

Tired nasal voices  
drift over the black air  
What a nice day!  
Chewing voices  
Friendly people!

Luminous ships  
full of slaves  
chewing voices  
vanish in the night

— Wycliffe Smith

**FRIENDLY PEOPLE!**

***APRIL 18***

*Prio-Tero-Chee! Zee-e-e-swees-ee! Prio-Tero-Chee!*

Jackson woke naturally to the sound of birds. As much as he hated to admit it, he was getting used to this hard bed, and his back was actually starting to feel better than before he came to Camille Spa. Katya was still asleep to his left. Rising to a sitting position, he noticed how the light played beautifully across her smooth cheek and shoulder.

He didn't like the rush of emotion that came with looking at her like this. In the business world, he relied on keeping his cards close and his emotions distant. He occasionally showed his temper during negotiations, though it was usually just to speed things along. He rarely **felt** the things he was actually saying.

But there was no denying the tightness he felt in his chest as he stared down at his wife. Recently, Jackson had gotten so used to not seeing her. Things were easier when work controlled his life. At work, every little iteration and transaction could be broken down into one simple question: What do they want out of it?

And when he got home, he found himself doing the same thing. The question he asked himself was always: What did Katya want out of it?

It probably wasn't fair.

Sure, she could occasionally be mean and a little spiteful, but only when he provoked her first. Yes, she did tend to obsess about getting certain things — this spa vacation for starters — but stubbornness and singlemindedness were not bad qualities in and of themselves. In fact, you could make the argument that they show a certain strength of character.

Jackson certainly couldn't abide a weak-minded, "whatever you say" wife. That would bore him faster than anything else. His parents didn't share his point of view on that subject. They tried to set him up with obedient second cousins from South Carolina at every family gathering. Even the morning of his wedding to Katya, his mother pushed this gaunt young thing — who was so pale he could see the roadmap of veins in her forearms — in front of him, saying, "This here's Edina, your Uncle Pete's step-daughter. Whaddya think?"

Ah, his wedding. Until the actual day, the prospect of the ceremony and reception hadn't been nearly as exciting as the tax shelter he was getting out of Katya's wedding

ring. Yet when he first saw her walking down the aisle, veiled and radiant, Jackson felt like his atrophied heart would burst with love.

Now, however, sitting in the glow of a bright Caribbean morning, with his wife sleeping next to him, a thin cotton sheet draped across her hips, Jackson felt conflicted. He hadn't stopped loving her, but it was hard not to resent Katya for this Camille Spa fiasco. Was he supposed to just forget that her folly had cost him 2.1 million dollars?

It wasn't the zeros that upset him. Jackson regularly dealt with sums in the millions, occasionally the hundreds of millions, where his business was concerned. In fact, he typically rounded to the nearest hundred thousand dollars when using his calculator at work.

But in his personal life, he used the four-digit rule. Anything that cost over a thousand bucks merited a hard look at where the money was going.

That wasn't being cheap. It was just good personal finance.

Katya was always bitching that "you never buy me stuff anymore," even though a few years ago he'd bought her that apartment in Paris so she'd have a place to stay during her fashion show excursions. And then there was all those renovations to the Brentwood house this past year. Was that being cheap?

Where did she think all those contractors, interior decorators, bricklayers, plumbers, and specialty electricians came from? How about those phony spiritual advisors who came in to measure the "color harmonics" in every room? What about that phrenologist she flew in from Argentina to measure the skulls of everyone in the house? Who did she think paid for all that — the Easter Bunny?

No, Jackson wasn't cheap. But he did demand a return on his investment. According to his chief accountant, the remodeling (with the wallpaper in the dining room personally approved by the spirit of JFK) was going to increase the property value of the LA house by a third. The apartment in Paris had already doubled in value. And because of the phrenologist, he fired two members of his security detail because Katya found out they had "suspiciously sloped cranial ridges around their frontal lobes." Later he found out that the two ex-security men had outstanding warrants against them for an '87 bank job in Tulsa.

Vacations, on the other hand, were like stuffing cash down your garbage disposal. They never had a chance of appreciating in value. So the few vacations Jackson ever took, he made sure they were worth blowing the money.

That's why dropping over two million on this spa was particularly galling. Camille Spa was money for nothing. Like a parking ticket. And if there was one thing that made Jackson consider hiring a regular chauffeur, it was those damn parking tickets! As a frequent driver in LA — especially one who couldn't be bothered to read all those blasted signs every time he pulled over — Jackson accumulated tickets as fast as those obese, chalk-marking meter cunts could write them.

But the thought of writing all those \$29 checks for absolutely nothing made him physically ill. So he'd stuff the lot of them into his Jaguar's cassette holder to keep them out of sight. Once they started to overflow, he'd order his mechanic to take them all away. He still wasn't sure whether Hans turned them over to his accountants or tossed them in the trash.

Memories of past parking indiscretions brought his tension level to the breaking point. He needed an outlet. *A racquetball game against Donovan sure would hit the spot right now. Beating up on the old man always does the trick.*

Jackson realized that he hadn't performed his morning lap swim since the morning at the one real hotel on St. Thomas.

He padded over to the dresser and started pulling open drawers. Eventually, he found where Katya had stashed his Speedos and swimming goggles.

Wrapping one of the fuzzy spa towels around his neck, Jackson made his way down to the beach.

\* \* \*

It was back to Plan B. He had to pull himself together or else he would be doomed to suffer through another 365 days before getting another chance at breaking the curse. This time, he was going to give his masseuse the full-court press.

Mickey D. couldn't help feeling the butterflies. Recently, he'd become too reliant on Zane. All the women were pre-screened and willing. They knew what they were getting and he didn't even have to work for it.

It's not like he was a total bastard, Mickey reasoned. He never forced himself on anyone and even tried to throw in a little romance to make the women feel good. Most of the time he'd say something sweet like, "I've been thinking about you all tour" or "You're the little secret that keeps me going all those other nights."

But this spa masseuse — inconceivable as it may be — gave no indication that she recognized Mickey D. was an international star. *She must never get off this island*, he thought.

Being a celebrity was usually nine-tenths of the battle. Back when he was just Michael Dershowitz from Indiana, the general female population treated him like a flaring case of genital herpes. After his first Top 10 hit, however, he couldn't walk down the street without some dish wanting to stick her tongue in his ear.

To make matters worse, he was stuck on this island without all his props. No flowers, no candles, none of his Rick James CDs. He didn't think to have Zane pack them because Marcella was supposed to be a sure thing. Big mistake.

He'd tried to be nice to her last night. He even carried her suitcase all the way back to his room. And then she had to get all tweaked out about something so minor as writing her name on his palm. Lots of people use memory cues.

He should've known better than to let Zane pick her for this trip. First off, he'd already been with her a half dozen times in the past few years. Why did he think she could keep him entertained for two whole weeks?

In a sense, he was almost relieved that she'd moved out of his cabaña. He certainly didn't miss the way she was always asking him questions. Besides, the sex was already getting too familiar.

If only she'd left after another twenty-four hours, then he wouldn't be in this bind. But that was ancient history. The task ahead of him was clear: Seduce this young island babe. Show her what she's been missing all these years trapped on Gilligan's Island. End his April 19<sup>th</sup> drought for good.

He thought it might be a good idea to get hard before she arrived. That way, the first thing she would see is a tremendous bulge in his bikini briefs. Mickey D. was not normally a morning erection guy, but desperate times called for desperate measures. He closed his eyes and tried to think about random sex scenes. Pink flesh. Yielding moisture. Thrusting.

Nothing happened.

Panting. Thong underwear. Handcuffs.

He reached inside his black bikini briefs, trying to cut through his anxiety about the looming April 19th deadline with some old-fashioned manual stimulation.

Nothing again. His Tower d' Amour was more limp than two-week old lettuce. He needed to focus. Concentrate.

Getting sucked off by that mother-daughter tandem in Phoenix. A foursome with those butch studettes on the U.S. Women's Field Hockey team!

Mickey D. opened his latest journal and desperately flipped to a random page.

*"1/31 — Denver. Btte. 5'6", 130lb. 32C, no ps. Cwby ht, b-jns, lthr bts. 15m-bj, 10m-stnd, 5m-cwby \*, 5m-bj, 5m-69, 10m-ds, 10m-invmiss, 5m-as \*. Scrmr. Solid 8. Tilly P. Johnston 1455 Waco St. Aroura, CO 80015 303-258-1303."*

That's right, Tilly from Denver who didn't take off her cowboy hat the entire night. She hosed him every which way to Sunday. Rode him like an unbroken stallion, yelling things like "Yippie kai yay!" and "Giddy-yap, lil' doggies!" His next tour will definitely make another stop in the Rocky Mountain State thanks in no small part to Tilly.

With the flash of memory from that wild evening, Mickey D. felt himself start to grow stiff. *Much better*, he thought with relief. Maybe he should've brought Tilly in the first place. Even though he'd only been with her once, the singer felt sure that she wouldn't have left him in the lurch. Unlike that totally irrational Marcella, who couldn't have waited—

And just as quickly as his erection had arrived, it started to disappear.

"No, no, no," he said to his flagging Tower d' Amour. "Don't do this to me!"

"You want me to go den, sah?" Virginia said from the open doorway.

Mickey D. turned, face ashen, one hand inside his bikini underwear, the other holding open his journal.

"Hey there," he said, quickly pulling out his hand. "I was just looking for my pen. It's cool, no problem."

"You ready for massage?"

She wore a pink lettered Camille Spa shirt with a white skirt that ended closer to her hips than her knees. Catlike, her bare feet floating above the sandy floor, Virginia drew closer. Mickey D. could see that she was carrying a bottle of scented oil.

She was such a heavenly vision that Mickey D. suddenly felt ugly and awkward in her presence. He was sure his hair looked stringy and childish. His nose a large summer squash, jutting out of the center of his face. Sunken chest, gangly limbs, bad posture, and had she really seen him pull his hand out of these ridiculous bikini briefs?

But the moment passed, and the singer reminded himself who he was. He was Mickey D., and this chick was gonna be #4,356.

“Yeah, baby. I like massage. Give it to me hard like that last time. That’s the way I like it.”

She motioned to the bed and he eagerly complied, watching intently as she oiled up her hands.

“So what’s your name again?”

“Virginia.”

“Like a virgin, eh? I think I can remember that.”

This time she did not climb on his back, but stood beside the bed and took his arm in a wing lock. With her free hand she dug her thumb into his left tricep and began making circular movements.

“Ahhh, that feels great. So, Virginia, what kind of music do you like?”

“Music? Skip play dey banjo some. I think I like ‘Johnny B. Goode’ best.”

“Old style, huh? I bet you’ve got a great singing voice,” he said as she moved her thumbs down to his forearm. “I’m a singer myself, you know.”

“Oh, very good.”

“If you were interested in singing in the States, you know, I’m sure I could arrange something for you. I’ve got a lot of connections in the biz, if you know what I mean.”

Her laugh was low and sexy. Releasing his arm, she scooped her right hand underneath his hair and cupped the nape of his neck. Then her fingers slowly contracted, working their way a millimeter at a time up his scalp.

Mickey D. found it difficult to continue the conversation. His spine tingled with pleasure and his sinuses began to open. Hell, even if she couldn’t sing, he could make her the official tour masseuse. How great would that be? He’d get done with a show, still dripping with sweat, and she could strip off his clothing and rub him down in his private dressing room. Then maybe once in a while she could join in on his evening’s entertainment, like a designated back-up hitter.

He wasn’t sure if it was the fantasy or her magic hands, but Mickey D.’s Tower d’Amour rapidly came back to life. His love muscle was primed and ready to go. And it didn’t seem like the small talk was going anywhere, so Mickey D. opted for the direct approach.

In one swift motion, he sprang off the bed and whipped down his underwear. With his tremendous erection bobbing up and down like a fishing pole, Mickey D. put his hands on his hips and asked, "Are you ready to get naked?"

Virginia sat on the edge of the bed and brought one oil-slicked hand to her mouth.

"See anything here that you like, sugar?"

Virginia unsuccessfully tried to suppress a giggle. Her eyes were locked on his midsection. With her opposite hand she reached out and pointed at his pride and joy.

She said, "Too small."

\* \* \*

Jackson was starting to tire after what he guessed to be thirty minutes in the water. Usually Arne held a stopwatch for him, so it was hard to be sure.

The lack of exercise the past few days had already affected his wind. He found himself gulping for air instead of keeping a steady rhythm.

It was distracting to be swimming above such a display of colorful fish. Jackson was used to following the black checkered tiles of the pool back home.

Making his way back from the reef wall, he felt a stitch start to develop in his right side. Instead of fighting through it, Jackson stopped to tread water and catch his breath.

Looking back at the beach, he saw his wife walking down the sand with the spa director. Skip laid out a pair of towels and sat down in a Lotus position. Katya did the same. Jackson kept treading water as they began doing a series of stretching exercises.

The swim had dulled the anger he'd felt towards her earlier. Swimming back to shore, he thought back to how Katya had sobered up enough to satisfy both of their desires last night.

If nothing else, at least Katya was finally getting what she wanted out of this spa vacation. Now she can go back and tell that Waverly bitch that she's had the most expensive yoga lesson known to man.

\* \* \*

Ratko couldn't wait any longer. His food partner was supposed to have been here an hour ago. It was time to break into 'The Essentials' again.

Gnawing on a piece of peppered beef jerky, Ratko devised his plan of attack. This was a small island and there were only so many places that Skip could hide his Nikki.

He could eliminate the staff quarters. That would be too obvious. The other high-traffic areas, like the game room, would be out as well. The stables would be a good place to start. Skip could've put Nikki in a cage inside the chicken coop. That would have been clever.

Lacing up his combat boots, Ratko vowed to traverse every square inch of Camille Cay in order to find his macaw. Nikki had been his constant companion ever since he'd rescued him from a Bulgarian pornographer three years ago. The man had used Nikki in his videos, feeding him celery sticks that were stuck in various female orifices. Ratko traded his Bulova watch — a real one, not a knock-off — for Nikki, and the bird had repaid him with undying loyalty when everyone else lined up to take their shots.

One thing was certain, he wasn't going to let his only friend left in the entire world end up being grilled on kebab skewers.

Ratko wished there was some way to help Skip with his problem. Under normal circumstances, he liked to fully stand behind his merchandise — as well as one could be expected to when trafficking in black-market military goods.

He would've been more than happy to put in a few calls to his old business acquaintances, if not for those twin death sentences waiting for him back home.

The price put on his head by the Bosnians had not been a particular surprise. He'd been supplying small arms and artillery to the Serbian side for years. They were his bread and butter.

The other death sentence, however, was simply embarrassing.

A month ago, Ratko stumbled across a valuable photo negative of a high-ranking Serbian commander engaging in a menage a trois with two members of his all-male youth corps.

Ratko's original plan was to sell the negative back to the Serbians, but that particular general had recently pissed him off by making conciliatory gestures to the UN inspectors. So he gave the negative to a contact in the Bosnian camps, assuming that they'd publish the photo and publicly humiliate the general.

Instead, those sneaky Bosnians wound up keeping the negative and secretly blackmailed the general into going a step farther with the UN. A week later the Serbian general was openly pushing a cease fire!

It was a nightmare. Not only had he taken a loss by not selling the negative in the first place, but now his arms business was threatening to dry up as well.

By the time the other ranking Serbian officers figured out what was going on, the peace process had gained too much momentum. So how did his former clients retaliate? By putting a price tag on Ratko's head, those ungrateful shitheels. After all the business they'd done together!

When Ratko realized that things were getting out of control, he contacted everyone who had outstanding bills. Camille Spa owed him one more payment, but Skip suggested a trade. Waive our last bill and you can hide out at the spa for free until things cool down.

It seemed like a good offer at the time. Ratko believed that it would just take another few weeks before those Bosnians and Serbs started killing each other all over again. They couldn't help themselves. It was in their blood.

\* \* \*

"Let me just say that I thought the beach party was a great success. And before you ladies start working on lunch, I've got a reward for you for working together so well yesterday," Skip said. "But you are going to have to put on your swimming suits first."

Gloria clasped her hands like a beggar. "Oh yeah. Tell me you've got a big Jacuzzi tub stashed around here."

"Any chance we could trade for a shopping trip to Harrods?" Katya asked.

Marcella ran a hand through her tangled hair. "I could just use a shower."

"Don't worry — you'll love it. It's an old favorite at Camille Spa." Skip instructed them to change into their smallest bathing suits and meet him at the main beach in ten minutes.

The three women scurried off and were back at the beach in seven minutes flat. Marcella was barefoot, with a long San Antonio Spurs T-shirt hanging past her hips. Katya had changed into a blue, two-piece Marc Jacobs original with shells sown into the straps of the sequined bikini top. She finished the ensemble with Jackie O. sunglasses,

a sheer teal wrap, and a pair of cross-strapped, open-toed sandals she'd picked up at Prada on her last trip to Paris. Gloria was wearing a white Speedo suit under one of the spa's pink terrycloth robes.

Skip had the women follow him along the edge of the sand in the opposite direction from Marcella's private lagoon. Before the group reached the rock jetty on the far end of the beach, Skip headed away from the water and cut through a small break in the palm trees. The women dodged around piles of dried branches the size of ant-hills and eventually reached a flight of stone steps that led up a short incline.

Katya looked down at her dirt-caked sandals as she clicked her way up the steps. "Oh, hell, another pair ruined!"

Skip led the group around a bend and stopped in a small clearing. "Well, we're here."

Marcella looked around in dismay. "I don't see nothing."

The spa director pointed down at the puddle of brown mud in the center of the clearing.

"Tell me we didn't come all the way out here for that," Katya demanded.

Gloria said, "That doesn't look like a Jacuzzi tub to me."

Skip walked to the edge of the dry land and stuck his hand into the viscous liquid. He pulled out a blob of the terra cotta mud. "Very special mud patch here, to be sure."

Katya groaned. "I could've gotten the same thing at the Golden Door."

"No, it would've been a cheap imitation," Skip said. "The mud in this natural bath is the finest of its kind. In fact, an herbalist from Lacôme offered to buy our entire island just to unlock the secret of our mud."

The mention of one of her favorite skin-care designers momentarily piqued Katya's interest. "What's so special about it?"

"Due to the unique combination of historic volcanic activity, centuries of erosion, and previous agricultural efforts, the soil on Camille Cay has a pH of 7.84, which has long been considered the ideal for maximum pore dilation. Then you consider the ratio of silicates to hard minerals, which on this island is a perfect 18-1. Finally, the mud here has anti-oxidant properties, which the representative from Lacôme was hard-pressed to explain. He theorized that there's an underground cave directly under this spot that pushes salt-water through the soil where it has been reacting with a vein of manganese on its way to the surface.

“It’s way too technical for me. All I know is that our guests love the way their skin feels after a long mud bath here. And you can see how we’ve trimmed back the trees so this spot gets maximum afternoon sun. I think you’ll find the temperature most comfortable at this hour.”

“Sounds good to me,” Marcella said and stripped off her T-shirt, revealing a microscopic leopard-print bikini that helped her become Miss October for True Value Hardware’s 1993 calendar. She waded through the calf-deep, soupy brown water and squatted down. The way the mud squished up around her toes and backside gave her the willies, but Marcella called out, “Feels good.” She couldn’t wait to see that stuck-up Holmsley woman covered in mud.

Gloria muttered something about wanting a rubber ducky as she removed her robe and joined Marcella.

Katya had been in plenty of mud baths before, but never in a mud puddle. Still, she reasoned, this was a spa... and if Lacômbé was interested in buying it, then the mud must be high-quality stuff. “The pH better be 7.84,” she said as her feet sank into the soft bottom.

Marcella cursed in Spanish. “It’s getting in my hair!”

“That’s okay, the mud also works as a great conditioner,” Skip said.

“This is the way to do it.” Gloria had turned so that her feet faced the center of the puddle. She found that she could fully recline with no effort. Her torso stayed fully submerged while her head rested against the edge of the dry land.

Marcella followed suit, stopping long enough to scoop a pile of mud around her head to form a makeshift pillow.

Katya watched and did the same. “This isn’t going to stain my suit, is it?”

“I’m afraid so. But it will be worth it, trust me.” Skip quickly excused himself — claiming he would return with towels — before Katya could get up a good head of steam on how much her one-of-a-kind Marc Jacobs swimsuit would cost to replace.

After Skip left, Gloria pointed out that whatever Katya had spent on her sequined bikini, it was still a far cry from what they’d all dropped on two weeks at Camille Spa, so she might as well shut her pie hole and enjoy her mud bath.

Katya wanted to come up with a really clever retort, but she had to admit that the preacher woman was right about the comparative costs. Plus, the cocoon of mud was draining her will to fight. It really was the correct temperature; slightly cooler than the

surrounding air, but not cold enough to give her a chill. Closing her eyes, Katya imagined that she was lying on a waterbed covered with silk sheets.

“Now this is more like it,” Marcella said dreamily.

Feeling snug as a box of sardines, Sister Glory voiced her only complaint: that they had all missed breakfast this morning because Mickey D. and Ratko flaked again.

Marcella kept her mouth shut. She didn't feel the need to explain her troubled relationship with the singer, and wasn't hungry herself. Now that she knew where to find the vegetable and fruit garden, Marcella didn't need to rely on anybody else for her food. She thought about the three oranges and two handfuls of blueberries she'd eaten for her breakfast.

“I just hope your husband comes through with dinner tonight,” Gloria said to Katya. “He hasn't helped with a single meal yet.”

“Look, Jackson is a powerful man. He doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do.” In defending her husband, Katya's own words opened a fresh wound in her ego. *Jackson doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do.*

Recently, Katya had been lumping herself in that category. No matter how much she worked out to stay the same weight, no matter how much she fought gravity and free-radicals, there was no denying that Jackson hadn't been interested in her recently. The nights he slept alone in his den, the fact that he didn't pinch her bottom when they walked into a room together anymore, the way he didn't get as jealous when she did extra-long workouts with Jean Claude.

Maybe it was the clean air, the fresh fruit, or just the lack of television — but ever since they landed on Camille Spa, Jackson had been acting like a younger version of himself in bed. Last night, he'd attacked her with all the passion that had been missing from their relationship the past few years. There was smoke in his eyes. His hot, desperate breath against her neck. Straining together. Not caring who heard their cries.

This morning, even though nobody was in the kitchen making breakfast, he didn't criticize her. He even patted her hand and whispered that he wanted her again. And just when she had come to accept that he was preparing to trade her in for a younger model.

“Well, powerful man or not, he better start pulling his weight around here,” Gloria said.

But as much as Jackson's lack of contribution irked her, Gloria secretly wished her husband, Harry, was more like Jackson. At least Holmsley was a real man.

He might bluster a lot and have a hang-up about organized religion, but Katya's husband had personal magnetism. It didn't hurt that Jackson was well built, with a chiseled, confident jaw. Gloria especially liked the gray in his temples. It showed that his arrogance was tempered with experience.

The gray in Harry's hair just made him look weak. Harry's jaw was soft and felt clammy to the touch. And don't get her started on the rest of his body. Of course, her husband didn't seem too concerned that he was hung like a baby's pacifier. He was too busy collecting those damn balls.

The thing that killed Gloria was that Harry didn't even play golf. But there he was, living in a 3-bedroom house right off the 17<sup>th</sup> green at the Albuquerque Country Club, his mortgage entirely paid by Sister Glory Ministries Inc. Every night he patrolled his yard with a flashlight and picked stray golf balls out of the grass. The next day, Harry would take the balls down to his workshop, paint Navaho patterns over the white dimples, then re-sell the balls to the club's pro shop.

It certainly wasn't that Harry needed the money. Aside from the mortgage, he received a generous monthly allowance just to show up on two or three telecasts a month to reinforce that Sister Glory practices what she preaches when it comes to family and marriage.

When Harry did fly out to Baton Rouge, they would dine together at Julio's, make small talk about the humidity, and hope the other person didn't want to stay for coffee and dessert.

Gloria couldn't pinpoint when the love in their marriage had disintegrated into mutual understandings and travel arrangements. Maybe it was the rapid success of her career coupled with the failure of his law practice. Maybe it was the half-naked church secretary she'd found in their rooftop hot tub. Maybe it was the paparazzi photos of her vacation on the French Riviera when she was caught lip-locked with that midfielder on the Real Madrid club football team. Or possibly they had just gotten married too young.

Whichever the case, Gloria learned her lesson and vowed that her next vacation was going to be someplace where not even the most ambitious shutterbug could capture her indiscretions. Boy, had she ever succeeded on that point!

Camille Spa was sure free from the paparazzi. Unfortunately, there were only seven guys on the entire island. Not exactly a plethora of choices.

It was pretty cool that Mickey D. was one of the seven, but he was so out of her league that it wasn't funny. That Han Dickson was kind of funny and had a good personality, but he was physically too soft and reminded her of a heavier version of Harry. Then you had that scary guy, Ratko. She had no idea where he was from and didn't care to find out. Jackson Holmsley was more her type, but would he really make time with her when he already had Katya? Highly unlikely.

That left the staff. Aye-Aye smelled like dung, and Skip was the peckerhead who thought the true essence of the Caribbean meant no running water for anyone. Bomba was a possibility. He was cute, didn't speak English, and couldn't blab to the tabloids. But he did seem close with Virginia, so she would have to check that out first. It did worry her that he was built like the Incredible Hulk. If she could manage to get with him, there was a distinct possibility that he would crush her. Of course, that would be better than not feeling anything at all.

All these thoughts of infidelity were making Gloria feel dirty. It probably didn't help that she was lying in a pool of mud.

Long ago, she'd already accepted that there was a very distinct possibility that she was going to Hell. It was funny — she had such a hard time believing in a righteous God, but never questioned the existence of the Devil.

The Evil One was out there. And he was saying that you better enjoy what you've got now, because you are going to be paying for it for a long, long time.

\* \* \*

Skip headed off in the direction of the staff's quarters. Bomba and Virginia had an overflow linen closet behind their cabaña that was stocked with fresh bath towels. Hopefully Bomba would be there, as the spa director had something to bring to his attention.

Paralleling the empty beach, Skip stepped over a trunk of a fallen palm tree. It had been blown down during a summer storm two years back, and stuck out from a break in the sea grape like a family-sized park bench. The storm had pulled the tree's base almost completely free of the earth, but somehow enough roots survived for it to keep holding on. The top of the palm now grew at a 90-degree angle from its trunk, curving up to the sun with fresh shoots of green.

Skip found the fallen tree symbolic of his people's struggle to maintain their identity in the face of centuries of colonization. All it takes is a root or two. The key is persistence. In time, those few roots can lead to resurrection.

The spa director saw Bomba emerge from the courtyard path and step onto the sand. Glad that he didn't have to track Bomba down, Skip increased his pace and intercepted his bulky co-worker.

"Hola, pardna. ¿Qué hondas?" Bomba asked when he saw Skip approach.

"Cut the Español crap. You know how that pisses me off."

"Oh, that's right," Bomba replied in crisp English. "You only liked the snobby languages in school — amo, amat, amas, and 'I paaked my caa in Haaavad yaad'." His imitation of a Massachusetts accent was flawless, of course.

There was no denying that Bomba had a gift for languages and impressions, alternatively a source of amusement and irritation with Skip. It had been that way ever since they'd met at boarding school in the small, lily-white town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Skip was the bookworm. Bomba was the entertainer — turning his dorm room into a cabaret with skits from Robin Williams, scenes from "Up In Smoke" (Bomba did both Cheech and Chong), and even monologues by Mort Sahl. Sometimes Skip would stick around for the show, but mostly he was too busy studying political science.

Their classmates nicknamed them the "Marx Brothers": Bomba being "Groucho" in reference to his performing skills, with Skip nicknamed "Karl" due to his early interest in Lenin, Castro, and Chairman Mao.

In private, they called each other 'pardna' — which to them was someone closer than family. For if their family had really cared, they reasoned, why had they sent them to the States in the first place? Under some kind of pretense of getting them "properly educated"? Skip and Bomba spent long, sleepless nights trying to guess what they had done wrong to deserve their fathers' wrath. Being one of the only black faces on campus was easier to overcome than the pain of feeling unwanted by your own kin.

In those early years, Skip kept a copy of his father's writings by his bedside and took to reading them whenever he felt like calling home. It was better that way. The writings were clear, passionate, and brilliant. Never distant and preoccupied, like the voice on the other end of the telephone. His father's words provided the framework and inspiration for what Skip, as he got older, began calling 'The Big Picture.'

'The Big Picture' was convincing enough for Bomba to cut short his Master's studies in Middle Eastern dialects and join his pardna at Camille Spa. And on the whole, Skip was grateful for his friend's contributions to the cause over the past decade. But there were times — and this was definitely one of them — that Skip wished his companion worked as hard on his observational skills as he did on his Swahili verb conjugations.

On the islands, people explained the laid-back mentality as, "Now-for-now, mon." Skip always believed that attitude was simply an excuse for laziness.

"I caught a moccasin inside the reef this morning," Skip said.

"Humph," Bomba grunted. "Big one?"

"Big enough. Two and a half feet, maybe three."

Bomba grunted again.

"If it had decided to bite one of our guests, they could've been dead before reaching help."

"Yep. Nasty buggers they are. Been around the wheel of life one too many times, I suspect. Snakes with bad karma. Did you kill it?"

"No, it wasn't the snake's fault that it went swimming off our beach. I gave it to Aye-Aye to keep until the end of the session. We'll ship it off to my cousin — I'm sure he will give it a good home." Skip stepped into Bomba's personal space and locked eyes with the larger man. "Unless I'm mistaken, security and guest relations falls under your duties, does it not?"

Bomba backed up a step. "Yeah. So?"

"That's supposed to be the safe swimming zone." Skip pointed at the turquoise shallows. "It will be difficult to have relations with our honored guests if they go snorkeling out there, get bit, and go into anaphylactic shock."

Bomba shrugged his rippled shoulders. "Hey, it probably got blown over the reef during the last storm. You can't expect me to control Mother Nature."

"No, I just expect you to do your job."

Skip knew he was being slightly unfair. There were hundreds of holes in the coral large enough for a snake that size to get through. It could have even swam over the reef at high tide. But Skip wasn't in the mood for a massive PR scandal right now, and he needed Bomba to be on his toes.

Why was he the only one who saw that, the closer they got to their goal, the more vigilant they had to become? If they weren't prepared for every eventuality, someone would get wind of their plan before the time was right.

The remainder of this session was going to be difficult enough. Something about this group, even with the repeater, was making him more edgy than normal. It may be another sunny day in Paradise right now, but Skip felt black clouds lurking around the horizon.

\* \* \*

*Fore!*

Jackson's drive was still rising when it cleared the reef. Then, the infuriating ball started to hook away from the jetty, eventually plunking in the water about forty yards to the left of his intended target.

*Shit. Gotta be turning over my wrists,* Holmsley thought.

He teed up another white Top Flight on the small patch of grass overlooking the beach. After tightening the glove on his left hand, Jackson took his grip again. He checked the alignment of his hips, relaxed his shoulders, steadied his head, and went into his backswing.

His focus was shattered when he heard a voice say, "Kindly explain yourself, Mister Holmsley."

Jackson followed through with his swing, but the distraction caused him to open his clubface and slice the ball across the empty beach like a rogue boomerang. He pounded the heel of his Big Bertha into the turf and said, "Dammit, Skip, look what you made me do!"

The spa director, who carried a pile of towels and an air of disgust, looked down at the empty sleeves of balls at Jackson's feet. "I highly doubt Top Flights are biodegradable. How many have you hit?"

"Maybe a dozen. What's it to you?"

"I'm the one who's going to have to swim out there to fetch them." Skip's voice remained cool, but his olive cheeks flushed slightly. "I will not have our beautiful reef resembling a driving range."

"Sue me. I'm bored," Jackson said with a shrug.

“Might I suggest a wonderful, cleansing mud bath. Your wife is just finishing one right now and I’m about to bring her these towels. You could follow me and take one yourself.”

“No thanks, I’m not really into that spa shit.”

“Have I mentioned that next to the bath, we have a rainwater collection system that acts as a shower. It’s warmed by the sun and would be the perfect way to clean up. I’m guessing you’re feeling pretty grimy by now.”

