound up in this situation. It was so humiliating and frustrating. What she really wanted to do is throw something. Searching the trail, she found a clump of dirt the size of a grapefruit and heaved it into the brush, watching with satisfaction as it broke apart against the base of a Barrel cactus.

It was Katya's arm that had lifted her out of that fly-speck of a town — Rangely, Colorado — in the first place. All those hours playing catch with her three older and two younger brothers in the back lot of their father's locksmith shop paid off with a softball scholarship to Kansas State University. But when she was eighteen, Karen Ibsen found her 1.3 ERA easier to maintain than a 2.0 GPA. So she dropped out of school, hot-wired her coach's truck and headed out for a bigger, better life with more taffeta drapes and fewer snowstorms.

Like many lost and dispossessed souls, she stopped driving when she hit the California coast. She was still living out of the back of the pickup when she bleached her hair, entered, and won a contest for Miss Topanga Canyon. Finding a greasy agent, she did a television commercial for Pepto Bismol, legally changed her name from Karen to Katya, saved up enough money to add a cup size to her chest, and finally landed her dream-job as a professional cheerleader.

Unfortunately, since the Raiderette gig only paid \$20 a game, Katya had to keep moonlighting as a hostess at El Torrito, even though the only Spanish she knew was "baño" and "alfombra."

Her life was forever changed during the 1982 Raiders-Browns playoff game, when her series of back handsprings to Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" during the halftime show caught the eye of the up-and-coming Jackson E. Holmsley the Third. Katya broke off her engagement to the team doctor when Jackson introduced himself and handed her the keys to a brand new cherry red Mercedes convertible "just because you look like a woman who would appreciate driving the best."

Six months later, Jackson took her out to The Palm and asked her two questions.

Over a lobster the size of her pom-poms, his first question was: “So, what are your feelings about having kids?”

“I...I... don’t know what to say,” she answered, trying to stall while she concentrated on choosing the right fork.

“I need to know the truth, sugar.”

“I’m sorry, Jackson, but after having five brothers, I don’t think I’d ever want kids of my own.”

“Good. That’s good to hear. I’m not hot on kids myself. They just pee in your pool and whine about your will. In that case, will you to marry me?”

Katya said yes to that question and their wedding made all the society pages. The first few years were the best. They bought a house in Aspen, and Katya was able to take the limo out to her hometown to show off the latest in Parisian fashions.

One year, she sponsored Rangely’s annual Fourth of July parade, during which she gave out free hardback copies of her husband’s new book and brought in Kenny Rodgers — who is still considered a big draw in Colorado — for a free concert. The townspeople sang wildly along with “You’ve got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em,” but most of the unread copies of “Secrets of an Industry Giant: The Jackson Holmsley III Story” found their way into Rangely wood stoves that winter. Most residents agreed that if Katya really wanted to impress the townsfolk, she should have skipped the book and given out free shotgun shells instead.

But the Colorado trips and random presents soon tapered off after their wedding day, and now Jackson was hard pressed to remember her birthday without constant nagging. Through it all, Katya kept up her end of the bargain, remained childless, and the pool stayed free of kiddy urine.

Sometimes Jackson would need to be reminded of this sacrifice. The last time she broke out the kid card was a week after Felix’s visit. Some spa representative kept calling about the bank transfer to the Caymans, threatening to cancel her reservation if they didn’t immediately receive the \$300,000 deposit.

Jackson had rebuffed her initial attempts at nailing down the reservation, so she waited until after a dinner party, making sure his wineglass was never empty. When the guests left, she tracked him down in his study. His tuxedo shirt was off, showing off his softening white belly, as he read the latest *Fortune* magazine.

“One-point-seven billion dollars,” he said without looking up. “Can you believe they’ve got Gordon Peter Getty in here at \$1.7 billion? What has that yahoo ever done to earn his money? Sold a fucking play to the Russian National Opera — that’s what kind of head for business he has. Too much old money out there. Old money just clogging things up for the real players doing the real business. Bastards.”

“Where do they have you on the list, honey?”

“Number 105, still behind that Styrofoam cup guy, William Dart. If I’m lucky he’ll keep up that trust battle with his kids and get soaked by his lawyers. Another ten million and I’ll break the Top 100. If that Honduras Nike plant goes through next month as planned, that’ll be five big ones in the bank, **BAM**, just like that.”

“That’s so great, baby. Then it wouldn’t be such a big deal to use some of that money for, say, the vacation of a lifetime.”

“Don’t start with me, Katya.”

“Oh, Jackson, I need this! You need this! Think about how much fun it would be!”

“Two-point-one million dollars? I don’t have that kind of cash on hand — you know that.”

“But the deposit is only three hundred thousand. The rest isn’t due until next April!”

Jackson picked up a copy of Caribbean Travel from the coffee table and shook it at her. “Have you actually looked through this? It’s full of spas for a grand or two a night. That would be easy. Done. End of conversa—”

“Oh no you don’t. Don’t you pull that line on me. What about that five mil you were just talking about?”

“Katya, it’s not going to happen. And what’s wrong with these other spas? They’ve got aerobic classes, nature walks — all that healthy shit you like.”

“Just listen to you. This coming from the man who dropped a million bucks at the Richard Nixon estate sale, just to buy a half-used bottle of aftershave and some stupid audio tapes.”

“There’s a big difference. Those were rare collector’s items, sugar lips. An investment.”

“What? What about me? Am I not an investment? I didn’t want to have the damn Hershey’s over this evening. But there I was, entertaining them for you. Haven’t I got feelings and needs too?!”

“Work those out with all those shrinks and spiritual advisors I’ve got on retainer for you.”

In that instant, Katya decided to escalate beyond conventional warfare. “Do you want to know what my spiritual advisors are telling me? They are saying that I’ve got some maternal urges to deal with.”

“Say what?”

“Maternal urges. You know, motherly-type stuff.”

“Now that’s really the end of this conversation.”

“Jackson, I’m sure I could work through these Baby Blues with a good vacation. I know two weeks at the Camille Spa do the trick. Don’t you think it would be much cheaper in the long run for us to take this trip versus setting up a trust fund for Junior?”

Jackson cracked his knuckles. “Are you blackmailing me?”

“Call it what you want. It doesn’t change the fact that I could stop taking the pill at any time and you wouldn’t know it.” She knew how much he hated to wear condoms during the rare occasions he did feel like having sex.

“Look, be reasonable. How could this Camille thing be worth a hundred-and-fifty grand a night? I don’t see why we can’t just spend a weekend at one of the beach houses.”