“I think I’d rather hit some short irons. My approach game could use some work.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Skip said. “Since you and Mister Dickson are slated for dinner duty — why don’t you try hunting for wild pigs this afternoon?”

“Fat chance. You might have suckered my wife into cooking for you, but you’re not convincing me.”

“Perhaps you would consider a trade?”

Jackson shielded his eyes so he could better look into Skip’s face. “What kind of trade?”

“You give pig hunting a try and I tell you whether someone referred you to Camille Spa.”

Jackson pulled off his glove. “That’s it?”

“You are interested to know, yes? All you have to do is learn how to throw a spear. It’s easy.”

“And you’ll tell me who sold us out?”

“If somebody referred you and your wife to us, I will divulge that name to you.”

“Deal. Where do we meet?”

\* \* \*

“Here, you gotta put this on.” Han offered Jackson a small canister of black makeup.

“You can’t be serious, Han.”

“It will be cool. Like we’re in the Lord of The Flies or something.” Han stripped off his “Beam Me Up Scotty” T-shirt and smeared black stripes across his belly.

“Don’t use too much,” the spa director said. “You don’t want to scare the dogs.” The panting canines at Skip’s feet looked up at Han with amusement.

Han tried to hand over the makeup again, but Jackson patently refused. He certainly wasn't about to go primitive while wearing tennis shoes and a short-sleeved Polo shirt at the same time.

Skip handed fiberglass spears to both men. Han's spear was red, Jackson's blue, and both had wicked silver tips.

"Gentlemen, these spears are longer and heavier than the ones we use underwater. They are equally good for throwing or thrusting. Unless you've had a lot of practice with this, I would recommend not trying to throw the spear farther than about ten yards — which means you are going to have to get pretty close to the pigs in order to drop one. The pig run is bordered by the ridge on your right, the beach on your left, and a rock jetty about mile and a half straight ahead. If you stick to the path you can't help but run across their footprints, which look like two big toes. Here's an example right here."

Jackson and Han crouched down with the spa director and followed his finger. "You see, all the tracks stay in a narrow line. They like to travel single-file. This is about the time the pigs forage, so you should be in luck. I'm going to send Fountain and Valley with you. They are experienced brush beaters." Skip scratched the pair of German Shepherds behind their ears and they yelped in agreement. River, the young Chocolate Labrador, protectively hung tight to the spa director's legs.

Holmsley gripped his spear and tested its weight. He considered going back to Ratko's bungalow to appropriate the commie's pistol. It certainly would make a more effective weapon than this oversized lawn dart.

"What's that?" Han pointed to a crumbling wall at the head of the trail. Tendrils and exposed roots covered the fallen stones, using them to support a network of larger tree branches, which had clawed through the gaps in the waist-high wall.

"That used to be part of a phosphate mine. Camille Cay was too far out of the way for VICORP's sugar mill operations back in the day. But various prospectors have tried to find everything from copper to gold on this island at one time or another. Can you see how the stones are systematically being dismantled by the greedmonger of the plant world? All these branches are part of a tree called a manjack, or a strangler fig. It hangs down those air roots, which thicken once they reach the ground, and eventually help support the tree as it expands."

Han scanned the length of the overgrown wall. "This is all one tree?"

“Hard to believe, but true. Not only does this strangler fig overrun anything in its path, but it sucks all the nutrients out of the soil, which prevents anything from growing underneath it. The only thing it produces are these little figs, which actually taste pretty lousy unless you mix them with tons of sugar. Well, good luck to you. Happy hunting.”

\* \* \*

“I’m telling you, the SPX is the way to go,” Jackson said as they followed the dirt path downhill through the pig run. The German Shepherds sprinted ahead of them and seemed more interested in biting each other’s tails than hunting.

“It’s got a range of 3,690 miles — which is 600 miles greater than the Hawker 800. You can get from New York to LAX an hour faster than the Lear 60 or the Citation VII, and it has a lower operating cost per mile than the Citation V Ultra. Mine’s got the best of everything, a top-end entertainment center, office, dressing room, even a heated luggage compartment. Cost my company \$15.1 million, but so far it’s been worth every penny. Jack Nicklaus told me that he was thinking of getting one too.”

“Hey, you know the Golden Bear?”

“We’ve played a few rounds together. He spots me twenty strokes a round and I buy the drinks in the clubhouse afterwards.”

“You know, I’ve actually met him once. Of all places, it was on a plane ride back from Thailand. We sat next to each other in business class — he was coming back from some celebrity event and I was returning from a software conference. Actually, this is funny story. While I was in Thailand, I’d arranged to meet with the CEO of this manufacturing company we were thinking of buying. But here’s the catch: this guy, Mr. Thien, will only sit down with us if we meet at his favorite strip bar. He insisted that the sight of naked flesh clears his mind for business.

“So against my better judgement, we meet down at this place called ‘The Crystal Palace.’ It wasn’t a very large club, but it did have high, vaulted wood ceilings and lots of bamboo chairs. The room was pretty dimly lit, with three or four stages spaced around the main floor. Each stage featured a young Thai girl stripping for the audience.

“But that’s not the thing I noticed right away. The entryway was above the ground level, and as you descend the stairs, you could see that all the tables in the club were made of glass. From above, it looked like a bunch of brown and yellow dogs were under

all the tabletops. But as you got closer, you realized that it wasn't dogs... it was girls. We were escorted to a large, circular table, with close to a dozen girls huddled under the glass. All of whom, mind you, were buck naked. There was at least one girl for every guy at the table.

"As soon as we sat down, the girls started moving. First they crawled over to your chair and unlaced your shoes. Then they pulled off your socks and started sucking on your toes. After a few minutes of that, they started doing things with your feet that modesty prohibits me from describing — and the kicker was, you could see it all through the glass tabletop. It was like one gigantic snakepit; writhing flesh everywhere.

"My team has already gone through the formal introductions, so Mr. Thien immediately begins the negotiations. He's speaking passable English, with a translator helping bridge the gaps. So understanding him isn't a problem — I'm just having some difficulty not being distracted by the naked teenager doing the splits between two chairs on the stage. Not to mention the tangle of girls under the table playing footsie with everybody.

"We're trying to hammer out back end points, distribution ports, and product liabilities. Meanwhile, I'm squirming all over the place and sweating like a pig. I've got to bite the back of my hand to keep from moaning. Meanwhile, this CEO hasn't even cracked a smile.

"Surprisingly enough, I manage to keep my concentration just long enough to grunt and nod when Mr. Thien asks if the terms are agreeable. At that point, I probably would've agreed to buy swampland from Michael Milken. I'm going out of my head just sitting there.

"I must've surprised him by agreeing so quickly on the deal, because he finally broke into a big grin and called over the teenage dancer. He pulled out a \$20 U.S. bill, whispered something in her ear, and ordered up another round of drinks. The girl comes over, and I swear she can't be older than 16. She was tiny, maybe 5'2", but perfectly proportioned. Big almond eyes, golden skin, and had that Thai way of looking at you, all shy-like and innocent.

"She starts to dance in front of me, kind of swaying side-to-side to the music. I seem to remember that it was a Beach Boys song. 'Barbara Ann,' I think. Then she grabbed my tie, hopped up on my thigh, and started riding my leg like we were going neck-and-neck down the backstretch at the Kentucky Derby. I didn't know whether to laugh,

neigh, or say ‘mommy.’ Then she turned around, sat full-on in my lap, and started to do that little side-to-side dance again. Let me tell you, it sure did take my attention away from what the other girls were doing with my feet. I couldn’t do anything but sit back and feel like a dirty, old Santa Claus.

“It wasn’t until afterwards, when we were in the limo heading out to the airport, that I realized my wallet was missing.

“I mentioned it to Mr. Thien, who had a good laugh at my expense. He pointed to a money belt tucked around his waistline. As I said, his English was passable, but it did take some ugly pantomiming on his part to describe how the dancers are able to work the wallet out of your pants with their pelvic gyrations. Then — without using their hands — they grip the wallet with their... ah... you-know-what, and drop it down to one of their co-workers under the table. He explained that the wallet would be stripped clean and long gone by the time we got back to the club.

“I told him not to worry about it. I’d only had a couple hundred dollars in the wallet, and the toe sucking and lap dance had been well worth the money they took. The CEO seemed to approve of my response, and he promised to take me back to the club the next time I was in town.

“Unfortunately, right after our meeting, Mr. Thien was arrested for some old war crimes and the deal fell through. So all told — including the money from my wallet — I probably lost fifty grand of time and manpower working on that deal. But when I got home, I did learn a very valuable lesson.”

“Get out of the Asian marketplace?” Jackson ventured.

“No, that wasn’t it. While I was relaying this story to Mr. Nicklaus on the plane ride home, I put in a call to my office. They informed me that during the time we were in the air, SuperNova’s stock had jumped by three points. Just like that, I’d made another 40 million dollars. So you see... it didn’t really matter what I did over in Thailand. Lose a deal, get my toe sucked by some underage hooker, watch Hogan’s Heroes in my hotel room — my company was going to keep making an obscene amount of money regardless. The Golden Bear and I both agreed that life is better when you quit worrying about the nuts and bolts of making money, and just do stuff you really enjoy.”

Jackson nodded, but he didn’t really see the point of Han’s story.

“Look,” Han said excitedly. “There’s some tracks right here.”

Jackson stopped. “Hey, where did the dogs go?”

\* \* \*

A freshly scrubbed Sister Glory, her brown hair pulled back in a short ponytail, sipped her guava juice and sighed. The makeshift shower — which consisted of an oversized water tank strapped to a palm tree, a steel nozzle, and a pull-chain — had felt divine. Afterwards, she'd gone back to her cabaña and changed into a new, white cotton dress.

Returning to the courtyard for her lunch duties, she found that Lucia had made fresh-squeezed juice for the ladies. Taking another sip, she could feel the sugars coursing through her body. Eyes closed, the sun warming her face, Gloria thought: *You know, this spa isn't half bad.*

Marcella and Katya joined her in the courtyard minutes later. Like Gloria, their skin was pink and shiny.

Katya said, "I know what I'm doing again tomorrow."

"Count me in," Marcella echoed. "I could spend all day in that mud bath."

"Next time I'm not wearing that Marc Jacobs suit."

Marcella joked that maybe tomorrow they shouldn't wear anything at all. Katya agreed that it would probably feel even better that way.

"I promise not to be embarrassed if you promise not to be," Marcella said.

"Me get embarrassed? Please — you're the one with the better body."

Sister Glory kept her mouth shut, choosing instead to drink more guava juice. She marveled at how quickly her food partners had gone from mortal enemies to best buddies. Ah, the power of a good mud bath.

Lucia emerged from the outdoor kitchen. She carried a metal grater and a brownish root that was as thick as a cucumber. "You enjoy de soak den?"

The three women heartily agreed. Lucia said that tomorrow, they could go to the mud bath a little earlier so they would have time for manicures and pedicures afterwards.

Marcella looked down at her poor nails. Her polish, which had started off as mini-American flags, was now so chipped that her nails looked like a cross between the Union Jack and the Rising Sun.

"But now, we make cassava bread for lunch. Dis here dey bitter kind of cassava," Lucia said.

She cut the root in four pieces and showed the ladies how to scrape the skin off the root with a peeler. They washed their sections of the root and Lucia gave each woman a piece of a burlap bag. Using the burlap to hold the cassava, Lucia scraped the pale meat against the grater. It spat out slivers the consistency of parmesan cheese on the other side. Without complaint, the women took turns grating their sections of the root.

After everyone finished, Lucia gathered the pile of shredded cassava into a clean cloth and squeezed out the excess water. Then she brought out a sifter and showed the women how to rub the root against the screen, so that only the finest parts got through. All you have to do is add salt to the fine meal, Lucia explained, and then cook up the loaf on a greased baking iron. The leftover, unsifted cassava can be used to make tapioca pudding later, she said.

While sifting the cassava root, Lucia began to sing. Like Aye-Aye, her voice was clear, strong, and unashamed. Her hand pressed the shredded root against the sifter in time to the verses:

*Simon yellow girl  
Girl, who bring you here  
O me nenne o  
Simon eh yellow girl  
Girl who call you here?  
Lord we no want she here*

*Simon eh yellow girl, o, me nenne o  
Who call you here, o, me nenne o  
Simon yellow girl poo poom pe doo  
Simon yellow girl poo poom e doo  
Simon ah go call me nenne o  
Simon eh yellow girl o poor me  
Simon yellow girl o poor me*

Marcella was in awe of Lucia's singing voice. She wanted to join in, but given last night's blow up with Mickey D., the lyric "Lord, we no want she here" hit a little too close to home. The lyric also provided a reminder that she had been putting off going to church for too long.

Leaning over to Sister Glory, Marcella quietly asked if she would be willing to minister to her later, adding that she had some things to confess.

Don't we all, dear, Sister Glory whispered back. Don't we all.

\* \* \*

Jackson was totally disoriented. During Han's story about the strip club, he stopped paying attention to which direction they were walking. And now the dogs had deserted them. Typical mutts.

At the head of the pig run, the path had been wide enough to race ATVs. But as the trail wound its way through the low shrubs, ankle-high rocks, and open patches of dried leaves, it began to narrow so much that Jackson and Han could barely walk shoulder-to-shoulder without getting their spears caught on fern shoots and flat banana leaves.

The palm trees grew closer together in this section of the island. Instead of the smooth trunks like the ones ringing the courtyard and Hearn's beach, the palms here were more rugged, with jagged cross-hatches of bark sticking out at every angle. Wispy brown vines hung from the lower leaves, draping the rough trunks with mossy veils. The canopy of leaves was so thick overhead that at times the two men lost track of the sun.

"Which way was the jetty again?" Holmsley wondered aloud.

"Pig tracks," Han said, pointing. "A bunch of them."

Jackson saw that Han was right. The two-toed tracks bisected their current path before disappearing into a waist-high break in the bright green branches. Holmsley wiped his brow and wished that he had a tall glass of ice tea. His Polo shirt clung to the back of his neck and chafed his underarms.

The heat was causing the black streaks across Han's prodigious belly to smear and run. "Maybe the dogs smelled something. Do you think we should set a trap?"

"Look, Han, we don't know if those tracks were made five minutes or five months ago."

"Skip said this was the time the pigs did their foraging. We could just wait here a while longer."

"And to think I could be hitting my Big Bertha right now."

"I've got an idea." Han pointed to a rock on the opposite side of the pig tracks that was shaped like a coffee-table. "Why don't I stay here, and you climb up on that rock. That way when the pigs come through here, we'll have them surrounded."

"If the pigs come through here, the last spot I'm going to stand is where you're planning to throw your spear."

“Good thinking, Jackson. See, you’re a natural at this!” Han paused. “Wait a second, did you hear that?”

The birds seemed to quiet overhead and Jackson did actually hear something. Barking. It was off to their right and getting closer. Then the sound of crashing and low grunts. More high-pitched barking. It was near, very near, in fact—

Before Jackson and Han could raise their spears, the undergrowth parted with a sea of bristles and pounding hooves. The two men jumped back as a string of wild pigs — with broad shoulders, thick heads, pointy ears, and upturned, toothy snouts — sprinted across their path.

Jackson was overwhelmed by the size of the feral pigs. He’d thought they would be small, pink, and hairless. With curly tails and pug noses. But some of the boars thundering by him were taller than both German Shepherds, and easily twice as wide. Now he wished he was standing on that rock, out of harm’s way.

“AiiieeeeEEEEEE!”

Jackson turned and saw his food partner launch his spear into the fray. Eyes bulging, the computer executive’s face twisted into a mask of primal aggression.

Han’s spear sailed over one of the smaller piglets and thudded harmlessly into the turf.

“Go, Jackson!” he screamed.

Holmsley lifted his spear like a javelin. The line of pigs was thinning and he could hear the dogs almost upon them. Jackson threw his spear just as one of the larger sows sprinted across the path. The tip caught the sow in the hindquarters and it stumbled.

*I hit it, Jackson marvelled. I actually hit it!*

The wild pigs trailing the wounded sow parted and continued through the opening in the greenery. The sow struggled to its feet, dislodging Jackson’s spear in the process. Turning away from the two men, their prey took off down the dirt trail.

Jackson rushed over to pick up his weapon. “Come on, Han, it’s getting away!”

\* \* \*

Bomba dunked a dirty beach towel into the tub of suds and swirled it around. This was probably his least favorite part of running a spa without electricity, having to do laundry the old-fashioned way.

Laundry was never an issue for Bomba while growing up. His father ran one of the few black-owned hotels on St. Croix, and Bomba's family lived in a corner suite overlooking the ocean. Every morning, a newspaper and continental breakfast magically appeared on their doorstep. While Bomba was at school, all the dirty plates were whisked away, the linens changed, and a mint put on everyone's pillow.

The young Bomba learned his love of languages hanging out in the hotel lobby, listening to his father deal with the never-ending stream of guests who'd flown in from all corners of the globe.

It seemed like a perfectly normal way to spend one's childhood. He didn't realize any differently until his first sleepover at a friend's house. Bomba watched with fascination as his buddy's mother bustled around the kitchen making dinner, chopping potatoes and peeling vegetables. Then, after eating, everyone in the household pitched in to clear away the dishes and scrub the pots and pans. Bomba helped dry the water glasses, thinking that it was the coolest thing he'd done all year.

After that evening, he started spending his free time in the hotel's kitchen and laundry room. Initially, the laborers thought Bomba was a spy sent by his father, but they eventually took a liking to the engaging lad, who was uncommonly gentle for someone nearly six feet tall and still in elementary school.

In the bowels of the hotel, Bomba learned a host of new dialects and began to see a different picture of his father. Instead of idolizing the man who took his family to Europe every Christmas vacation, the recent immigrants from islands like St. Kitts and Antigua would tell Bomba about the times they worked double shifts without the extra hours ever registering on their paychecks. They would speak of random firings, sometimes for such minor infractions as not saying "Good day" to a guest while passing by in the hallway.

From the kitchen staff, Bomba heard about how his father would occasionally have a bottle of the hotel's finest champagne delivered to the room of a cute, single vacationer, only to later be seen slipping inside himself for a nightcap. Bomba was never sure if his mother — who mainly spent her days inside the gated pool area playing with his younger siblings — noticed his father's wanderings or even cared.

Personally, Bomba always suspected that his knowledge of his father's overly-solicitous behavior is what caused him to be sent off to boarding school in the States.

Bomba found it mildly ironic that if not for matriculating in Pennsylvania, he would never have hooked up with Skip and come to Camille Spa. Thanks to boarding school,

Bomba found the means of striking a blow against island oppressors like his father. And in the process — more irony here — he would be required to make up for all the chores he'd missed in his youth.

Careful not to dip his long dreadlocks in the bubbles, Bomba leaned over the tub and quietly asked Virginia, "Did you hear about Skip making off with that dude's macaw?"

"Lucia tol' me 'bout it," she whispered back, glancing nervously at the trees.

Bomba handed her the soapy towel, which she wrung out and dunked into a basin of clean water. Keeping his voice low and relying on the splashing sounds as a cover, he ventured the question, "Doesn't seem a little drastic to you?"

"Skip tol' Lucia it was de only way to get dat man's attention."

"I think it stinks. I don't care if this is a trade deal; there's no reason to stoop to bird-napping." Bomba started in on a pile of dish rags, using a stiff-bristled brush to work out the stains. "I think Skip needs one of your massages big time."

"I try yesterday. But he won' let me."

"Maybe I need to sit on him just so you can give him a rub-down. Skip's getting so uptight you could start playing the steel pans on his ass at the next beach party."

Virginia started giggling.

"I'm telling you, he's been acting erratic lately," he said. "I don't know if I can hang around if he keeps this up."

A look of concern passed across Virginia's face. "You should know not to spread commess 'bout Skip. 'Sides, you two move so well together."

Bomba realized that they'd risked enough by talking out in the open. He wasn't sure why the bird-napping bothered him so much. In a more normal tone of voice, he asked Virginia how the guests were treating her.

"Number two make sweet eye and show me dey pilly today." Virginia started pinning up the clean beach towels on a clothesline. "Dat Mickey D. jus' like Ratko. Dey both rammish and hot-skinned, thinkin' dey can get in with me."

Bomba was impressed. Usually it took a whole week for a guest to work up the desperation and courage to make a play for Virginia. "So they begged you for a piece of the thing?"

"For sure. But you and I know good talks ain't enough." Virginia reached out and trailed her smooth fingernails down Bomba's wet forearm. "I know he hands up plenty. His hand sweet."

Her touch sent shivers down his spine. “So what’s next for you?”

“Sweep rooms. Den gotta give a massage to Mister Dickson later. At least he no make a pistacle. He a gentleman.”

\* \* \*

Behind him, Jackson could hear the dogs barreling through the bushes, still chasing the string of pigs. All other sounds were blocked out by the blood pounding in his ears as he followed the wounded sow.

Even with a bleeding hip, the feral pig maintained a large lead. On a long straight-away, Jackson caught flashes of white bristles, but lost sight of it when the narrow path curved again. He kept pushing himself forward until the path split into a Y, forcing him to halt.

“Which way?” Dickson panted, catching up with Jackson. The fatty curves in Han’s upper chest quivered with each breath.

Jackson saw that the droplets of red in the dirt continued along the path on the right. “That pig can’t keep this up forever.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I do know one thing, I can’t keep this up forever.”

“Don’t wimp out on me now, Han.” Jackson switched his spear to his left hand and took off down the right fork.

At that moment, Han would’ve given big money for a Pizza Hut delivery. But instead of tormenting himself with the thought of a large, deep-dish pepperoni and sausage pie with extra cheese, he wiped the sweat from his eyes and followed after his food partner.

The path began to climb, and Jackson felt his knees register a complaint. He noticed that the splatters of blood on the ground were becoming a steady stream. *It must be slowing down*, he thought.

The trail bent sharply and ran up against a wall of rock. The cliff was sheer and thick with foliage. No way for a human, let alone a pig, to climb it. The path continued alongside the ridge, but collapsed so much that Jackson would’ve had to turn sideways to continue.

He checked the dirt and lost sight of the red droplets. Backtracking, he nearly ran into Han. “You’re trying to kill me, right?” the larger man asked between gulps of air.

“I think it went into the brush,” Jackson said. “See how the blood trail just ends right here?”

Grasping his sunburned thighs, Han peered down at the nearly impenetrable row of greenery underneath the ridge.

“Poke your spear in there,” Jackson said.

Han stuck his red spear between some leaves and rattled it around. Nothing. He tried another spot, but only succeeded in knocking more dust into the air.

“Maybe we should try calling the dogs,” Han suggested.

“It’s gotta be around here somewhere. Keep trying.”

“I don’t see why I’m the one that’s got to mess around in the bushes while you just stand there and— HOLY SH—!” Han didn’t even get to finish his curse when the wounded sow broke out of the fern in front of him, causing him to pinwheel and fall backwards.

The feral pig, bleeding and limping, did not try to follow the path along the ridge. Instead, it doubled-back, heading directly at Jackson. The businessman lowered his spear at the onrushing sow. He zeroed in on the bristles between the pig’s beady eyes and hard snout. Snarling himself, Jackson drove his spear into the sow’s breast. Its own momentum buried the tip deep and the pig dropped to the dirt, pulling the fiberglass shaft out of Jackson’s hands. This time the sow made no attempt to get back to its feet.

“Wow. You really killed it,” Han said with admiration.

Jackson put his foot down on the fallen pig and yanked out his spear. He tried to will his heartbeat to slow down. Everything around him felt alive and in-focus. He forgot how much he missed the hunting trips he used to take twice a year, back when he had the energy for things outside of the office.

Han looked down and realized — now that it was still — the pig was at least four feet long and probably weighed several hundred pounds. “Uh, Jackson. How are we going to carry this thing out of here?”

\* \* \*

Gloria couldn’t remember the last time she’d done a one-on-one session, but the desperate look on Marcella’s face made it impossible to turn her down. She felt like an

imposter — trying to minister to someone without her wig, make-up, and a studio audience.

Nevertheless, she suggested that they hold their service on the beach. Marcella thought that would be a grand idea.

As she knelt in the sand with Sister Glory, Marcella relished the quiet. Unlike San Antonio, there was no traffic, no planes flying overhead here. The only sound on the beach was the rhythmic lapping of the languid shorebreak. She wondered if heaven could be any more peaceful.

“Holy Father, we give thanks this morning for your grace and protection,” Sister Glory intoned. “You have sent us peace and natural beauty in the form of this spa, and for that we thank you. The shower today was a special treat, but we still wish, though, that you could provide some porcelain facilities for us to take a proper bath. For as you know, Lord, there is no better way to communicate directly with the holy spirit than with the aid of a two-hour soak with just the right amount of bubbles and bath crystals. Especially those liquid-filled balls from the Body Shop. You know, the ones that smell like jasmine.”

Marcella opened her eyes, but kept her hands firmly clasped in front of her. “Uh, Sister?”

Sister Glory cleared her throat. “Anyway, Lord, sorry to go off on a rant there... but if you could work on the bubble bath thing for us, we’d all be very appreciative. Amen.”

“Amen,” Marcella repeated. She didn’t think she’d ever heard the Lord’s prayer done in quite the same fashion.

“I’m afraid the closest thing we have to a confessional booth is the outhouse, so we’ll just have to wing it without one.”

“Okay.” Marcella genuflected and instinctively closed her eyes. “Bless me Father— I mean Sister, for I have sinned. It’s been four weeks since my last confession. In the past month I’ve had, um, unmarried relations on several occasions, lied to my mother, taken the Lord’s name in vain, and coveted Leandra’s Toyota 4-Runner every time I see it.”

“Leandra?”

“Leandra lives across the street, and she always parks the car right out in front. It’s the special edition model: white, gold alloy rims, tinted windows, with a 4.0 Liter, V-6 engine and the heavy-weight chassis package. It’s my total dream car and don’t think that she doesn’t know it too. I know that she bought it just to spite me because her

husband, Miguel, came on to me at our block party last summer. Now Miguel, he's got a good job as a foreman at MMI and all Leandra does all day is sit around, eat those chocolate-marshmallow pinwheels, and spend Miguel's money. I even told her that I wanted—“

“Hold on, hold on,” Sister Glory interrupted. “We'll get to your neighbor's car in a minute. First, I'd like to go back to the unmarried relations. When you said ‘several occasions,’ how many times would that be exactly?”

Marcella scrunched up her face in thought. “You mean since my last confession?”

“That's right.”

“Um... my priest at home says it doesn't count if the guy doesn't, you know... spill his stuff.”

“You don't have to include those if you don't want to. How many times then?”

“Sixteen, I think.”

That didn't seem like such a huge number to Sister Glory. For one month's time, that's only once every other day. “And how many different partners are we talking about here?”

“Just one.”

“Mickey D.?”

“Yep.”

“So you spent the last month with Mickey D.?”

“No, I just met up with him at the airport about four days ago.”

Sister Glory paused. “Wait, do you mean to tell me you and Mickey D. have had sex sixteen times in the past four days?”

“Well, nineteen if you count the times he didn't spill his stuff.”

“Doesn't that seem like a lot to you, Marcella?”

“I suppose. But we haven't seen each other in a while. Look, I'd really rather not talk about it.”

The freckled preacher nodded, but she wasn't quite ready to move on. Rocking back on her knees in the golden sand, Sister Glory said, “Just one more question. Is it really true what they say — that he's ‘gifted’ in the member department?”

“Excuse me, Sister?”

“You know. His thingy. His pixie stick. Is it as big as everybody says it is?”

Marcella was slightly taken aback. She'd never gotten into this kind of detail during a confession before. But Sister Glory had to be a good minister if they let her be on TV. "It's not the length that's surprising," she admitted. "It's the width."

"Like a large banana?"

Marcella hesitated.

"Go ahead, you can tell me," Sister Glory said piously.

"More like a can of soup."

"Would that be the 15 oz. or 19 oz. size?"

"What?"

"Never mind. I have noticed that there's been some friction between you two."

"I'm not sure if I want to get into that."

"This is a confession, Marcella. Remember, we are all children in the eyes of God."

"Well, we've had some disagreements the past few days. And Mickey D. has said some things that I really wish he hadn't. But I keep thinking that there is a good person in there, you know. I just think he needs more time to really get to know me."

"Would you like me to talk to him about your feelings?"

Marcella's eyes lit up. "Would you, Sister?"

"Of course, dear. It would be my pleasure. I'm sure I can smooth things out for you in no time. Now let's go see if our cassava bread has finished cooling."

\* \* \*

Jackson had to agree. Carrying out the dead sow was going to be more difficult than killing it in the first place. Jackson realized that he'd been so blasé about this afternoon's activity, he never insisted on the normal trappings of big game hunting — a knife, game bag, tarp, rope, and a dirty Sherpa making \$3 a day to do all the heavy lifting.

"We can't leave it here," Han said.

"We're not gonna leave it here. I killed it, I'll get it back." Jackson scanned the foliage. "We need to find a long branch. Something thick enough to support the pig's weight."

Finally, his eyes stopped on a tamarind tree whose roots blended into the base of the rock. The top of the tree soared above the lip of the ridge, and there were several young

branches about five feet off the ground. Jackson pushed his way through strands of ivy in order to reach the trunk. The most suitable prospect was near the rear of the tree, up against a wall of gray stone.

Jackson grasped the branch with both hands and pulled down with all his weight. It bent, making a sound like the seams being pulled out of a cheap suit, but did not give. "Han, give me some help."

The software CEO grumbled, but joined Holmsley at the back of the tree. Han stood the farthest away from the trunk, hung from the branch, and lifted his feet off the ground. Jackson did the same and against their combined weight, the limb held out for a few seconds more, then broke off. In the process, the branch pulled off a section of bark the size of a golf divot.

Han shook his hands in pain. Jackson looked at where the branch had separated from the trunk and asked, "What the devil is that?"

Following Jackson's finger, Han could see something thin, white, and rubbery inside the pocket of missing bark. It was exposed for half an inch, before disappearing back into the tree. "Is it a maggot? Maybe sap?"

Jackson squinted. The object was too imbedded in the wood for him to get his finger around it. "Looks like a wire. Some kind of cable."

"Could be. Maybe it's something left over by that VICORP sugar refinery Skip told us about."

"Why would they have wires in a tree?"

Han shrugged. "Hard to say. I can't even tell if that's really plastic in there."

"Well, now I'm sure that something funny is going on here," Jackson said. He didn't feel the need to tell Han about the conversation he'd overheard between Skip and Ratko. A plan was forming in his mind, and Jackson wasn't yet sure if he wanted to include Han or not.

"Of a more immediate concern, how are we going to tie the pig to this branch?" Han asked.

Holmsley pointed at his feet. "Our shoelaces."

"Clever, clever, Jackson."

\* \* \*

Lucia nearly dropped her dishrag in surprise when the great white hunters carried their sow — its breast and hindquarters caked with dried blood — through the courtyard.

The weight of the pig bowed the tamarind branch between Jackson and Han's shoulders. Because their shoelaces hadn't been enough to secure the pig's feet, Jackson needed to reinforce the knots with strips of dried palm fronds. It caused the dangling pig to resemble a burst piñata.

Fountain and Valley, who'd rejoined the two men on their trek back out of the pig run, took turns jumping up to nip at the sow's bobbing tail.

Han carried his end of the branch with difficulty. The stripes of black makeup under his eyes ran in eddies across his puffy cheeks, finally pooling against the tangled hairs at the top of his beard.

Jackson, his yellow Polo shirt stained with dirt and perspiration, shimmered with achievement. His back hurt like hell, but he was not going to slouch in his moment of glory. Like Han, he had to shuffle his feet to keep from stepping out of his unlaced sneakers.

"Skip, I believe you owe me some information," Jackson announced.

Katya looked up from her table and gasped at her husband's appearance. The other two guests in the courtyard, Marcella and Sister Glory, froze in mid-conversation.

The spa director looked up from behind the outdoor grill where he had been scooping jam into small serving bowls. "Hello there, Mister Holmsley. I see you and Mister Dickson have been successful in your hunting endeavors. Just in time for some fresh cassava bread."

"The bread can wait. You know what I want." Jackson dropped his spear and used both hands to heave the branch off his shoulder. The pig fell to the grass beside a flowerbed of blooming white oleanders, giving the dogs another excuse to bark excitedly.