“If you want the best, you’ve gotta pay for the best — isn’t that what you said to me once? I just want us to have a real vacation together, honey, is that so wrong?”

“Don’t honey me. It’s not going to work.”

“I don’t see why you can’t deduct this, Jackson. You work so hard; shouldn’t you be allowed to take a vacation and have the company pay for it?”

“I am the company, Katya. But I suppose...”

“Yes? What?”

Jackson reached for his cellular and speed-dialed his head accountant’s home number. “Leo, it’s me. I want you to add Katya to the payroll... What?... No more than ten K a year should do it... Yeah... Oh, I don’t know, make her a personnel supervisor or something... Yeah, fine... Now since she’s on the payroll, shouldn’t a trip we take together count as a business expense?... No, I’m saying we *would* talk business... I don’t care *what* the IRS would say... That’s *your* job... No, *you* make it happen, got it? Done. End of conversation.”

“See? Was that so hard, pookie?”

Looking back on her marriage, Katya saw that it wasn't that hard to get what she wanted from Jackson. After thirteen years, she knew all the right buttons to push. The only question was how much longer she could continue to leverage motherhood, or the lack thereof, for vacations and tennis bracelets. She only had five years of prime birthing years left until hitting forty. At that point, would the great tan and pretty baubles be worth the tradeoff of being a childless spinster?

Before Katya could work herself into a full neurotic twister over that, her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp, "Hey!"

She turned and saw Marcella approaching. Her food partner carried a large basket of vegetables and demanded to know where was the chicken for the evening's dinner.

"Aye-Aye wouldn't give it to me." Even though they were twenty feet apart, Katya realized that she was giving up several inches of height to Marcella, who probably grew up in a Mexican gang and was used to streetfights and gangbangs. It's a good thing Jean Claude had been teaching her some kickboxing moves. "I couldn't believe that awful man. He actually expected me to kill one of those dirty birds by myself."

"Why didn't you? Too afraid to chip a nail?"

"I wouldn't be talking, Miss Lee Press-On action."

"I'll have you know these nails are real, blondy, unlike those tits of yours."

How could she know? Katya had a recent alignment from the best cosmetic surgeon that Beverly Hills has to offer. She figured Marcella was just jealous of her more perky implants. "At least it doesn't look like I've got a pair of watermelons strapped to my chest. I'm surprised that you don't need a shopping cart just to push those things around."

Marcella dropped her basket and grabbed a ripe bell pepper. "You better get your Princess ass back up there and fetch us a chicken, or I'm gonna stick this where the sun don't shine."

Katya forgot all the lessons in subtlety that she'd learned at the country club and resorted to her favorite phrase from high school. "Oh yeah, well suck my dick."

Marcella cocked her arm and chucked the green pepper at Katya. It was an accurate throw, straight and eye-level. Katya guessed she wasn't the only one who grew up with brothers. Thanks to her softball background, Katya caught the flying vegetable with her

left hand, flipped it to her right, and fired it back at Marcella, who barely ducked in time. The bell pepper bounced harmlessly into a stretch of Mother-In-Law's Tongue.

"Don't fuck with me, you Charo wannabe," Katya spat. "You haven't got what it takes."

"Really? I think I've got what it takes to get your husband's attention." Marcella straightened up and grabbed her own generous cleavage. "Don't think I haven't noticed that man of yours checking these out. He must be getting bored of your little silicone walnuts. Maybe I'll just have to see if he's interested in seeing if these watermelons are seedless or not."

"Jackson wouldn't go for trash like you."

"Are you so sure of that, blondy? In my experience, most men have a difficult time saying no when a certain body part of theirs is saying yes."

Katya wanted to run over there and start pelting Marcella with the rest of the fresh vegetables, but a kernel of doubt had sprouted in her mind. Even on this tiny island, she couldn't keep an eye on Jackson 24/7. Could she be sure that Jackson would do nothing if this Latin hussy just threw herself at him?

Marcella sensed the break in Katya's confidence. "Lucky for you I'm a churchgoing woman. But I'll be damned if I'm going to be the only one in our group who does her chores. So get back up that hill and do yours, or else I might forget what my pastor says about interfering with the sanctity of marriage."

* * *

Aye-Aye brightened when he saw Katya cresting the ridge again. "Hey dere. Back so soon."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I stopped by my room and picked up some cash. Will a hundred bucks work?" Katya dangled a greenback in front of the grinning man.

"What use have I for dat?"

He pulled open the gate to the chicken pen and guided Katya inside. Most of the fowl didn't take notice, but a few stopped their pecking and looked up expectantly, as though they might get fed.

"Don't tell me you can't use the money. I mean, I know there's not a good outlet mall on the island, but you can't keep wearing the same pink spa shirts all the time, can you?"

Aye-Aye pointed out the obvious fact that at the moment, he wasn't wearing any shirt at all.

"See, all the more reason to take the cash. You should get yourself a nice Armani button-down for when you want to impress Mrs. Aye-Aye. Of course, for linen it might run you more than a hundred unless you can find an Emporio, but I'm sure we could work out the details if you'll just do me the small favor of cutting up one of these chickens."

"Be happy to. You just gotta catch she first." Aye-Aye went over to the fence and picked up the leather scabbard. Katya was distracted by the man's oblique muscles long enough for him to slip the carving knife back into her hand.

Katya held the blade away from her body as though it were radioactive. "You don't seem to understand that there is no way I'm going to— SHIT!" Looking down with horror, she realized that she was still wearing her suede taupe flats. Her conversation with Marcella had flustered her so much that she'd forgotten to change out of them when she went back to her room for the money.

"Shoo shoo. Jus' try."

In a daze, Katya found herself taking a few dumfounded steps towards a group of hens. The nearest birds instinctively moved away, giving her a several foot buffer. Katya spied a large white hen with a tuft of orange in the feathers running down its back. She bent down for it, but it hopped forward out of reach.

"I can't do this," she said.

"Go on," Aye-Aye insisted. He advised her to focus on one bird and try to corner it against one of the fences.

Katya walked towards the same orange-tufted hen, not really sure why she was still hanging on to the butcher knife. The other birds in her path gave way as the hen started for the bale of hay, then veered away in the direction of the black rooster.

Katya was forced to pick up her pace to keep up. The rooster shook its wattle and jumped out of the way. Katya had a clear shot at the hen, but it broke into a run, eluding her grasp.

Without realizing that she was nearly sprinting, Katya diligently followed the orange-tufted hen across the enclosure. The hen broke in a ninety-degree angle to her right.

Katya planted hard, her left foot digging into the soft dirt, using the same technique as making a baseline charge to the net in tennis. Hunched over, clutching the knife like her

racquet, she realized that the chicken was going to run out of room against the wood and bailing-wire fence. As the hen slowed, Katya quickly closed the gap.

“Got you!” she exclaimed as she reached for its long white neck. Before she could close her fingers, the bird exploded in a feathery ball of flapping wings and pumping legs. Katya tried to yank her hand away, but the hen twisted its head around and sank its beak into the fleshy part between her thumb and forefinger.

Katya cursed and her vision narrowed to a tunnel of red. The chicken landed on its scaly yellow legs and took off running alongside the fence. Ignoring the pinprick of blood on the back of her hand, Katya again took up chase. A low growl escaped her lips.

The chicken was seconds away from making it back to the safety of its clucking companions when Katya lunged forward with her left hand and caught the bird around the base of its neck.

Without thinking, she brought the knife down with her opposite hand. The blade traveled in a wide arc and sliced completely through the hen’s skinny neck. Its head bounced in the dirt, spraying blood all over her ankles and toes.

She released her grip on the hen’s spurting neck and the remainder of its body staggered forward with the jerky steps of a wind-up toy. By the time the decapitated fowl stopped moving and finally toppled over, the white and orange feathers along its back had completely soaked through with red.

A strange sound drifted across the chicken pen. As her vision cleared, Katya realized it was Aye-Aye laughing and clapping at her handiwork.

“Oh, gross,” she said and dropped the knife. Looking down at the unblinking chicken head at her feet, Katya saw that her Gucci flats were now totally unsalvageable.

Aye-Aye walked over, grabbed the carcass by its yellow legs, and carried it over to a stool he’d set up outside the pen. He told Katya that he’d demonstrate how to prepare the bird for dinner. She mumbled fine, thinking about all the times she’d had chicken cacciatore in the past year, never considering where the bird came from before it arrived on her plate.

Watching Aye-Aye pull out large chunks of bloody feathers by hand was enough to make Katya seriously think about becoming a vegan. The only thing that kept her from gagging was the sound of Aye-Aye’s voice when he began to sing:

When down bay, coming day,

*I need fowl, coming day,
With two little chicken, coming day...*

Aye-Aye's sharp cheekbones dripped with sweat as he cleared the last batch of down from the hen's breast.

*She wouldn't give none, coming day
And I must get one, coming day,
And I need chick-chick-chick, coming day...*

Katya just watched as he stood up and brought the pink carcass over to a metal basin mounted below a red-handled water pump.

"Got to wash she out," he called.

"You go right ahead." Her heart was still thudding — more from the shock of killing the bird than the exertion of chasing it.

Aye-Aye shook his head. "You can pump dey water or hold open dey hen." He used his fingers to pull open the chicken's bloody neck.

Katya decided to pump the water.

* * *

"So you're a minister?" Lucia asked.

"Yep. I have my own TV show in America." Gloria wondered if it would be necessary to explain the concept of cable television to the spa worker.

Lucia didn't look up from washing a head of lettuce in the sink. "Do you think God looks down on keeping with a man outside of marriage?"

Gloria thought for a moment and folded another cloth napkin. "You mean you and Skip? You two aren't married?"

"My mother always say to me 'It is better to marry than to burn.' But Skip say that my mother is nothing but a macoe and should mind her own business."

Sister Glory recognized the Biblical passage from First Corinthians 7:9. She'd quoted it herself on several broadcasts the past few years. "What else does your mother say?"

“She always tol’ me that when married you can always say you have a husband to take your response; but when common-law de boy could come and go and pretend to love you and come only for sex.”

“The Bible does say that being married is the ideal state of union for a couple. Do you want to get married, Lucia?”

The spa worker couldn’t keep herself from blushing. She wasn’t used to talking about her personal life like this. When she was growing up on St. Thomas, her mother had two neighbors that came over every afternoon — Catherine Tremaine, an octogenarian who used to make the best peach pies on the island, and the young widower Missy Boyer, who had a face like a bunched-up newspaper. Catherine, Missy, and her mother would sit on rocking chairs on their front porch, sip lemonade, and trade gossip about their fellow townspeople in Red Hook.

Lucia used to sit under an open window, her tiny legs clutched to her chest, and listen to their strumoo. The three loved to complain about that Eddy Walkin always knocking about or speculate whether or not Daddy Weyland had been seen liming about street corners the night before.

When she got older, however, Lucia never had a chance to develop a circle of friends like her mother’s. She’d fallen for Skip and made the choice to follow his dream on Camille Cay. There had been a string of temporary workers — none of whom she was able to confide in — until Virginia joined the staff three years ago. Virginia was a different matter. Because of Virginia’s relationship with Bomba, and Bomba’s closeness with Skip, Lucia never felt comfortable expressing her fears and desires.

Her mom used to say ‘friends sometimes better to you den family,’ but Lucia knew that whatever she said to Virginia would eventually get back to Skip. So with Virginia she never talked anything she really cared about.

But this Sister Glory woman didn’t know her, didn’t really know Skip, and was, after all, a woman of the cloth. Lucia allowed the words to come spilling out. “Skip say when he ready for marriage, we should just go to courthouse for ah license wedding. But I want Father Mooney to do de service, to be sure. I always dream Skip and I lead a big motorcade down to the Monrovia Memorial Church, in de Kongens Quarter of Charlotte Amalie. Skip wears a sharp black suit. Me in white, my hair up in pins ‘n flowers.”

“Go on.”

“Den from the church we can walk to Roosevelt Park for a keep-up. No big big fête like de society ones at the Estate St. Peter Great House, but not a t’ief wedding, you know. Enough black cake for all.”

Sister Glory was having a hard time following Lucia’s vernacular, but got the general idea of what was going on. It was comforting to know that no matter where you went, human relationships were the same.

“Is there a reason Skip doesn’t want to get married? Do you think he is cheating on you?”

Lucia shook her head. “I know Skip hasn’t butt on me, and don’t get me wrong, never do I want he and me to mash up, but sometimes it’s hard. My mother say Skip just runs whores on de island, but he not like that. He does hand up plenty when I need it, but right now he just got other stuff on his mind.”

Both women jumped as Skip poked his smiling face inside the kitchen hut. “Good news. Mrs. Holmsley just brought down a lovely bird for our dining pleasure this evening.”

“De salad gonna be a good one.” Lucia tried to whisk away her nervousness.

Skip gave no indication that he’d overheard any of their conversation. “I think we should have a beach party tonight. I’m going to go set up the fire pit.”