"A very impressive first effort at carting out your kill," Skip said. "A number of former guests, however, have found good success in tying the pig to their spears instead of finding a branch. The fiberglass is lighter and stronger than the wood, plus it frees up your other hand."

Han groaned. Why hadn't they thought of that?

Jackson refused to let Skip derail the conversation. "You owe me a name. Who referred us to this spa?"

“Ah yes. A deal’s a deal. You and Katya were, in fact, recommended to us by a former guest. An elderly fellow who, I believe, hired you for your first job. A man by the name of Donovan Ashlock.”

Jackson could hardly believe it. *Donovan!* He’d been so sure it had been the countess or some financial rival. But not his old friend and mentor. “That can’t be true. Donovan may be pissed that he can’t beat me at handball anymore, but he wouldn’t sell me out like that.”

“Actually, he thought he was doing you a favor. Mister Ashlock stayed with us for two weeks last February and had a grand time. He thought this was as close to Paradise as you could find on Earth. He told us that you and Katya had been particularly stressed lately, and thought you might enjoy the simple kind of rest and relaxation we offer at Camille Spa.”

“That senile old fool! He sends us into Hell, ruins my business, and thinks he’s doing me a favor?”

Skip stopped and cocked his neck. “Hell? You think this is Hell? Look around you and what do you see? Fresh air, flowers, sunshine, flying birds, and a group of women who have worked together this afternoon to make their own bread. Look at yourself, Mister Holmsley. Tell me that you feel no sense of satisfaction for going into the brush with nothing but a spear and returning with dinner for everyone.”

Jackson couldn’t say that killing the pig wasn’t a source of pleasure, so he just crossed his arms and stared back at the spa director.

“I’ve been to your world,” Skip continued. “I’ve been to Los Angeles; the hoards of people all crushed together, radios blaring, pagers beeping, a billboard for some big-budget Hollywood movie thrust in your face every few feet as you creep along the freeway in your overheating car. Nobody meeting your eye. Nobody taking responsibility for anything. Ask yourself this, Mister Holmsley: when’s the last time you actually made anything aside from money? Camille Spa is not Hell. It may not have been the Heaven you and your wife expected, but perhaps that is a sign you need to rethink your idea of Paradise.”

“I don’t know about Paradise, but I do know that I’m not carrying this pig another foot,” Han said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have Aye-Aye come down and start dressing the meat for dinner.”

“I need to wash off before my massage,” Han told the spa director. “I’m gonna need my shoelaces back too.”

“I think you and Mister Holmsley have performed yeoman’s duty this afternoon. We’ll take over from here — and I’ll be sure to tell Aye-Aye to go easy on your shoelaces when he cuts the pig free.”

Katya sidled over to her husband. She ran a hand along his biceps. “Did you two really kill that big thing?”

“I dropped it by myself. Han totally missed with his spear.”

“I’m so impressed, Jackson!”

Gloria dipped a morsel of conch into some garlic sauce that Lucia had contributed to their lunch, and thought over what Skip had said about Paradise. She was beginning to understand how some people could see this spa as worth the money. Not that she would ever pay to come back, but if nothing else Camille Spa was making her appreciate the amenities she had back home. Her plush Mercedes with bucket seats and power windows, a shelf of cold beer in her refrigerator, a deep tub with warm running water — all these things had taken on greater importance to Gloria during the past few days.

Vowing to never again take the simple pleasures in life for granted, Gloria left her seat and walked over to where Virginia was polishing a pile of silverware. If she was going to enjoy the spa for all that it had to offer, she’d better get started. “So, Virginia, that Bomba is quite a man, isn’t he?”

“Sure thing, Miss Gortner.”

“How old is he?”

Virginia flashed a brilliant smile. “Longer in tooth den de ‘cуда, but he more den sharp enough.”

“So... how long have you two been together?”

“Bomba and me? Nary a lifetime.”

“Then you **are** related.”

“In spirit, yea. Always in de spirit.”

*This was going nowhere*, Sister Glory thought. “You two share a cabaña, yes?”

“Of course. Only one t’ be had.”

“And you both share the bed?”

“What a funny question! Share dey bed, share dey life. It all about comin’ together, you know.”

Sister Glory decided to give Skip a try to see if he made more sense. She didn't beat around the bush. Walking right up to the spa director, Sister Glory took him by the arm and turned him away from the group. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but are Bomba and Virginia together?"

Skip's smile was as wide as the horizon. "Hah, you'd think they'd have to be. But they hardly see eye to eye on anything."

"Uh... okay. Thanks."

Sister Glory retreated back to the safety of her seafood appetizer, more confused than ever on the romantic status of the massive Bomba.

\* \* \*

Aye-Aye sat on a woven mat inside his lean-to and chewed on the end of his pencil. A blank piece of paper in his lap, he hummed while attempting to compose his response to his darling Eunice. The words weren't coming.

He looked around for inspiration, but his personal space didn't provide much in the way of stimulation. Aside from his sleeping mat, the only possessions in his hut were a metal bowl for washing, two hurricane lamps, a small rack for his spa uniforms, and a hatbox for letters.

He didn't mind the absence of modern conveniences, but sometimes his decision to work at Camille Spa did not seem particularly wise. Not only was he gone from Eunice for long periods at a time, but given his arrangement with Skip, it was hard to send her money on a regular basis.

A fly buzzed his ear. Like one of his four-legged charges, Aye-Aye absently swatted it away, knowing it would be back.

He heard rustling outside. Seconds later Marcella poked her head inside and said, "Hello."

Aye-Aye tucked the blank paper inside his pocket. "You come to cool out with me?"

"Actually, before it gets too dark, I was hoping you could show me how to brush Pepper. I know you're probably tired from cutting up that pig, but..."

"No problem. Pepper sure do love when she get dey brush." Hopping lithely to his feet, Aye-Aye walked with Marcella to the stables.

He found a pair of hand brushes and showed Marcella how to make long, vertical strokes down Pepper's torso. The gray mare stood perfectly motionless for his unexpected grooming.

Marcella reached up to tickle the back of Pepper's ears. "Thanks. I just needed some unconditional love."

"Oh, Pepper she hardly like anybody. If Missus want dey unconditional love, she should jus' pet dey dogs instead. But Pepper seem to like you plenty."

Marcella shook out her hair and gave him a weak smile. "At least somebody does."

Aye-Aye frowned. "Dat man of yours not treatin' you kindly?"

"I don't know — I haven't seen him since last night. Skip says he's holed up in his room and won't come out for anyone. You know, I don't know what's wrong with me. Here I've got a man that's worth millions of dollars — hundreds of millions — and I go and screw it up. It's not like he hit me or anything. I should be able to put up with it."

"Put up with what exactly?"

"It wasn't much of anything. He's got a temper. But I've got a temper too! I'm sure he didn't really mean those things he said to me."

"He disrespect'd you?"

Marcella started brushing Pepper's forelegs again so she wouldn't have to look at Aye-Aye's sincere face. "I guess so."

"Are you respect'n yourself?"

She really had to think about that one. "Yeah, I do respect myself."

"Dere's your problem den, Missus. Man gotta respect dey woman. Else nobody gonna be happy."

"So, Aye-Aye, how did you get so wise in the ways of love?"

He laughed. "Jus' me and dey animals all day long. Got lots of time to think. I sure know how love can twist one inside an' out."

Reaching into his back pocket, Aye-Aye took out a folded piece of stationery. He handed Eunice's latest letter over to Marcella. She struggled to read the flowery cursive script, but eventually made out the short note.

*Hello Aye-Aye*

*I got the letter what you wrote me and I must say your love to me set me on top of the world. When Alice tell me all what you said about loveing me I tell she I know that before you ever tell her so, because I use to see how you is watching me from afar.*

*I am asking you this favour. I don't even have so much as a red cent in my hand this morning to make tea. I also want to go down to Cinnamon Bay Friday and come back Monday. Alice tell me that we making messages because I want a Suit case. So write back quickley and say if you can help. Look Aye-Aye all my mind is on you.*

*As long as a reel fish has a tail my love for you will never fail.*

*I am,*

*Always your love*

*Eunice Roberts*

“That’s so cute,” Marcella said. “Eunice is your girlfriend?”

“She lives on St. John. We’ve been sweet fuh years, and she don’t ask much. Jus’ some money for dey suitcase. I try to hand up when I can, ‘specially because I think she spending time with other men. But Skip is being licrish lately and right now I’m broke.”

“Did you say licorice? Like the candy?”

“Licrish. Too tight with dey money.”

“Oh. He sounds like the boss I had at a cabaret club back home. He was always a month late — and when he did pay up, you never knew if the check was going to bounce.”

“I know Skip is no tief, he has his reasons. But now I’m a faddy to my buddie’s new kid, who needs a gift. I jus’ hope Eunice can wait a little longer. Den everything will be fine for us.” He put away the brushes and gave Pepper a handful of fresh grains. The sun was going down — turning the overhead sky into sheets of scarlet — and he knew that he should fetch Marcella some bug juice.

“Maybe tomorrow you could teach me how to ride Pepper,” she said.

“Sounds like big big fun. See you tomorrow den?”

“Definitely. Thanks, Aye-Aye, it’s been nice talking with you.”

“Dey pleasure all mine, sug’.”

\* \* \*

Mickey D. could hear the commotion of people in the courtyard. The smell of cooking meat made his stomach lurch.

Peering around a hedge of orange Flamboyants, he spied his target. Good, she was sitting alone at a table. Even better, his Ex was nowhere to be seen. It had taken himself all day to psych himself up for this.

Mickey D. re-tied his leopard-print bandana to make sure he didn't have any stray hairs. He blew into his hand to check his breath again. *Don't forget, you're THE Mickey D. You can do this in your sleep*, he told himself. *Act casual. You know she wants it.*

Keeping his head down, he walked across the lawn and sat down next to Katya.

"Hi there," she said. "We haven't seen you all day."

That's what he liked about her. She'd obviously seen her fair share of celebrities in her time, and wasn't too afraid to talk to him. "Yeah, I've been working on some songs. Just haven't got out much today. Hey, do you remember when that spa guy first gave us the island tour and you asked if you could have a picture with me?"

"Oh, right."

Mickey D. looked over his sunglasses. "So let's do it. I've got a few free minutes."

Katya pulled her silk cover-up tightly across her chest. "Maybe later. I don't have my camera on me right now, and they're about to serve the pig my husband caught for dinner. You're more than welcome to join us, though. I'm sure Jackson won't mind if you sit there. He doesn't think you're the pool cleaner anymore."

Mickey D. leaned in. It was time to go for broke. "Look, I've actually got more on my mind than taking some pictures. What say tomorrow morning you come over to my cabaña and show me the cheerleading routines you used to do to my songs? I promise not to bite... unless you think it will help you come."

Katya brought a delicate hand to her throat. "My! I'm very flattered, for sure. But I'm also very married. Sorry."

Mickey D. pushed up his shades, stood up, and walked directly back to his room.

\* \* \*

Marcella cut into her pork fillet and looked over at Han. Katya had told her the computer nerd was worth even more money than Mickey D. and Jackson combined. Maybe he could give her some clue as to how the minds of these rich people work.

Han certainly looked like the least threatening person here. He'd cleaned up after hunting and put on a powder blue T-shirt that said, "Beam Me Up, Scotty."

Marcella picked up her plate and walked over to Han's table. "Do you mind if I join you?"

He looked up, startled. "No, go right ahead."

"You appeared to be really concentrating. I was curious of what you were thinking about."

"You really want to know?" He put down his fork.

"I do." Marcella gazed deep into his eyes, sure that he was about to unlock the secret to understanding the alpha male.

"Well, I was just sitting here and wondering why you have to put soap in a dishwasher for both the pre-wash and main wash cycles. The dish washer should be able to handle all the washing with the main wash, don't you think? After all, that's its job. Is there really something so special about a pre-wash that necessitates the use of more soap? Or do you think the dish washer manufacturers are in it with the detergent companies and put in two dispensers so people go through soap twice as fast?"

Marcella looked down at her pork and thought: *Maybe it isn't too late to join a convent..*

\* \* \*

Ratko was steamed. He'd been walking all day and had nothing to show for it but dusty boots and a sunburned neck.

The island wasn't that hard to walk across, but aside from the main beach, the other coastlines were difficult to reach. Some sections were nothing but jagged rocks that dropped right into deep water. Other bits required him to cut through the undergrowth with his hunting knife in order to reach mangrove lagoons that appeared to have never carried a human footprint.

After searching the animal pens, he'd even made his way up to the island's peak. The climb had given him a grand view of the water and several scrapes across his knuckles, but no sign of Nikki.

He wanted to take some target practice, but knew he couldn't fire off his SIG Sauer without alerting Skip. Maybe he could empty the chamber and just stalk the spa director — see how many hypothetical head shots he could get on Skip before he noticed.

Ratko lifted up his palm mattress and reached underneath. He couldn't feel his pistol, so he pulled the entire mattress off the bed platform. Nothing was there except the cushion and wooden slats.

"Shatze," he muttered. That bastard, Skip... First his precious Nikki, and now his pistol! Ratko decided that he better hide his portable water pik.

As if to further mock him, he saw Skip's head appear in his open window.

"There you are," the spa director said. "I finally saw a light come on up here. Haven't seen much of you today."

"Where is it?" Ratko growled.

"Your bird? I thought we've been over this. In fact, I was hoping that you would give me a solution to our mutual problem so I could return Nikki to you tonight."

"Not Nikki. My gun."

Skip's head disappeared. Seconds later he pushed through the front door without knocking. "What gun?"

The look of concern on Skip's face confused Ratko. The spa director appeared genuinely surprised at the disappearance of Ratko's semi-automatic.

"A SIG Sauer. I kept it right here."

"Dammit, Ratko, I told you the guests are not allowed to bring firearms to the island! That was part of the deal."

"Do you think I would travel without protection? No way."

"How did you get it past security?"

"Pshaw, it wasn't even a challenge. Frankly, your security sucks."

Skip absorbed that comment with a furrowed brow. "When did you last see your gun?"

"I cleaned and oiled it last night. I did not have it today on my hike and just got back."

"So basically anybody could have walked into here at any point during the day and taken it. That really narrows it down, Ratko. Well, now that I have a new issue to worry about, do you have some suggestions for me about how to solve our old problem?"

"I need more time to think about it."

“Very well. Don’t take too long, though. I think Lucia wants to make kallaloo tomorrow. It’s got vegetables, okra, boned fish, ham bone, and all kinds of other goodies in it. I’d hate for you to find out that Nikki was a last-minute addition to the pot.”

\* \* \*

Mickey D. checked his watch. 10:19 pm. April 19<sup>th</sup> was less than two hours away. It’s a good thing he was so depressed. That way it didn’t matter that he hadn’t eaten anything all day.

He’d ruined things with Marcella (of course, **now** he could remember her name!), been shot down by his masseuse, and blown off by that blonde with the nose job. In fact, the trophy wife wasn’t even interested in getting a picture with him anymore. How was that for a low blow?

Opening his guitar case, Mickey D. took out his trusty Martin. He strummed a minor chord and started into some lyrics he’d been toying with for weeks.

*I got me a dresser  
With two empty drawers  
Tryin’ not to remember  
When they were yours*

*Nothing in the fridge  
‘Cept a jar of mayonnaise  
Ain’t been shopping  
For twenty and one half days*

*Don’t worry about the seat  
No more when I flush  
Finally got enough space  
To lay down my toothbrush*

It still needed some work, but Mickey D. liked the rhymes in the first verse. Maybe he could turn that into the chorus.

He’d been getting into the blues lately, even before the current April 19<sup>th</sup> countdown. Lightning Hopkins, Otis Rush, T-Bone Walker — they spoke to Mickey D.’s fears about his life, musical career, and relationships.

Deep inside, he wondered if he deserved this odd curse. Maybe this was his cosmic punishment for living a decadent, shallow life. Just look at his own pathetic attempt at writing a blues song.

Had he ever really shared a dresser with a woman? Had he ever really shared a life? Pushing these feelings of self-doubt aside, Mickey D. started to sing the lyrics again. He told himself that he didn't need to experience true intimacy in order to write a song about it. *When in doubt, fake it.* It had worked for him time and time before, why stop now?

**FULL OF SLAVES**

***APRIL 19***

Katya diced the slab of cooked ham and couldn't tell if the cubes were too large. She popped one into her mouth to make sure she could chew it without choking.

"I'm off to get the eggs," Marcella announced.

"How many does she need?" Katya asked Lucia.

"Have Aye-Aye pack up two dozen." She gave Marcella a tin cup. "An' fill dis up with milk, if you please."

Marcella was dressed conservatively this morning in knee-length brown shorts and a pink spa T-shirt. Her naturally wild hair was corralled into a simple ponytail. "Is that it?"

"I think we're all good here," Katya said. "Gloria is getting all the spices for the scrambled eggs. She also said she'd pick enough fruit for us to make a big fruit salad."

"When I come back, I'll help y'all cut up the fruit."

"That would be great, Marcella. Thanks."

Katya transferred the diced ham from the cutting board to a glass bowl. She thought about the few times she'd actually gone into her kitchen at home. It was usually to berate the chefs for taking too long between courses.

What would they say if she were to show up in the kitchen and actually start helping them prepare the food? Hah, they'd probably faint. But Katya had to admit to herself that she kind of enjoyed this. You could see tangible results. You cut it up, you eat it. The food even tasted better.

Maybe when they get back, she could even sign up for a cooking class.

\* \* \*

Marcella was looking forward to seeing Aye-Aye's smiling face. She hoped she could sneak in enough time to give Pepper a big kiss.

*What a glorious morning*, she thought. Not a cloud in the sky, and the birds were busy telling the world about it. Marcella pondered whether these island birds ever got bored singing the praises of the sun, day in and day out.

As she made her way up the incline towards the stables, Robert Mendoza's face came into her head again. It had been happening a lot since her conversation with Aye-Aye last night.

Robert Mendoza was her friend Lucy's neighbor. He had a big smile, floppy mustache, husky voice, nice ass, and a moderately-successful car financing business. They'd met at a church picnic two years ago and been seeing each other off and on since then.

He wasn't glamorous. Certainly wasn't ever going to be famous rock star. But he naturally smelled like English Leather cologne, treated her well, and made her laugh.

She'd been keeping Robert at arm's length lately. Even more so after Mickey D. invited her to come with him to the Caribbean. She couldn't help but think of Mickey D. as the Grand Prize. Before this trip, she thought that winding up with Robert would be settling for the consolation ribbon. Now she wasn't so sure.

Marcella had it all plotted out. Mickey D. would fall for her. She'd get her picture in all the magazines with him. People would start to know her name, and it would help launch her dancing career. Maybe she'd even get to do "Cats" in Vegas.

But if professional dancing was her dream, why did she keep taking all those lousy calendar jobs? The photographers gave her the creeps and she couldn't get her oil changed anymore without some bozo leering at her and asking, "Aren't you Miss February?"

She'd been telling herself the modeling was temporary — that the money was helping her hold out until the dancing career kicked in. Now she wasn't sure about that either.

Aye-Aye's words echoed in her ears: *Are you respect'n yourself?*

If she was going to be totally honest with herself, Marcella had to admit that she hadn't been acting that way. If she truly respected herself, she wouldn't have pinned her hopes on Mickey D. making her dreams come true for her. She wouldn't let people take pictures of her in a "Budweiser" bathing suit instead of practicing her kick-turns.

She wasn't sure what she was going to do with Robert when she got back. Maybe she could pen him a love letter like Eunice did to Aye-Aye. *As long as a reel fish has a tail my love for you will never fail.*

"Hello, Aye-Aye!" she called across the animal pens. She saw him stand up next to one of the milking cows.

"Good morning, sug'. Thought you be needin' some of dey milk."

"Yep. That and two dozen eggs."

Aye-Aye said that would be no problem. He asked when she was going to be coming back for her horseback riding lesson.

Marcella explained that it could be a few hours. “First I’ve got to take this stuff back to Katya and see if she needs any more help. Then I’ve got to track down Sister Glory right away.”

“Dey Sister? What for?”

“She was going to talk to someone for me, and now I don’t want her to.”

\* \* \*

“I say we follow Skip and see what he’s hiding,” Jackson said.

“What makes you think he’s hiding anything?”

“Listen, you don’t have to come,” Jackson told Han irritably. “It’s not your company that’s going down the toilet. I can’t wait another 10 days to get off this island, and I’m sure that something fishy is going on.”

Han shuffled his feet in the raked sand of Holmsley’s cabaña floor. “How about if we just throw some horseshoes instead. It’s such a nice afternoon and I’m still full from breakfast.”

Jackson poked through his luggage, looking for something that would be appropriate for a stakeout. What would Bogart wear? Jackson didn’t have a trench coat — and it was far too warm outside for one anyway — so he settled for a dark blue Tommy Hilfiger windbreaker.

“Forget the horseshoes,” Han said. “I’ve got a beta version of a breakthrough data base program on my laptop and maybe forty minutes left on my batteries. Once you see it, even if you don’t know a thing about computers, it will knock your socks off. It’s not too late to get in at the ground floor of this one, and I guarantee the product will sell like hot cakes.”

Reaching into the bottom shelf of his dresser, Jackson pulled out the SIG Sauer.

“Oh, Jesus,” Han said. “Where did you get that?”

“The commie had it in his room. He wasn’t around while they were cooking up the pig, so I liberated it.” Jackson went over to his golf bag and started rummaging through the side pockets. He finally located a small pair of binoculars.

“What are you planning to do with it?” Han was still fixated on the pistol.

Instead of answering, Jackson checked to make sure the safety was on, then slipped the SIG Sauer into his front jacket pocket. Enough of this ridiculous spa, it was time to

take matters into his own hands. Jackson smiled to himself. He wouldn't have it any other way.

"Let's go."

\* \* \*

Mickey D. only stayed in the courtyard long enough to grab some fruit salad and request a morning massage. Skip told him that it would be no problem and asked if he and Ratko would like to spear some fish again this afternoon.

Why not, Mickey D. replied glumly. He made a comment that it will no doubt be the only action he gets today. The spa director pursed his lips, but did not inquire further.

Mickey D. went back to his cabaña and played the blues until there was a knock on his door.

He doubted he was going to have much luck with his masseuse, especially after she'd already dogged him on the size of his dick. But this time, he planned to take a different strategy.

First, he would apologize for his rash behavior the other day. Then, he'd see if she'd like to join him in a rousing rendition of 'Johnny B. Goode.' And if that didn't get her in the mood, he planned to offer her as much money as necessary in order to get laid.

"Come in." He rested his guitar against the bedframe.

His plans came crashing down when he saw that it was Lucia who'd come to give his massage. The older spa worker, her hair braided in a bun, set down a pair of towels and a vial of lotion on his dresser. She motioned for the singer to lie on his stomach.

"Where's the other one?"

"Virginia? She busy. Don't you worry, I give good massage too."

"I'm sure you do. But I was hoping to see the other gal so I could give her something special."

"I know. I heard all 'bout dat. An' if you knows what's good for you, you'll keep your hands outta your pants with me."

\* \* \*

The last time Jackson let Katya drag him on vacation, “doing” an African safari was all the rage. They ventured out of their air-conditioned Hummvee long enough for the guide to give Jackson lessons on how to walk in the bush. Keep your weight evenly between the balls of your feet, the guide instructed. Never pick up your back foot until your front has found a clean landing spot.

Han broke the silence by trampling right through a pile of dry branches and announcing, “Whoops, it’s our turn to make lunch today.”

“Will you keep it down,” Jackson hissed.

There have been large men who were still able to move with remarkable grace — Magic Johnson, John Belushi, Tony Gwynn — but Han Dickson was not one of them. He huffed like Peter Ustinov finishing a 10K and drenched his blue “Don’t Panic” T-shirt with frisbee-sized patches of sweat.

Fortunately their prey was too busy to notice their presence. They followed the spa director for the entire afternoon and had yet to see anything more suspicious than Skip’s hyperactivity.

The spa director never stayed in one place for more than fifteen minutes. First he tidied up the game room, then he walked down to the beach and demonstrated fishing techniques to Sister Glory, then it was sand-raking inside the upper cabañas, followed by a heated argument with Bomba with muffled words but lots of arm waving. Now he was pulling weeds around the courtyard grill.

Jackson peered through the binoculars, which were actually a golf range-finder he’d picked up at Brookstone last month. The GreenFinder Pro® had a laser-guided scope that could measure distances more accurately than any human caddie.

From their current position in the brush above the courtyard, Skip was 146 yards away (a solid 7-iron when Jackson was striking the ball well) as he weeded a patch of dirt. Then the spa director stood up and started cutting up some fresh fruit.

“Let me see,” Han whispered. Jackson reluctantly handed over his GreenFinder Pro®.

Han squinted through the eyepiece. “Ah... very interesting.”

“What?”

“He’s got strawberries down there. It looks they are just starting to turn red. Boy, do those look good.”

“Give me that back.”

“I’m getting hungry. Jackson, we’re wasting the whole day watching Skip do chores. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.”

Jackson looked up from his range finder. “He’s on the move again. You coming?” Han sighed, wiped the sweat from his brow, and followed Jackson down the path.

\* \* \*

They kept a good distance behind the spa director until he entered the wild pig run carrying a baggie of cut fruit.

“What the heck is he doing?” Han wondered.

Jackson silently pocketed his GreenFinder Pro® and made for the treeline. The sun was well past vertical, and the island air was infused with orange warmth.

The foliage thickened, which Jackson found to be a mixed blessing. The canopy of silkcotton trees provided more cover than the skinny palms in the hills, so there was less chance of being spotted. On the other hand, they had to stay closer to Skip for fear of losing his trail. On several occasions the spa director completely vanished from sight, only to reappear just when they were about to give up hope.

Jackson was sure that Han’s labored breathing was going to give away their pursuit, but Skip seemed preoccupied and never turned around when his pursuers were exposed.

They followed roughly the same course of yesterday’s pig hunt, heading slightly downhill towards the coast. Suddenly, Skip veered off the path and plunged through a wall of leafy undergrowth.

The two men were forced into a half-jog to catch up. Han went first, acting like a blocking halfback, pushing away the springy branches. Jackson followed, arms wrapped around his chest. Everything became a green blur. Leaves the size of Mikado fans smacked the side of his head.

And then he was through. Jackson opened his eyes and found himself standing directly behind Han in a circular clearing. They were surrounded on all sides by a ten-foot wall of brush.

“Where did he go?” Jackson mouthed.

Han shrugged. The clearing was small and empty. The only thing of note was a ring of flat stones that resembled Skip’s fire pit on the beach.

They both stood perfectly still, listening for some sign of their quarry. Han started to fidget as Jackson silently counted to himself. Eight seconds... nine seconds... ten.

Han hissed, "Which way?"

Jackson pointed to a small break in the branches to their left. They were about to plunge back into the brush when they heard it. The high-pitched voice was muffled, but the words were unmistakable: "Money shot."

\* \* \*

Marcella had debated with herself all afternoon. Finally, she approached Sister Glory, who was sitting at one of the courtyard tables doing a crossword puzzle.

"Sister, I'd like to talk to you about my confession."

"Yes?"

"Yesterday, when we finished talking about Mickey D., you said that you could smooth things over between us."

"Of course, dear." Gloria looked up and saw Mickey D. walk down the path from his cabaña. He crossed the courtyard in the direction of the beach. "Why, there he is right now. Give me just a minute and I'll take care of it."

Marcella grabbed Gloria's white blouse. "No, Sister, that's what I was going to talk to you about. I'm not sure if I want you going to the trouble—"

Gloria shook off her hand. "Nonsense, Marcella. It will be easy as pie."

She jogged after the singer and caught up with him before he reached the sand. "Good afternoon."

Mickey D. turned his mirrored sunglasses in her direction. "Yeah?"

"Do you have a minute?"

"I was just about to do some spearfishing, but I suppose."

"I wanted to let you know that yesterday I ministered to the young woman, Marcella, that came here as your date."

"Oh really?"

"It was very interesting. She let me know that you two have had some difficulties since your arrival at the spa."

"You could say that. I feel so bad about it that I can barely eat. By the way, though, good fruit salad this morning."

“Thanks.” Gloria had to double her normal walking pace in order to keep up with Mickey D.’s long strides. Even though they were alone on the beach, she leaned closer and dropped her voice. “I thought you should know that Marcella asked me to intervene on her behalf.”

The singer stopped in his tracks. “Intervene?”

“She wanted me to make sure that you got a message.”

“What kind of message?”

Sister Glory took a step closer and tilted her head to look directly up at the singer. Her chin was level with Mickey D.’s sternum. “Marcella wants you to leave her alone. She’s not interested in you anymore. Frankly, I think she has a thing for Aye-Aye.”

“Well, that’s just my luck today.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much, dear. I’m sure you get lucky plenty of other days.”

“Yep. Just not this particular one.”

Even though Mickey D. was wearing reflective shades, Gloria could see the pain and frustration in his face. “Maybe you’re just not asking the right woman.”

“Maybe you should mind your own business, unless you’re volunteering.”

Sister Glory scrunched up her freckled nose and smiled. “The Good Book does say to be fruitful and multiply.”

Mickey D. nearly swallowed his tongue with his good fortune. “Hey, I’ve got a journal that I consider my good book. I’m thinking the spear fishing can wait if you want to follow me back to my cabaña so we can compare chapters.”

\* \* \*

Jackson stood over the ring of stones and saw they hid a manhole-sized opening in the ground.

Bending over, Jackson peered inside. For the umpteenth time that afternoon, he bemoaned the bitch called middle age. His back threatened to lock up on him in this position, and his once-hawklike eyes struggled to adjust to the darkness. The sudden rush of blood to his head made him nauseous.

“See anything?” Han asked. “No? Great, let’s go back then.”

With a grunt, Jackson pulled himself back. “There’s a ladder just a few feet under the opening.”

“How far down does it go?”

“I think I can see the bottom. It doesn't look that far of a drop. Why don't I go first.”

“Wait a minute, here. I don't think I can fit through that hole,” Han said. “Besides, we can't be sure that Skip is in there. For all we know, this could be the island's sewer system.”

“Oh, he's down there all right. I can feel his smugness from here. I'm betting this thing leads to a private boat dock or something. Hold this,” Jackson said, handing over his GreenFinder Pro®. Then he reached into his windbreaker and pulled out the gun. “When Rasta Boy sees this, he will have no choice but to take us off this island. Or to the nearest phone so I can call my office. I can promise one thing: he's going to regret ever crossing Jackson Holmsley the Third.”

Jackson swung his leg over the side of the pit and felt his way for the ladder. Moments later, his head disappeared from view. Han nervously circled the pit twice before deciding. He swore to himself and knelt down to grab a handhold.

The gray walls of the cave had the texture of peanut brittle. As Dickson descended, he marveled at how the crystals in the rock picked up every stray beam of sunlight through the overhead opening and reflected it throughout the cavern. It felt like he was dropping into Studio 54.

Han felt his way down the thin iron ladder and soon joined Jackson in a long chamber that stretched off into inky blackness. “This way,” Jackson whispered, motioning with the barrel of his weapon.

They took about a dozen steps before a shrill voice boomed out “Incoming! Incoming!” The proximity and volume of the voice made Han jump. Jackson whirled and nearly ventilated his fellow vacationer's lost macaw, Nikki.

The bird was perched on the back of a wooden chair that sat incongruously on its own against one of the cave walls. Eyeing the two men as they approached through the gloom, Nikki stuck out his chest and said, “Hande Höch.” The macaw flapped its wings, and Han saw that one of the bird's feet was attached to the chair by a short leash.

“Easy, little one,” Skip's voice called from the dark passageway. His voice got louder as he approached. “Dinner is just moments away, yes? Tonight we have a lovely

selection that is sure to make you sing the theme to— ah... Mister Holmsley, Mister Dickson, how nice of you to drop by.”

Skip’s sleek profile slowly came into view. The spa director carried a plate of cut fruit and shredded lettuce. He did not seem surprised by their presence, nor particularly distressed by the sight of Jackson’s weapon. “Can I get either of you gentlemen something to drink? Coffee? Tea?”