* * *

Skip positioned a ring of upside-down wooden crates around a roaring bonfire. With no other kindling in sight, Sister Glory presumed that if the fire started to die, their seats would be thrown in for additional fuel.

She wondered what method they would use to choose which crate got tossed into the blaze first. She was prepared to throw a tantrum if they tried to take hers. For as uncomfortable as the three wooden slats were against her sunburned bottom, it was still better than squatting on the sand.

Skip asked if everybody was warm enough.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Han said. The sun was about 30 minutes from setting into the horizon, but the air held the warmth of the day. Still wearing his “IBM Sucks” T-shirt, Han had to scoot his crate back from the fire to cut down on his sweating.

“Ouch! I think I got a splinter,” Katya exclaimed.

“We could use some proper chairs here,” Jackson told the spa director.

“This is certainly not the way they do things at the Golden Door,” Katya said for the umpteenth time that day. “At the Golden Door, they welcome the sunset with an hour of meditation and chanting. Then you sit back in a padded recliner while they do neck rubs and pedicures.”

Gloria was already tired of hearing about this Golden Door Spa. If she thought God wasn't keeping such close tabs on her this vacation, she would've stopped chopping carrots during her dinner chores and turned the knife on Katya.

Now that would be something. Interrupting Katya's whining by cutting off her limbs, one by one. “You know, at the Golden Door, they always had a flannel robe waiting—” then **WHACK!** Off with Katya's ear.

“You know, at the Golden Door, they would never cut off your ear without first lighting some periwinkle incense —” **WHACK!** Off with an arm. What fun that would be!

To get her mind off dismemberment, Gloria started petting the chocolate Labrador curled up at her feet. “What's this one's name?”

“River,” Skip replied.

“That's right, the nature names.”

“Not really. She's named after ‘River Phoenix.’ Did you ever see ‘My Own Private Idaho’? I thought River showed a lot of courage and dramatic range in that one.”

Marcella motioned to the two German Shepherds resting on both sides of Ratko's crate. “What about those two? What are they named after?”

“Fountain and Valley? That's a longer story, and one you may not want to hear,” said the spa director.

“Man, I thought there was going to be food down here,” Mickey D. grumbled from behind his aviator shades. After spending the afternoon spearfishing, the singer's back and neck matched the red bandana holding back his hair.

“I hate to sound impatient, but all this fresh air has gone right to my appetite,” Han said.

“Fear not, my friends,” Skip said. “Lucy and Aye-Aye will be down any second with the shish kebabs. And before we get started, I would like to thank the three ladies for working hard to prepare the chicken and vegetables for us this evening.”

Dickson gave the women a golf clap.

“I’d also like to take the opportunity to remind you that tomorrow morning Mr. D. and Mr. Pijasek have breakfast duty, the ladies will be on lunch, and Mr. Holmsley and Mr. Dickson have dinner. Hopefully they will be providing more for us tomorrow night than they did for us this morning.”

Marcella didn’t even want to look in Mickey D.’s direction. It killed her to have to be on the same beach with him.

How could she have thought he’d be different than any of the other men in her life? They were all just walking sacks of testosterone who wanted to get their rocks off and go home. Home. Even though the voice of her mother had spoken to her so sharply in the garden earlier, Marcella would’ve given anything to feel her comforting embrace.

But she didn’t want to give Mickey D. the satisfaction of knowing that he’d hurt her, so Marcella turned to Skip and reminded him that he hadn’t told them story behind the two dog’s names.

“I really think you’d prefer to wait until after we eat.”

“Unless you’ve got a dinner show, I don’t see a lot of other options,” Han said.

“Alright then. The lads are named after the Fountain Valley Golf Course on St. Croix,” Skip began.

“Oh sure, rub it in,” Jackson said. He thought about his new graphite Big Bertha that was just collecting dust back in his cabaña.

“The Fountain Valley Golf Course was the site of one of the most pivotal events in recent Virgin Islands history,” the spa director continued. “The course itself was the first championship-caliber eighteen-hole golf course ever built on our islands. It was developed in the mid 1960s by David and Laurance Rockefeller, who’d been allowed to purchase forty-four hundred acres of northwest St. Croix.

“Because of its unique location and challenging terrain, the course was an immediate hit with tourists from the States. It was such a hot spot that in ’67 both Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew bought property on the island.

“What a lot of these new visitors didn’t realize, however, was that outside of Fountain Valley’s manicured greens, the political climate of the Virgin Islands was a powder keg waiting to go off.

“First of all, the total population of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John more than doubled during the 60’s — with a huge influx of immigrants from other islands, especially Puerto Rico, who started competing with the locals for menial jobs. By the end of the

decade, these immigrants accounted for nearly fifty percent of the population — and when you threw in the whites, who were only fifteen percent of the population but owned most of our land — the native Virgin Islander was suddenly in the minority.

“Adding to the tension, in 1970 the U.S. Congress enacted a law that made it easier for illegal aliens to stay in the Virgin Islands, and even bring over their spouses and children — who proceeded to clog up our already overcrowded school system.”

Skip stared into the fire as he spoke. His tone was dry and clinical, like he was reciting from a textbook. Sister Glory wondered what happened to the rhythmic, easy lilt Skip had used when first greeting the group two days earlier. Was this the same man who'd earnestly pointed out every tree and bush during their island tour? The gravity in Skip's seemed to even silence the bonfire.

“That same year, our islands prepared to vote for our first elected Governor. You see, from 1733 to 1917, the Virgins were under Danish rule. But during World War I, America was worried the islands would come under German influence, and give them a staging area for attacking ships going through the Panama Canal, so they pressured Denmark into selling the Virgins for \$25 million in gold. That purchase agreement allowed the U.S. Congress to determine our rights as a ‘dependent territory’ and directly appoint our Governor.

“But back in the early ‘70s, after nearly 200 years of colonial rule, and more than 50 years of having our highest official picked by the U.S. Navy or the Department of the Interior, our people were finally going to have some say in their leader. It was an ugly first election: lots of in-fighting, back-room deals, and charges of racism. The new Governor, a native of St. Croix by the name of Melvin Evans, was under tremendous pressure to fix the rising crime rate — especially since the bulk of muggings and burglaries were directed at white tourists. In typical fashion, the local government placed the blame on unemployed youths and illegal aliens. Evans would eventually call in the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to help round up and deport approximately ten thousand illegals during the first part of ‘71.”

Jackson interrupted by asking: “What the hell does any of this have to do with golfing?”

“I’m just trying to set the stage so you understand the context of the events that followed,” Skip answered, kicking at a log to give the fire more air.

“Compounding matters, during this time there were some sweetheart land deals given to industrialists like Leo Harvey and Leon Hess, who brought aluminum processing and oil refineries, respectively, to St. Croix. The hope was that heavy industry would stimulate our economy, but it didn’t work out that way. Not only did we have to watch as the refineries started killing off our fragile coral reefs, but the continentals were hiring mostly illegal aliens and shipping the profits back home to the States.

“The final straw was when these same plunderers started closing off our beaches. You see, the beaches in the Caribbean have historically been public property with free and unrestricted access. But during the development boom of the 60’s and 70’s, the wealthy continentals started buying up all our beachfront property and built fences that ran all the way to the water line. Their ‘Keep Off’ and ‘No Trespassing’ signs were the equivalent of stealing our birthright.

“I think the Calypso poet Corey Emanuel best summed up our outrage when he wrote:

*Well, we ain't go'n beg
An' we ain't go'n bawl
Every beach in these Virgins
Must be free for all!*

“So now, Mister Holmsley, as promised we finally get to the Fountain Valley Golf Course. In the midst of this political and emotional strife, you had this beautiful, tree-shrouded resort on the windy side of St. Croix. The afternoon of September 6, 1972, there were sixteen people — seven whites and nine blacks — in the Fountain Valley clubhouse. The white folks consisted of two vacationing couples from Miami, a greenskeeper, an electrician, and the part-time manager of the pro shop. Of the blacks, one was the electrician’s assistant, while the other eight were all Fountain Valley employees.

“The mood inside the clubhouse was light and relaxed. Of course, that quickly changed when five men wearing masks and green army fatigues burst through the doors and started ordering people to lie down on the floor. Three of the masked men had shotguns, one was armed with a .45 caliber machine gun, and one carried a Luger automatic pistol.

“The gunmen proceeded to rob the tourists, clean out the bartender, and empty the pro shop’s cash register. All told, they collected about \$800 in cash and valuables. But

instead of fleeing, the masked man with the machine pistol walked up to Charles Meisinger, one of the tourists from Miami, who'd been ordered to stand with his wife at the bar. The gunman proclaimed, 'I hate these white motherfuckers' and shot Mr. Meisinger at point blank range.

"Before anybody could react, someone was heard shouting 'Don't feel sorry for them and don't leave no one on the floor.' The clubhouse filled with the roar of machine gun fire and shotgun blasts. When it was over, all seven of the whites and one of the blacks were dead — all with at least one gunshot wound in their backs or the back of their heads. Of the sixteen people originally in the clubhouse that afternoon, only four escaped without any injuries. Afterwards, the masked gunmen were seen casually walking away from the crime scene like they were ready to tee it up on the back nine."

When Skip finished his tale, there was a palpable hush from the group.

"That's horrible," Gloria finally said.

"How could you name your dogs after that?" Katya wondered.

"Believe me, Mrs. Holmsley, many on our islands would love to wipe the Fountain Valley incident from our collective memories. It's bad for business and doesn't reflect the centuries of mixed racial heritage we have in the Virgins, people say. Personally, I subscribe to the theory that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it."

Han sat back on his wooden crate and crossed his arms. He was enjoying Skip's delivery of this adult campfire story. "So what happened afterwards?"

Taking a deep breath, Skip continued. "Well, the description of the massacre was front page news on all the major papers back in the States. The FBI assigned 34 agents to the case, a posse was formed, and within days, five men were arrested and charged with the crime. All were young black men from prominent families on our islands. Three of the suspects were Vietnam War veterans, which led to speculation that the entire incident was the fallout of some kind post-traumatic stress syndrome.

"The Fountain Valley Five, as they came to be called, were represented in court by William Kunstler, the same lawyer who defended the Chicago Seven in their notorious conspiracy trial. The pre-trial for the Fountain Valley Five was an endless stream of outbursts, obscenities, and disputes over conjugal visits. There were also allegations of torture, police brutality, and coerced confessions. The trial itself took a whole month, and featured more drama. At one point, the defendants 'boycotted' the proceedings and flatly refused to show up in court.

“After deliberating for eight days and suffering through two deadlocks, the jury came back with guilty verdicts on all charges. The honorable Judge Warren Young handed out a sentence of eight consecutive life terms on each of the defendants as they stood, backs turned to the court in protest.

“But things didn’t end there. Right after the jury was dismissed, the foreman came forward and recanted his verdict to an important Virgin Island senator. Another juror followed, echoing the foreman by signing an affidavit that said his verdict against the Fountain Valley Five was not of his own free will. Both men claimed that they were pressured in the jury room to come back with guilty verdicts, but Judge Young struck down the defendants’ appeal for a new trial.

“During the next few years, the Fountain Valley massacre sparked a series of other violent incidents in the Virgin Islands. In two years, a total of twenty whites, twelve blacks, and six Puerto Ricans were killed on St. Croix — all of which were played up in alarmist news reports in the States. Real estate prices dropped in half and hotel occupancy rates went in the toilet. The economy in the Virgins went into a decade-long decline. Fountain Valley officially changed its name to the Carambola Golf Course, and everyone set about putting the incident behind us and wooing back the tourists. One of the Fountain Valley Five, Ishmail Labeet, actually escaped during a prisoner transfer and hijacked a plane to Cuba. Another of the convicted gunmen, Raffie Joseph, was just pardoned a few months ago, and now plans to attend UC Santa Cruz.”

“So then everyone lived happily ever after, right?” Gloria asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Not really. You see, back in the 70’s, most of the violence was caused by young black men who were frustrated with their leaders and disillusioned at the state of our islands. And while the cruise ships may have come back, the issues that caused these feelings have never gone away.

“The economic gap between the native islanders and the vacationers has become a chasm. If you spent any time in the Virgins, you would see the streets are lined with shops selling watches and necklaces that are far beyond the means of the average islander. You’ve got boatloads of restaurants with \$20 entrees that the locals can’t afford to eat at. The prime real estate has already been snapped up by hotel chains and wealthy continentals. If you ask me, I think the Virgins are approaching critical mass, and wouldn’t be at all surprised to see them explode again.

“You see, that’s what Camille Spa is all about. We attempt to show our guests the natural beauty of our islands, the way they were meant to be. We believe that relaxation and peace comes from simplicity — not jet skis and parasailing. If you leave our spa understanding the joy of living in harmony with your surroundings, then we have succeeded. And speaking of harmony, here comes the crew with our dinner!”