*The boy had ice water in his veins*, Jackson thought with some admiration. Under different circumstances, he might’ve offered him a job on the spot.

“I think you know what we want,” Jackson said. “A boat. A phone. Then we can talk about our refunds.”

“Why don’t you step into my office,” Skip said. He set the plate down on the seat of the chair. Nikki hopped down and gleefully tore into a chunk of orange.

Skip easily slipped into tour guide mode. “I think you will be surprised to hear that this cave is a natural rock formation. Most caves are formed by erosion, but this one was part of the original volcanic activity that created Camille Cay. As the magma that formed the island cooled, it developed air pockets. That’s how you get the quartz-diorite in these cavern walls. Very pretty, yes?”

Jackson and Han followed the spa director around a bend, and the cave began to slowly brighten. A series of small amber lights were set into both sides of the walls at fifteen foot intervals. The air became stuffy, and Jackson felt beads of sweat trickle down his back.

They padded along the sandy floor in silence. Eventually the passageway funneled into a set of concrete stairs. “This way,” Skip said, descending. Each step felt a half-degree cooler than the last. After a ten degree temperature drop, the corridor bottomed out into a long, tiled hallway.

Jackson could see two sets of doorways up ahead. The first pair opened to a fully-functional kitchen opposite a bathroom with a porcelain sink, shower, and toilets. The next series of doors revealed matching bedrooms complete with rows of military-style bunks and footlockers.

The hallway ended in a windowless room filled with a metal desk, hanging file cabinets, and a bank of video monitors. Skip asked if the two men cared for a seat.

“No thanks. We’ll stand,” Jackson said. He pointed to the row of black and white video screens showing live views of every cabaña and common area. From the high

camera angles, Jackson guessed the remote units were mounted in the palm trees. “I see you’ve been keeping an eye on us the whole time.”

Skip said, “Merely a precaution for the safety of our guests. Honestly, we mostly use the cameras to keep track of the dogs.”

“Is that what I think it is?” Han pointed to a circular LED display next to the video monitors. It resembled a screen you’d expect to see in an airport traffic control tower, with a glowing mass in the center illuminated by a sweeping wand of green light.

“Island security, Mister Dickson. A combination of sonar buoys and surface-to-air radar. We’ve got a camouflaged dish on a small inlet not too far from here. Any approaching vessel larger than a tree-branch will set off an alarm. Actually, you can thank Mister Pijasek for our updated system. He negotiated the purchase of the hardware for us.”

“Let me guess,” Jackson said, “you use the sonar and radar just to keep track of the dogs.”

Skip took a seat and assumed a relaxed pose — hands laced behind his neck, feet up on the corner of the desk. “Like yourself, Mister Holmsley, our guests demand a great deal of privacy. Furthermore, most are travelling without their normal security people, so an early detection system is vital.”

“For what — in case you get invaded by Cuba?” Jackson asked. “Or is its real purpose to keep your guests from trying to escape?”

Skip only smiled in response.

“Speaking of escaping, where do you keep your boats?”

“Look at the radar screen, Mister Holmsley. You can see the outline of Camille Cay, yes? No docks anywhere here. I’m afraid we are very much on our own.”

“Fine. You want to play it that way?” Jackson pointed to an empty cordless phone jack sitting on the desk. “Where’s the phone that goes with that?”

Skip shrugged. “The housekeeper has the day off.”

“You look for it,” Jackson told Han. “I’ll keep an eye on spa boy here.”

“Right.”

Once Dickson left the room, Skip said, “I assume that’s Ratko’s missing pistol.”

“I borrowed it, just like you borrowed his bird.”

“That’s a nice SIG Sauer. My family had one just like it when I was a kid. My father was big into personal protection.”

Jackson kept his pistol leveled at the spa director's chest.

"Hard to blame him," Skip declared. "You see, he was the black sheep of the family. My father's father owned the local rum distillery. A regular island baron, my gran'pappy was. Had a big mansion on the north side of St. John with at least five servants for every family member. "

Jackson could hear Han banging open all the footlockers in one of the bedrooms down the hall.

"My father could've lived the life of luxury. Could've sat by the pool swilling banana daiquiris all day. Dashing off for long weekends in Monaco. Running some small portion of his father's business from the back nine of the country club. It would've been easy."

"But he didn't. You see, my father — Mario Moorhead — had this crazy notion that the Virgin Islands belonged to the native West Indians, and not the tourists. Even back then, this was not a popular view. Visitors from the States were starting to buy up huge chunks of land, which sent property values through the roof and in turn filled the governor's tax coffers. The local politicians and certain businessmen — like my gran'pappy — were making out like bandits. He couldn't make the rum fast enough before it was shipped out to all the new hotels and duty-free shops."

Jackson rolled his eyes. "Does it look like I care?"

"In the midst of this so-called progress," Skip continued, "Mario saw the fabric of the islands tearing apart. He understood how — with the influx of continentals — the native islanders were relegated to third-class citizens. Suddenly, the only open jobs for Caribs were as gardeners, pool sweepers, or shoe shiners. Maybe if you spoke 'proper' English, you could get a job at the front desk of one of the four-star hotels — instead of washing dishes or folding towels.

"There was a deep undercurrent of dissatisfaction running through the islands. But who could the people turn to? The governor? Until 1970, the people had absolutely no say in their elected officials. Even today, while they are supposedly American citizens, the residents of the Virgin Islands cannot vote in the U.S. Presidential elections. Did you know that?"

Han appeared in the doorway with a white portable phone. "Found it in the bathroom."

Taking the phone, Jackson noticed a framed portrait hanging above a shelf of unlabeled binders. He guessed the portrait was of Skip's father. They shared the same eyes and cheekbones, but the man in the photograph had a darker complexion and dreadlocks hanging down his shoulders.

"Self-determination. That's what Mario believed in." The more Skip talked, the more he lost his smile. His voice became pedantic, the same monotone he'd used to deliver the Fountain Valley story during their beach party. "Surely you understand. Your whole country was founded on that concept — George Washington, the Revolutionary War, the Declaration of Independence, fireworks and hotdogs every 4th of July. And yet the United States — itself a former British colony — allows our beautiful islands to be subjugated without a second thought. And for what? So we can be another stop along the cruise circuit, a quaint day-trip for shiploads of camera-toting advertising exec's and blue-haired retirees?"

Jackson dialed his office but was unable to make the connection. The phone line simply clicked in his ear. He tried dialing '9' first, then hung up and pushed '0.' No international operator, just more clicking. "What the hell is wrong with this thing?"

Skip paid Jackson's frustration no mind. "First, my father sought to change the status quo within the system. He founded the UPP — the United People's Party — to fight American colonialism. That's when gran'pappy disowned him, but that didn't stop Mario."

"Get me an outside line." Jackson waved the pistol in Skip's direction.

"He started a referendum to secede from the U.S. in the fall of 1979. It was mostly a symbolic gesture, since he knew the puppets in the government were never going to let that happen. True to form, they sabotaged his referendum from the start. My father was labeled every '-ist' you could think of: communist, socialist, Marxist, Maoist, anarchist. The powers that be told the people that, without U.S. protection, the sky would fall down, the stars would go out, and every islander would get a nasty case of the clap."

Jackson held the firearm steady and looked down the gun sight. "Am I going to have to shut your mouth by putting a bullet in your head?"

The question hung in the recycled air. It was quiet enough for Han to hear the hum from the overhead fluorescent lights.

The software mogul watched the two men with growing trepidation. Jackson's back was rigid and his jaw was set forward, lips tight. Skip, on the other hand, kept a relaxed

pose, fingers still laced behind his head. But you could light a cigar off the tension in the cramped room.

“When the political referendum failed,” Skip continued, “Mario came up with the radical idea of raising enough money to simply buy the Virgin Islands back from the United States. It had been over 60 years since the U.S. had purchased the islands from the Danes for the paltry sum of \$25 million. Mario knew it would take a lot more money than that for the American government to pay attention — probably several hundred million for him to be taken seriously. Our family was rich, but we didn’t have that kind of liquid cash. Not that it mattered anyway, since Mario had already been cut out of the estate by that point. So he began soliciting private donations. A few hundred bucks here, a thousand there. Small business owners. Teachers. It was a true grass-roots effort. People were starting to listen and give what they could.”

“Goddamn it, boy, I’ve heard enough of this shit!” Jackson tensed his finger over the trigger.

Skip closed his eyes and Han hoped the spa director would just hold his tongue for a minute. He wanted to jump in and diffuse the situation, but was afraid that any sudden sound or movement would startle Jackson into firing accidentally.

Han couldn’t see how Skip could keep so calm in this situation. Was this some kind of Zen state, or was the spirit of his father whispering in Skip’s ear? Perhaps the serene man seated in front of him heard the voices of all his ancestors — including the Caribs who used bows and poisoned arrows in a futile attempt to keep Columbus and his armada from overwhelming their idyllic islands more than five hundred years ago.

“Even the local union of sanitation workers started a UPP fund. However, before he could generate sufficient momentum, the island’s puppet government made it so hard on my father that the UPP movement fizzled out.”

“Enough.” Jackson brought his second hand up to the pistol’s grip. “Either you show me how to work this phone or I will make your chest whistle Dixie. Now I’m going to count to five. One... two...”

Han blanched. “You... you don’t need to do this.” His stammered words did not seem to register with Jackson.

“Three...”

“Stop counting!” Han shouted.

“He doesn’t think I’ll shoot,” Jackson said. “He’s very wrong. Four... “

The spa director opened his eyes and had a placid, almost bemused look on his face. *Perhaps Skip is really ready to meet his maker*, Han thought. Not wanting to take that chance, he made a dive for Jackson's gun. Lunging quickly onto his left foot, Han lost his balance when his shin clipped the edge of a filing cabinet — sending his overweight body on a collision course with the blue-tiled floor. Han remembered his high school physics teacher saying: *It's not the fall that hurts, it's the rapid halt of acceleration.*

“Five.”

Skip did not lose his smile or even flinch as the pistol roared. The small office immediately filled with the acrid, brimstone stench of gunpowder.

The echo carried through the underground cavern all the way back to the small, hidden cave opening. Nikki flapped his wings and made short hops around the back of his wooden chair. It was hardly the first time he'd heard the distinctive crack of a bullet, and the macaw was smart enough to know that once that sound started, it rarely stopped at just one.

“Medic,” Nikki called out. But nobody was listening.

\* \* \*

Katya knocked a chunk of dirt off the beet's long root tendril and didn't notice when the soil rained down on her white tennis shoes. In the quiet of the garden, surrounded by the linear rows of vegetables and herbs, she felt oddly connected to the heartbeat of nature.

It wasn't her turn to help cook, but since she couldn't find Jackson all afternoon, she'd offered to help Lucia make a big salad for dinner.

Taking off her gardening gloves, Katya ran her thumb over the beet's slick, purplish skin. Once it was clean, she placed it alongside the other vegetables in her wicker basket.

*It's not a baby I want*, she thought. *That wouldn't fix things.*

She backtracked past a row of tomato plants and found the plot marked 'carrots.' Katya pulled up her sundress, knelt down, and used her slender fingers to start clearing out the topsoil around two tufts of green. Lucia never said whether there was a correlation between the size of the carrot and the sprouts above the soil, so she would have to find out for herself. If only her assistant, Janice, could see her now!

For someone who didn't have a job, Katya couldn't believe how busy she'd been keeping herself back home. Mornings with her trainer Jean Claude, afternoons doing verbal jousting with the countess, reading self-help books, stressing about renovations, watching countless Martha Stewart videos, planning one charity event after another, trying to keep track of Jackson's business affairs and commitments — it was all avoidance therapy. She saw that now.

She had surrounded herself with so many other voices — Salvadore the psychic, yoga master Xiong, even long-dead Norse Gods — because she hadn't wanted to hear what her own voice was saying. And now, clear as the blue sky above, Katya's inner voice said: *I'm not happy.*

But didn't she have everything she'd ever wanted? A rich husband, a big house — multiple houses even! — membership to the best clubs, her photo in the society pages, a Saks card with unlimited credit. Wasn't that enough?

That first night at Camille Spa had been different. Jackson was so pissed off, her only thought was to distract him. So she'd put on her sexiest lingerie, flipped her blond hair back and forth, and did a few handstands in the middle of the sandy floor.

It had worked. For a short time they forgot about the lack of basic creature comforts like television, running water, electric lights, carpets, and cell phones. The shared passion had been real, when so many other times the sex had felt... obligatory. That was the word for it all right.

Snuggled in Jackson's arms afterwards, she realized how much she'd missed his smell. With her sweaty back pressed against the cool of his chest, she breathed it in, his musk radiating power and security, its manliness tickling a place in the base of her brain.

When Jackson's breathing became deeper and more regular, she was struck by the realization that it had been nearly a month since they'd slept in the same bed.

After that first night, Katya had not been able to shake the feeling that something significant had happened. It wasn't so much the re-kindling of old passion, but the shock of realizing that it had been missing for so long without her noticing.

Katya used a scoop-shaped trowel to leverage the first carrot out of the soil. Holding the vegetable in the light of day, she saw how a few misplaced thrusts of her garden tool had accidentally nicked its surface. She'd have to be more careful next time.

No, it wasn't a baby that she wanted. She'd been lying to her therapists about that one, and she'd been lying to herself. Just another stab in the dark for an elusive cure. Besides, how could she take care of a baby when she'd been so clueless about herself?

Katya stood up and had to fight back the urge to run away somewhere, anywhere. To shop, to exercise, to do anything but think these thoughts. They were too scary.

*How can I tell Jackson?*

*Would he even care?*

*I could lose everything.*

*No more, Katya told herself.*

*Run. Run. Run.*

But the sun on her forearms, the smell of mint and rosemary from the herb garden, and the whisper of a tropical breeze gave her enough strength to stay.

The Trump's new spa in Palm Beach sounded so tempting right now. Katya knew that she could've gone there and kept herself occupied enough to not be asking herself these difficult questions. For better or for worse, however, Camille Spa was giving her the space and time to confront things that she'd ignored for so long.

Taking a deep breath, Katya got back down on her knees and started digging out the second carrot.

\* \* \*

"File recovery error," Han said from his fetal position on the control room floor. He clutched and rocked his bruised shin like it was a colicky baby.

"What the hell are you doing down there?" Jackson evidently hadn't seen Han's desperate lunge for his weapon.

Han said, "Just checking out the tile work they've got in here. If you look really close, you can see how the corners make a lovely scalloped design."

"Well get up already. You look like a putz." Jackson turned to the spa director and said, "I hope that got your attention."

Skip lifted his feet off the corner of his desk and swiveled his chair around to look at the shattered video screen slightly to the left of his head. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to take that out of your security deposit, Mr. Holmsley."

“You can consider that my warning shot. Now, I have a very important deal to close with Fox, and my office is expecting my call.”

Skip said, “I don’t think so. Spa rules. No contact with the outside world during your stay. It’s for your own relaxation, you see.”

“Does it look like he’s relaxed?” Han asked with disbelief as he struggled to his feet. “Just let him make a few calls and we’ll both wash up for dinner.”

“So sorry. But there are no exceptions.”

Jackson felt his chest tighten. *Who does this fucking tar baby think he is?* There could only be one explanation. “Is this some pathetic attempt at a shakedown? Let me guess, all of a sudden you forget that policy if I leave you a big tip? Considering everything else on this trip, I’m sure your telephone charges are going to be a bargain.”

His tone was sarcastic, but Jackson knew he would pay thousands of dollars for a fifteen-minute phone call to his office. He would get Phillippe on the phone, give his blessing to the Fox contract, tape a voice message to Murdoch, and buy a bunch of that WebScape stock. There would be no way to put out all the fires that would’ve inevitably sprung up in his absence, but he could make a few snap decisions and keep things from going under until he got back.

“This is not a shakedown, Mr. Holmsley. I have no intention of selling you the access code to that phone.”

“Then I guess the next time I count to five and squeeze this trigger, you are going to have to take the cost of a new lung out of my security deposit. One...”

“Not this again,” Han moaned.

“Two...”

“Spare me the counting and unnecessary theatrics,” Skip said coldly. The amusement in the spa director’s voice vanished, and Jackson found himself taking an involuntary step backwards. “You are an exceptional bluffer, Mr. Holmsley. I’m sure that has served you well in your business pursuits. But you are not a killer. If you were capable of shooting me, you would’ve done so already.”

“Just keep talking like that and you’ll find out exactly what I’m capable of,” Jackson said.

Han looked over at the seated spa director and was distracted by one of the video screens. Just to the left of the smoking monitor with the bullet hole, he could clearly make out two guests exploring each other’s tonsils. It was a ground-level shot of the

back of Mickey D.'s cabaña. The camera panned around to show the rock singer and Sister Glory locked in a mouth-to-mouth embrace. In one motion, Mickey D. whipped off Gloria's blouse and lifted her onto a swaying hammock.

"You are not a stupid man," Skip said to Jackson. Unlike Han, they were both oblivious to the action on the video screen behind the spa director's head. "Surely you've realized by now that wounding or killing me is not going to make it any easier to get an outside line."

"Would you look at the size of that," Han muttered.

"Perhaps you're right." Jackson lowered the weapon. "Maybe I'm a humanitarian and not a murderer. But that's why I've got lots of lawyers. Instead of shooting you, I think I'll just sue you for every cent my company loses by your refusal to give me access to a telephone."

"You are certainly welcome to try. I've already told you that our spa has yet to lose a case in court."

The way things were quickly progressing on the video screen, Han was sure the hammock was going to flip over at any second. The room was getting warmer. Or maybe it had something to do with the lack of breathing room in his shorts.

"I have a feeling that my case against Camille Spa will turn out differently than the others," Jackson said with conviction.

"And why is that, Mr. Holmsley?"

"Because I have something that the other plaintiffs didn't have."

"Which is?"

"Proof. False advertising, for starters."

"What sort of proof?"

"We're standing in it. These tunnels. Those lights. All the sinks and beds with mattresses. That first day, you told us that you'd gotten away with saying Camille Spa has 'The Finest Accommodations on Camille Cay' because our huts were the only lodging on the island. But that isn't true, is it? You've got electricity down here, not to mention air conditioning, running water, and indoor plumbing. And I've got Han as a witness to vouch for it."

"You can bet I'll have an inspection team here within hours of my departure. I'm sure you could try to dynamite this little clubhouse of yours, but you'd better make sure to get rid of all the pipes, cameras, and every last inch of electrical wiring. Otherwise I'm going

to come down on this pathetic operation like a sledgehammer. Which do you think is going to cost more: ripping out all your plumbing or paying off my lawsuit? I can't imagine the judge looking kindly on your case — with you living like a king down here while your guests pay millions to shit in an outhouse. Now... shall we talk about that phone call?"

"Bravo. You are truly a gifted negotiator," Skip said with a slight bow. "But I must respectfully decline to cooperate."

"Perhaps you need some time to reconsider. Han, did you see any rope when you were looking around? Han?... Han!"

Dickson looked away from the video monitors sheepishly. "Huh?"

"Rope. You need to find me some rope."

Han wiped his sweaty forehead. With the Mickey D. and Sister Glory video show in front of him, it was difficult to focus on Jackson's words. "What do you need rope for?"

"Don't worry about that. Just get me something I can use to tie up our host."

Sneaking one last glance at the rocking hammock, Han reluctantly backed out of the control room.

Jackson said, "That chair better be comfortable, because you could be sitting there for a few days. Actually it could be more than a week. That's when the helicopter is scheduled to come back, right? I sure hope your bladder is as strong as your willpower."

"Another bluff, I see."

"No, just an insurance policy. I don't want you getting a head start on that demolition before my lawyers get here. I guess you could call this a citizen's arrest."

"You seem to be under the impression that I'm worried about some nonexistent lawsuit. I think you will find it difficult to prosecute any type of case against Camille Spa in these parts. And it will be even harder to move your lawsuit off the islands."

"Why is that?"

"Let's just say that we've been a rather generous contributor to many local political and judicial campaigns over the past decade. Very generous indeed."

"Greasing the local pockets? I thought that would be beneath you, Skip."

"Oh, no. Us Moorheads understand the power of a good bribe. My father was involved in taking the statements from the Fountain Valley jurors who wanted to recant, and was subsequently accused of jury tampering. That time, he greased the right people in the court system to keep from going to jail again. Mario frequently ran afoul of

the law due to his political beliefs — a fact his enemies used against him every time he tried to make a legitimate push for Virgin Island independence. Which is a tragedy, because he was the only one who was on the right track.”

Jackson rolled his eyes, but Skip continued. “Mario understood what it takes to break the cycle of a tourism-based economy. It’s not about political parties. It’s not about armed revolt. It is, however, all about money. Back in 1971, from a jail cell, he penned a letter called ‘The Myth of Sand, Sun, and Surf’ that was widely published throughout the local newspapers.

“In his letter, Mario traced the problems of Virgin Island society to foreign capital, because of how it creates an exploitative relationship between the colonials and the natives. On this subject, he wrote: ‘To fight apathy or corruption in politicians, crime in the streets, racism and discrimination, closed beaches, etc. without attacking the source is like trying to remove a shadow from a wall by painting the wall.’

“Mario attempted to debunk the notion that sun and surf are our only natural resources, and he concluded that economic self-sufficiency was the only means of curing our social ills. My father knew the solution, where he fell short was in his execution.”

Jackson said, “Just keep talking. I’m sure you haven’t used up all the oxygen in this cave yet.”

“Am I boring you, Mr. Holmsley? Well, here’s a little tidbit you might find interesting: Camille Corporation, the parent company of this spa, is now a holding company with over seven billion dollars in assets.”

“Seven billion? I don’t think so. That’s the size of the entire Marriott chain. If Camille Corporation was that big, I would’ve heard of it.”

“Are you sure of that?” the spa director asked. “What if Camille Corporation wasn’t interested in looking big? What if Camille Corporation had its assets spread through a series of seemingly unrelated shell companies? It’s really not that difficult; drug dealers do it all the time. I should know, enough of them have stayed here over the years.”

Jackson mentally charted where Camille Corporation would fall in *Fortune* magazine’s annual list of the 500 top companies. “What would be the point of that?”

“Simple. Do you see that map there?”

He wasn’t sure if this was a trick, but was interested enough to follow Skip’s finger. The map was a couple of feet wide, stuck into the side wall beneath a shelf of black

plastic binders. It showed a blow-up of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. Each island was dotted with dozens of red, green, and yellow push pins.

“Very pretty,” Jackson said.

“It *is* very pretty,” Skip agreed. “And it’s all mine.”

Jackson paused. “Come again?”

“You happen to be pointing a gun at the president and CEO of Camille Corporation, the single largest property management company in the Caribbean. The red pins are hotels, motels, or private rentals where Camille Corporation owns controlling interest. The green pins are for properties where we currently own at least 25 percent. And the yellow pins represent future acquisitions in the next two years.”

Jackson noted that there were far more red pins than the other two colors. “How is that possible? Where did your capital come from?”

“Guess.”

“Drugs?”

Skip laughed.

“Family money?”

“I told you, my father was disinherited. And that didn’t change when I came along. Frankly, I thought it would be obvious — the capital comes from spa guests like yourself. Given the nature of our accommodations, our overhead is less than one percent of revenues. Everyone who works at Camille Spa shares my vision and does not draw a regular salary. As for myself, I may control billions of dollars, but I’ve personally got less than ten grand in my bank account. Everything we make is reinvested into Camille Corporation. The spa alone generates more than fifty million dollars per quarter, which is then distributed through our sister companies. That’s how we started, but now we’ve got additional revenue streams through our real estate holdings. Plus, we’ve attracted several private investors and humanitarians who’ve greatly contributed to our cause through donations and financial planning.”

Holmsley was mesmerized by the amount of colored pins on such prime real estate. If Skip was telling the truth, Camille Corporation vastly outpaced his own company. There was something about Skip’s story that didn’t sit right. “If your company is performing as well as you say, then why are you still running this dive of a spa?”

The spa director pointed at the map again. “To turn those yellow pins into green pins. To turn those green pins into red pins. To take back what is rightfully ours, that which was stolen by the United States seventy-nine years ago.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Revolution. That’s what I’m talking about,” Skip said, his eyes blazing. “The rebirth of the UPP. The rise of the new, free Virgin Islands.”

Jackson’s respect for the man’s financial empire instantly vaporized. He couldn’t help but snicker. “You’re going to use your money to buy guns? I can’t wait to see you guys go up against the U.S. Marines.”

“You haven’t been listening, have you? My father knew that armed revolution wasn’t the answer. He just didn’t quite see the entire ‘Big Picture.’ But I do. Camille Corporation exists solely for the purpose of buying hotels and property in the Caribbean. At this point, we control 43% of the available rooms in the Virgin Islands, and in two years we’ll be up to 61%.”

“Great, so you own a Hyatt or two. So does Donald Trump. What are you planning to do, name them after your daddy?”

“Actually, I’ve got a better idea. I see a day — a day in the not-too-distant future — where everybody who lives, works, and plays in the Virgin Islands will wake up to find the majority of the beachfront hotels have been closed, cleared, locked, and boarded up during the middle of the night. A day where the maids, receptionists, and valets show up to find nothing but irate guests and pink slips for all. What do you think of that?”

Holmsley was stunned. “You would close all your own properties? Put your own people out of work? What good would that do?”

“These islands have lived off the teat of tourism for so long that it’s going to take a big shake to pull them free of the nipple. Well, Camille Corporation will be that shake. Suddenly, the tourists will find themselves out on their asses without any way to get a Tequila Sunrise at the pool-side lounge. You’ll see a mad scramble for the few remaining beds on the islands, while everyone else will be forced to sleep in the airport until they can get on the next flight out of town.

“There will be public unrest, of course. Probably a riot or two. Then NBC and CBS will show up to shoot the opening segment for their nightly news. If we’re really lucky, Wolf Blitzer will make an appearance. And all the while, the only jobs left will be guarding the empty hotels to make sure nobody breaks through the chains on the front

doors. On St. Thomas, the duty-free shops in Charlotte Amalie will be the first to go under. Then the overpriced seafood restaurants along Mosquito Bay. All the T-shirt stands, dive shops, one-hour film developers — they won't last the month. I predict that tourism traffic in the islands will quickly drop by 80%, and not even the off-shore cruise ship excursions will be able to save this house of cards. Economic collapse should be complete within sixty to ninety days.”

“I don't get it. You'd actually want that?”

“In order to re-seed, you must first burn the fields. Ask any farmer. Our people need to find a new way of being. At one time, our islands were very much like Camille Spa is now. Peaceful, no frills, with a strong sense of community. A place where everyone pitched in and all were accountable to each other. We got away from that when the Europeans came. First there were the invasions, then came slavery and the sugar mills. Eventually we traded service to the white man to service to the white man's tourism dollar. We've replaced the plantations with satellite TVs, ski boats, frequent-flyer cards, gold necklaces, and strip-malls. When I walk the streets, I see our local teenagers with baggy jeans and pagers, wearing backwards Yankee hats, eating junk food and drinking cans of Pepsi. Well, that's not **my** culture, that's **your** culture! It's become painfully obvious that nothing less than a total meltdown will rescue my people.”

“Look, if you want to play Stalin with your islands, I really don't care. I wasn't keen on making a return visit to the Caribbean anyway. So just give me a phone, call me a taxi, and I'll be on my way.”

“But you haven't heard my proposition yet, Mister Holmsley.”

“Proposition?”

“Of course. Why else would I tell you my designs for Camille Corporation? I'm prepared to offer you the chance to join our select group of private investors. You've seen what's behind the curtain. Now I'm giving you the chance to be on the same team as the wizard.”

“Do I look like someone who was dropped as a child?”

“Hear me out. Our organization is acquiring properties at a rate of three per month. Given the current interest in Caribbean travel, I can guarantee an annual ROI of 27%, if you meet a certain level of commitment. You don't have to agree with our philosophies, but surely you recognize a prime investment opportunity when you see it.”

Holmsley couldn't help but consider the offer. A guaranteed 27% return on any investment was significantly better than the current bond market. "What sort of stake are you looking at?"

"Thirty million over two years, minimum. Seventy would be more in line with our current investors. You have my word that I will give you ample notice before Camille Corporation pulls the plug on our holdings."

Jackson shook his head. "Do you really think I would hand over that kind of money to some lunatic bent on destroying his own economy? That's funny. But not as funny as Mike Wallace and Morley Safer are going to find it."

With a nervous cough, Han waddled back into the room holding a bundle of blue fabric. "I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find any rope. I brought you some bed sheets, though."

"Those should work," Jackson said. "Tie him to the chair."

Han blanched. "You want me to... to... no, I can't. I was never much of a Boy Scout. I mean I could do a square knot. That was over, over, then through, right? Or was it over, twist, then through? No, that's not it."

"Forget it. Here, you hold the gun and I'll do the rest. If he moves out of this chair, shoot him."

"Gee, Jackson, I don't know if I can..."

"All you have to do is squeeze the trigger. Now don't get all soft on me. Aim for the kneecaps if it will make you feel better."

Jackson traded the semi-automatic for the sheets. He rolled one of the cotton sheets into a twisted cord and ordered Skip to put his hands behind the back of the chair. Skip complied and Jackson found himself crouched behind the chair, straining to tighten a double knot around the spa director's left wrist. Now he'd have the chance to look around on his own. Plus, there was something appealing about leaving Skip in the chair overnight. Maybe 24 hours without food, water, and a bathroom would knock that grin off his face.

The one thing Jackson knew — but hated to admit — was that he could never fire that gun at Skip again. He thought it wouldn't be a problem; even while he was counting down from five that first time. Jackson discovered there was a big difference between hunting for big game and shooting another human between the eyes. The realization of what he was doing didn't really hit until he reached three.

Unexpectedly, the gun started to get heavy, his wrists trembled, and the trigger felt like a hot stove. He was only able to fire the weapon after moving his aim away from Skip's head. The inability to make good on a threat showed naked weakness, and Jackson hated himself for it. So he concentrated on lacing the rolled bedsheet through the back of the desk chair. Once he finished with this, he could find a gag for the spa director's mouth and have some time to figure things out. That's all he needed, just some time to think.

"Get up," a steely voice commanded.

From his knees, Jackson lifted his head and found himself staring down the barrel of the SIG Sauer.

"Step away from the chair."

Jackson forced himself to look away from the deadly black metal eye and was even more shocked to find the hard, flat voice belonged to Han Dickson. The voice sounded so different from Han's usual stammering that Jackson's brain had trouble processing the visual input.

Even Dickson's posture was different. His large curves no longer seemed soft, but had transformed into something powerful and menacing. It was like following a Koala around a corner only to find a fully-grown Kodiak.

Jackson was so stupefied that he hardly noticed the spa director slip out of the unfinished knots. "I'll take that now," Skip said as he walked over to Han.

"Han, what the blazes?"

"You couldn't just sit on the beach, could you?" Han snarled. "You couldn't just sip your rum, enjoy the sunset, and leave your fucking business behind. No, you've got to go traipsing around the entire island in search of a phone! Well, I for one am not going to have you ruin my **whole** vacation."

"Give me the gun." Skip kept his voice gentle, but Han's finger stiffened over the trigger. "Give it to me," the spa director repeated, and the bear reluctantly handed it over.

Han said, "I knew I should've picked Ratko as my food partner."

"But I appreciate your offer to keep an eye on him. Don't worry, you are welcome to extend your stay another two weeks if you wish." The spa director turned to Jackson. "Mister Dickson happens to be one of our largest private donors to the Camille Corp.

Last year both he and Sting gave fifty million dollars to further the cause of Carib freedom.”

Without the pistol, Han seemed to revert back to his old, pudgy self. “Hell, it’s only play money. Plus, I get to stay here whenever I need to detox from life.”

Skip didn’t exactly point the pistol at Jackson, but he gripped it with the ease of someone who wasn’t afraid to use it. Holmsley didn’t have the confidence to make a play for the weapon. His gut told him that Skip would not be extending him a courtesy warning shot.

“So now what?” Jackson looked around defensively and happened to see Katya on one of the video monitors. She was picking through the herb garden, a wicker basket in one hand and some scissors in the other. The picture was black and white, and Jackson was impressed at how beautifully the light caught the curves of her muscled calves beneath the hem of her sundress.