Lucia came down the beach first, carrying a glass tray piled high with chicken and vegetable skewers. Virginia was next, loaded down with a stack of plates and a wicker basket of silverware. Bomba appeared to be toting a large circular grill and a handful of metal poles. Aye-Aye brought up the rear with a batch of cooking utensils, hotpads, and a small bowl of marinade.

Bomba immediately went to work pounding iron stakes around the bonfire ring. Within minutes, he’d rigged up the circular grill so that it rested a few inches above the tips of the flickering orange flames.

As Aye-Aye distributed the plates and silverware, Ratko asked him if he’d happened to come across Nikki at any point during the day. Aye-Aye shook his head no, which plunged the European into an even darker mood.

In no time, the kebabs were sizzling and smoking, and the beach grew silent as the guests dug into their meals. Katya was sure that Jackson was going to make fun of her for helping out, but instead he took another skewer and said, “Nice job on the bird.” Her heart sung with his compliment.

Katya didn’t know if it was the fresh air or the effort it took to catch the chicken, but everything seemed to taste much better than usual. She didn’t even have the urge to pick at her food or light one of her menthols. If it wasn’t for the damnable mosquito bites on her ankles, she would have considered herself relatively happy.

Virginia noticed Katya’s furious itching and offered her a vial of homemade bug repellent. This time, Katya plugged her nose and rubbed the pungent lotion onto her legs.

Mickey D. finished eating and sidled over to the grill where Skip was turning the last of the kebabs. He whispered something into the spa director’s ear and took a blue pen out of his pocket.

Bomba and Aye-Aye disappeared for about five minutes, then returned to the beach carrying cases of musical instruments. Aye-Aye set up three steel drums in the sand

and stepped behind the largest one. Skip lined up behind the middle drum, and Virginia took the smallest.

Sitting on one of the empty drum cases, Bomba brought out an object with a flat wooden base and a dozen bent metal fingers, like a miniature keyboard. He started plucking a melody from the metal keys. The trio of drummers reached over their instruments with wooden sticks and joined in.

Aye-Aye began singing with a clear, strong voice:

*Old man, old man, come lend me your horse
Poor man old man,
And if he throws me, I ride him again,
This poor old man*

Skip and Lucia sung harmony on the alternating “poor old man” lines. Bomba did not open his mouth, but simply concentrated on his smaller instrument. Aye-Aye rocked back and forth, eyes closed, as his voice soared over the steel vibrations.

*And if he is dead, I pay you for him
This poor old man,
But if he throws me, I ride him again,
This poor old man*

The clouds had steadily moved in during the meal and gathered in the distance. But instead of spoiling the sunset, they had the opposite effect. As the sun dipped low, the outlines of the clouds glowed like neon piping. The ocean caught the colors, sparkling in a direct pathway from the horizon to the shorebreak.

Overhead, tufts of white cirrus melted into streaks of orange. Minutes later, the stratosphere itself seemed to catch fire. It blazed to the south and slowly worked its way to redden the scattered clouds to the north. The sun completely disappeared, leaving hues of purple in its wake.

Transfixed by nature’s light show, the guests bobbed their heads in time with the music. The makeshift band finished the tune with a flourish, and even Jackson found himself clapping.

“Thank you, thank you.” Skip said. “That was Bomba on the marimba, Aye-Aye on the bass boom, Virginia on the ping pong, and I’ve got what is called a tune boom. The

steel drums — or pans as they are sometimes called — have been a staple of calypso music ever since World War II, when the islands were a dumping ground for surplus oil drums. Ah, I see Lucia has been busy getting our dessert.”

The guests swiveled their heads around to find Lucia walking down the sand with a tray of glasses.

Han stood up and allowed her to set down her load on his wooden crate. Lucia thanked him and lowered the tray, which also held a plate of cookies and a mason jar inside the ring of glasses. Each glass was half-full of brown liquid, with a wedge of lime floating inside.

“A tot with lime was once every seaman’s daily treat,” Skip said. “And when you mix this sweet island rum with Lucia’s sugar cakes, you can’t go wrong.”

Lucia and Aye-Aye passed out the glasses while Bomba carried around the plate of sugar cakes. Mickey D. downed the rum with one long gulp. Katya took a nervous sip and gagged at the first blast of alcohol. It smelled like one of the countess’ post-tennis cocktails.

“Drink up,” Lucia said. “Plenty mo’ here.” She opened up the mason jar and refilled Mickey D.’s glass.

“Once the rum is bottled, we keep it buried in the shade of a tamarind tree so it stays relatively cool. Before you all have seconds, I’d like to again remind Misters Dershowitz and Pijasek that they are on breakfast duty tomorrow.”

Mickey D. asked if he could get a massage in the morning first.

“No problem,” Skip said and nodded to Virginia.

“Then we have the ladies for lunch, and Misters Holmsley and Dickson on dinner patrol.” Skip turned to Han. “Might I suggest that you try a pork dish. We do have an area where you can hunt wild pigs. I think you might find it a nice change of pace from a typical afternoon at the office.”

“Sounds good to me,” Han said.

Munching on a sugar cake, Jackson said, “I’ll think about it.”

* * *

The beach party broke up shortly after sunset. A full cup of rum in her belly, Marcella felt warm and pleasantly fuzzy. It also made her need to use the bathroom.

As she exited the outhouse, Marcella realized that it was now totally dark and she still had no idea where she was going to sleep tonight. That first day, Skip had said there were no empty cabañas on the island — not that she could remotely afford her own room even if there were.

Marcella supposed that she could sleep on the beach again, but didn't want the other spa guests finding her there in the morning. She finally decided to ask Skip for a lantern so she could move her stuff to the small lagoon that she'd found earlier. It had enough sand for her to lay out some towels and offered more privacy.

Walking down the torch-lit path back to where she'd stashed her suitcase, Marcella heard the murmur of two men talking. She heard a laugh that she recognized as coming from Mickey D.

Marcella left the path and moved into the shadows of the palm trees. As she quietly approached, the voices got louder until she could make out the figures of two men standing at the edge of the sand. They had their backs to her, and both men were still drinking rum from the spa's tall glasses.

Hidden behind a wide palm trunk, Marcella was close enough to clearly hear Mickey D. say, "I'm a big fan of your latest portfolio tracking software."

"Thanks. I was proud of that little program," the larger silhouette said. She recognized the voice as coming from Han Dickson. "I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that I loved your album of Moody Blues covers."

"Holey nutsacks, I thought I'd already met all five of the people who bought that one."

"Didn't set the charts on fire, huh?"

"Let's just say that album almost single-handedly brought my label to declare Chapter 11."

"Too bad. I thought it was an interesting departure from your normal material."

"Yeah, it sure didn't have the typical breakin' shit and bonkin' babes stuff. But I grew up on the Moodies' *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* and *Seventh Sojourn*, so I was honestly trying to pay respects." The singer was unsuccessful in keeping his voice from sounding bitter. *Mickey D.'s Moods* was the only thing he'd recorded in the past five years that he'd remotely cared about.

Han picked up a palm-sized rock and chucked it all the way into the dark water. "I think the American public doesn't react well when artists try to step out of their niches.

Just look at how they punished David Caruso for daring to jump from 'NYPD Blue' to the big screen."

"He should never have made that movie with Linda Fiorentino," Mickey D. agreed. "She seems to be the kiss of death for the thriller genre. Did you ever see 'Jade'? That's one that really sucked."

Taking another drink, Han said, "I'm not just talking about Caruso. It's the same with almost anyone who tries to cross-over. There seems to be a noticeable lack of Renaissance Men nowadays."

Marcella could see that Mickey D. was scratching the stubble underneath his pointy chin. "David Byrne, Henry Rollins... I can't think of any others. At least not ones I respect."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I think it goes like this. Once you're an established actor, best-selling author — whatever — the public has already invested a good deal of money into your career. In my case, they've bought the magazines with me on the cover. Purchased my tapes and CDs. Paid \$15 to join the fan club and \$25 for a black tour shirt that wears out after two washings. And I really think they expect me to be happy with my good fortune and repay them by doing the same shit over and over and over again. As long as I keep it up, they'll keep buying it happily.

"But when I showed the ingratitude — the nerve — of wanting to try a different path and exercise some different muscles, those same fans turned on me like jackals. They took it as an insult. After all, these teachers, housewives, bus drivers, waitresses, civil servants, toll booth operators — they all want different jobs as well. In fact, they dream about having my job! Who wouldn't want to be in my shoes? I've got more money than I can possibly spend. I've got fame, platinum records, and fans who pull off their bras so I can sign their rack.

"Do you think all those poor suckers who drag their sorry asses into work for another 12-hour shift feel sorry for me? Not a chance. But these same people don't understand that for an artist, the same-old-same-old is the equivalent of death. Creativity is the quest for new. But as Vic my P.R. guy likes to say, 'New departures in rock music are about as popular as a nice bubonic plague.'"

Mickey D. apparently realized that he was ranting, because he suddenly stopped and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, at least my album of Moodies' covers did well in

Germany. Maybe I can go out on tour with David Hasselhoff. So how did you hear about it?"

"Your album? I read the review in *Rolling Stone* and they gave it half a star. *Rolling Stone* almost never gives anything under three stars, so I went out and bought it the same day."

Mickey D. laughed.

Han drained his glass. "What can I say? I've got a soft spot in my heart for hopeless causes. That's why I had to buy the Seattle Seahawks last year. Thirteen straight losing seasons. And I've got no doubt that this fall will bring a fourteenth, but at least now we've got nicer locker rooms than those asshole 49ers."

The singer laughed ever harder. "I didn't know you owned the Seahawks. Boy, and I thought I had problems."

"Speaking of problems, I've got to pee like a racehorse. Then I'll probably hit the sack. See you bright and early tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. Pretty hard to sleep late when you don't have any curtains."

"Just think how much more time in the day it gives you," Han pointed out.

"That may be true, if I actually **did** anything."

"Hey, you helped catch the fish for lunch today. That was something right there."

"I guess so."

"Besides, I'm sure you will be able to turn this whole spa experience into a Top 10 single some day."

"Maybe I should tell my label that the next Mickey D. album is going to be nothing but covers of traditional Caribbean folk songs. I'm sure that would go over well."

"At least you could count on getting another half-star from *Rolling Stone*."

"Stop tempting me."

Han laughed and patted the singer on the shoulder before walking back up the path of torches towards the courtyard. Mickey D. lingered at the edge of the sand, staring at the sparkle of the moon off the reflective water.

Marcella was torn. She really liked hearing the conversation between Mickey D. and Han. Marcella reminded herself that Mickey D. is an artist — which does mean that he operates under a different set of rules. It certainly didn't excuse the way he treated her yesterday, but maybe she should cut him a little slack. After all, if he could open up and share his thoughts and feelings with Han, maybe he could start doing it with her.

Plucking up her courage, Marcella stepped out of the shadows and approached the singer. “Hi there,” she said.

Mickey D. appeared surprised to see her, but recovered quickly. “Hey. What’s up?” “I’ve been thinking a lot about us, and how you invited me to share this vacation with you,” Marcella said.

“Look, lemme apologize for the stuff I said to you before,” Mickey D. cut in. He brushed a strand of hair and held his hand up to his face. “I’ve been under a lot of pressure lately and I took it out on you, Marcella.”

“Hey, you finally got my name right.”

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about you too. I don’t know exactly where you slept last night, but I’d like to think that you’d be more comfortable in my bed tonight.”

“You know what they say, make-up sex is always the best kind.” Marcella reached out and took his hand in hers.

Yes! Mickey D. thought. *This is going to be the year!*

Playing it cool, he asked if he could carry her suitcase.

“That would be nice. It’s over there.”

Mickey D. retrieved her luggage and offered her the last sip of his rum. She drank it down and playfully nibbled on his ear.

*See, he **can** be a gentleman,* Marcella thought. In that moment, the Mickey D. that was on the poster hanging above her bed in high school perfectly matched the one standing in front of her. “The sooner we get back to the room, the sooner I can slip into something more comfortable,” she purred.

* * *

Ratko stared down at his chessboard. All the pieces were still at their base positions. He reached out to move the first pawn, but couldn’t bring himself to lift the black game piece. It just wouldn’t be the same without Nikki’s input.

He reached into his jacket and brought out the mason jar. It still had several shots of rum inside. After the jar had come around the circle to him the second time, nobody questioned him when he announced that it was empty.

Ratko walked over to his sink and poured himself two fingers of rum into a clean glass. He cursed himself for not remembering to pocket his lime wedge.

Downing the alcohol, Ratko hoped the buzzing in his head would keep away the dark thoughts long enough for him to get to sleep.

He was about to start doing his gums when there was a knock at his door.

* * *

“You tink we can get shum mangos t’morrow?”

“I don’t see why not, honeybunch,” Jackson said. It took every ounce of his willpower not to slur his words.

“An’ shum fresh squeezed orange jews too.” Katya wasn’t having as much luck with her enunciation. She was doing an even worse job at pulling down her bikini straps.