At this moment, he would’ve given anything to be at her side right now. He would’ve ripped up their pre-nup, redecorated the apartment in Paris, even given her a kid. Anything to get out of this Armageddon bunker with not one, but two madmen.

Jackson forced back the waves of panic. “This doesn’t change anything, you know. It’s not too late to save yourself some big-time litigation. Just five minutes with that phone and we can forget this incident ever happened.”

Skip said, “Ah, the continental arrogance, as predictable as the tides. Maybe it’s you who needs to sit in that chair for a few days in order to assess your situation.”

“Don’t you think my wife might get a little suspicious if I suddenly disappeared? It’s not like you can tell her that I just stepped out for a quick handball game.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” Skip said. “But I’m not a total barbarian. Before I tie you up, I will allow you to visit our modern lavatory.”

Holmsley’s bladder felt as though it had been dipped in lemon juice. He was starting to lose his veneer of calm. “What if I can’t go?”

“I’d try real hard if I were you. I’ll even run some water if it will help.”

\* \* \*

Bomba used a dry towel — like he hadn't seen enough of those while doing the washing this afternoon — to knock the dust off the leg of a dining chair. The furniture in the courtyard needed constant attention or it started to look ratty.

He wondered if Skip was watching him right now. *Well, here I am, boss. Keeping the place clean like a good soldier.*

Bomba could remember the first time Skip sketched out the rough outline of what would eventually blossom into Camille Spa. Nobody will pay that much for two weeks at a spa, he'd told Skip after hearing the idea. You don't get it, Skip replied, people will seek us out **because** it costs so much.

We can't offer enough services to make it worth the money, he'd pointed out. We don't have to, Skip said. The class of person who can afford us will be too embarrassed to tell anybody when they get home. Just think what the money could do, Bomba. We could give the Virgin Islands a whole new start. No more poverty. Wipe out centuries of degradation. All we have to do is put up with some snobby guests and everything will take care of itself.

We're gonna get busted, he'd said. We're not doing anything illegal, Skip pointed out. Besides, if somebody tries to sue us, we'll be able to afford the best lawyers. Don't worry, I've got connections.

Bomba certainly couldn't argue with that. The Moorheads were one of the oldest and most networked families in the Caribbean. One of Mario's brothers was the president of the St. Croix teachers union, and another had become a Senator. In fact, Skip's grandmother, Esther Moorhead, had been so tight with the Islands' first elected governor, she used to call him "Uncle Melvin."

That was before Governor Melvin Evans took Mario away for an old armed robbery charge with the help of federal marshals, carrying rifles and sub-machine guns. After that, Esther went around telling everyone that Uncle Melvin was "a Christian who has forgotten that the good book says, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'"

You certainly didn't want to cross a Moorhead if at all possible. That whole family was touched by something — either brilliance or craziness, depending on your perspective.

Bomba initially thought the whole idea of Camille Spa was nuts, but Skip had been right about everything. It still baffled him that anybody would pay millions of dollars for a two-week vacation. Even more flabbergasting — after a short adjustment period, a lot of

these rich dudes actually got off on roughing it and cooking their own meals. Some of them even made return visits, paying full-price for another two weeks!

Skip, to his credit, had been true to his word. He plowed every cent of profit back into Camille Corporation and started quietly buying up properties. There had been some glitches along the road. A few lawsuits that had to be settled quietly. A boat load of payoffs to government officials and judges. But they were actually getting close.

The pieces were starting to fall into place. Camille Corporation was starting to reach critical mass. They were going to do it... if only he could keep Skip from coming apart at the seams first.

\* \* \*

The spa director motioned with the pistol for Jackson to walk down the hall. Holmsley felt his legs obey even though his mind shrieked in protest. He tried to make eye contact with Han — maybe the bear would finally come to his senses — but was unsuccessful. Dickson hummed to himself and seemed entirely transfixed by the wall of video screens.

Mickey D. and Sister Glory had finished their torrid hammock session. On another monitor, Bomba was dusting the chairs in the courtyard. There was Lucia lighting the coals on the outdoor grill. Katya shaking the dirt off a carrot. Ratko walking up and down the beach, looking at the trees. Aye-Aye in the stables talking animatedly to Marcella. Han wondered if he could get sound along with any of these pictures. He'd love to hear what those two were saying.

In all the times he'd visited the spa, Skip never let on about the existence of this control room, nor the security cameras. Not that Han cared one way or the other. It wasn't for him to tell Skip how to run his spa.

Han could hear the faint sound of rushing water from the bathroom down the hall.

These cameras must have some kind of zoom feature, he thought. But there didn't seem to be any kind of joystick on the control panel. Instead, there were series of buttons with labels like AWAKS, CHAFF, ADS, and C-NET. Han was not one to resist his natural curiosity. As a child he wound up taking apart everything in his room: clock radio, watch, stereo, adding machine — and when confronted by things he didn't understand, his inclination was to fiddle around and use trial by error.

Han was about to touch the 'CHAFF' button when he remembered that chaff was what military aircraft and battleships used to distract incoming missiles. He decided it would be best to just sit quietly until Skip returned.

Standing at the porcelain urinal, Jackson looked down at his shrunken penis sticking out from the flap of his Calvin Klein boxer shorts. He didn't like the fact that the pepper-to-salt transition in his hair was also taking place in his pubic area. But that annoyance was minor compared to the presence of the gun-toting spa director behind him. "It's no use. I can't do this with you right there," he grumbled.

Skip remained silent but held his ground. Jackson could feel the spa director's eyes on him like a knife tip between his shoulder blades. He tried to focus on the pattern of clean, yellow tiles with white grouting in front of him and let the sound of rushing water unlock his plumbing. But the way his bladder felt right now, Jackson could be standing next to Niagara Falls and not feel the urge to urinate.

"You can turn the water off now." Jackson reached for his zipper. In that instant he realized why the spa director had brought him to the bathroom. It wasn't to give him one last potty break before tying him to a chair.

There had been a negotiation. There had been a choice. And there had been a decision. For someone who made his fortune reading people across the bargaining table, Jackson was astonished that he could've missed it so completely.

Jackson knew that there's more to any negotiation than a simple transfer of money or property. It's an elaborate dance — the offers, counter-offers, and rejections. With each step you learn more and more about your opponent. Will they accept your lead? A feint here. Will they stand their ground? A twirl there. How quickly will they buckle?

The goal of the dance isn't necessarily about trust, but understanding. For you can dance with a partner you don't trust, as long you can anticipate their future reactions. Jackson made plenty of business arrangements with people he didn't trust, but never without giving them a series of small tests.

The tests could be small — did they care for a soda or a double vodka? He'd make a joke about being unfaithful to the wife — how hard did they laugh? Jackson would sometimes insert an error into an offer sheet just to see if his counterpart would catch it. Or maybe he'd be more blatant: suggest a bribe, slam down a book, or insult their

mother — anything to gauge their reactions to a variety of situations. Enough of these forks in the road and Jackson felt confident in guessing the outcome of any deal-breaker questions.

He was so good at this process, it was nearly inconceivable that a dance had been performed right in front of him. Skip had told him about his father, showed him the map with the colored pins, outlined his plans for an economic catastrophe — and yet in his hubris, Jackson never felt like he was being quizzed. Granted, he was holding a gun on the spa director at the time, but how could he not have noticed?

Skip had laid out his little forks in the road, and like an idiot Jackson kept picking the same direction. For God's sake, the man even threw him a lifeline! Offered to cut him in on the deal. Allowed him to save face and even make some money in the bargain. It didn't matter whether or not Skip was serious about the investment opportunity. Jackson's reaction to it was what had been important. And, like a broken record, he again threatened to go to "60 Minutes" and expose the whole spa as a scam.

So here he was, dick in hand, standing in this underground bathroom. Miles away from his wife, and in a different room from the only person who might object to violence. On a tiled floor, where it would be pathetically easy to clean up the mess.

As if to confirm his suspicions, Jackson heard Skip cock the pistol and utter four words that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand at attention.

"Get in the shower."

Jackson tucked himself back into his red boxers and turned around. "Let's talk about this," he said, now feeling — a little too late — the need to pee.

"No more talking." Skip's blank face didn't betray his intentions. "Kindly step into the shower. Now."

The solitary shower, with a three-inch raised platform and institutional clear plastic curtain, was in the far corner of the bathroom next to a changing bench. Jackson slowly backed towards it, holding his arms up at shoulder level. He knew he'd missed the crucial fork in the road, but Jackson hoped it wouldn't be too late to throw the car into reverse.

"I'm reconsidering your offer. Maybe investing in Camille Corporation should be a topic at my next board meeting. Why don't you turn off that faucet." Jackson retreated another few steps. "Look, you can't do this. I'm not some transient that you can bump

off in the middle of the night without anybody being the wiser. Do you have any idea what kind of shitstorm will hit you if something happens to me?”

To Jackson’s dismay, Skip was prepared for that question. “You and Mister Dickson decided to go spearfishing off this end of the island even though the rocks and unpredictable tides make it considerably more dangerous. You split up and Han finally swims to shore, expecting you to be right behind him. But you never do make it back. A rip current? Shark attack? Did your fin get caught behind a rock or in some outcropping of coral? For all Han knows, you could’ve drifted around the reef shelf and come up on the other side of the jetty. After waiting another fifteen minutes, he finally runs back for help. The staff and other guests search the water and back side of the island until dark, but alas, they have no success.”

Keeping a steady distance of ten feet between them, Skip mirrored Jackson’s shuffling footfalls. For an instant, a look of mock sorrow passed across the spa director’s face, and Jackson had no problem believing Skip capable of acting out this whole charade.

“Fortunately, a police boat happens by the island the next day. They radio St. Thomas’ well-respected Chief of Police, Captain James Tillafarel — who, by coincidence, happens to be my step-uncle — and he launches a quick and painless investigation. After conducting their own search and interviewing Han, the only witness, they have no choice but to pronounce you missing at sea. The police boat takes the grieving widow back to the mainland and we quietly refund her spa fees. She could make a stink about this tragic turn of events once she gets back to the States... or she could concentrate on spending her newfound wealth. I’m guessing she will enjoy having her hands on your purse strings during the years it will take for you to be officially declared dead. Who could blame her for finding solace in the comfort of some new, younger man in the meantime? A good-looking woman like that, it’s hard to imagine her bed staying cold for long.”

The piano player finally took his hands off the ivory keys, and Jackson saw the lights go down on the dance floor. The last thing he felt was his heels hitting the ledge of the shower stall and then he was falling backwards, falling, falling.

Han was getting a little bored with spying on his fellow guests. Everybody seemed to be sleeping or moving in slow motion. Marcella was no longer talking with Aye-Aye; now she was sitting on top of Pepper as Aye-Aye led the horse in circles. He still couldn't find a way to zoom the cameras.

The background hum of running water was interrupted by a sharp retort, like a broomstick snapping.

Minutes later, Skip returned. His hands were clean, but Han noticed new, tiny red flecks in the floral pattern of the spa director's shirt.

"He didn't leave me any other choice," Skip said, eyes downcast. "This wasn't supposed to happen."

The spa director remembered his bet and wondered how he could get out of re-thatching the game room. Maybe Aye-Aye would take double or nothing on the rock singer. He told Han, "I've got some things to clean. Then I'm going to need you to back me up on a few things."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." Han turned and moved to the exit.

"Where are you going?"

"To play with the bird. Come get me when you're ready. Remember, I'm the one on vacation."

\* \* \*

Lying in the sun, their naked bodies enveloped in the cradle of the rope hammock, Mickey D. experienced an unusual feeling. It took him a minute to identify it. Contentment.

He looked over at his companion and brushed the short brown hair out of her eyes. "You know, I don't even know your name."

"Gloria. Gloria Gortner."

"Gloria." He rolled her name around his mouth, savoring it like a fine wine. "Can you help me remember that? I'm kind of bad with names. It's been so easy to, to..." He wasn't sure if he should proceed.

"Yes?" She had the calm, serene look of a Saint. For some reason he felt like he could tell her anything and she wouldn't judge.

“I think I intentionally don’t pay attention to women’s names. It’s like if I don’t really know who they are, it’s easier to move on to the next one without worrying about hurting them. Or myself. I probably do it more for my benefit than theirs. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I think so.” Gloria cuddled up in the crack between Mickey D.’s chest and shoulder bone. His armpit smelled of perspiration, coconut oil, and cigarette smoke. This must be groupie heaven, she thought, feeling both naughty and triumphant at the same time.

Mickey D. marveled at how the breeze was just strong enough to sway the hammock slightly from side to side, without the air feeling unpleasant against his skin. The towering palm fronds cast dappled shadows against their slick bodies.

He said, “You have no idea what kind of weight you lifted off me today.”

“Um hum,” she breathed against his breast.

“I feel like I’ve cleaned a slate. Like today could be a new beginning for me.” He tried to look down into her eyes, but her lids were closed and relaxed. “I really believe that, you know.”

“Um hum.”

“Hey, don’t go to sleep. I want to ask you something.”

“Hum?” Her eyes fluttered open.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Me? White.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. It just makes me feel clean and happy.”

“Maybe I need to start wearing white more often.”

“You were wearing white the last time I saw you,” she said.

“What? When?” Mickey D. was momentarily concerned that he’d already slept with this woman and not remembered. He tried scanning his memory, but would need to check his journals to be sure.

“New Orleans. 1990. It was your ‘Broken Promises’ tour and you were playing two nights at the Superdome. I snuck into both nights with a wig, dark glasses, and big scarf over my head just to make sure nobody from my congregation recognized me. The second night you went shirtless and wore a white, spandex leotard with matching cowboy boots.”

“I remember that leotard,” he said with relief. “Some chick made off with it while I was sleeping.”

“It was pretty hot. Hard to blame her.”

“You live in New Orleans?”

“Baton Rouge. I’ve been there the past dozen years. Went to LSU and never left the state.” She shifted her weight to be able to drape a leg over his. “But I was born in Indiana and lived there for a while before my family relocated to Kansas.”

“Hey, you’re a Hoosier too? I was born in Indiana!”

“I know. In Jeffersonville.”

“How did you know?”

“I read lots of magazines.”

“Oh yeah. Sometimes I forget people write about me.” Mickey D. smiled. “So, Gloria Gortner, a fellow Hoosier, who likes the color white, has a thing for spandex leotards and wears wigs to rock concerts — tell me more about yourself.”

\* \* \*

“Do you have any queens?”

“Go fish,” Marcella said.

Katya winced and took a card off the top of the pile.

Skip quickly walked over to their table. She didn’t like the worried look on the spa director’s face. “Has he come back?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Your husband.”

“I haven’t seen him all afternoon.” Looking past Skip, she could see Han, shirtless, holding a mask and snorkel, standing by himself at the fringe of the courtyard. Her stomach began to clench.

“I don’t know how to tell you this, Katya, but Mister Dickson and your husband went spear fishing this afternoon and got separated. They were on the other side of the jetty, where the tides can be dangerous.”

Marcella dropped her cards on the table. “What are you saying?”

Skip waved Han over. “Han spent a half an hour looking for him in the water. Then he found me, and we canvassed the shoreline. We were hoping that he got out early and beat us back.”

*This can't be happening*, Katya thought. Not now — just when she and Jackson were starting to re-connect. *Please God, don't take him away from me.*

“I told Jackson that we should stay inside the reef, but he wanted to catch something really big,” Han volunteered. “He seemed to have some trouble fighting the currents. It didn't seem like he was comfortable in the water.”

Katya blinked through her tears. “What are you talking about? Jackson swims every day. He used to do triathlons.”

“Uh, that's just what it looked like to me. Maybe it was just because he wasn't used to carrying a spear.”

“It's still too early to panic,” the spa director said. “He could have drifted to another point on the island and still be making his way back. Katya, why don't you stay in the courtyard in case he comes from a different direction? Marcella, try to find Aye-Aye and Bomba. Tell them to get snorkeling equipment and bring everyone to Pelican Rock. We'll set up search parties and spread out from there.”

Marcella patted Katya's hand and gave her a hopeful smile. “I'll check your room too. Make sure he isn't in bed sleeping like a baby.”

Skip told Katya to keep her chin up, grabbed Han's forearm, and started to jog back towards the reef.

“How was I supposed to know he used to swim triathlons?” Han asked between breaths.

“Don't worry about it, you covered well.”

But Skip began to question Han's ability to carry off this charade. Let's face it, the man designed software applications. He was not a spy, revolutionary, or even a very good actor. Skip knew that the safe course of action would be to take him out as well. It would be preferable, though, to wait until Han got back to the States. After he provided an eyewitness account of Jackson's disappearance to the police.

What really surprised Skip, however, was Katya's face when he broke the news. She was genuinely upset. Not the reaction of someone who was just looking to get her hands on Jackson's money. Amazing.

\* \* \*

Three spa employees and three guests stood on Pelican Rock, a flat promontory stained with guano. Skip broke the group into three pairs. He and Han would search the water around the jetty, Bomba and Ratko were to follow the drift around the rocky end of the island, and he told Marcella and Aye-Aye to double-check the coastline.

The search party was short by three bodies, aside from the shaken Mrs. Holmsley. Marcella had tried to find Mickey D., but nobody was inside his bungalow. Sister Glory's room was empty as well. Lucia had decided to stay in the courtyard with Katya, pouring the trembling woman a large tumbler of rum.

"We've got at least two hours left of light," Skip announced to the group. "We'll meet back here about fifteen minutes before the sun goes down."

"I don't have a watch." Marcella pointed to her bare wrist.

"You can always tell the approximate time before sunset by doing this." Skip held his hand out, with his palm turned back to his face, thumb pointing up. "If you line your pinkie up with the horizon, each finger represents fifteen minutes of time. So if the sun is three fingers above the horizon, that would be forty-five minutes before sunset. You can use your opposite hand to keep stacking your fingers on top of each other for longer times."

Marcella and Han held out their hands and tried the technique, discovering that, sure enough, the sun was eight fingers above the horizon. Ratko grunted in amusement and didn't join in. He knew all kinds of tricks for telling time and figuring out directions — but found it was easier to just wear a watch and carry a compass.

"If you come across Mister Holmsley, one person should take him immediately back, so his wife doesn't worry," Skip said. "The other person should wait here to give a report when we meet up. Good luck."

Bomba and Ratko made their way across a series of boulders, before finding a suitable entrance point to the water.

"So what do you think?" Ratko asked while adjusting his mask.

"Ich glaube Herr Holmsley könnte jetzt schon in St. Thomas sein," Bomba grumbled in German. *I think Jackson could be in St. Thomas by now.*

“Du könntest recht haben. Vielleicht ist er auf seiner heißen Luft hin geschwommen,” Ratko replied. *You could be right. Maybe he floated there on his hot air.*

“Olyan fajta pacák aki egy darab szenet dug a fenekébe, hogy gyemántot tudjon ajándékozni a feleségének minden Karácsonyra,” Bomba said in Hungarian. He hadn't used it in a while and was a little shaky on his tenses. *He's the kind of guy who keeps a lump of coal in his ass so he can give his wife a nice diamond every Christmas.*

Ratko was impressed. He would not have guessed that Bomba was fluent in that language. “Gyönyörű munka. Az akcentusodból ítélve Debreceni a tanárod.” *Nicely done. By your accent I would place your teacher from Debrecen.*

Bomba jumped into the water and pulled on his fins. “Ya veru ona bila,” he said, switching to Russian. “Oo tebya bil ochen horoscheey goad.” *I believe she was. You have a very good ear.*

Business had been slow in the Soviet republics lately, so it took Ratko a few seconds to formulate his response. “Ya obyazan na moyei raboty. Noo kakya oo tebya orgovorka?” *You have to, in my line of work. So what's your excuse?*

“Ya otvechayu za gosteyei. Ee ri nikogda nya znaesch otkooda gostee priyazhaute.” *I'm in charge of guest relations. And you never know where our guests are going to come from.*

Ratko decided to test Bomba with some Turkish: “Hayranlik verici. Gelen ziyaretçilere kendi dillerinde konusabilecek degeri gosteren birini bulmak oldukca zor rastlanan birsey. Eminim kendilerini evlerinde hissetmelerine yardimci oluyordur.” *An admirable trait. It is rare to find someone who has an appreciation for speaking to visitors in their native tongue. I bet it helps your spa guests feel more at home.*

“Eminim olurdu, eger gerçekten kendi dillerinde konussaydim. Ana o zaman ne eglencesi kalirdi?” Bomba said happily. It had been years he'd last broken out his Turkish conjugations. *I'm sure it would, if I used their natural language. But where's the fun in that?*

Ratko hopped into the water beside Bomba. “Albateh, man hads mizanam yek seri keshvar hastand ke dar hammoomhayee ommomi aghaliat hastand,” the smuggler said in Farsi. *Of course, I'm guessing there are certain countries that are underrepresented at this spa.*

“La tata’agab.” Bomba replied, leaping from the Indo-European language of Iran to the formalized speech of Saudi Arabia. *You’d be surprised.* “‘andak isti ‘daad tidawwar ala ilbahlawan dah?” *You ready to start looking for this bozo?*

Rakto made the subtle shift to the colloquial Arabic found in Egypt. “Leih La’? Ma ‘andeesh haga ahsan a’milha.” *Why not. I’ve got nothing better to do.*

Bomba was just about to put the snorkel in his mouth and start swimming when he decided to give Ratko one more challenge. “Yeh beer humareh upar hai, Aap sahi ho to.” *The beers are on me if you get this one.*

The smuggler cocked his ear. In English, Ratko asked, “Can you repeat that one more time?”

“Yeh beer humareh upar hai, Aap sahi ho to.”

Still treading water, Ratko grimaced. “Damn. It kind of sounds like Hindi. That’s not fair, I never did any business in India.”

Bomba broke into a huge grin. “That’s not my fault,” he said, slapping Ratko’s hairy back. “You were close, though. It was Marathi, the regional dialect of Bombay... and you owe me a beer.”

\* \* \*

Two hours later, the exhausted pairs rendezvoused at Pelican Rock. The grim looks on everyone’s faces told the story.

“Maybe he already make it back, and dey all jus’ waiting on us,” Aye-Aye said with optimism.

“If he’s not, I guess we’ll have to call the police,” Han said.

“That’s not funny,” Marcella retorted. Katya had repeatedly told her about Jackson’s urgent need to call his office about some kind of business deal. Surely he hadn’t tried to actually swim to a phone.

Han’s face flushed in embarrassment. Fortunately for him, most of the redness was covered by his dripping beard.

“Let’s go back. All we can do is hope that Mister Holmsley made it back safely on his own,” Skip said to the group. Watching Han lumber away, Skip decided that he would need to take action sooner rather than later. It will be a shame to lose such a generous donor to Camille Corporation, but Han was not leaving him any choice.

\* \* \*

Making their way back to the courtyard, Bomba and Skip lagged behind the group so they could talk in private. Bomba quietly asked, “So what happened, pardna?”

“An unforeseeable aberration. Holmsley found the bunker. He held a pistol on me and threatened to expose everything.”

“A pistol? How the hell did he get that?”

“Ratko smuggled a SIG Sauer in his luggage. Somehow Holmsley found it.”

Bomba didn’t like where this was heading. “What did you do?”

Skip made sure that nobody was listening. “Han and I got the gun away — but I had to shoot him in the process. He’s back at the barracks, wrapped up in a shower curtain.”

“Oh, man,” Bomba whistled. This was turning into a cluster fuck. One of the spa’s founding tenets was that none of the guests were supposed to get hurt.

“Han’s kind of shaky,” Skip said. “He might have seen too much, but he’s trying to play along.”

Bomba didn’t know whether to believe Skip’s story or not. He tried to play off the news like it was no big deal. “You could’ve told me that before we swam all the way to the back side of the island, mon.”

“Didn’t have time. Besides, with your dung guts, it looked like you could use the exercise.”

“Hey, don’t make fun of my stomach. I’m just big boned.” Bomba thought about how Virginia will react when she hears how quickly things have escalated. “Are you going to tell the others?”

“Not quite yet. They’ll give a better performance if they don’t know.”

\* \* \*

When Katya saw the group return through the courtyard empty handed, she wailed hysterically. Marcella ran over to comfort her.

“Why don’t I make dinner. I got some Johnny cakes already balled, it just take a few minutes to bake dem up,” Lucia said. She presumed nobody would feel like eating, but at least it gave her something to do.

“Oh, Jackson,” Katya repeated over and over.

Aye-Aye bowed his head in silence. He believed in respecting the dead, even if they happened to be a bombastic pain in the ass.

Ratko was the only guest not getting choked up. The way he saw it, Jackson shouldn't have gone spear fishing outside the lagoon if he wasn't willing to risk his life. The smuggler sneaked a look at Skip, guessing that he was somehow behind this. The spa director's face was devoid of emotion.

“I'll organize the staff and start searching at first light tomorrow,” Skip announced. “Before it gets too dark tonight, I'm going to head up to the ridge just in case I can spot something.”

“Oh, Jackson,” Katya cried. Her chest ached but she couldn't stop it from heaving every time she tried to get air. Buffeted by a hurricane of swirling emotions, Katya clung to Marcella as though the Latina were her anchor.

As dusk began to creep into the courtyard, Lucia served the warm biscuits. Ratko eagerly took a handful of Johnny cakes, but nobody else immediately reached for the tray. Their eyes were on Katya, who huddled in Marcella's chest, still mouthing Jackson's name.

Han reached into his pocket and realized that he still had Jackson's GreenFinder Pro®. He'd forgotten that Jackson gave it to him before climbing down into the cave. In all the excitement, Han didn't even feel it while he and Skip splashed around in the water, pretending to look for Holmsley.

He wondered if the range finder still worked. The GreenFinder Pro® didn't strike Han as the type of gadget that would be waterproof. Would anybody realize it was missing? To be safe, he should return it to Jackson's golf bag.

Han excused himself and walked towards the stone pathways. One of the German Shepherds followed him, hoping that Han would give him another one of those tasty Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. Checking the range finder, Han found that the swim had indeed burned out its electronics. The binoculars themselves still worked, but the digital distance readout remained blank.

Using the glasses to scan the white-washed cabañas above, Han saw a shadow through an open window. *Wait a minute, that's my room*, he thought. His door opened, and Han saw Skip sneak out, carrying a brown burlap bag. The spa director did not come back down the walkway, but cut through the brush in the direction of the pig run.

\* \* \*

“Hello?” Han peered into his semi-dark room. The cabaña was empty and nothing seemed to be missing. His Nike bag was still on his bed, and his laptop computer was in its usual spot on top of his dresser.

Ignoring the panting dog at his feet, Han went over and clicked open his Powerbook. It booted up with a series of clicks and crunches. He typed in his password and checked the hard drive. It listed each folder in order of the last modified dates:

<i>StorageMaster Beta1</i>	<i>Mon, Apr 18, 1995, 9:01pm</i>
<i>Dragonsfire IV-Tester.v.2</i>	<i>Sat, Apr 16, 1995, 10:45pm</i>
<i>Edit Bay Demo</i>	<i>Sat, Apr 16, 1995, 8:47am</i>
<i>PasteUp Maestro</i>	<i>Wed, Apr 13, 1995, 1:08pm</i>
<i>Tetris</i>	<i>Wed, Apr 13, 1995, 11:12am</i>
<i>Personal Corresp.</i>	<i>Tue, Mar 7, 1995, 3:23pm</i>

Han could see that nothing had been opened in the past twenty-four hours. All his files appeared to be present and unchanged. The German Shepherd padded across the room and put his paws on the bed platform.

His power indicator was down to three bars. Then it was goodnight for his 5300C.

The last time he visited Camille Spa, Han brought a whole bag of extra batteries and found himself unable to relax. He'd been fixated on writing code for an asymmetric encryption program and never left his cabaña. The program turned out to be horse crap and he totally missed out on Virginia's massages.

This visit, he purposely limited himself to one spare battery and a bare minimum of applications, hoping it would force him to be more social and his limited computer time more productive.

Han knew that in order for his company to survive, it required more than just some fancy lines of new code. The storage industry was in a finite lifecycle, with the end closer than his own engineers were willing to admit.

The Internet was changing everything. It was disorganized, but people would start harnessing the power from all those computers and servers linked together soon enough. *How many years before the average Joe had all the virtual storage space and*

*computing power he needed through a dummy terminal that had less RAM than a toaster?*

His concern for the future was not motivated by money. SuperNova could go under tomorrow and Han would still have enough cash to buy another ten NFL teams if he wanted. But even though he spent almost no time in the office anymore, Dickson felt personally responsible for every brick in his 600,000-square-foot facility. He couldn't emotionally divest himself from SuperNova any more than a father could easily cut himself off from his favorite son.

He was about to light one of the lanterns when the canine began to growl.

Han assumed the dog was going for his candy. "What is it, boy? Did they not feed you today?"

Before the German Shepherd could pull its nose away, a black shape the length of a walking stick shot out of Han's Nike bag and struck the canine in the throat.

The golden-haired animal staggered backwards, whimpering. Han watched in horror as the dog awkwardly teetered to its side. The black object landed in the sand next to the pet, released its fangs, and slithered off to the darkest corner of the room.

Han didn't think; he just reacted. Grabbing his Nike bag off the bed, he ran out of his front door, leaving his laptop computer behind.

He needed to hide. To get away.

Using the trees as cover, Han cut through the brush, skirting the courtyard below. The last slivers of light were fading from the sky, so he reached into his bag and pulled out a small flashlight. Since this was his fourth visit to the spa, he knew to have one of those handy.

Dickson forced himself to focus. He'd watched Skip head back towards the control room. No doubt the spa director was planning to watch the snake's handiwork on the video monitors. But Han had gone to his room immediately after seeing the spa director leave. There was still a good chance Skip hadn't reached his hidden bunker yet.

Han needed to get away from the cameras. But where? The cameras were everywhere... he'd seen all the monitors with his own eyes. Cameras in the trees. Eyes in the trees. Wires in the trees.

Taking a gamble, Han followed in Skip's footsteps and veered towards the wild pig run himself.

His senses were jacked to the maximum. The flashlight picked up wild shadows in his peripheral vision. He could hear every bird calling overhead. The dust particles in the air tickled his nose.

As he ran, his mind started to catch up from the shock of watching the lightning snake attack. Han replayed the chain of events. What if he had picked a different food partner from the get-go. Would this have happened if Jackson had not found Ratko's pistol? Might they have missed Skip's cave without hearing that macaw? If that poor dog hadn't followed him to his room, would he even be alive now? They were all connected. A chain of events. Cascading from one to another. Causing the system to overload.

They were all connected. His mind leapt and he saw the future of SuperNova. The next direction for his company should not be in applications, storage, or data base management, but in connectivity. The television in one room talking to your VCR in another, which in turn talks to your computer. Your cell phone connecting directly to the Internet. Don't stop there. Expand the paradigm. Your alarm clock sending orders directly to your coffee maker. Linking your garage door opener to your hot tub. Having your fire alarm check the status of your oven. They would all need to speak the same language. All need to seamlessly link together. It would be the wave of the future.

This vision drove Han forward, overriding the painful stitches in his sides. Now he truly needed to make it home. He had his next big thing. His gut instincts were 100% sure about this one.

Following the downhill slope of the pig run, Han tried to remember the path he and Jackson had taken during their hunting trip. Everything looked different in the narrow beam of his flashlight.

It was hard to tell how far he'd come, but the undergrowth was starting to close in. Branches reached out of the darkness and slapped at his thighs. He was about to turn around and try a different direction when the path swung around and split. Han stayed to the right and soon came upon the stone ridge where they'd cornered the sow.

His flashlight was not powerful enough to illuminate the top of the ledge, but he quickly found the tamarind tree where they'd pulled off a branch. Han made his way to the back of the trunk and played his flashlight into the hole in the bark. Yes, that was definitely a camera wire running through the wood.

Han reached into his Nike bag and found his Swiss Army knife. He opened a small blade and began to saw at the rubber casing. When he'd completely cut through the wire, Han made a bed out of dirty T-shirts and curled up against the stone wall.

\* \* \*

By the light of his hurricane lamp, Mickey D. savored his newest journal entry.

*4/19 — CS. BH. Pln. 32B, nat. Wht bls, bs. Ham. 5m-bott, 10m-mission \*. PJ. 10. 10. 10! Gloria Gortner, Hoosier — Louisiana.*

He almost didn't want to use his shorthand. It was such a beautiful sight.