“We’ll just have to tell those two guys tomorrow morning. C’mere, let me help you with those.”

“No,” she said loudly and pouted her lips. “I wanna you t’ tell ‘em now. So it’ll be ready fur me inna morn.”

“Later. I want to play now.” He leaned in for a kiss.

“No!” Katya insisted and crossed her arms around her chest. “Go tell ‘em we wanna mangos and jews. Then we play alla you want.”

He knew better to argue when she had that look, so Jackson put on his shoes and stumbled off into the night. He couldn’t remember which bungalow that long-haired dirtball stayed in, but Jackson was pretty sure the commie was in the next one over.

He followed the torches down to where the walkway split and trekked up the next stone path as it wound above his cabaña. Finally he turned a bend and could see lights flickering through a pair of windows. The door to the bungalow was open, and as Jackson approached, he heard Skip’s voice shout: “Ratko, you aren’t listening!”

Jackson froze. He heard Ratko’s baritone mumble something about how they’d already been over this yesterday. The glass windows were closed, but Jackson tip-toed around the porch and found a spot behind a fern where he could hear the conversation through the open door.

“I’m telling you that we need a new string of buoys,” Skip’s voice said. “We had three false reads last night alone. One we think was a pod of dolphins, but the other two we couldn’t identify. Bomba has no idea why the perimeter alarms keep going off.”

“You tried adjusting the sensitivities?”

“Of course we tried adjusting the sensitivities. We’re not idiots. There’s got to be a short in the underwater lines. Or maybe one of the cans is defective.”

“I don’t know what you expect me to do about it. I’m no repairman, just the middleman.”

“And you’ve been well paid for your services in that regard. Don’t forget how much you need us right now.”

“I don’t see how I can help you. All my contacts are awaiting trial or already dead.”

“Ratko, Ratko... what am I going to do with you? I know you are a man of immense resourcefulness. I have no doubt that if properly motivated, you will find some way to get the job done, which is why I took the liberty of borrowing your bird.”

“Nikki!”

“Of course you don’t want anything to happen to your pet. Which is why I’m hoping that you will quickly come up with a solution to our equipment problem.”

“You bastard. How could you take Nikki?”

“Borrowed. He will be returned when you begin standing behind your merchandise. I wouldn’t wait too long, however. Who’s to say that the next time we eat kebabs, it won’t be grilled macaw on the skewers.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Or I could just turn Nikki loose in the bush. To be honest, I don’t think he’d last very long. There’s a family of mongooses on Camille Cay that serve to keep down the rat population. They are nasty little creatures that wouldn’t think twice about making a meal of a domesticated bird.”

Jackson left his hiding spot behind the fern and crept up against the side of Ratko’s bungalow. He peeked through the corner of the windowpane and caught a glimpse of Ratko pacing through the middle of the room.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t do anything stupid, like telling the other guests about Nikki,” Skip’s voice rang out. “Just put on your thinking cap and have a solution for me by tomorrow night’s Mühle game.”

Without warning, Skip walked through the open doorway, crossed the porch, and started down the stone path. Fortunately for Jackson, the spa director blew right past and didn’t notice him standing in the darkness against the wall.

After catching his breath, Jackson peeked through the window again. Ratko was rummaging inside his bed frame. The man pulled out a shiny pistol and pointed it at the open doorway.

Jackson's heart seized up again and he whirled away from the window. He could hear Ratko cursing in some guttural language and expected the commie to come barreling out the door at any moment.

The next five seconds were the longest Jackson could remember since he low-balled Rupert Murdock to his face when negotiating the Fox deal. But there was only silence from inside the bungalow.

He didn't see me, Jackson told himself. To prove it to himself, Jackson bit the inside of his lip and forced himself to look again.

Ratko sat on his bed with his pistol resting on a towel. He pulled at his moustache and began disassembling the gun into several pieces. Jackson watched him oil the barrel, put the weapon back together, and hide it under his mattress. Then the hairy man began to floss his teeth.

Jackson pulled away from the window and quietly made his way back down the path. *There is definitely something strange going on here*. Holmsley knew that he was in no condition to figure it out tonight, but he promised himself to keep his eyes open tomorrow. For now, he just hoped that Katya hadn't fallen asleep while he was gone.

* * *

Something comfortable for Marcella turned out to be nothing at all.

As soon as Mickey D. dropped her suitcase onto the floor and lit one of the lanterns, Marcella shucked off her clothes and pushed the singer over to the palm mattress. She ordered him to take off his shirt.

With one hand, Marcella gently caressed the bulge pressing against the front of Mickey D.'s beach shorts. With her mouth, she took his left nipple between her teeth and flicked it with her tongue.

Mickey D. moaned and reached up to stroke her hair.

While increasing the pressure with her palm, Marcella moved her lips to the inside of his elbow. She ran her tongue back and forth in that pocket, tasting the sweat and saltwater on his skin.

Moving her kisses down his forearm, Marcella used the tip of her tongue to tickle the inside of Mickey D.'s wrist. Between the licking, hand-work, and the sight of Marcella's naked body on her knees in front of him, Mickey D. felt like he was about to blow a head gasket. He arched his hips and struggled to pull himself free of his red Quicksilver shorts. After three tries, he finally got them past his bony ankles.

Grinning wickedly, Marcella moved her whip-like tongue down towards his fingers and was met with an unexpected sight.

It was her name, written out in block letters across the inside of the singer's hand.

She squeezed Mickey D.'s package so hard that his legs kicked straight out. "What the fuck is this?"

"Nuthin', babe." He closed his fingers and tried to pull his hips out of reach.

"Nuthin', huh? Not a little reminder to keep from messing up my name, so you could get me into the sack again?"

"Hey, it's not like that. I just have some problems with my short-term memory."

Marcella stood up and went over to her pile of discarded clothes. She pulled on her panties so fast the elastic snapped against her hips. "You won't need to worry about remembering it again, because I am not sleeping here another day."

"Look, I know it now. It's Marcella. Marcella. Now why don't you just continue where you left off?"

"Why don't you see if you can give yourself a blow job."

Mickey D. felt his erection soften. All the steam that was in his loins started moving back up to his brain. "Fine. Take it or leave it, babe. The day I get back, I can be playing in front of eighty thousand screaming fans — all of whom are just dying to jump my bones. Do you know what that feels like? No, of course you don't. Because you're a nobody. Less than a nobody. You're a nobody who gets off pretending she's a somebody. I don't even know what I'm doing here with you!"

Marcella picked up her suitcase and walked to the door. "And to think I was really starting to believe there was more to you than your prick."