"4/19 — Camille Spa. She had brown hair and plain features. A natural 32B chest, she wore a white blouse with a bathing suit. Doing it in a hammock, rode for 5 minutes on the bottom, then switched to the Missionary position and came after 10 minutes. She praised Jesus and scored a perfect 10, 10, 10!"

*That's right, Gloria Gortner, the ex-Hoosier who now lives in Louisiana, you have joined the immortals, Mickey D. thought. You are one of my few perfect 10s.*

Maybe when he got home, he'd frame that journal page as a souvenir. He was so proud of himself for not freezing up when it came down to crunch time.

To overcome the pressure of breaking the curse, he'd used an old technique taught to him by Dean, his favorite sound mixer. In his head, and using every sports cliché imaginable, Mickey D. kept up a running commentary of his sexual encounter like was a Monday Night Football game:

*It's fourth and goal, game on the line. The crowd is on its feet, expecting a big play — but the kid has a history of fumbling the rock. It's gut check time. The feisty tailback takes the pitch, spies a hole between the tackles, and breaks into the secondary. He jukes the linebacker, lowers his head on the free safety... four yard line, down to the two, will he make it? Yes! Tacklers draped all over his legs, he took it to the house to win the game! That's just refusing to go down. I tell you what, Dan, this kid did all the right things on that final drive — he concentrated on one play at a time, listened to his coach, did his part to help the team, and now look, he's being carried off the field by his fellow players. After a tough season, nobody deserves it more. In fact, if you ask me, that kid's not going to stop until he reaches Disneyland!*

Wearing nothing but sandals, Mickey D. carried the hooded lantern around to the back of his cabaña, where Gloria was still sleeping. He joined her on the hammock, trying not to wake her as he swung his legs over the rope cocoon. The sling rose up, and for a second Mickey D. thought it was going to flip over. He rolled almost on top of Gloria and the hammock straightened out.

She stirred, but did not open her eyes. “Tell me a story,” she murmured.

Mickey D. curled up against her cool skin. “What kind of story?”

It was an innocent, but daunting request. All the concerts, all the parties, all the appearances — his whole life seemed to blur together. That’s why he needed to keep a journal.

“Anything,” she breathed into the night air.

He searched his memory for some kind of isolated incident that she might find funny. “There was this one time during our ‘Wasted Minds’ tour that we were in Chicago — no, maybe it was Philly? — I’m not sure which one. Wait a minute, now I’m thinking it was the ‘Suck This’ tour, so that would have made it late ’87. Anyway, let me start over... this one night on the road, me and Grouper, my guitarist, made a bet to see who could get with the ugliest girl that evening. I think we had a thousand bucks on it.

“After the show, we split up, and I head down to this notorious biker bar. After spending a few hours trolling for leather mamas, I find this one who’s got a half-dozen missing teeth and more tattoos than me. We trade tequila shots until closing time, then I bring her back to the bus. Grouper’s already there, buck naked, thrashing around in my bed with an ape. I’m not talking about an ugly chick here, I’m talking about a real fuckin’ ape! The kind that eats bananas and shit. Let me tell you, I was picking black hair out of my sheets for weeks. I never did find out if he got past third base with the primate, but I gave Grouper the grand just for the effort, hahaha!”

Gloria chuckled briefly, but then her voice turned serious. “Not that kind of story.”

“Then what?”

“Tell me when you decided to be a musician.”

“Well, there was this air band contest at my high school and—“

She shook her head. “I’ve already read that one in *People* magazine. Something else.”

Mickey D. felt his vocal cords stiffen. He wanted to get out of the hammock, but Gloria lifted her head and rested it against his chest, melting his anxiety.

"I can hear your heart," she said.

Before he could stop himself, his mouth said, "I think I was five."

When he paused, she prompted him. "Yes, go on."

"My mom was crying. She did that a lot because my dad would yell stuff at her, then disappear for what seemed like weeks at a time. For my birthday, I'd gotten this little ukulele, with a red guitar pick that was as big as my whole hand. The ukulele had these really loose, plastic strings and no frets. This one time, I remember picking it up, dancing around, and playing a made-up song for my mom until she stopped crying. I kept doing the same thing for years. Whenever my dad would leave, I'd play a little concert for my mom and it seemed to cheer her up for a little while. The high school air band thing came much later. That's the first time I realized that I could use music to get chicks — but I think I'd decided to be a musician the first time I made my mom stop crying."

Gloria kissed his neck and touched his face. "Better story."

"Ow," he said, feeling a mosquito bite his elbow. "I think we're getting eaten alive."

"Ready to see if anybody cooked dinner?"

"Sure." Mickey D. felt his suppressed appetite return in a flash.

He and Gloria dressed and walked arm-in-arm down the stone path to the courtyard. In the glow of the torches, they saw Ratko sitting by himself at one of the tables. He appeared to be munching on some kind of biscuit.

Mickey D. walked over and said, "Just the man I wanted to see. I had a nightmare about that shark last night. I don't care if Skip says it wasn't the aggressive kind, I remember the look in its eye. I really think you saved my life, man, and offering tickets to one of my shows was a lame way of thanking you."

Ratko had his mouth full, so Mickey D. carried on. "I know that I haven't been the greatest food partner these past few days, so I'm willing to make it up to you. How about if do tomorrow's meal all by myself?"

"I'd help you," Gloria said.

"Thanks, babe." The singer leaned down and gave her a kiss. Straightening up, he looked around the courtyard. "Where is everyone?"

"You missed it." Ratko wiped crumbs out of his moustache. "That Holmsley guy disappeared. The other women are up in the wife's room. She pretty broken up about it. Don't know where everyone else went."

Gloria instinctively clutched her throat, where she normally wore a 24-carat gold cross. "What do you mean disappeared?"

"Went spear fishing on the other side of the jetty and never came back. We looked for hours."

"My God," Gloria said. "I've got to go check in on Katya."

After she left, Mickey D. asked if Ratko had any more of those biscuits.

Ratko nodded. "Nobody very hungry tonight. Say, have you ever played Mühle?"

\* \* \*

Skip looked down at the cooling German Shepherd at his feet.

Han's cabaña was illuminated by the glow of his screen saver. Little fish swam across the Powerbook's screen as though it were an aquarium. Every few seconds, the machine burbled like an air filter.

*Poor Fountain*, the spa director thought. He allowed a single tear to fall down his olive cheek. It landed in the sand next to Fountain's gaping mouth.

Thinking about what to tell the guests, Skip decided that he probably wouldn't need to say anything. Since he could barely tell Fountain and Valley apart, the guests surely couldn't. He could just alternate calling Valley by Fountain's name. Good thing they didn't wear distinguishing collars. For the next ten days, the two dogs will just have to be like Superman and Clark Kent, never seen together.

*Where was Han?*

It had been hard to see much of anything from the control room. The cameras did not perform well at night. He swore to himself that for their next security upgrade, he'd switch to an infrared system.

Skip tried to recreate the scene in the room. If the man left his computer behind, he no doubt left in a hurry. He can't be thinking too clearly. It shouldn't be too hard to mop him up in the morning.

The spa director searched the room and located the deadly moccasin he'd found in the lagoon yesterday. Using a Y-shaped branch, he pinned the snake's head to the sand until he could force its writhing coils into a burlap bag.

Should he take Han's computer? Thinking that it might come in handy as a negotiating tactic, Skip clicked the laptop closed and tucked it under one arm.

**VANISH IN THE NIGHT**

***APRIL 20***

Katya woke at first light. She felt someone next to her. Her heart leaping with hope, she turned over — but it was only Marcella.

Rising to her elbows, Katya saw that Gloria was also sleeping in her bed, curled up behind Marcella. Lucia had brought up a straight-backed chair and was snoozing there, her hands draped gracefully in her lap. Normally, Katya would have welcomed the chance to host a slumber party, if it were for any other occasion but this.

She had to face it. Jackson was gone.

Of all the cruel timing. Yesterday she had felt ready to confront Jackson about their lack of intimacy. By telling him, she would no doubt put a strain on their relationship. She didn't know how he'd react — and there was a better than even chance that he wouldn't be willing to meet her halfway. He might use it as a handy excuse to divorce her and get some younger arm candy.

But she had decided to risk that, hoping the last few nights together would convince him things could be better. And now, they would never get the chance to try.

*What's going to become of me?* she wondered.

Her door opened and Skip peeked inside. He saw that Katya was awake took in the scene before him with sympathy. “Han, Bomba, and I are going to check the area one more time. But if he hasn't come back by now, the chances aren't good.”

The tears threatened to come again and Katya nodded. “I know.”

\* \* \*

“Where the hell are you, Han?” Skip asked the bank of video monitors.

The morning gave way to the afternoon, and the spa director still had not seen hide nor hair of the software mogul.

Katya, Sister Glory, Marcella, and Lucia were all on Camera #1, sipping tea in the courtyard. Mickey D. and Ratko were on Camera #7, playing Mühle in the game room. Camera #12 showed Virginia sweeping the floor of Sister Glory's bungalow. Aye-Aye was on #21, feeding the chickens.

Two of the video screens were not functioning properly. The monitor that normally panned the lower quadrant of Hearn's beach had taken the brunt of the impact from Jackson's warning shot. The screen below it — which was part of the network of

cameras in the pig run — only showed static. Skip assumed it had been damaged by the bullet as well, but maybe there was another reason. Maybe he was underestimating Han, just like Jackson had underestimated him.

Bomba sidled up next to him. “What’s the scoop? Are you finally going to let me know what’s going on, or should I unwrap the shower curtain and see if Holmsley will tell me?”

“Han’s missing. He bolted last night and now I can’t find him.”

“Bolted? What for?”

“I think he couldn’t handle knowing what happened to Jackson. You heard him after the search party, he couldn’t even keep from blabbing about our phone line. The man’s a threat to us. He knows everything about the UPP and can expose all our plans.”

“But Han’s been one of our biggest supporters.”

“I know. It’s a shame.” Skip made a mental note to sell his few shares of personal stock in SuperNova before the end of the day.

Bomba stared ahead at the video monitors. “What do you want to do about it?”

“We’ve got to make sure that Han doesn’t contact the other guests. One person should man the cameras, and the other is going to have to take care of the problem. Permanently. I’ve got an idea that he may be in this sector.” Skip fingered the screen full of static.

“If he is, why don’t we use the dogs to flush him out.”

Skip shook his head. He hadn’t yet told Bomba about Fountain’s demise, and now wasn’t the right time. “You know the boys are only interested in chasing pigs.”

“Yeah, but Dickson doesn’t know that. When he hears barking, he may panic and expose himself.”

“No. No dogs. Look, I want you to handle this, Bomba. He trusts you. Because of what happened to Holmsley, there’s no way I could get close enough without spooking him. I wouldn’t ask you to do this if the situation wasn’t desperate. I need to know that you’re up for the task.” Skip’s eyes burned themselves into Bomba’s retinas.

The dreadlocked man didn’t see any choice in the matter. “I’ll do it.”

“Good. Let me get you a walkie-talkie.”

“You don’t want to use the bird signals?”

Along with the cameras, various trees throughout Camille Spa were rigged with hidden speakers. The staff memorized a complex code of non-indigenous bird calls in

order to secretly communicate with each other. This was particularly necessary since the control booth was often unmanned. The proximity alarms, for example, were linked to the call of the Yellow Breast, also known as the Sugar Bird. The friendly, black-beaked bird was the official bird of the Virgin Islands. You couldn't go anywhere on the other islands without seeing its brilliant yellow plumage. By a twist of fate and migratory patterns, the species never made it to Camille Cay.

Skip said, "I want to be in direct contact with you in case he runs. When you find Han, it would be best if you just used your hands. Bang his head on a rock. That way we can plant him in a way that looks like he fell while looking for Jackson." He handed over Ratko's SIG Sauer. "I'd prefer that you not use that, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

The spa director watched Bomba leave with a healthy dose of unease. He re-settled into the control room's chair and continued to scan the video screens.

*I've got to get a bigger staff,* he thought.

\* \* \*

Bomba accidentally smacked the butt of the semi-automatic on the lowest rung of the cave ladder. The noise woke up Nikki, who fluffed his green feathers and said, "Suck it, bitch."

Even though Skip insisted that all the spa employees be trained in light arms, the SIG Sauer felt awkward in his hand. Checking the safety, Bomba stuffed the pistol in the back of his waistband.

The words of the former USVI Attorney General Verne Hodge drifted from the recesses of his memory. Speaking about the UPP in '73, Hodge had said, "The recent outcry for independence is not accidental. It is a natural avenue for those who are convinced that the objectives of the whites are incompatible with the objectives of the natives and that there can be no reconciliation under the present system."

Bomba climbed up the narrow ladder and squeezed himself through the circle of sunlight. The malfunctioning video monitor was linked to Camera #17, which covered the part of the pig run that bordered Anegada Ridge. It wasn't too far of a walk.

*No reconciliation under the present system.* Bomba believed that. The only real question was whether or not Skip's solution was the only alternative. Bomba remembered a poll in '81 that claimed only 13% of the Virgin Islanders favored complete

independence from the United States. Skip always dismissed that study as propagandist clap-trap. He said the public will has been pacified by the easy tourism dollars and the hundreds of millions the U.S. gives every year in welfare, housing subsidies, food stamps, and educational grants.

We've got to wake the people, Skip preached. We've got to show them that economic self-sufficiency is not only possible, but an absolute necessity.

His walkie-talkie cackled to life. "Come in, Bomba."

"Yeah, pardna."

"You're in the clear. All the other guests are accounted for and at least a mile away. Start cutting over to the ridge and work your way up from Camera #16."

"Roger."

Bomba pushed his way through an outcropping of palm saplings and joined up with the pig run's primary East-West thoroughfare.

He'd always agreed with Skip about economic independence being a requirement for true political freedom. He had his doubts, however, about Skip's timetable. Closing a mess of hotels will certainly have an immediate impact on the tourist traffic — but what about the resident continentals?

Skip was convinced that the unrest from an economic collapse would drive out all the foreigners living on the islands, but Bomba wasn't so sure. History was rife with examples of settlers refusing to give up their adopted homes: the Golan Heights, South Africa, even Texas.

Furthermore, it was getting difficult to tell who was a true local nowadays. To Skip, it was a black and white issue. Blacks were local, whites were not. But Skip didn't get off Camille Spa very much anymore. Bomba, on the other hand, had skipped several guest sessions in order to scout new island properties for potential acquisition. In the process, he'd encountered numerous whites who'd lived their entire lives in the Virgin Islands and were just as "local" as anybody else. He was also friends with blacks — small business owners, restaurateurs, real estate agents — that had transplanted from northern cities like Chicago and New York a decade or two ago. Did that make them any more or less local than the Anglo who'd been born on St. Croix?

The Virgin Islands were such a melting pot of cultures: white, black, down-island, Puerto Rican, Danish, British, Indian, to name a few. In fact, Bomba's favorite restaurant on St. Thomas was Chinese. And while there were still signs of a proud African heritage

among the residents — with common fashion accessories being large pendants of the mother continent and oversized hats in Africa’s colors of red, green, and black to hold one’s dreadlocks — everyone seemed more or less resigned to being America’s Caribbean playground. The tourists had become such a part of the landscape that they were indistinguishable from the palm tree and parrotfish.

Well, that would soon be changing.

But this was no longer the bloodless revolution that Skip had promised when Bomba signed on with the UPP. Instead, he was getting a good look at the flip side of the Moorhead legacy. The side that got Mario involved in a holdup of a Washington D.C. grocery store back in ’67.

These past few years, Bomba watched Skip get edgier with each passing guest session. First it was the Orwellian cameras. Then Skip got on an early-warning kick and installed the radar and sonar systems. Secretly, Bomba believed that Skip was less concerned with guest security than with getting hauled off to the pokey like his father.

Last month, Bomba walked into the control room and found Skip juggling live grenades. ‘Just keeping the reflexes sharp’ was Skip’s excuse at the time.

All these incidents begged the question: Was Skip the man to lead the Caribbean into a new era? If Skip was willing to rub out a pair of guests at this stage, how would he behave when he got his hands on some real power?

\* \* \*

“One more time?”

“Sure, why not,” Mickey D. replied.

Ratko gathered up the pile of Mickey D.’s black stones. He was impressed by the singer’s quick grasp of strategy. After only three or four games, Mickey D. was starting to take Ratko’s pieces off the board with regularity. Ratko frequently had to resort to defensive positions in order to defeat Mickey D.’s freewheeling style.

The Mühle games were a nice distraction from thinking about Nikki. Ratko had searched the entire island with no luck. Every clever hiding place, every bush, every tree. The only thing Ratko could find out of the ordinary was that sometimes, when he stood really still, he swore that he could hear chirping coming from trees that didn’t have any birds. He probably just needed glasses.

If Nikki was still alive, Skip had him stashed away too well.

That left Ratko few options. He could pretend to work on getting new sonar equipment for the island, and hope Skip or one of his employees lets something slip about Nikki's location. Or he could take something of Skip's that he valued equally.

Gloria swept into the game room and whispered something into Mickey D.'s ear.

The singer stood up. "Sorry, champ. But I'm going to need to take a rain check on this one."

\* \* \*

Han munched on a Snicker's bar while pacing around the spot where Jackson had delivered the death blow to that wild sow. He was reluctant to stray very far.

Since he hadn't been discovered yet, Han assumed that he'd been successful in knocking out this camera. But there were multiple views of the pig run in the control room, and Han didn't know exactly where other video units were located.

He certainly couldn't spend the next ten days just walking around the same tamarind tree. For one thing, he didn't have enough candy and beef jerkey.

Every time Han tried to think of a way out of this mess, he hit a brick wall. Right now, his brain seemed unable to focus on the immediate future, and only wanted to replay yesterday's events.

Han didn't want to jump to conclusions. There had to be some chance that the snake crawled into his bag by accident.

A very slim chance, granted. Why else would Skip have been in his room when he was supposedly keeping a lookout for Jackson?

Having his own life in jeopardy forced Han to rethink his attitude about what happened to his late food partner. Holmsley had done nothing but ruin his vacation, but did the asshole really deserve to die?

Skip told him that Jackson had finished taking a leak in the urinal, turned suddenly, and rushed him. He said the gun had accidentally gone off as they fought over it. But Skip hadn't shown any signs of being in a struggle. In fact, when the spa director had come back from the bathroom, he wasn't even breathing hard.

What really happened when Skip was alone with Jackson?

Did it even matter?

If he was going to make it back to Seattle and impart his new vision for SuperNova, Han knew that he must convince Skip that he wasn't a threat.

Even after the snake thing, Han honestly didn't have a problem keeping his mouth shut about Skip's plans. The Caribbean was overrun with Ugly Americans already, and these UPP folks seemed like the only ones who were doing something about it.

Looking up at the sheer stone ridge, Dickson wondered if there was any way he could possibly climb it. Before he could discount that notion, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

He turned and a giant black hand clamped over his mouth. Han's eyes bulged as he watched Bomba's other hand heft a large rock over his head, poised to bring it down on the software mogul's exposed skull.

\* \* \*

Gloria stood at the edge of the shore and scanned the empty beach. Giving Mickey D. a wink, she tugged her white sundress over her shoulders, unsnapped her bathing suit, and let her clothes fall to the sand.

Mickey D. was instantly aroused. He flipped back his cobalt hair, tightened his bandana, and pulled down his swimsuit. Gloria reached out to grab his member — noting that it actually did resemble a can of soup — and led him into the water.

They made love in the shallows. Mickey D. stood in the chest deep water, feeling broken chunks of coral brush against his toes. Joined like mating porpoises, Sister Glory arched, as though swimming the backstroke. The ocean swells gently lifted her up and down on top of him.

Through the translucent water, Mickey D. admired her tight body. Boyish breasts, flat stomach, freckles down her shoulders — he'd certainly been with more spectacular women in his career, but none that made him feel like this.

Perhaps Gloria was meant to be more than his April 19<sup>th</sup> curse-breaker. Maybe this was fate's way of stringing him out, keeping him waiting until he met his destined partner.

She was a performer too, so she understood the lifestyle. She liked his music, but didn't fawn all over him right away. He could talk to her, but she didn't totally drag it out of him.

Mickey D. found himself wanting to impress her. Ratko told him about his missing bird while they played Mühle. Maybe he could offer to help look for it. Better yet, he could swim around and look for the guy who drifted off while spear fishing. How cool would it be if he actually rescued that dude?

Gloria tightened her scissors-grip around his hips and pulled herself vertical. She took Mickey D.'s face in her hands and began to shudder against him. When her body quieted, Gloria leaned close and kissed the singer's salty neck.

"Now that's what I call a baptism," she sighed.

\* \* \*

"Skip tell me to do all dey cooking-up today," Lucia reminded Katya. "You like kallaloo? Maybe some fungi? Dey very light — jus' corn meal dumplings is all. Eatin' help take de pain away."

Katya sipped her tea and shook her head. She didn't want to eat. She didn't want the pain to go away. It had been so long since she'd felt connected to Jackson, she didn't want to shut it off. She needed to experience every ounce of anguish.

"Why don't you make some of those dumplings," Marcella said to Lucia. After sitting with Katya all day, her stomach was growling.

Lucia, happy to finally have something to do, bustled off to the kitchen and started preparing the fungi.

Katya said, "I need a cigarette."

"I'll go get it for you, dear. Where are they?"

"In our room — my room," Katya corrected herself. "The silver Gucci bag."

"Be back in a flash."

Marcella sprinted off just as Gloria made her way up from the beach.

"I looked, but couldn't find Skip, Bomba, or Han," she said. Katya didn't notice that Sister Glory's hair was still wet. "Can I get you anything?"

"Cigarettes. But Marcella already went for them."

Gloria sat down next to Katya and took her by the hand. "I've got an idea. How about if we all go and take another mud bath? I'll hunt down some towels for the shower afterwards. What do you say?"

Katya shrugged mutely.

Ratko emerged from the direction of the game room. He was tired of waiting for Mickey D. to return. Finding a seat next to the two women in the courtyard, he said, "I don't suppose either of you would like to challenge me at chess?"

\* \* \*

Skip double-checked all the other monitors to make sure Han wasn't sneaking around somewhere else.

Mickey D. and Sister Glory had finished thrashing around the lagoon like a pair of stuck parrotfishes. Almost everyone was now on Camera #1, except for Marcella and Mickey D. The singer was in his bungalow, filling out some kind of diary. The Hispanic woman entered Holmsley's room, and started poking through a silver handbag.

Bomba had stepped out of the range of Camera #16 five minutes ago. Skip desperately wanted to check on his partner, but didn't want to give away Bomba's position if Han really was hiding in the pig run.

Finally, Bomba's voice came over his walkie-talkie. "Do you have a visual, mon?"

The screen was still full of static. "Negative. What's the status?"

"I found Han. He put up a little struggle, but nothing major. He's unconscious now. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you make it look like he tried to climb the ridge and hit his head on a rock when he fell?"

"No problem." Over the open channel, Skip could hear the sound of rustling leaves and Bomba's heavy breathing. Then some dragging. A brief stretch of dead air was punctuated by a brutal cracking noise.

"It's done."

Skip leaned back in his chair. "Good work, Bomba."

"You know, chief, I've been wondering something."

That made Skip tighten back up. Bomba seemed to be wondering about a lot of things lately.

"Do you think the other guests will believe two unexpected deaths on back-to-back days. Won't this really freak them out?"

"I've been pondering that myself," Skip admitted. "They may not buy it. I've been working on a contingency plan."

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m leaning towards a helicopter accident on their trip home. It’s the only way to totally wipe the slate clean. That way we can just add Dickson’s body to the wreckage. Unfortunately, because of the gunshot wound, there’s no way to stick Holmsley there too. But if the helicopter really brakes up on impact, it would be plausible for Holmsley to have drifted off before the coast guard arrives. I’m going to start searching the charts for a good combination of deep water and nasty currents.”

His plan was met by silence from Bomba’s end of the connection.

“Bomba?” Skip could picture Bomba shaking his dreadlocks and shuffling his feet.

“Yeah, I thought you’d say something like that, pardna.”

“Regardless of how the guests react when Dickson is discovered, we’re going to need to bury Holmsley,” Skip pointed out. “Plus, he’s really starting to smell up the joint.”

“You want me to do that?”

“That would be great. Take the back way to the tool shed, though. I don’t want the other guests to see you carrying a shovel. I’m thinking we should plant Holmsley next to the compost heap.”

“Roger.”

“One more thing, Bomba, be sure to dig a deep hole.” Skip didn’t like the idea of forcing Fountain to share an eternal resting place with a jerkoff like Holmsley, but at the moment he had more pressing concerns. He really needed to tell Bomba about the stiff German Shepherd before the day got much later.

The spa director opened a file cabinet and brought out a roll of nautical charts. With a ruler and a pencil, he started charting a rough flight path from Camille Cay back to St. Thomas.

He set his mind to working out the logistics of a helicopter accident. The easiest thing would be to rig an explosive in the luggage compartment. But Skip knew that a crash involving Mickey D. alone would attract the attention of the Feds and the FAA. When you threw in the Holmsleys, Dickson, and Sister Glory, one had to assume that it would be a media and multi-jurisdictional feeding frenzy. There would be no way to completely contain this with the local authorities, so he couldn’t make the wreck too suspicious.

There was also the Ratko factor. The smuggler wasn’t planning on taking the next flight off the island. Could he figure a way to get Ratko on that helicopter? Maybe he could offer to give Nikki back if Ratko would go to St. Thomas for some supplies. Of

course, that would cause another setback in fixing their defective sonar alarms. Who else could he find to help replace that kind of equipment? Decisions, decisions...

The real shame is that the pilot will have to go as well. Pedro had served Camille Spa well over the past five years. It would really break up his twin boys. They were freshmen at the University on St. Croix. Pedro told him that his twins planned to study sociology.

But Skip knew there was no way he could turn back now. His father's dream was in sight. He'd taken on the sacred task of delivering his people from the yoke of oppression, and that vastly outweighed whatever feelings he had toward Pedro, the pilot's two sons, and a handful of worthless spa guests.

\* \* \*

Slipping into the cool puddle of mud, Gloria glanced over at Katya. Her companion had on the same Marc Jacobs bikini that she'd worn two days earlier. The sequins did not sparkle this time, mirroring its wearer's mood.

"Doesn't it feel good?" Marcella asked.

Katya dropped her lit cigarette into the thick brown liquid and watched it fizzle out and slowly sink under the surface.

Gloria rested her head back on the pillow of packed mud. *Go to work, you million-dollar mud.* She could almost feel the 7.84 pH, 18-1 ratio of silicates, and antioxidants seep into her skin.

Thoughts of Mickey D. ricocheted around her skull. *What the hell am I doing?* Her plan had been to get away from the paparazzi, find some cute stranger that would keep his mouth shut, and have a little fun. Not hook up with an internationally-known rock star, whose every fart was covered by Liz Smith.

Mickey D. was already talking about seeing her when they got back to the States, and she desperately wanted to take him up on that promise. She didn't worry about how this would affect her so-called marriage with Harry, but knew that it would effectively ruin her career. How could she preach the Gospel while essentially dating the Devil? If it got out, her congregation and TV viewers would drop her faster than you could say 'pledge drive.'

She told herself to stop worrying and just go with it. They had another ten days on Camille Spa to have great sex before reality set in. But Gloria knew that the longer they dallied together, the harder it would be for her to give him up. And she had to give him up, she knew that in her heart. Her career, her livelihood depended on her keeping up the pretense of fidelity.

But Mickey D. was so cute. For months after sneaking into his concert in New Orleans, she fantasized about what it would be like with him. He stirred up a passion in her breast that she never felt with Harry. Not even when they were first married.

“Eeeeeeahhhhh!” Katya flailed her arms and struggled to reach the edge of the puddle.

Gloria’s eyes shot open. “What? What?!”

Marcella splashed over to Katya. The blond woman was huddled in a ball, her face buried in her hands.

“I felt him,” Katya’s face was streaked with mud and tears. “I felt what it must be like for Jackson. Underwater... floating away.”

Gloria motioned for Marcella to get the towels. “Let’s get you under the shower, Katya. Everything’s going to be okay. It’s going to be all right.”

\* \* \*

“I’ve always wanted to know... what’s Han short for? Handsome?”

“Nope. Hanforth. My parents thought it would make me grow up to be a lawyer.”

“You must have been teased a lot.”

“Up until the Star Wars movies came out. Then ‘Han’ became cool.” The software mogul looked at the split coconut at his feet. “By the way, thanks for not killing me.”

“No problem, mon.” Bomba dropped the rock and wiped the coconut milk off his hands. He knew that his ruse wouldn’t last for long. Eventually, Skip was going to want to see Han’s busted cranium for himself.

“What now?” Han had listened to Bomba’s conversation over the walkie-talkie with Skip, and was now convinced that he would be lucky to ever set foot off Camille Cay.

“We’ve got two cigar boats on the island. I’ve got to distract Skip long enough to evacuate the other guests. You’re going to have to stay here. It might not be a bad idea to lie down and play dead, just in case Skip walks this way.”

Han moved his bed of dirty T-shirts over so that he could lie down, with just his feet visible from the path. He didn't have any kind of fake blood, so if Skip came for a closer look, he'd be toast.

Bomba told Han that he'd be back around dusk, but had to do some digging first.

\* \* \*

Measuring the hole in the ground, Bomba estimated that it was wide enough for Jackson's shoulders. He'd just need to dig another foot. Skip said to make it deep.

He hopped back into the grave and ground the shovel under his foot. The smell of fresh dirt was losing in a landslide against the overpowering stench of decomposing trash from the adjacent compost heap.

Virginia would definitely come with him. Unlike Skip and Lucia, Bomba hadn't waited until after the revolution to tie the knot with Virginia. Two years ago, they'd made it official in a brief service at Virginia's old church on St. Thomas.

Skip didn't approve — thinking the guests would be happier believing that Virginia was attainable, like some cheap cocktail waitress — and boycotted their ceremony. It still bothered Bomba that he and Virginia couldn't wear rings to proclaim their love.

Aye-Aye was a 50-50 proposition. He would be afraid to cross Skip, but might be persuaded. At least he was reasonable. If Bomba laid out the facts, Aye-Aye would see that they had no other choice.

Lucia was another matter. Bomba couldn't decide whether to tell her or not. She would almost certainly side with Skip. But to be fair, he should offer her the chance to get off the island before Skip totally loses it.

There had to be some way to evacuate the guests without spoiling everything they'd spent the past dozen years working towards. Bomba racked his brain as he shoveled his way deeper into the soil.

Ten minutes later, he pulled himself out of the hole and flipped on the walkie-talkie.

"Come in, Skip."

"What's up, Bomba?"

"I'm done with the digging. I think getting Holmsley over here is going to be a two-person job."

"I agree."

“I’m going to go over and grab Aye-Aye. Is he still at the stables?”

“Yeah. Hey, I’m making good progress on the contingency plan. I’ve found the perfect spot for a helicopter mishap. Could take weeks to find all the wreckage.”

Bomba tossed the shovel into the grave. “That’s great, boss.”

\* \* \*

“What are we doing?”

“Putting on more sunblock, babe. Did you want the SPF 15 or the 30 for your shoulders?” Mickey D. held up both tubes of lotion.

Gloria didn’t want to repeat her question, but catastrophic endings were running through her mind so much that it was hard to think of anything else.

Her id cut through for a split second — *Just enjoy it, stupid!* — but was quickly drowned out by a flurry of ‘what ifs.’

She had to know.

“What are we doing together?”

Mickey D. seemed puzzled by the question. “Say what?”

By his reaction, Gloria got the distinct impression that he hadn’t been sharing her concerns. Still, she forged ahead. “Look, forgive me for stating the obvious, but you’re Mickey D. I mean, blind kids in Bangladesh know your name. I’m a television preacher, and a married television preacher at that, even though I haven’t lived in the same state as my husband for the past five years. But you see, if we were to even be photographed together, I’d lose everything. I just don’t think—“

She stopped. Her eyes fixated on the beach towel under her pale legs. Everything else fuzzed out: the cloudless sky, the expanse of turquoise water, the golden sand sticking between her toes, the bandana-clad rock star sitting across from her.

“What are you saying, Gloria?”

“I don’t know what I’m saying... I’m so confused right now. You know, every day I get in front of a camera and tell these believers that God has a plan for us all. That there’s a point to our lives. That we aren’t just random sacks of flesh and water who diddle around for a brief existence until we get cremated and scattered to the winds. My big problem is that I’m not sure that God — if there even is a God — has it all together, you know. Even though I’ve got all kinds of quotes from the books of Saul and Job that

say otherwise, I get the feeling He's more like an absentee property manager who just stops in once a year to make sure the toilet still flushes. I can't tell you how many times I've had to minister to a mother whose daughter is dying of cancer, and all I can say is that it must be 'God's will' that little Suzi won't live to see her sixth birthday. Maybe I'll read from Genesis:22 and compare the situation to Abraham's sacrifice, but that's it. How pathetic is that?"

Mickey D. scratched his scruffy chin. "What else can you say? I mean, who really knows why things happen the way they do."

Gloria flushed and made eye contact with the singer, showing the fire that she usually saved for her Sister Glory performances. "You don't understand. It's my job to know why this shit happens. That's why my viewers tune in to me day after day and pop those checks in the mail. That's why our advertiser renewal rate is at 80%. Everyone wants certainty in their life — including a guarantee of Paradise for their afterlife. If I can't provide the answers to why their trailer park got hit by a hurricane, instead of the one across the street, they'll find another preacher who'll tell them what they want to hear."

"So tell them what they want to hear. It not that hard. I do it every time I give an interview or sing 'Grass In The Infield' for the umpteen-millionth time."

"But what I'm doing has got to be a sin, don't you see? How can I keep preaching about God's will if I don't really believe it myself? If there is a God, shouldn't he strike me down for my hypocrisy? But He doesn't. In fact, I've been rewarded at every turn. I've got more money than I know what to do with, nice houses, cars, a little fame, and even had my deepest desire come true."

"And what was that?"

Gloria looked back down at the sand. "I got a chance to be with you."

Mickey D. felt something clutch in his chest. It wasn't painful. On the contrary. It was like being stirred on a frosty morning by a warm, naked embrace under the covers.

"I don't have a lot of experience with God, but I happen to know a thing or two about fate," the singer said. "Years ago, I became convinced that fate had it out for me on a personal level. I thought I was cursed."

"How could you be cursed?"

"It all started when I started going through my notebooks. I was cross-referencing my journal entries and... you know, I'm not so sure I should be telling you this story."

"Why, is it embarrassing?"

“Pretty humiliating, actually.”

Gloria tweaked Mickey D.’s big toe. “Good. Maybe it will cheer me up a little.”

“Okay. But before I start, let me first tell you my cosmic theory of life.”

“Well, this ought to be interesting,” she said and lightly ran a finger up the singer’s thigh.

\* \* \*

“Geez an’ Nate,” Aye-Aye said.

“For Pete’s sake, keep your voice down,” Bomba whispered. “You better believe it. Before digging that grave for Holmsley, Skip had me out trying to kill Han too.”

“Han? He been here lots, what he do?”

“Nothing. That’s my point. I’m telling you, Skip has gone off the deep end.”

“Geez an’ Nate,” Aye-Aye repeated. His eyes were full of worry.

Bomba lifted up his shirt and turned around so Aye-Aye could see the SIG Sauer in his waistband. “Skip gave me this to use on Han if he resisted.”

Aye-Aye crossed himself.

“He’s planning to blow up the helicopter on the guests’ flight home. We’ve got to get them off the island before that.”

“When?”

“Tonight. I’m going to take one of the boats. I need your help, Aye-Aye.”

“Lordy, Lordy...”

“I need you to tell Virginia what’s going on. Have her round up all the guests into the courtyard right before dusk. I’ll meet you there and come up with some kind of excuse to evacuate everyone. Get Lucia there as well, but don’t tell her anything beforehand. Can you do that for me?”

Leaning against the fence to the chicken coop for balance, Aye-Aye rubbed his temples. Bomba could see the divided loyalties battling it out in the man’s simple brain.

It was time to bring out his trump card. “How long has it been since you’ve seen Eunice?”

Aye-Aye looked up. “Eunice? Near three months.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to drop in on her again? Maybe bring her a new dress.”

Aye-Aye unconsciously reached into his back pocket, where he kept Eunice's most recent letter. "Yeah, dere's a good idea."

Bomba called Skip again on his walkie-talkie. "Change of plans," he said into the mouthpiece. "Lucia already asked Aye-Aye to slaughter one of the cows for dinner tonight. Can you give me a hand with Holmsley?"

"Sure. Why don't you take the scuttle."

Bomba signed off and walked over to Aye-Aye's lean-to. Behind the shelter was a small patch of sugar cane and wild grass. He felt through the grass until finding a small circle of metal. Bomba stuck his finger through the ring and pulled. A square mound of turf lifted on a hinge, revealing a flight of stairs that disappeared into inky blackness. With his hand on the plywood backing of the trap-door, Bomba felt his way down several steps.

An automatic light clicked on.

Aye-Aye knelt down and stuck his head through the opening. "Good luck," he said.

"Same to you, pardna," Bomba replied, closing the door behind him.

The steps led to a catwalk, which dumped him out on a narrow concrete platform. Bomba hit the call button and waited in the orange-lit dampness, listening to the clatter of the rising elevator.

When it arrived, he got into the iron-mesh cage and yanked the creaky safety door closed. Bomba hit a red button on the console and descended. Watching the polished rock walls pass in front of him, he occasionally saw the uneven cleft from a stray pickaxe. *How many slaves had it taken to carve out this mine shaft?*

When the elevator reached the bottom of the shaft, Bomba walked over to one of the three electric golf carts parked in the low chamber. He turned on the running lights and sped down a rounded, eight-foot-high tunnel that ran a full mile through the rock, before linking up with the underground barracks.

\* \* \*

Instead of taking the shaft, there was more tree cover if they cut through the pig run directly to the compost heap. Bomba had to use a fireman's carry in order to lift

Jackson's body up the cave ladder. Skip stood over the ring of stones and helped pull the CEO's shoulders through the round opening.

Shuffling backwards up the dirt path, Bomba gripped his end of the swaying shower curtain with both hands. "How do you want to handle finding Han?" Bomba was relieved that Skip had been too busy with his nautical charts to go over to Anegada Ridge and verify Han's corpse.

"I'm thinking that we tell everyone he was with us this afternoon while we searched for Holmsley again. Then, he decided to look around on his own." Skip kept his hands cupped underneath Jackson's ankles as he walked. "We don't make a big deal about it tonight, but when Han doesn't show up for breakfast tomorrow, we spread out and find him after lunch. That way we space it out a little bit."

Inside the rolled plastic, Bomba could see a red stain where Holmsley's face should've been. Exiting the pig run, Bomba swiveled his head around to see if anybody had seen them. His dreadlocks flew back and forth like a cat 'o' nine tails, whipping his face.

"Don't worry, Bomba, we should have a totally clear shot to the compost heap."

"Hope you're right. I'd hate to try to explain this to one of the guests. Somehow I don't think they'd believe it was a fantastic, new, body-shaping spa treatment."

The spa director laughed. Now that was the Bomba he knew and loved. "I've got a plan for rigging the helicopter, but I'm going to need about twenty minutes alone with the engine. When Pedro lands, you're going to have to get him away somehow. Maybe have Lucia make him lunch while everyone else is bringing down their luggage."

"This is still just a contingency plan, right?"

"Of course. We'll just have to wait and see how our guests take the news of Han's little fall."

They cut behind a row of silkcotton trees, keeping a wide berth between them and the path to the outhouse. The compost heap was just over the next rise.

Bomba blinked the sweat out of his eyes. "I told Aye-Aye that I'd help carry the steaks down to Lucia. Do you think you can finish with our friend here?"

"It would be my pleasure to inter Mister Holmsley," Skip said. Having Bomba leave would give him the perfect chance to bury Fountain at the same time. He'd just have to rush over to the rear of Han's bungalow, where he'd hidden the German Shepherd underneath a pile of leaves.

Skip thought it would be better if he could wait a few days — let things settle down — before breaking the news about Fountain to the staff. Let them absorb one shock at a time.

They finally reached the compost area and Skip aimed for the large pile of dirt. Setting the body down at the lip of the grave, Bomba knelt and fished out the shovel. “Do you want to say a few words?”

Skip stared down at the plastic human burrito. “Check-out is at noon. Be sure to tip your bellboy.”

The spa director kicked Holmsley into the pit.

Bomba handed Skip the shovel and started to walk away.

“Hey, Bomba.”

“Yeah?”

“I just wanted to thank you for your good work. I know the past 24 hours have been tough for you — but if we all pull together, we’ll see this through, you’ll see.”

Bomba didn’t turn around. “You’re welcome,” he said, fully expecting to never see his old friend again.

\* \* \*

Bomba faced the semi-circle of guests in the courtyard and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but I have an important announcement.”

Sister Glory ogled him in disbelief. “So he **does** speak English!”

He nodded at Katya. “I know you have barely had time to grieve for Mister Holmsley, but I must impart further bad news. As a safety precaution, we keep several geological sensors on the island. This afternoon, we started picking up increased volcanic activity in the area.”

“What does that mean?” Marcella asked. She had relatives in California that still spoke in awe about the big quake that hit Northridge a few years back.

“Unfortunately, it means that it is no longer safe for you to be here. Camille Cay is located near a magma hot-spot, and it seems Mother Nature is about to start forming a new sister island for us. We are prepared to evacuate you immediately back to St. Thomas. Due to this inconvenience, we will be refunding your spa fees in full.”

Katya cackled bitterly to herself. If only Jackson could hear this now. He was going to get his money back after all.

Bomba watched Virginia take Lucia aside and start talking in hushed tones.

Ratko asked Bomba: "How are we supposed to get off the island?"

"We have two cigar boats stashed here just for emergencies."

"I searched this whole island for Nikki and didn't see any boats."

"Trust me, they're there. We'll pick up Han on the way to the dock. Please stay calm and follow me, it's about a five-hour boat ride to St. Thomas."

"Wait a minute — what about our bags?" Mickey D. interjected. He was not about to go anywhere without his journal.

Bomba wanted to kick himself. He was so unaccustomed to having personal effects, it didn't cross his mind that the guests would want to bring their luggage with them. He guessed that it would probably take Skip about half an hour to finish burying Holmsley.

"You have five minutes to grab your valuables," he told the guests. "Skip will be staying behind to pack up the rest of your luggage, so only take what is absolutely necessary. One bag per person, and remember that you are going to have to carry it about a mile down to the boats. Any questions?"

The guests were either too stunned about the disaster warning or Bomba's sudden grasp of English to reply.

"Then go fast. Believe me when I say that time is short."

Mickey D., Gloria, Katya, and Ratko headed up to their rooms. Bomba motioned to Aye-Aye. "Go with them and make sure they're all back here in five, or else we're all history."

Aye-Aye sprinted up the stone walkway, and Bomba could hear him exhorting the guests to hurry. He turned and saw his wife and Lucia still deep in conversation. Lucia shook her head with an emphatic no. Virginia reached up and touched her on the shoulder.

"Mister Bomba," said a voice behind him. It was Marcella. Even with her expansive hair and chunky-heeled sandals, Bomba still towered over the Latina. "All my important stuff is in one bag. But it's down there in this tiny lagoon where I've been sleeping, and the suitcase is really heavy."

“Okay. Hold on a sec.” He went over to the other two women. Lucia found a chair and sat, looking as though she’d been kicked in the ribs. He pulled his wife aside.

“What did she say?”

“She don’t know who to believe. She want to see Skip first.”

“Not possible. Tell her it’s now or never.”

“Jus’ a few minutes more, hon.”

Bomba took a deep breath and glanced between his co-workers and Marcella. What he really wanted to do was stay in the courtyard, in case Skip came back early. Instead, Bomba quickly weighed his options — thinking that today seemed to be the day for snap decisions — and told Marcella that he’d go with her to get her bag. Leaning over to his wife, he whispered: “Stay with Lucia. She’s got five minutes. Just don’t let her go running off to warn Skip.”

\* \* \*

Katya scanned the piles of luggage in the corner of her cabaña. With no closets and only one dresser, she’d only been able to unpack a fraction of her belongings when they arrived four days ago.

She’d spent months plotting what to bring on this vacation. Since Katya really didn’t know anything about Camille Spa beforehand, she’d packed for every contingency.

Given the spa fees, it was natural to assume there would be several formal dinners. Katya had trunks of slinky cocktail dresses, off-the-shoulder Mizrahi gowns, and a handful of DKNY pant-suits. Everything was coordinated with scarves, handbags, pumps, wraps, hosiery, jewelry, and make-up.

Then there were the stacks of bathing suits, yoga slippers, workout leotards, lingerie, and a whole line of casualwear from the House of Versace, personally fitted to Katya’s measurements by Donatella herself.

Katya spied her special, hard-plastic, foam-lined garment bag — designed to hold her Lacoit — and was surprised by how little it moved her. Usually, just the sight of the garment bag, let alone the gem-encrusted gown, made Katya shimmer with glee. Now, however, she would’ve happily donated the Lacoit original to Goodwill.

It was meaningless. All of it. Was some stupid dress going to bring back her husband?

Her heart felt like a cored apple. Katya picked up her silver Gucci purse, where she kept her passport, keys, and extra cigarettes. She left all the other bags in the room, not really caring whether or not she ever saw them again.

\* \* \*

Virginia wished she owned a watch.

Five minutes. She rarely thought in such small increments. It was hard to keep track of the time. Tick, tick, tick.

Had it been a minute yet?

The darkness was coming fast. Even if she'd been blindfolded, Virginia could tell the moment of sunset. The air became eerily still, as though gathering itself, preparing for the light show to come. Through the silhouetted palm trunks, Virginia could see the tired solar disk finally slip into the horizon, fanning the night sky with its component wavelengths.

At her side, Lucia seemed to fade into the dusk; her molecules not having the will to vibrate on their own. The older woman's shoulders, which normally stood ramrod straight, hunched forward, rounding up around her ears.

Tick, tick, tick.

Virginia wished she could've fed Lucia the same story about volcanic activity that Bomba used on the guests. Since there were no geological sensors anywhere on Camille Cay, Lucia would not have believed the lie. But anything would've been easier than telling her that her lover was planning to wipe out a whole crop of guests.

No, Bomba was right. Lucia deserved to make up her own mind. She'd just better make it up quickly.

Virginia cleared her throat. If she liked Lucia any less, she would've twiddled her fingers. Instead, Virginia said, "Bomba gonna be back any minute now."

Her companion's eyes slowly came into focus. "I need to get my flowers."

"We can do that. But gotta hurry."

Lucia regained control of her molecules and stood up. "I'll be right back."

"Why don't I come? Jus' in case you think of bringin' something else."

"That's okay."

"Really. I insist."

Lucia didn't argue further, so they set off at a half-sprint towards the staff quarters. Their onyx legs chewed up the ground with long, fluid strides.

Slowing only to push open the unlocked door to her bungalow, Lucia went straight to the dried flowers Skip had given her on their first date. "We need rum for de trip," she said.

"I go get it," Virginia replied. Bending down in the sand, Virginia reached under the bed platform and felt around the frame. She found the lever and popped open the false wall in the side of Lucia and Skip's room.

The hidden cubbyhole was only a foot high, and just deep enough to hold some boxes of crackers and several bottles of 'kill-devil.' When it was closed, the false panel seamlessly blended into the corner of the bed frame.

Virginia assumed the guests would want more than a few shots of the unaged rum during the long boat trip. "Should we take two?"

Hearing no answer, Virginia straightened up and turned around. Lucia was gone. The vase of dried flowers was unmoved from its position on top of Lucia and Skip's dresser.

Virginia beat Bomba back to the courtyard. When he arrived, tugging Marcella's bulky suitcase, his face registered alarm.

"Where's Luica?" he asked, coming up so close that Virginia could smell the sharp tang of sweat from his skin.

"Looking for Skip, I reckon."

Bomba nodded, as though acknowledging a universal truth. "Then we really got to hot-foot it."

The other guests came jogging down the stone paths, with Aye-Aye herding the stragglers. Ratko carried his black valise, Sister Glory had a small duffel bag, and Katya's hands were empty, although she had a silver bag around one shoulder. Mickey D. only carried one thing: a black, leather-bound book.

"This way." Bomba set off in the direction of the pig run.

\* \* \*

Slumped under the tamarind tree, Han was antsy, dirty, and deliriously thirsty.

There was still enough light in the sky that he didn't need to break out his flashlight to see. He wasn't sure if the impending darkness would be a blessing or curse. Maybe it would be better not to see Skip coming for him. Every time a bird sang out, Han imagined that it was the spa director sneaking through the bushes, getting close enough to finish him off.

He missed his Powerbook. There wasn't anything on the hard drive that was irreplaceable; just some notes on SuperNova's current projects. But toying around with his laptop would've calmed his nerves. He still had over a half-hour of batteries left. If not for the security cameras, homicidal spa director, and poisonous snake slithering around his room, he would've gone back for his computer in a heartbeat.

Han wanted to eat another chocolate bar, but they were all still squishy from the heat of the day. Furthermore, he had nothing to wash it down with, and his mouth was so parched his lips were sticking together. At this point, he would've gladly traded a thousand stock options for an ice-cold Mountain Dew.

To distract his mind from corporeal complaints, Han forced himself to outline his plans for SuperNova if — no, harness the power of positive thinking — **when** he got back.

It would mean closing down his database division: 310 employees, half of whom worked the production floor making less than 60K a year. The marketing folks would land on their feet — it was a hot market for them right now. But Han knew several machinists who were the heads of single-wage families. It could take them months to hook up another gig. There was always the possibility that he could find a buyer willing to keep the labor force intact, but that was a long-shot.

Life was much simpler, Han decided, when he was writing code in the basement of the Speed & Suds Laundromat.

He heard a noise that was definitely not a bird. Every fiber in his body clamored for him to run, but Han forced himself to lie still, crumpled up against the base of the ridge.

The sounds were definitely coming closer. Holding his breath, praying to any deity that cared to listen, Han heard Mickey D.'s voice filter through the leaded air, "Dude, I think I just saw a pig!"

\* \* \*

Marcella wished Bomba had given them more time to pack. She still had two bags back in Mickey D.'s room, and remembered they contained some of her best audition clothes.

"You did say that Skip is going to get the rest of our luggage?" she asked the enormous spa worker with the bouncy hair.

"Oh yes, I'm sure Skip's right behind us," he said in a way that sounded more nervous than reassuring.

Marcella mentally calculated how much it would cost to replace those outfits, since it didn't look like she was going to be marrying into money any time soon.

She turned and saw Mickey D. holding hands with that so-called Sister Glory. That was definitely the last time she gave confession to a priest outside of her church.

Instead of getting pissed, Marcella had to laugh at the sight of those two together. They certainly deserved each other. Marcella knew she didn't need Mickey D. to make it in life.

The person she really felt sorry for was Katya. She had seen how much losing a spouse can tear you up before. Her oldest sister, Lupita, lost her husband in a construction accident, and she didn't leave the house for years afterwards.

She imagined Katya was like Lupita, whose entire life revolved around her husband, and was completely unprepared to move through the world on her own.

The path ended in a 'T' junction.

"Which way?" Han peered down the left and right forks. His thighs were so pink with sunburn that Marcella knew they would be peeling soon.

"Neither," Bomba said. "We've just got to cut through this hedge here. The docks are on the other side."

"That's no hedge." Marcella observed the wall of ferns in front of them. The plants were even taller than Bomba, their fronds thicker than his dreadlocks. "You don't really expect us to go through there, do you?"

"Don't worry. The plants don't bite."

\* \* \*

Mickey D. used his leather-bound journal to protect his face while he pushed his way through the leaves. He'd been following Han, but lost sight of the heavier man in the

gauntlet of greenery. Mickey D. felt vines and sticks lashing out at his exposed shins, but he continued forward.

Mercifully, the foliage thinned and he popped out on the other side. Mickey D. found himself standing with his fellow guests in a small dirt clearing that dropped off into the ocean. In the dying light on the horizon, the singer could make out mounds of rocks below the clearing, blocking their way to the water. The rocks had worn in striated vertical layers, and appeared to be some kind of slate or shale.

Bomba had said this was the way to the docks, but there didn't seem to be any path through the jagged beachhead. And even if they could navigate around the boulders, there didn't appear to be any boats in sight. Just dark, featureless water surging against the stony island shelf with a hollow thumping sound, causing a light spray to drift up to their faces.

"Well, we're here," Bomba announced.

"You've got to be shitting us," Gloria said, which caused Mickey D. to sneak a hand around her waist. He loved it when she broke out the potty-mouth.

Han said, "I hope you're not planning on making us swim for it. I left my fins back in my room."

"Trust me." Bomba slid down to the closest rock and dug around in the sand, using his bare hands as a shovel. Evidently, he found what he was looking for, because the night air was suddenly filled with the rumble of machinery.

Amid the clattering of belts and gears, the rocky outcropping split down the middle and slowly yawned open like a Venus flytrap. Inside the belly of the false shorebreak, two modern speedboats came into view, one painted white and one painted red. The 30-foot crafts bobbed in the water, with a padded, portable dock floating between the two hulls. Twin outboard motors dominated the sterns of both vessels.

*This is so James Bond*, Han thought, pleased that his money had been well-spent on cool toys. Now he knew why Bomba had called them cigar boats. Each craft was long and thin, shaped like the drug-runners' boats on "Miami Vice."

When the din stopped, Aye-Aye helped Katya and Gloria down to the dock. Virginia followed, hefting Marcella's suitcase. Minutes later, the whole group stood at the base of the wooden gangway.

"Please be careful when you board," Bomba said. "We don't have a handrail, and as you can see, the dock will rise and fall with the waves."

Han brought out his flashlight and shined it on the undulating planks.

Bomba thanked him and proceeded to escort Marcella across the narrow dock to a gleaming step ladder that dangled off the side of the white cigar boat. When Marcella climbed safely aboard, Aye-Aye did the same with Katya. The blonde stumbled halfway to the ladder, but regained her footing before she tumbled into the pitching water.

"I wish Nikki could see this. He always liked boats." Ratko stared wistfully back at Camille Spa.

"Don't worry about Nikki. He's fine," Han said.

Ratko whirled. "What do you mean? You seen Nikki recently?"

"Uh, I mean, I'm sure he's okay."

Grabbing the front of Han's T-shirt, Ratko pulled the software designer so close that he almost choked on the European's mustache. "Where is he?"

"Bomba... Help!" Han squeaked. His flashlight caught the gleam of a vicious blade that instantly appeared in Ratko's hand.

"What the hell?" Aye-Aye said from the ladder of the speedboat.

Ratko held the tip of his knife against Han's bulging neck. "Tell me!"

Mickey D. stepped in front of Gloria, protecting her with his body. "Woah, woah, partner, there's no need for that."

Virginia dropped Marcella's suitcase, but was not close enough to do anything. Ratko looked like he was ready to cut out Han's eyes and use his head as a bowling ball.

Han blubbered in fear as Bomba thundered down the gangway.

Ratko said: "Stay back."

"I know where your bird is," Bomba said. "Now drop the knife."

"Where?"

"He's close."

"You will take me to Nikki." It was not a question.

"We really need to go now. You don't understand."

"I'm not leaving without him." Ratko's knife was close enough to Han's neck to give him the Gillette challenge.

Bomba looked over at the petrified Dickson. The poor guy was really having a lousy day. "I'll take you there," Bomba said to the smuggler.

Ratko let go of Han's shirt and sheathed his knife. Han slumped to the ground next to his Nike bag.

"It won't be easy getting to your bird," Bomba said.

"How come?"

*Because there's a chance that Skip is already back at the bunker,* Bomba thought.

Instead, he said, "Tough spot to reach."

"I can help," Mickey D. volunteered.

Bomba shook his head. "No way."

Mickey D. insisted, glad to have a chance to impress Gloria with his newfound sense of reciprocity. "Look, this man saved my life. If he needs a hand getting his bird, sign me up."

Gloria squeezed the singer's hand. "What about the volcano warning?"

"Don't worry, babe, I live for danger."

Bomba didn't have time to argue or explain the situation, so he reluctantly agreed. He instructed Aye-Aye to take his wife and the other guests to the Virgin Hydrofoil dock in Charlotte Amalie, giving him a heading that should take them through the cruise ship routes.

Gloria pressed herself against the singer's gaunt chest. "Be careful."

"We'll be right behind you." Mickey D. pointed to the other boat.

Helping Han to his feet, Bomba discreetly asked, "Are we cool?"

Dickson understood that he was referring to the UPP's plans for restructuring the Caribbean. "Mum's the word. I always liked the underdog."

"Me too," Bomba said. "If we don't make it, you'll take care of Virginia for me?"

"Of course." They shook hands and Han made his way down the wooden planks.

Virginia returned from loading Marcella's bag. "You don't have to do this," she said. He could see that the corners of her eyes were moist.

"I just wanted to get you and the guests off the island safely." Bomba engulfed her strong hands in his, and kissed them tenderly. "I suppose it wouldn't be fair to leave Nikki behind. After all, you can never have enough foul-mouthed macaws in the world."

Ratko, Mickey D., and Bomba watched from the dirt clearing as Aye-Aye gunned the speedboat's engines and headed out to the open sea. Waving goodbye to his wife, Bomba turned to Mickey D. and said, "You're really going to want to wait here."

"Heck no, I'm coming with you guys."

It was now completely dark overhead, so Mickey D. took off his aviator shades for the first time all day. The night sky was totally clear, and a half moon glowed above the island's peak. It bathed them with enough light that Mickey D. didn't need to click on the flashlight he'd borrowed from Han.

Ratko cracked his knuckles. "Where's Nikki?"

"In an underground bunker, about a quarter of a mile away," Bomba answered.

"What kind of bunker?"

"It's got all the video feeds, sonar and radar readouts, and some light arms."

Ratko was pissed at himself for missing both the boats and bunker while searching for Nikki. Unfortunately, he'd only negotiated the sale of the sonar equipment, and been totally uninvolved in its installation. "Skip told me that his control room was off-site."

Bomba shrugged. "He lied."

"Is Skip there now?"

"Could be."

"What kind of arms?"

"I'm not really sure. He keeps them in a locked storage closet. I never really got into the gun thing, but I know he's got a few boxes of rifles in there."

Mickey D. watched this exchange with growing concern. *What the hell were they talking about?* All of a sudden, staying with the second boat didn't seem like such a bad idea. "Look, man, I thought your bird was stuck in a tree or something."

Ignoring his food partner, Ratko asked Bomba if there were any other kinds of weapons in the bunker.

"Last month we got in a shipment that Skip wouldn't let me see. He stashed them away really quickly. I heard the delivery guy say something about 'stingers' and 'dragons,' but I got the impression they were electric zappers to keep the sharks away."

Ratko could hardly believe his ears. "Are you kidding me, Bomba, you've never heard of a Stinger? Have you been living on a deserted island or something?!"

"Yeah. Here."

"A Stinger isn't a shark zapper, you idiot, it's a shoulder-fired missile. With it, one person can take out a plane or a helicopter. A Dragon is mainly used as an anti-tank missile, but you could also use it to shoot down a boat."

Bomba gulped. "What's its range?"

“Three miles.” Ratko knew it would take at least twenty or thirty minutes for the boat to travel that distance at their current rate of speed.

Bomba started jumping up and down, shouting Virginia’s name, waving after the vanishing boat, but it was no use. The darkness and engine noise swallowed his cries.

Ratko grabbed his arm. “Stop it. Her only chance is for you to take me to the bunker. I get Nikki, you secure the weapons.”

“I’ve got to go after her. We’ve still got the other boat.”

“Then you both become sitting ducks.”

“Will somebody tell me what the fucking fuck is going on?” Mickey D. interrupted.

“No time to explain,” Bomba said, his throat tightening in panic. “All you need to know is that Skip has declared open season on his guests.”

Ratko took out his knife. “We should split up. Where’s the best spot to get a bird’s eye view of that boat?”

“Probably the ridge, next to the stables. There’s a passageway and elevator shaft between the control room and Aye-Aye’s lean-to.” Bomba reached under his shirt and pulled the SIG Sauer out of his waistband.

“There you are!” Ratko exclaimed when he saw his pistol. He took the semi-automatic from Bomba and handed his knife over to Mickey D. “Bomba’s going to show me to the bunker. You take this and run up to that ridge. If you see Skip up there with a shoulder rocket, I suggest you not let him fire it. That is, if you want to keep both of your girlfriends in one piece.”

Mickey D. switched Ratko’s hunting knife to his other hand. “Hold on — I’m supposed to use this against a rocket launcher?”

“You’re the one who said he lived for danger,” Ratko pointed out.

\* \* \*

Aye-Aye kept the speedboat under five knots. Several of the reefs circling Camille Cay came right up to the surface, so he diligently watched the depth finder on his console.

The six-inch square readout showed they currently had a good twenty feet of clearance from the ocean floor, but Aye-Aye wasn’t comforted. He knew that the reefs

came up fast, and hitting one — even at this slow speed — would easily rip a hole in their hull.

Keeping the prow on Bomba's course heading, he told Virginia to space the guests out evenly on the ring of cushions. Aye-Aye hunched down below the windshield, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. The radio on the dashboard buzzed like an angry hornet.

"Come in, Aye-Aye. I know you can hear me," Skip's voice said. The speakerphone was just loud enough to be heard over the drone of the engines.

"I'm takin' dem all off to safety jus' like you say," Aye-Aye said for the guests' benefit. "Any word 'bout dey volcano?" He pulled the radio off its cradle so he was the only one that could hear Skip's reply.

"That's very nice, Aye-Aye. This has gone far enough. Why don't you turn around now?"

"Love to, boss. But gotta full boat of scared guests here."

"I understand. And if you bring them back to Camille Cay, I promise they won't be harmed."

Aye-Aye saw that they were drifting off course. He corrected it with a sharp tug on the steering wheel. "Uh-uh. Not what Bomba tell me."

"Ah, yes. My disloyal Number 2. I see that I'm about to get a visit from him, Mister Dershowitz, and the persistent Mister Pijasek in a few seconds. Maybe I need to phrase this differently, Aye-Aye... turn the boat around or I will blow you out of the water."

"How you gonna go 'bout dat, chief?"

"Let's just say that after the excitement yesterday, I wanted to make sure nobody got the idea to take off on me. So I rigged both the boats with a remote explosive. In fact, I've got the trigger right in front of me. Don't for a minute think I won't use it."

Aye-Aye knew better than to call his employer's bluff. "Is dis 'cause you lost our bet? Tell you what dere, you don't need to go re-thatching the game room if you don't want to."

"Very funny, Aye-Aye. Come back now or the next joke you crack is going to be to Saint Peter." Skip's voice softened. "I don't want to kill you and Virginia. You're family to me. We can still make the dream of the UPP happen, Aye-Aye. It's not too late."

"What about dey other guests?"

Gloria, Katya, Marcella, and Han started to get bad vibes from Aye-Aye's body language. Virginia tried to lean in, but couldn't hear Skip's end of the conversation above the wind and the churning propellers.

"I'm sorry. I can't promise anything there. We'll just have to see how things go."

Aye-Aye cut the engines. "Give us a minute, chief?"

"You've got a minute, Aye-Aye. The next time you throttle up, though, I better see that you've reversed your heading."

"What's going on?" Kayta asked.

Aye-Aye and Virginia were whispering furiously to each other. Virginia's jaw got more and more tense with each exchange. "No, you can't!" she hissed.

Aye-Aye ignored her and turned to the guests. "We's afraid we gotta small problem. Dere's a bomb on de boat here."

"No, Bomba's back there," Marcella said, pointing back at the shore.

"Dat's not what he said." Virginia wrung her hands. "Dere's a bomb on de boat. It all rigged to explode, so we gonna hafta turn 'round and bring you back."

"What about the volcano?" Gloria asked.

"Dere's no volcano warning there. That just a ruse to get you off dey island."

"Why?" Katya asked.

"So you all not end up like your husband," Aye-Aye responded. Virginia kicked his calf.

"Jackson? Are you saying that you know what happened to him?"

"He cross Skip and he wind up dead. Skip in ah bad bad mood lately."

Katya reeled. The last vestige of hope she carried in her breast curled up and vanished. A moan escaped her lips, and Marcella scooted over to comfort her.

Gloria stood in the center of the boat, and in her loudest Sister Glory voice, demanded that Aye-Aye and Virginia tell her what is going on.

Han remembered his promise to Bomba. Before the spa employees could reveal too much, he said, "It's a long story. Suffice to say that Skip has gone a little cuckoo. He killed Jackson yesterday and tried to kill me last night, so we thought we'd better get everyone off the island for your own safety."

"Why did he kill my Jackson?" Katya asked through her tears.

Aye-Aye and Virginia exchanged a look. Neither one wanted to field that question.

“I don’t know,” Han said. “Maybe he thought we missed too many of our meal duties. Whatever the reason, now he wants to make sure that there are no witnesses from our group.”

Gloria asked: “But if we go back, won’t he just try to kill us?”

“Proably,” Aye-Aye said. “But if we go forward, he gonna blow us all up rightaway.”

Marcella’s voice quivered. “How will he know if we don’t turn around?”

“Trust me, he’ll know,” Virginia said.

Katya felt herself falling into the black pit again. Jackson was definitely gone. She could hear the others discussing their current situation. *What would Jackson do if he were here?* That was easy — he’d take charge. He wouldn’t let others determine his destiny. From the depths of her grief, Katya could hear Jackson’s voice telling her to be strong. Wiping her eyes, she asked, “What if the boat goes back, and we get off?”

Han looked overboard at the dark water. “I think it’s a bit too far to swim to St. Thomas.”

Katya thanked all the summers she’d spent going to parties at the yacht club. “Sometimes a boat this size will have an inflatable dingy. Is there one here?”

Aye-Aye shrugged. “Dunno. Dis only my third time on dey boat. Honest.”

“Well don’t just stand there people, look!” Katya commanded.

Everyone hopped to it. Han quickly located a storage chest of life vests. He tossed the red foam collars around to everyone. Virginia lifted up a cushion next to the starboard engine and found a folded pack stenciled with the words: ‘Coast Guard Emergency Life Boat.’

“Over here,” she said. Virginia lifted out the deflated rubber raft and its attached CO<sup>2</sup> tank. While she fiddled with the CO<sup>2</sup> nozzle, Aye-Aye reached into the same cabinet and came out with a pair of collapsible oars. Han screwed the oars together while Aye-Aye rooted around some more, finding a flare gun and an emergency beacon.

Katya bucked the straps of her life vest and turned to Aye-Aye. “Turn us around and lash the wheel,” she ordered.

\* \* \*

Skip drummed his fingers on the edge of the sonar panel as he watched the cigar boat reverse direction and start back towards Camille Cay.

For a second, he thought he saw a smaller, second blip on the monitor, but then it disappeared.

“What is it?” Lucia asked.

Skip didn’t reply, but swiveled his chair to the bank of video screens. Camera #21 had the best view on that side of the island, but there wasn’t enough light to get a clear picture. *Damn this cheap-ass equipment*, he thought.

“They might have jumped ship,” he said. “I want you to check it out.”

He thought he saw a flicker of indecision in her eyes, but she straightened the bun in her hair and asked where he wanted her to go.

“Take the shaft up to the ridge. Grab a walkie-talkie and get the Remington with the night scope. Call me when you have a visual of the boat.” Skip wrote down the combination of the lock on the storage closet for Lucia. From the corner of his eye, he could make out Bomba and Ratko approaching the bunker on Camera #19. The last time he checked, Mickey D. was with them. The singer must be dragging behind.

Lucia turned to go. “Wait,” he said, getting to his feet.

From behind, Skip slipped his hands around her delicate waist. He felt Lucia melt in his embrace. “This is a defining moment in the revolution,” he breathed into her ear. “In order for us to be together, you’re going to have to be strong now.”

“Don’t worry,” she replied.

“I’ve never worried about you, Lucia. You’ve been with me every step of the way.” Kissing the back of her head, he released his grip.

Lucia forced herself not to tremble as she exited the control room. Passing by the bathroom, she caught a whiff of dried blood. Lucia considered lighting a candle to help clear the bunker of Holmsley’s smell.

She crossed through the bunk room and opened a small gray door beyond the last foot locker. Following the sandy tunnel, she came upon a padlocked iron door flush with the cave wall. Skip was normally the only one allowed to go inside. Lucia knew that he must really trust her if he was sharing the combination for the first time.

The tumblers clicked into place and she removed the lock. Flicking on the light, she admired the amount of firepower inside the storage closet. The room was about the same size as their bungalow, but seemed smaller because it was cluttered with stacks of

wooden crates. The rack of AK-47s on the far wall were new. She wondered when Skip had acquired them.

The metal shelf to her left contained a bank of walkie-talkies attached to a re-charger. Lucia grabbed one and navigated around a box labeled “Hecklers” in order to get to the glass case of Remingtons. Taking out the Model 700.375 bolt-action sniper rifle, she chuckled at the fact the Remington’s night scope was longer than her forearm.

Skip made her practice on the M700 at least once a month between guest sessions. She was by no means a crack shot, but getting better.

Lucia liked the Remington because even though it was normally designed for wet, cold-weather environments, she found it to be more accurate than the other rifles beyond 500 meters.

Whenever she missed a target, Skip would tease her and say that she could blame it on flawed American workmanship. The M700 had been the government-issued weapon for US snipers in Vietnam.

Lucia locked the storage closet behind her and got into one of the three electric golf carts parked inside the curved passageway. Balancing the bolt-action rifle in her lap, she turned on the cart’s power and sped off towards the elevator shaft.

\* \* \*

“Down here?” Ratko shined his flashlight — glad that he always kept a torch in his bag of ‘Essentials’ — through the round opening of the bunker.

Bomba nodded and offered to hold his SIG Sauer while Ratko climbed down the ladder.

“Nah. I got it.” Ratko swung his legs over the edge. He took one last look at the panorama of stars overhead. Their immortal light always put things in perspective for him. It reminded Ratko that no matter what he did, no matter whom he happened to sell weapons of mass destruction to, we mattered very little in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

Making his way down the rungs, Ratko reminded himself that he only had six rounds left in the SIG’s magazine. The walls of the cave sparkled like cut diamonds in the beam of his flashlight. His feet finally reached the sand floor.

“Work the head,” a voice said behind him.

Ratko dropped into a two-point firing stance and swept his flashlight around the cave. He quickly located the source of the noise. "Nikki!"

His macaw was perched atop a wooden chair that rested against the side wall. Nikki bobbed his head at the sight of his owner and fanned his tail feathers.

Ratko ran over to his old friend and saw that Nikki's leg was securely bound by a loop of string.

"Los Schießen! Feuer!" Nikki hooted in German.

"I know. Be patient for another second." The string trailed down the back of the chair and appeared to be tied off under the seat. Ratko pulled on the leash to check its tension and heard the familiar clink of a grenade pin.

The string came loose in his hand.

Cursing his slow reflexes, Ratko dove to his right as the chair exploded in a flash of orange, spraying the cave with a shower of deadly splinters.

The concussion knocked Bomba off the ladder. He fell the final ten feet, landing flat on his back with a rib-jarring thump.

Bomba wasn't sure how long he blacked out. It felt like just a second, but it could've been longer. His ears rang so much that he couldn't hear himself grunt when he sat up. White spots danced across his field of vision.

He crawled over to Ratko's discarded flashlight, half-buried in the sand. Miraculously, it still worked. In its dim glow, Bomba could see the air was full of green feathers, fluttering down like snowflakes.

Ratko lay in a blackened heap in the center of the cave, surrounded by pieces of Nikki's chair. Bomba got one look at the European's charred body and turned away.

Overwhelmed by the smell of burning flesh, Bomba gagged. Struggling to his feet, he located the SIG Sauer. It sat in the sand next to the smuggler's left arm, which was incongruously separated from the rest of Ratko's body by a distance of ten feet.

Bomba limped away from the scene, heading deeper into the cave. He shined the flashlight on his hamstrings and ankles and saw they were bloodied by dozens of wood splinters, which caused him to wonder why he hadn't noticed that before.

Reaching the stairway, he let the flashlight drop from his hand. Each step brought sharp pangs of torment from his newly-awakened legs.

The track lighting cut into his throbbing head. Between the cuts down his legs and the cymbal crashes in his ears, Bomba found it hard to maintain his equilibrium.

He inched his way forward, the long hallway pulsing and swimming before his sensitive eyes. Bracing himself against the doorframe to the bathroom, he propelled himself the last few yards towards the control room.

Skip was waiting for him. In his right hand, his old friend held a cocked Glock pistol aimed at Bomba's chest.

"Evening, boss."

"What the hell were you thinking, Bomba?"

Through Bomba's ringing ears, the question sounded like: 'Hut ell er oo inking, 'Omba?' He had to do a fair amount of lip reading to understand what Skip was saying.

"Funny question, coming from you," Bomba spat through numb lips.

"After all these years, after everything we've been through, how could you do this to me?"

Bomba's nose felt like it was bleeding. He didn't think he had enough strength to wipe it. "Do you even remember why we started Camille Spa?"

"Of course I remember. Don't tell me you've renounced the ideals of the UPP." The spa director waved his Glock in disgust.

"I haven't renounced anything, pardna. But Camille Spa and the UPP was meant to free our people from economic dependency, not make political statements by murdering a bunch of tourists."

"Shutting down the tourism traffic was always part of the plan. I'm just making sure that we have a few less yahoos to drive away."

Bomba wanted to curl up and sleep, but the anger welling in his chest kept him from losing consciousness. "There's a big difference between driving away the vacationers, Skip, and personally putting a bullet in each one of their brains!"

"Oh come now, Bomba, don't tell me that you thought we'd have a revolution without anybody getting hurt. Not even you are that naïve."

"Wanting significant social change without bloodshed isn't naïve — it's noble. You used to believe the same thing."

Pacing the narrow control room, the normally-unflappable spa director paused in front of the portrait of his father. Skip's wild eyes stood in sharp contrast to Mario's stoicism. Bomba flashed back to when they were juveniles in boarding school together. The younger Moorhead used to get this way whenever he was backed into a corner by their

fellow students. Bomba had seen Skip take on a half-dozen of those crackers by himself.

Lucia's voice came over the walkie-talkie on the desk. "Skip, can you read me? I can see dey boat."

\* \* \*

Aye-Aye was pretty sure the dingy wasn't meant for six people, especially when one of them was the size of Han Dickson. Every time he tried to find a rhythm with his rowing, the drag would cross him up.

"How far are we away from the nearest island?" Katya asked.

"Too far with no supplies," Aye-Aye huffed.

Han asked if they should be activating the emergency beacon.

Aye-Aye glanced over at Virginia. "Tell him."

"We don't know if it gonna work," Virginia said. "Dere's a cellular jammer on de island peak. It broadcast'n white noise across a wide band of frequencies, like dey done in Eastern Europe. The thing designed t' mess with de signal to noise ratio of all kinda cell phones, radio broadcasts, an' such. Skip only keep a few frequencies open for de walkie-talkies and boat radios."

Gloria looked up at the Heavens and groaned. "That's just ducky." She felt pinpricks of dampness seeping into the seat of her shorts.

"Eventually we'll get out of range," Han offered.

"I dunno," said Aye-Aye. "Tis a pretty powerful jammer."

Katya tried to shift her legs to give Marcella more room. "Just keep paddling."

\* \* \*

"Can you read me, Skip? I got visual contact."

The spa director pointed to the walkie-talkie. "I should get that," he said.

Bomba was torn. He was afraid to let Skip talk with Lucia, especially since she could very well have one of those Dragon missiles, but he wanted to make sure that Virginia was all right. Raising his SIG Sauer, Bomba nodded.

Skip picked up the walkie-talkie and pressed the call button. "Hello, babe. I'm here having a nice conversation with Bomba. You can see the boat?"

"Yes, it headin' back here, but it empty."

The spa director smiled when he saw the panic in Bomba's face. "Where did they go?"

"I see a dingy in de water about eight hundred yards out. Looks like everyone in dere. Dem paddling away an' even with de night scope... hard to say which is Aye-Aye and Virginia."

Bomba brought his other hand to the butt of the semi-automatic. "Just leave them be."

Skip, in turn, had his Glock pointed at Bomba's feet. He made a show of releasing the walkie-talkie's call button. "What's it going to be, Bomba? We can end this now. Just help me dispose of the evidence and we can pretend this insubordination never happened."

Bomba flushed. "You don't get it, do you? They're not evidence, they're people."

"I get it just fine. You're the one who needs a refresher course in priorities." Skip clicked the call button and said into the mouthpiece: "Shoot them all, honey."

"No!" Bomba cried and fired. The spa director moved sideways in a blur, raising his Glock and simultaneously unloading a round at Bomba.

The 9mm bullet from the SIG Sauer tore into Skip's left biceps, passing right through the muscle. The slug continued through the flesh until it shattered the video monitor for Camera #1, which seconds earlier had showed Mickey D. sprinting through the torch-lit courtyard on his way to the animal pens.

The impact spun the spa director around so he was facing the control panel. In one smooth motion, Skip hit a flashing red button with the muzzle of his Glock.

\* \* \*

"I've got an idea," Gloria said. "Why don't we go back and get the other boat."

Aye-Aye groaned. His back ached from spending the last fifteen minutes trying to get as far away from Camille Cay as possible.

"No," Katya said. "What if the other boat is boobie-trapped as well? Is anybody here qualified to disarm a bomb? Didn't think so."

“At least we could warn the guys,” Gloria insisted.

“You don’t even know if there really was a bomb on our boat, do you?” Marcella asked Virginia. She could still faintly see the red taillights of their speedboat as it motored back towards the island.

“Dat what Skip say, an’ he never lie about stuff like dat.”

A ball of flame engulfed the cigar boat, sending plumes of water and pieces of the hull hundreds of feet into the air.

Han leaned forward, admiring the mushroom cloud of smoke that quickly formed above the pyre.

Marcella patted Katya’s foot. “Forget what I just said. Thanks for getting us off of that thing.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Gloria mumbled. She couldn’t take her eyes off the conflagration. *So that’s what a lake of fire looks like.*

“Don’t thank me yet. Jackson always told me to expect things to get worse before they get better. That way you’re always one step ahead of the optimist.”

As though proving the prophetic powers of Katya’s late husband, the air was punctured by a high-pitched whistling sound. A tumbling H&H Magnum round from Lucia’s Remington M700 slammed into the side of the dingy just inches away from Marcella’s knee.

The life raft instantly deflated and sagged under the weight of its passengers. Lukewarm water poured over the side of the flaccid sidewalls. With a surprised yelp, Han toppled backwards, his meaty legs kicking the oars out of Aye-Aye’s hands.

Gloria struggled to free herself, but the rubber raft seemed to cling to every part of her body at once. In that moment, she had to agree with Mickey D.’s cosmic theory that he’d shared with her earlier that evening: ‘Life is like an orgasm... It’s too short, and you often look stupid during it.’ *If I do get out of this alive, she thought, I’m not going to let anything keep me from that man. Fuck my producers. Fuck my flock. Fuck Harry. I’m going to make Mickey D. retire his journals.*

Katya was suddenly engulfed in dark wetness. Her life vest yanked her back to the surface, but not before she swallowed a mouthful of saltwater. Gasping for breath, Katya felt something brush her leg. Instantly, she was positive that it was Jackson’s bloated body drifting out to sea. Her cries drowned out the others as they all screamed for help.

\* \* \*

The flames from the blazing cigar boat glowed white through her scope. Lifting the muzzle slightly, Lucia re-located the group of deserters splashing at the surface. The bulky life vests were excellent targets, but the distance and downward angle made the shot challenging.

Lying on her stomach at the lip of the ridge, grass tickling her neck, Lucia blocked out everything but what she could visualize through the crosshairs.

The unpleasant thought of shooting Aye-Aye and Virginia flashed through her mind, but she willed it away. *Focus on the task at hand.* Skip had said to shoot them all and he was depending on her.

Lucia saw the outline of a ponytail and guessed it was Katya. She slowly exhaled and steadied her rifle. When the image in the crosshairs held perfectly still, Lucia squeezed the trigger. The Remington had a small kick, but she was able to watch through the scope as the bullet splashed into the water about a foot behind Katya's head.

She'd overcompensated too much. But that was okay. Lucia racked another H&H Magnum round into the bolt-action M700. They weren't going anywhere, and she had lots of ammo.

\* \* \*

Mickey D. had just rounded the bend where Skip had shown off the island's rare Pope's Head cacti during their initial spa tour, when there was a massive explosion out to sea.

The singer turned just in time to see a the bow of the cigar boat's spiral through the air and come smashing back into the water.

He was too late. They were all dead because of him.

Gloria.

Just when he was feeling like he'd found his special person, she was snatched away.

The shock spread down his arms and his fingertips tingled. Mickey D. realized that he was hyperventilating. He had no idea what to do next.

The singer probably would have remained there, feet rooted in the dirt path, watching the flames consume the woman of his dreams, holding vigil until the cruel Caribbean water swallowed the last ember of the speedboat, if not for the crack of a rifle above him.

Shaking off his paralysis, Mickey D. dashed the last stretch to the top of the rise. His lungs ached with the effort of sprinting the distance from the boat dock, but hope drove him forward.

Another shot rang out from the edge of the ridge.

*At least it's not a rocket launcher,* Mickey D. thought. *If someone's still shooting, then there's a chance Gloria's still alive.*

He ran past the pen for the Brahman Bulls and almost tripped over a black figure lying prone in the grass, pressed up against a long rifle with a hunting scope. Mickey D.'s flashlight played across two strips of white fabric and an open box of copper bullets.

He pulled up just as the figure, either hearing his footfalls or sensing the light, rolled over and brought the barrel of the rifle around in his direction.

Mickey D. planted on his right foot and did a spinning side kick, just like David Lee Roth had showed him when they were partying backstage before last year's MTV Video Music Awards.

With his pirouette, the singer's leather boot caught the bottom of the muzzle and the rifle flew sideways, landing in a clump of sawgrass at the edge of the ridge.

Mickey D. stepped back, positive that he'd just broken his big toe, and steadied his flashlight.

"Freeze!"

Mickey D. was relieved to see that it was Lucia, not Skip, caught in the beam of light.

Lucia got to her feet and Mickey D. realized that the white straps he'd spotted earlier was the back of her cooking apron. She wore it loosely around a pink collared spa shirt and a black knee-length skirt.

"Oh, hi, Mister Dershowitz," she said, as though offering him seconds of some sugar cakes.

"Don't 'hi' me, sister. You and Skip have a great spa here... so what's with all this shit?"

"You wouldn't understand." Lucia reached to her waist. From the front pocket of her apron, she pulled out a pearl-handled carving knife.

"Hey there," he said, giving her some space.

Lucia lunged forward and nearly cut off his favorite studded leather bracelet.

"I'm not normally a big fan of hurting chicks, but you aren't playing fair." Mickey D. kept retreating, hoping that Gloria had been able to jump off that boat before it blew up. "See, I've got a knife too. So why don't we call it a tie."

"I will chop you." Lucia feigned left and made a backhand slash at Mickey D.'s chest. For once, he was glad that he was so skinny. Her blade passed through the air just inches above his nipple.

Jumping back, Mickey D. landed on his throbbing toe and he lost his balance.

Falling to the soft grass, he raised his flashlight in time to see the cook launch herself through the air.

The singer brought up his other arm in self defense, feeling Ratko's hunting knife catch bone and grind into a space between Lucia's ribs. Her momentum and body weight drove the blade in deep.

Because of Mickey D.'s superior reach, Lucia never completed her attack, only nicking his forearm as she somersaulted forward.

Mickey D. saw that his serrated blade was covered in red. The woman in the grass next to him dropped her carving knife and laid her head back. Bubbles emerged from a jagged gash in her chest.

Mickey D. scrambled over and threw away her weapon.

Lucia made no effort to stop the flow of bleeding, her thin arms resting demurely at her sides. "It was a nice spa, wasn't it?"

Her voice was faint, and Mickey D. could hear a sucking sound coming from her lungs.

"I really liked your roti."

"Thanks. It was my mother's recipe," she said and died.

The singer found the Remington at the lip of the ridge and peered through its scope. Beyond the sputtering flames of the cigar boat, in photoluminescent green profile, he saw several figures bobbing up and down in the water. It looked like Gloria was among them, but he couldn't be sure.

Knowing firsthand what kind of creatures swam outside the lagoon, Mickey D. dropped the rifle and started back to the boat dock.

Wincing with every step, he tried to block out the pain by thinking of a blues song. Something that would make the pain in his foot seem inconsequential in comparison. Lost my job at the factory, can't feed my family, caught my wife in bed with another man.

*Here's a blue thought, I'm falling for a woman who feels that she can't be with me because she doesn't know the answers to everything, and is afraid she'll lose her television show. That's assuming, of course, that she wasn't on that boat when it blew up.*

As he stumbled down the dirt path, Mickey D. heard strains of a guitar in his head. But it wasn't a blues number. The notes were distant and twangy, played with reverb and a slide. Closer to country than anything else.

The words came to him, floating up out of nowhere:

*There's no master plan  
No hands on strings  
Together we'll stand  
God is you and me*

*Christ Almighty, it's a ballad*, Mickey D. thought. He always believed rock ballads were for sissies and had never attempted to write one before. 'Why should I try to put Jon Bon Jovi out of work?' he always said.

The guitar notes continued to play in the key of G. The second verse bubbled into his consciousness before he could stop it.

*Won't let Fate decide  
Our pleasure our pain  
Karma can't keep us  
Apart again*

It was writing itself. And he knew it was good. Not just a single. A freakin' monster hit.

Mickey D. ran faster down the ridge, the pain in his toe completely forgotten, singing along with the words, committing them to memory. *There's no master plan. No hands on strings...*

\* \* \*

Bomba slid to the ground, clutching his side. He saw blackish blood seeping through his fingers. When the bullet from Skip's Glock caught him, he'd lost his grip on the semi-automatic. The SIG Sauer came to rest on the tile floor halfway between himself and the grinning spa director.

Standing in front of the bank of video monitors, Skip checked out the through-and-through in his upper arm. "Damn, Bomba, I really didn't think you had it in you."

Bomba scooted his hips so he could prop his back up against Skip's desk. The dreadlocked man tried to get his feet under him, but the blinding pain in his gut cut short his efforts. Instead, he reached up behind his head, feeling around the desktop for something to throw at Skip. His fingers came across something smooth and plastic. He brought it down, only to see that it was the cordless phone.

"What are you going to do, Bomba, call 911?"

Skip took aim and shot the phone out of his hand, taking off the first two knuckles of Bomba's ring finger as the keypad blew apart.

Bomba groaned and dug his hand into his opposite armpit.

"Ouch. That's going to make it hard to throw your split-fingered fastball," Skip said. "Hey, maybe I could alternate between your fingers and your toes. This little piggy went to market, this little piggy went home... that might be fun. Tell you what, why don't we first see if your lovely wife is still with us? You know Lucia — it takes her a few tries to find her range. But when she does, she's a lil' Miss Annie Oakley."

Because of the wound in his left arm, the spa director had to tuck his Glock in his waistband in order to hold the walkie-talkie. "Lucia, come in."

"This... is madness," Bomba said through gritted teeth.

"No, I'll tell you what's madness — risking exposure of Camille Corporation for the benefit of a half-dozen rich, continental bastards. I thought you were committed to the cause."

Bomba tried to laugh, but it hurt too much. "Committed. Yeah, that's a good word to describe you all right."

Skip ignored the slight and clicked the call button of the walkie-talkie again. "Lucia, can you hear me?"

Hearing a shuffling sound from the hallway, Bomba swiveled his head in time to see Ratko drag himself into the control room.

“Oh my,” the spa director said.

The smuggler was a sight indeed. One side of his body looked like a barbecued hog.

The stump protruding from his right shoulder was cauterized to the torn sleeve of his camouflage jacket. In fact, in several spots, it was difficult to tell where the ripped fabric of Ratko’s outfit ended, and his charred and oozing flesh began.

Ratko’s moustache had burned down to a neat Hitler imitation. In his one functioning hand, the European held a broken chair leg from Nikki’s perch.

From his position on the floor, Bomba could see that the smuggler’s combat boots were his only garments that had survived the grenade blast with no damage. In the fluorescent lights, the boots gleamed with a fresh coat of polish.

Skip couldn’t help but admire the ring of green feathers that were melted to Ratko’s crispy neck. “Hey friend, nice boa. Did you design that yourself?”

The whites of Ratko’s eyes narrowed against blackened, hairless lids, and he flung himself across the control room.

The spa director dropped his walkie-talkie and went for his Glock. Skip was able to snap off one round into Ratko’s abdomen, but it wasn’t enough to halt the man’s banshee charge.

Brandishing the chair leg like a spear, Ratko tumbled forwards, plunging the sharp wooden stake into the center of Skip’s breast.

The spa director crashed backwards into the video monitors, legs jerking spastically. As he fell, Skip twisted around, his hand reaching for a row of toggle switches.

The ghastly, green-feathered apparition stood there, wavering in his spotless combat boots. Ratko summoned the will to dribble spit on the twitching spa director and said, “I told you, if you ever called me friend again, I would cut out your heart.”

All Bomba wanted to do was let the blanket of sleep cover him. But he kept his eyes open just long enough to see the smuggler’s knees buckle. Ratko collapsed on top of the impaled spa director, and for the first time all night, the underground bunker was dead silent.

\* \* \*

Evelyn Strawberry spent \$75 a month to keep her hair the same color as her last name. Tonight, she'd teased her fuchsia locks into Phyllis Diller-like proportions and put on her favorite pair of beaded earrings, which she'd picked up for \$12 on one of the reservations back home after haggling the grumpy Indian down from \$15.95.

Three hours earlier, Evelyn and her husband, Thomas, had entered the ship-wide talent contest in the Wayne Newton Theatre on Deck 12 and performed a memorable rendition of "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

She still felt a lingering buzz from the performance — possibly attributed to her third Belvedere and cranberry of the evening — even though they'd been screwed out of first place by the incompetent judges. How could they have scored Donna Whiteside, who shook her saggy 76-year-old booty to "Like A Virgin," higher than their version of the Dean Martin classic?

After the judging, she and Thomas headed to the "Star Lounge." It was their favorite spot on the ship for a nightcap because the bartenders made the stiffest drinks and Thomas could smoke his Montecristos without being hassled. At 00:30 hrs, everyone in the lounge was ordering their last drinks before retiring to the safety of their cramped cabins. Evelyn and Thomas found a spot under a cloth awning where they had a view of the empty shuffleboard courts.

Evelyn asked if they could do an early breakfast tomorrow.

Thomas, still wearing his white scarf and top hat from their performance, grunted noncommittally. "What for?"

"I want to make sure that I have enough shopping time on St. Croix. I still haven't picked up any souvenirs for the Ryans or the Thompsons." Evelyn didn't mention that she also planned to pick up several new necklaces for herself.

Thomas knew better than to challenge his wife's souvenir overkill. It was all a part of their agreement. She didn't bitch about him playing poker every Friday night with the guys and he took her on one week-long cruise a year. They always went in April, a needed break from the incessant rain that blanketed their hometown of Tacoma, Washington.

"I thought the shrimp tonight was a little crunchy," she said.

"You're right," Thomas agreed. "Wasn't as good as the seafood on the '89 Baja cruise."

After seventeen years of riding the high seas, Evelyn and Thomas thought they'd seen it all.

They'd faced waves the size of apartment buildings, been spit on by a shopkeeper in Cabo San Lucas, had their toilet back up in the middle of the night, been double-billed on their drink tab more times than they could count, and even survived a nasty outbreak of food poisoning that turned an entire Alaskan cruise into an evil game of "Musical Lavatories."

But they had yet to encounter the scene that followed.

Without warning, the night sky lit up like an ambulance siren. A brilliant red sphere arced downwards, falling directly upon the "Star Lounge." The flaming ball landed on the awning above the bar, setting it ablaze. The bartender, a chiseled Frenchman by the name of Luc, dove for cover.

Panicked guests thundered for the exits while the Greek crew shouted obscenities and fought against the tide to get to the fire extinguishers. During the commotion, a Little Mermaid ice sculpture toppled into the lounge's kidney-shaped swimming pool.

Searchlights went on and fanned the darkness. Looking over the railing, Evelyn and Thomas saw the spotlights stop on a small, pencil-thin craft bobbing in the water below.

Behind them, the crew quickly put out the small blaze from the flare and immediately pored themselves a round of Ouzo shots.

Straining their eyes, Evelyn and Thomas could make out a group of people jumping up and down on the bow of their speedboat, waving their hands madly.

## **Epilogue**

***Fall, 1996***

The frosty-haired woman took the business card and turned it over in her manicured fingernails. She absorbed the gold-embossed lettering that read:

*CAMILLE SPA*

*The finest accommodations on Camille Cay*

“Really, it’s about time you got back to me. Do you know that I’ve been trying to get a reservation at your spa for years?”

Felix sat on the edge of a coral-colored ottoman in the middle on an expansive parlor. His smile was brighter than the seashell necklace encircling his ebony neck.

“I can appreciate your frustration, but the spa was closed for several months for an extensive remodel. I’m sure you heard about Hurricane Marilyn.”

The frosty-haired woman shook her head no.

“Well, Hurricane Marilyn was the largest of three hurricanes to hit the Virgin Islands around this time last year. The storms caused major damage throughout the Caribbean, and set us back with our reservation process. Because you and your husband came so highly recommended, we actually bumped you to the head of our list once we reopened.”

The smiling man’s apology and sweet floral scent temporarily mollified the countess.

“I can’t tell you how many times Katya raved about your spa to me,” she said. That wasn’t technically the truth. What Katya had actually said to the countess was that she ‘deserved to go,’ but who’s splitting hairs? Countess Waverly wasn’t about to let Katya be the only one to experience the unparalleled treatments at Camille Spa.

Felix tilted his head in concern at the mention of Katya’s name. “And how is Mrs. Holmsley doing?”

Countess Waverly clucked in sympathy. “The poor dear has had a rough time of it lately. First the O.J. thing happens practically in her backyard, then Jackson gets in that awful snorkeling accident during her trip to your spa, and then that Raiderette Linda Sobek gets killed by that psycho photographer. Katya didn’t know her personally, but she was really broken up about it. You know how those ex-cheerleaders stick together, like they’re in their own little sorority.

“I think she’s finally starting to come around. She did sell the house, though, and hardly ever comes to the club anymore. I think she’s too busy spending time with that new man of hers.”

Felix asked: “A new man?”

“Some pony-tailed, crystal peddler named Salvadore. He used to do her aural readings. Frankly, I don’t know what she sees in that low life.”

From a deep, cracked-leather armchair, a gravelly voice said: “She told me they fuck like rabbits.”

The countess whirled around and exclaimed, “Henri!”

The voice belonged to a pale, white-haired man wearing a terry sweatsuit. His eyes didn’t look away from the wide-screened television that cycled through replays of the day’s baseball highlights. “Well, that’s what Katya said.”

Smoothing the front of her silk Chanel blouse, the countess apologized for her husband’s crassness.

Felix told her that no offense was taken and he was glad to hear that Katya was recovering nicely. He brought out his reservation book and began to thumb through the pages.

“You **are** all repaired from that hurricane thing, right?” the countess asked. “I don’t want to get there and be short-changed on your program.”

“You have my word that we are back to peak efficiency, countess. Our classic bungalows have been completely rebuilt. The private beach has been restored to its former glory. And our new spa director, Bomba, along with his lovely wife Virginia, are dedicated to continuing the time-honored traditions and unique services that make Camille Spa the pride of the U.S. Virgin Islands.”

### *Author's Note*

All of the contemporary characters and their accounts in *Camille Spa* are entirely works of fiction, especially Mickey D.'s supposed foursome with members of the U.S. Women's Field Hockey team.

The legal status of the Virgin Islands through the ages, the 'incident' at the Fountain Valley Golf Course, the aims of the United People's Party, and the Moorhead family legacy are based on historical record.